

Western Classicism and Western Art Music Conducting in Southern Nigeria

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Abstract

Western conducting involves the use of diverse forms of body language to direct ensembles. Although conducting originated in the Middle Ages, its standardization in eighteenth century classical Europe has left observable classical principles that now define the art, even in twenty-first century southern Nigeria where Western conducting is utilized to direct Western art music. Although the use of Western conducting to direct European art music predates twenty-first century, how Western conducting reflects classicism and its spirits has not engrossed adequate scholarly discourse, especially in Southern Nigeria. This paper engages non-participant observation of select Western art music conductors in Southern Nigeria to descriptively discuss Western classicism and Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria. Findings indicate the intersection of Western classicism and Western art music conducting, as well as how adherence to the principles of Western classicism produces '*stringent*' conducting in the region. These underscore the intercourse between Western conducting and Western classicism. Thus, Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria should be conceived in tandem with the principles of Western classicism which it reflects.

Keywords: Conducting, Art Music, Western Classicism, Southern Nigeria.

Introduction

Western conducting is a European art music artistry that engages different forms of body language to direct ensembles. Thus, the exportation of Western art music into Africa through the activities of Western Christian missionaries and colonists were in tandem with the influx of Western ensemble conducting tradition into African countries, including Nigeria. While the colonists have relinquished political power; and many of the foreign Christian missionaries have returned to the West, European art music with its conducting remains an art feature in twenty-first century Southern Nigeria. In the region, Western art music with its conducting manifests in Church and school based, as well as non-institution based, ensembles. Hence, Western ensemble conducting is used to direct Western art music in twenty-first century Southern Nigeria. Although the practice is rife in the region, Western classicism as a movement that underpins Western conducting that directs Western art music in Southern Nigeria has not engrossed adequate scholarly discourse. This paper descriptively discusses Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria, explicating the role of Western classicism in Western art music conducting in the region.

Review of Related Literature

This section reviews literature that are related to the study under two subheadings, namely: Western art music in Nigeria; and concept and evolution of conducting.

Western Art Music in Nigeria

As noted earlier, Western art music in Nigeria is rooted in the advent of Christian missionaries with their Christian, musical, and educational activities, in Nigeria around middle of the 19th Century. According to Chukwu (2006), in the middle of the 19th Century, Western Christian missionaries made the performance of European music popular in Nigeria as they utilized it in pursuit of their objectives. He states that European songs in English and Latin texts were rehearsed, performed and promoted in churches by the missionaries and their converts. Adegbite (2001) reports that the Christian missionaries established mission schools in parts of Southern Nigeria. These schools promoted western music through the teaching of Western music theory, and performance of Western music. As many Nigerians excelled in the Western music, efforts were made to translate the Western songs into Nigerian indigenous languages, however, the experiment was challenged by indigenous language peculiarities (Chukwu, 2006). Beside the activities of the Christian missionaries, Chukwu (2006) reports that some Nigerians who travelled to Europe returned with Western music. It is deducible that the interactions between Europe and Nigeria, and Europeans and Nigerians gave rise to the advent of Western art music in Nigeria. It is noteworthy that the music introduced foreign music idioms into Nigeria.

Apart from the activities of Christian missionaries, and Nigerian returnees from Europe, the social developments prevalent in middle 19th Century and early 20th century Nigeria also promoted the performance of Western art music in Nigeria. Ogisi (2008) observes that concert music in Nigeria evolved from the social milieu in Nigerian between middle of 19th century and early 20th century which featured the return of hitherto enslaved Nigerians, intense nationalism and attempts aimed at creating distinct national musical identity. Other factors include the emergence of Nigerian art music composers, and experimentations in styles and idioms. He states that the collective efforts of the afore-listed factors introduced concert music to Nigeria where Western art music was performed. His study reveals the developments that gave rise to the performance of Western art music in Nigeria.

The performance of Western art music requires certain abilities; thus, Udok (2011) is of the view that effective performance of Western choral music involves proper adherence to clear tone quality, balance and blend of voice parts; enunciation and articulation of words, notes and pitches accuracy, and general interpretation. Although the study focused on rehearsal techniques, it is noteworthy that effective performance results largely from effective rehearsal. From the foregoing, it could be noted that literature indicate the origin; and the performance of Western art music in schools, churches and concerts in Nigeria, as well as Western art music technicalities. How Western art music is conducted, and the norm governing the conducting are scant in literature.

Concept and Evolution of Western Conducting

Contrary to Ossaiga (2023), conducting has been viewed as a body of gestures used to direct ensembles. It is in view of its gestural perception that Kennedy (2007) observe that conducting is the art of directing an orchestra through the dedication of a conductor who utilizes gesture to set tempo, ensure appropriate entries, and ensure phrasing where appropriate. While the definition is replete with the roles of gesture, it is silent on other forms of non-verbal communication that are also used in conducting. Hollis (2013) defines conducting as the use of gestures to start an ensemble, establish and maintain clear and uniform tempo, and to aid proper interpretation and execution of dynamics. It is noteworthy that conducting transcends gestures; and is thus, responsible for Holden (2017) defining conducting as the conveyance of musical ideas, and interpretation through gestures, eye contact, with or without a baton; noting that a conductor's conveyance of musical intentions is almost invariably supplemented or reinforced with verbal instructions. While his view is explicit on the nature of conducting, acknowledging the use of verbal instruction is noteworthy. In the view of Macarthur (2013), conducting is essentially a practice that is known with Western classical music. He observes that as a rule, jazz bands and rock bands do not utilize conductors, except when performing with a symphony orchestra in some non-Western music traditions, such as, Turkish classical music. His acknowledged exception to the rule in a part of Europe underscores the existence of diverse conducting traditions in Europe. Furthermore, it also posits that conducting is not exclusive to Western classical music thereby implying the existence of diverse conducting practices in different parts of the world.

Although classicism has arguably left enduring impacts on Western conducting, it is worth noting that Western conducting predates classicism. It began as *cheironomy* in the Middle Ages (The *New World Encyclopedia*, 2013). In the church where that art originated, the individual indicating the gestures held a staff to execute the task. As music became more metrical, a staff (an early form of the baton) was moved up and down to indicate beats. With time, the use of the staff was discontinued and replaced by rolled up sheets of paper and the hands. The *New World Encyclopedia* (2013) records that during the Baroque era (c.1600-1750), the conducting of instrumental music was assigned to a member of the ensemble but mostly played by the principal violinist, who also combined the playing of his instrument with conducting the ensemble by using his bow as a baton. In some cases, the role was undertaken by a flutist who would move his instrument in time with the music or the harpsichord played the continuo. Thus, there were varieties of practices at the earliest stages of conducting (Camesi, 1970).

In arts history, one art often points to developments in other arts. Thus, Demaree and Moses (1995) report that the pictures of earliest conductors were gleaned from mythic recollections, ancient drawings, and modern inferences. They observe that early Christians gleaned gesticulation from the Mediterranean World's techniques of gestures which served liturgies of the Middle East and applied the knowledge to the chants called Gregorian. In their book, *The Complete Conductor*, Demaree and Moses (1995) report that the first written

indication of a conductor is on a Greek tablet c. 709 BC. The caption on the tablet presents the conductor as the giver of time beats, who moves his staff up, and down equally that everyone might keep together. They observe that there are archival pictures as far back as 11th Century that display some conductors at a stand with their right hands free for *cheironomy*, with a staff in their left hands which was a symbol of authority, and an instrument of discipline. From their report, the credited inception of conducting in the Middle Ages might have been rooted in practices that precede the Middle Ages.

It is noteworthy that music in the Middle Ages was in tandem with *cheirinomy*. For as Reese (1941) observes, music of the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries) was sacred, and secular chants in North Africa, Middle East, and Europe. He states that the music of the era was free ancient chants/speech-songs; thus, not metrical. He notes that the chants were based on strophic divisions, the strophes appeared in pairs, thus, provides an example of oriental parallelism. His observation brings to the fore the nature of music in the Middle Ages. According to Hendrik Van Der (1988), rhythm and metre are the most controversial topics in respect of the music of the Middle Ages, especially, as regards the governing of the era's music by a type of rhythm. He states that counting of syllables, absence of fixed positions for accented and unaccented syllables apart from the rhyme in limited number of poems, characterized the music of the Middle Ages. Gleaning from the writings of the period, he reports that there is no information on melodic rhythm, however, a discipline called *Musica* was concerned with measuring the art. He notes that squared notation was typical of the period, as evident in the Gregorian chant. The notation bears no indication for duration, aside from double notes. He states that there were multiple versions of pieces as scribes were at liberty to document songs as they pleased, within a predominantly oral tradition. While his study acknowledges lack of information on some essential aspects of music of the period, the study reflects the state of music at the period. The flexibility of syllabic accents, the absence of fixed durations of notes, and the use of discretion in documenting pieces underscore the non-strict music tradition reflective of the period. These further underscores the absence of fixed conducting patterns at the period as conducting interacted with the music of the era. The reviewed literature indicates the concept, history and evolution of Western conducting; how Western art music is conducted in Southern Nigeria, and its cultural underpin are scant in literature.

Hence, I note that in a whole, the reviewed literature reflects the history and nature of Western art music in Nigeria, as well as the concept and evolution of conducting in European art history, literature is scant on conducting techniques that are utilized in performing Western art music in Southern Nigeria. Also, literature is not clear on the role of classicism in Western art music conducting, especially in Southern Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theories of classicism; and conducting dynamism. According to Caves (2004), classicism refers to a high degree of regard for the classical period in Western arts tradition. It means a set of artistic standards that classicists seek to emulate and

promote. In its purest mode, classicism is the aesthetic attitude that depends on cultural, art, and literature principles of the ancient Greece and Italy. Classicism emphasis form, simplicity, proportion, structural clarity, perception, emotional restraint, and appeal to intellect. Although classicism arguably found its utmost expression in the Western art music of the Eighteen (18th) Century, the movement also found expression in philosophy, literature, and architecture (Johnson 1996). While classicism is a principled movement in Western art music history and tradition, the movement defines the context of Western art music conducting in twenty-first century Southern Nigeria where conducting interacts with Western music culture, composition and conductors in classicism.

Explicating the intercourse of music context, composition, and conductor in conducting, Ossaiga (2020) espoused the theory of conducting dynamism. The theory explicates choral conducting in Southern Nigeria, noting that conducting manifests dynamics when executed in different music cultures, contexts, with different compositions, and by different conductors. Thus:

- a) conducting in Southern Nigeria results from music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors.
- b) dynamics in music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors affects conducting.
- c) dynamics in music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors is vertical, and horizontal. Vertical dynamics is historical, and time-based, while horizontal dynamics is location based.
- d) conducting conventions point to the history, and evolution of conducting with due regard to music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors, from one part of the world to another, and from one era to another; thus, choral conducting practices in Southern Nigeria point to conducting conventions in Southern Nigeria; and
- e) conducting evaluations are based on fair regards to relevant music culture, context, composition, and aspects of conductor's personality.

The aspect of the theory that explicates the impact of relevant music culture, context, composition, and aspects of conductor's personality on conducting relates to the study. Although conductors in Southern Nigeria are mainly Nigerians, the relevance of Western music culture, in the performance context of Western art music by largely Nigerian art musicians who are grounded in Western music is central to this study. From the foregoing, I note that literature indicates the origin of Western art music in Nigeria, the performance practices that characterized Western art music in European art music history, as well as the challenges of performing Western art music. It worth noting that literature is scant on Western art music conducting, especially, on how Western classicism underpins Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The study is practice-led research that used data obtained through non-participant observation and interview of ten (10) purposively selected conductors in Southern Nigeria. The conductors:

- are formally trained musicians who studied music in tertiary institutions
- are exposed to Western art music conducting,
- direct choruses that perform Western art music;
- have held concert(s) in the past two years.

Table 1.1 displays select conductors and respondents in respect of the study.

S/N	Name of Conductor	Name of Ensemble	Ensemble's Stylistic Intent	Location
1	Bob Amunye	Port Harcourt Men Ensemble.	Western Art Music and others	Port Harcourt, Rivers State.
2	Mudi Igbi	Cherub Voices.	Western Art Music and others	Warri, Delta State.
3	E. O. Otamere	Benin Choral Society.	Western Art Music and others	Benin City, Edo State.
4	Tolu Owoaje	Ibadan City Chorale.	Western Art Music and others	Ibadan, Oyo State.
5	Emeka Nwokedi	Lagos City Chorale.	Western Art Music and others	Onikan, Lagos State.
6	Albert Oikelome	Best-spring Chorale.	Western Art Music and others	University of Lagos, Lagos State.
7	Yemi Akinpelu	Nightingale International.	Western Art Music and others	Ibadan, Oyo State.
8	Nwamara Avankoku	Vocomotive Choral.	Western Art Music and others	Awka, Anambra State.
9	Jude Nwafor	J. Clef Chorale.	Western Art Music and others	Nsukka, Enugu State.
10	Louis Ekezie	St. Louis Golden Voices.	Western Art Music and others	Owerri, Imo State

Figure 1.1: Respondents in Respect of the Study

Source: Field-work, 2024.

To observe the conductors, observations were scheduled through pre-field contacts. The conductors were observed during their ensembles' rehearsals and performance in concerts and other outings. Notes were taken on Western classicism and Western conducting in the region. To interview the conductors, interviews were scheduled through pre-field contacts. The conductors served as respondents in respect of the study; thus, they responded to

questions that were raised in tandem with the research objectives. The obtained data were collated, reported and analyzed in line with the objectives.

Discussion of Findings

Findings indicate that Western classicism governs Western art music conducting in Southern Nigerian; and that strict adherence to Western classicism produces a strict conducting model, herein called "stringent" conducting. The findings are thus discussed under the following subheadings: Classicism and art music conducting in Southern Nigeria; and Classicism and "stringent" conducting in Southern Nigeria.

Classicism and Art Music Conducting in Southern Nigeria

Conducting in Southern Nigeria is influenced by its Western origin, and the classical ideas that govern the art. Western classicism is the major foundation on which conducting in Southern Nigeria is based. Conducting is a heritage of Nigerian classical musicians background, and orientation. It is the means through which classical music is coordinated. Whether in vocal or instrumental form of classical music, conducting is involved: someone standing before an ensemble and directing its performance. The concept of conducting is Western, it is the means by which music of Western nature is coordinated. The practice of a dedicated conductor in ensemble performance resonates conducting as a Western European art tradition that many Southern Nigerian choral conductors are raised in and are exposed to. Though conducting is not only applied to classical music, classical ideas of emotional restraint, objectivity, and adherence to forms are evident in conducting conventions. While conducting was formalized in the classical era, the background, and orientation of many conductors in classical music make Western art music conducting, and conductors promoters of European classicism, even in Southern Nigeria. It was observed that conducting in Southern Nigeria flows much from Western classicism; thus, reflects the principles of emotional restraint, and adherence to forms that are typical of Western classical era, especially, when performing Western art music. The conducting in Southern Nigeria could be said to be in strict adherence to the above classical norms. The form of conducting, here called "*Stringent*" conducting refers to conducting according to classical conducting tradition. The conducting is applied to Western art pieces in Southern Nigeria. It is also in tandem with Western conducting culture, that is, the use of communicative nuances to elicit acoustics from ensembles.

To conduct Western European art pieces, conductors in southern Nigeria use applicable beat pattern(s), adhere strictly to dynamics, moderation, restraint and form. However, when the music is not marked in terms of dynamics, the conductors creatively effect their own dynamics. Although this report explains how the conductors conduct Western art pieces, the report reflects how Western art pieces are conducted in the study area, echoing restrains, strictness, and conventionalism. It was observed that the choral conductors conduct Western art pieces by limiting their tools to gestures, and other restrained body languages, and in adherence to most conducting conventions, most of the times. It is worth

noting that the formalization of conducting in the classical era in European music history loaded conducting with classical ideals of emotional restraint, and adherence to form. Thus, Western European art music of the baroque, classical, and romantic eras is still being conducted with the classical influenced conducting tradition which maybe be called conventional.

In directing Western art music in Southern Nigeria, conductors use strictly the nuances that they are learnt from music texts, and schools, namely: posture, conventional beat patterns, gestures and facial expression, showing restraint. Thus, they use restrained gestures, beat patterns, posture and facial expressions and limit their conducting concern to sound and the execution of dynamics. The limitation of conductor's focus to sound reflects the sonic basis and concept of Western art music. It is worth noting that the conducting does not only limit concerns to ensemble sonic, it also limits conducting nuances to conducting conventions. Thus, adherence to Western art music tradition is central to the conducting. Normality, and music tradition re-echo conducting conventionalism. Reflecting conventionalism in Western European art music conducting in Southern Nigerian, it was observed that Western art music is conducted (by adhering) strictly to the rules of conducting. It involves time beating, strict dynamics and tempo marks and keeping to conducting conventions, while bringing in the required variations. Western conducting in Southern Nigeria restricts the conductor to the podium, not allowing movement, to singing as the sole duty of choir; thus, the conduct restricts his act to nuances that aid in eliciting singing. From the foregoing, the glossary of terms central to conducting practices in Southern Nigeria includes Western classicism, pattern, tradition, adherence, strict, convention, and norms. These words uphold the existence of strict conducting tradition in the conducting of Western art music in Southern Nigeria.

It was observed that the choral conductors in Southern Nigeria conduct Western art music by observing most classical conducting conventions. Also, their dressing is observed in adherence to conducting conventions. However, there were some finer details of Western art music conducting conventions that were observed in disregard. From the foregoing, it could be said that Western European art pieces in Southern Nigeria are conducted through adherence to (most) Western European conducting traditions, and conventions that the conductors have been exposed to. The conducting is hereby called "*stringent*" conducting.

Classicism and "Stringent" Conducting in Southern Nigeria

"Stringent" conducting refers to the style of conducting that is used to direct Western art music in Southern Nigeria; and that is applicable to genres that share similar performance practices with Western European classical music. As observed in Southern Nigeria, "*stringent*" conducting involves:

- a) much use of beat pattern(s)
- b) emotional restraint
- c) observance of posture minutiae
- d) total focus on choral acoustics as performance objectives

- e) use of gestures and
- f) rare use of verbalization

It is worth noting that the "*stringent*" mode of conducting that is typical of Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria incorporates the use of basic conducting beat patterns. Such patterns as the simple duple, triple; and quadruple beat patterns, as well as the compound duple, triple and quadruple beat patterns are utilized based on the metre indicated in the music. Thus, there is a relationship between the metre indicated in the performed compositions and the beat patterns. I further note that the use of conducting beat patterns in the locale reflects classical principle of adherence to form.

Also, emotion is restrained in Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria; thus, the body with its expressions are utilized with a measure of control that aims just to elicit acoustic production from ensembles. In addition to the use of basic beat patterns, Western art music conducting in the domain engages gestures that indicate and communicate performance details and dynamics that beat patterns alone may not be able to elicit. Where gestures do not seem to suffice for eliciting appropriate ensemble sonic, there is rare use of verbalization. On the use of verbalization in conducting, Miller (1978) notes that the conductor must possess the skills needed to think and communicate the finer details of musical colour, variation, inherent drama and structure, stating that these skills are lucidly manifested through gestures, other forms of body language, and verbalization. Thus, Holden (2017) avers that a conductor's conveyance of musical ideas is almost invariably supplemented or reinforced with verbal instructions. Similarly, Skadsem (1995) investigated the effect of conductor's verbalization, dynamic markings in the score, and conductor's gesture on the dynamic responses from singers; and reported that the verbal instructions given by the conductor invoked the most significant changes in the dynamic responses of singers. Despite this fact, the traditional concept of conducting does not often acknowledge the use of verbalization.

From observation, verbalization is an integral part of conducting in Southern Nigeria. Although some conductors are not favourably disposed to it, it was observed that most conductors manifested conscious, and unconscious use of verbalization in their conducting. They use verbalization to communicate with their choirs, encourage good musical acts, discourage wrong musical behaviour, reorder performance acts, and to introduce ideas that are partly different from those rehearsed in performance. While this may be deemed inappropriate, carefully deployed verbalization is evidently effective in directing ensembles.

Conclusion

This paper discussed Western classicism as the norm governing Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria, noting the relationship between Western classicism and Western art music conducting; and how Western classicism births "*stringent*" conducting in the area. Although Southern Nigeria is not within the bounds of Europe as a continent, Europe has a measure of impact on musical arts in the region through its history of

colonialism and Christian missions. While the discussion focused on Western classicism and Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria, it is worth noting that Western influence and norms are not limited to Western art music conducting in the realm. They underscore formal music education in its many sub-disciplines. The study underscores the artistic intercourse between Western music culture, Western classicism, and Nigerian art music conductors in Southern Nigeria.

Recommendations

To realize the gains of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- a) conducting education should underscore the relevant music culture that informs conducting conventions,
- b) conducting evaluations should be based on adherence to conventions in relevant music culture,
- c) studies should be extended to the contributions of Nigerian conductors to the development of Western art music conducting in Southern Nigeria,
- d) comparative studies should be executed on Western art music conducting and Nigerian Art music conducting in Southern Nigeria;
- e) further studies should be executed on gospel music conducting in Southern Nigeria.

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