

# Performative Dimensions of Gospel Music Artistry in Nigeria: Implications for Church Music Directing

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## Abstract

While in America, gospel music is a form of music that is deemed an offshoot of African spirituals, in Nigeria, gospel music evolved from the evangelistic activities of Christians who used the music in their outreaches. From being an evangelistic music, gospel music has become the mainstay of church music in many churches in Nigeria; thus, there is an increasing patronage of gospel music artists in Nigeria. This has led to the formation of gospel music bands by many practitioners whose performances are here referred to as gospel music artistry. In addition to singing, the gospel musicians have incorporated additional sonic and extra-sonic nuances into their church musicianship; however, how gospel music is performed in the context of church music has not engrossed adequate scholarly discourse. This has left performance practices of gospel music as a form of church music out of the grasp of standard gospel music literature, especially in Nigeria. This article engages non-participant observation and interview of select gospel music artists to discuss the performative dimensions of gospel music artistry in Nigeria and their implications for church music directing. Findings indicate that gospel music artistry in the context of church music in Nigeria includes prayers, prophesy, preaching, singing, choreography, sound engineering, and dancing. The findings underscore the importance of knowledge of Christian worship, preaching, prophecy, choreography; and sound engineering to gospel music directing. It is recommended that music directors should be knowledgeable in the reported dimensions for effective church music directing.

**Keywords:** Gospel Music, Music Performance, Music Directing, Music Artistry, Church Music.

## Introduction

Church music in Nigeria consists of diverse song forms that are used by the Church in Nigeria to pursue its objectives: worship, discipleship, education and evangelism. A form of church music prominent in the realm is the gospel music. Gospel music in Nigeria originated from the evangelistic activities of different Christian groups who used the music in their outreaches in Delta (Oseovo-Onibere 1990), Western Nigeria; and beyond (Adedeji 2004a). Since its origin, gospel music has evolved in its compositional and performative dimensions by incorporating sonic and extra-sonic materials as well as performance practices that have come to define gospel music artistry in twenty-first (21st) century Nigeria.

Thus, from being a music form known with Christian evangelistic groups, gospel music has evolved to a church music band that belongs to a musician/singer whose identity and

performance practices brand his/her group. In the performances of the gospel musicians called ministrations, the Nigerian gospel musicians incorporate different nuances that point to different performative dimensions of gospel music artistry; the manifest dimensions are not without implications on church music directing; yet studies are scant on gospel music performance practices in Nigeria; and their implications on church music directing. In this paper, I discuss the performative dimensions of gospel music artistry in Nigeria and their implications on church music directing.

Gospel music, once defined as the music that preaches the good news of Jesus Christ (Adedeji 2004a), originated in Nigeria from the evangelistic outreaches of different Nigerian Christian groups (Oseovo-Onibere 1990; Adedeji 2004a). Although some gospel music expresses Christian good news (Adedeji 2004a), the music addresses diverse themes in Christendom, including praise/adoration, thanksgiving, testimony, fellowship, and faith. It is in tandem with the multiplicity of Christian themes that the gospel music expresses that Forchu (2010) defines gospel music as a type of popular music with Christian ideology. Furthermore, gospel music was not accepted in all churches in Nigeria, at same time. Agu (1991) reports that gospel music was earlier practiced in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, and later in some orthodox churches. His report indicates gradual acceptance of gospel music as church music in history.

The gospel music in Nigeria is not without types, according to Adedeji (2004b) there are different types of gospel music. Gospel music in its types features distinctive vocal, phrasal and rhythmic characters that define the genre. The music also features stylistic characteristics. In the view of Adedeji (2009), gospel music rides on vocal aesthetics amongst other features. According to Agu (1991), gospel music is characterized by free transmission, aesthetic and functional values that are evident in Nigerian ethnic societies. To him, its characteristic features are call and response, chorus and mixed patterns, simple, short and repetitive melodies, speech-song melodies, and western and traditional instrumental accompaniments. His elucidation brings to the fore the features of gospel music in Nigeria.

Building on the historical, conceptual, typological and practical studies on gospel music in Nigeria, Ibude and Ossaiga (2023) discussed the intersection between technology and gospel music in Nigeria, reporting how technology is engaged in gospel music sourcing, personal practice, rehearsal, performance and streaming. Their study brings to fore the interplay of gospel music and technology in Nigeria. While literature discussed the reported aspects of gospel music in Nigeria, it could be observed that gospel music in America is an offshoot of negro spirituals (Legg, 2008). Hence, the music features performance practices that are traceable to the history, and music tradition of Africans (Legg 2010) in Africa and Diaspora.

Gospel music is a spiritual art with liturgical, therapeutic and social import. According to Ayorinde (2022), gospel music in Nigeria interacts with spirituality in everyday meaning making; thus, to underscore its liturgical potentials and artistic versatility, Nigerian gospel music has been recreated into art church music in Nigeria by Igbi and Ossaiga (2024). Their

recreation of gospel into Nigerian art church music underscores the versatility of Nigerian gospel music. Gospel music has potentials for spiritual healing as testified by Yende (2023). His report is not without theological and biblical import. Furthermore, gospel music has been explored for peace and social change in South Africa (Yende and Moshugi, 2024) where gospel music is being deployed as a tool for change advocacy. These studies underscore gospel music as a church art with spiritual, therapeutic, and social import. From the foregoing, it is noteworthy that literature indicates the history, and sonic features of gospel music in Nigeria, as well as gospel music's origin in the United States of America; and the intersection between gospel music and technology in Nigeria. Also, literature indicates gospel music as an art with liturgical, spiritual, therapeutic, and social import. The performance dimensions of gospel music artistry in twenty-first century Nigeria church music is scant in literature. This study discusses the performance dimensions of gospel music in the context of church music in Nigeria; and its implications for church music directing.

### Research Methodology

The study is a practice-led research that utilized non-participant observation and interview of ten (10) purposively selected gospel musicians in Nigeria. The gospel musicians were selected based on the following criteria:

- a. ownership a gospel music band
- b. release of gospel songs in the past five years;
- c. performance on invitation in the past five years.

The select gospel musicians were observed in their performances in Warri, Delta State; Port Harcourt, Rivers State; Lagos; Owerri, Imo State; and Abuja, Federal Capital Territory between 2019 and 2024. During the observation, their performance dimensions were noted using jotters, and pens, while pictures were also taken with the aid of a camera. The selected gospel musicians were interviewed in tandem with the research objectives. Thus, the select gospel musicians served as respondents in respect of the study. Data gleaned through the non-participant observation and interview were recorded, collated, analyzed and reported in line with the research objectives. The gleaned, collated, reported and analyzed data constitute findings in respect of the study.

### Research Findings

Findings indicate that gospel music artistry in Nigeria encompasses praying, prophesying, singing, instrumentation, and dancing. While some of the dimensions of the gospel music artistry may be said to transcend music, the dimensions are not far removed from music as conceived as a union of arts, especially in Africa (Nzewi 2006).

### **Prayer in Nigerian Gospel Music Performance**

Gospel music artistry in Nigeria involves an ability to pray. The prayer comes in short phrases that seek to invoke God's blessings of provision, and protection on the participating congregation who say amen in response to each prayer offered. The prayer is executed by the gospel musician as part of gospel music performance. The prayer may be offered at the beginning of, or in the midst of performance. Thus, knowing how to lift the congregation with prayer is a skill in the gospel music. To pray, the gospel music artist or minister points towards the congregation and offers the prayers.

Prayer as a performative dimension of gospel music artistry in Nigeria underscores music as a spiritual exercise. In Nigerian traditional society, many spiritual practices are executed with music such as chants, and incantations and instrumentations. Thus, music serves as a medium for accessing the gods and their blessings. The spiritualists in Nigerian traditional society engage music in pursuit of their objectives. Also, the musician in the society engages music to perform spiritual functions such as prayers for his audience and for him/her self. Prayer as music is not strange to the Bible for its book of Psalms, though being the song texts of the Jews, embodies a lot of prayers.

From the foregoing, it could be said that musicians relate with their audience/congregations through prayers that are aimed to invite and involve their audiences/congregations in the musical performance, for thundering 'amen' to well crafted lines of prayers is capable of communalizing and diversifying the music performance. Realizing this, gospel music artistry in Nigeria involves a lot of prayers for the congregation; and for the musician(s).

### **Prophesying in Nigerian Gospel Music Performance**

Gospel music artistry in Nigeria involves prophesying in its forth telling and fore telling dimensions. This is done by the gospel artist who rides on his or her music ministrations to prophesy to the congregation. To prophesy, the gospel artist points to the congregation and declares positive statements that suit the congregations. The congregations respond to gospel music prophecies by shouting, hailing, or dropping money on the podium. It was observed that prophesy as a dimension of gospel music artistry in Nigeria does not often express God's anger against sin.

In traditional Africa from where the gospel music evolved, music is prophetic for musicians in traditional Nigerian societies sometimes communicate divine teachings and predict events of the future through their musicianship. While the musicians do not go by the name prophets, their roles in forth telling and foretelling are essentially prophetic. This traditional manifest of music and musicians in Nigeria has been applied to gospel music.

Prophesy is a biblical and Christian practice through which God's will is made known to God's people. In prophesy, commendation and condemnation, blessing and curse, God's love and God's wrath are communicated. Thus, prophesy in its biblical manifests addressed God's pleasure for righteousness, promise of redemption and blessings, as well as God's anger and intended punishment against sin. Prophesy as a manifest of gospel music in

Nigeria differs from its biblical mode for it addresses just promises of blessings. Figure 1.1 displays prophesy in Nigerian gospel music artistry.



**Figure 1.1:** Prophesying in Nigerian Gospel Musicianship

**Source:** Field-work, 2024.

### **Singing in Nigerian Gospel Music Artistry**

Singing is a major dimension of gospel music artistry in Nigeria. Singing is led by the lead singer who owns, and whose face and name brand the gospel music band. Thus, the ownership of the gospel music band in Nigeria resides in the lead singer who is closely supported by a team of backup singers.

The song leader leads the gospel singing with an ordered progression of speeches, a medley of slow songs; and a collection of fast songs. The speeches that precede the slow songs are usually speech-songs that address the character of God in adoration for whom God is; and in gratitude for what God does. The speech-songs are occasionally interjected with musical instruments that announce and sustain tonality. The slow songs continue with the theme established in the speech-songs through the singing of select gospel songs that the congregation could participate in. Some of the gospel musicians are known for their performance of their personally composed, and worded songs in Nigerian languages, such as Igbo and Yoruba.

Singing in Nigerian gospel music artistry moves from the slow mode to the danceable fast mode wherein medleys of Nigerian gospel songs are performed by the gospel musician, his vocal and instrumental back-ups and the congregation. While the songs featured in the



session are sources from personal albums, others are sourced from other gospel musicians' releases. This mode of singing is celebrative, emotive and communal. While the celebration, emotion and communism are in praise to God, songs that transcend the theme of praise also feature in the session. Figure 1.2 displays singing in Nigerian gospel music artistry.



**Figure 1.2:** Singing in Nigerian Gospel Musicianship

**Source:** Field-work, 2024.

Singing in Nigerian gospel music artistry features songs that are either composed by the gospel musicians or their foreign counterparts. The gospel songs composed by the Nigerian gospel musicians often utilized the techniques of code switching, call and response, and repetition. Code switching involves the use of English Language or Pidgin English with a Nigerian indigenous language such as Igbo, Urhobo, Ijaw, and Yoruba. The technique of code switching aims to widen the songs' reach, engage more people in worship, increase acceptability, and enhance patronage. Call and response is used to elicit artistic interaction between the musicians and their audience as the audience joins the vocal backup in re-echoing the chorus; thus, communalizing the ministration and/or performance. While the melodic contour and rhythm of the call sections may be varied for dynamism, the response is less varied. Repetition enables the gospel musicians to emphasize their songs' themes, engage the audience more and elongate their performance duration.

### **Instrumentation in Nigerian Gospel Music Artistry**

The musical instruments used in Nigerian gospel music performance are Western drums, base and lead guitars, electronic keyboard. These musical instruments are manned by guitarists, a drummer and a keyboardist. Often, the instrumentalists double as vocal backups to the lead singer. Few gospel music bands like that of Nathaniel Bassey have a trumpet in their collection.

Musical instruments in the gospel music artistry perform introductory, voice-leading, accompaniment, and interlude roles. Thus, gospel music performance typically begins with scale and chord performances on the keyboard. The inception is usually not in strict metre for it follows the mode of singing/voicing. Thus, the speech-song stage of singing is critical for tone setting as the keyboardist uses this time to perfect tonal decision in coded communication with the lead singer. Also, the sound engineer utilizes this state to finally examine the state of sound. With tonality perfected, the keyboardist with the other instrumentalists, and singer transits the performance to its slow steadied tempo.

Instrumentation at the slow stage of the performance is usually less percussive and more carefully tempered. Realizing chords and beats specifications appear to be the objective at this point. Since the gospel music performance seeks to recreate the exact studio recordings of the songs, excellent performance involves timely sounding of the acoustics associated with the song in force. To underscore the import of adherence to the sound corpus that is typical of a gospel song, the lead-singer and band owner relies on instrumental cues and clues for guidance. This means that every musical instrument is expected to play as rehearsed. At the fast stage of the performance, the musical instruments introduce the transition from the slow stage through a hastened introductory section that sets the stage for emotive and explosive singing and dancing. Instrumentation also involves clapping as participants accompany singing with clapping. Musical instruments in gospel musicianship set and mirrors the modes of the performance while providing vital clues to other members of the band. Figure 1.3 displays gospel music instrumentation in Nigeria.



**Figure 1.3:** Instrumentation in Nigerian Gospel Musicianship

**Source:** Field-work, 2024

### **Dancing in Nigerian Gospel Music**

Dancing is a dimension of gospel music in Nigeria. The lead singer is usually the lead dancer; thus, he or she combines role by leading the congregation to dance. Dancing in the realm is of two types, namely; the free styled and the stylized dance patterns. In the free styled pattern of dancing, the lead singer evokes congregational dancing by accompanying congregational song leading with dancing. The styled dancing is initiated by the lead-singer who demonstrates a dance pattern with either a member of his/her band or of the congregation. The participating congregation follows the modeled pattern of dance. The stylized pattern of dancing is usually short and used to interlude gospel music performance. Thus, returns to the free-style pattern of dance ensures that most sections of the performance features free styled pattern of dancing. The system of dancing leaves much room for congregational freedom in kinetic expression. Figure 1.4 illustrates dancing in gospel music performance in Nigeria.





**Figure 1.4:** Dancing in Gospel Musicianship

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

#### **Implications of Gospel Music Performance Dimensions for Church Music Directing**

The performative dimensions of gospel music artistry in Nigeria are not without implications on church music directing. Thus, to effectively direct gospel in tandem with its performance dimensions, the church music director needs to:

- a. accommodate the expansion of his/her scope of music to include extra sonic nuances,
- b. be knowledgeable in Christian worship,
- c. be schooled in Christian preaching and teaching,
- d. and be grounded in choreography;
- e. know about sound engineering.

Gospel music as a fusion of preaching, prayer, singing, and dancing is not far from Nzewi's (2006) concept of music in Africa as a union of musical arts. Thus, the concept of music as a kinship of arts is not only relevant to African music but also to all music forms that evolved from African music conventions. Gospel music performance dimensions of singing, dancing, and clapping underscore that gospel music is a kinship of the musical arts. The church music director, therefore, should conceive gospel music in tandem with its performance practices in order to realize its multifaceted performance objectives.

Gospel music in Nigeria functions in Christian worship, a knowledge and practice realm that features preaching and teaching. The inclusion of preaching and/or teaching in gospel music performance in Nigeria highlights the need for church music directors in Nigeria to be knowledgeable in themes in Christian preaching and theology in order to direct their gospel music appropriately. Every subject has its terms, and foundations; the church music director in cannot leave terms and themes in Christian preaching to the discretion of the gospel musician. From knowledge in the realm, the church music director can effectively prepare gospel musicians with the right message for each performance and/or ministration. Auditing courses in Systematic Theology, Old Testament Survey, New Testament Survey, Christian Worship, and Christology is capable of equipping church music directors with tools for directing the preaching and prophesy aspects of the music.

The dance dimension of gospel music underscores the import of choreography to gospel music performance in Nigeria. For the gospel musician and director to properly choreograph dancing in gospel music performance, he/she needs a knowledge of chorography. This will help in dance directing, sequencing, and formation. Dancing in gospel music provides opportunity for the release of different patterns of dance with different album releases as is already the case with popular music album releases. Dancing as an important aspect of gospel music should not be left to discretion and experimentation.

Gospel musicianship in Nigeria engages electronic gadgets and instruments such as microphones, keyboards, drum kits, bass and lead guitars. These instruments are connected to sound enhancers such as amplifiers, speakers, speaker management, and mixers. The use of electronic sound components in amplifying gospel music acoustics underscores the import of sound engineering to gospel music in Nigeria. While the service of a sound engineer addresses the sound needs of a gospel band, a knowledge of sound engineering enhances the church music director's role in directing the acoustic dimension of the music, as well as the gospel music as a whole.

### Conclusion

This paper identified, and discussed the performance dimensions of gospel music in Nigeria, noting the implications of the performance dimensions for church music directing in Nigeria. In addition to being knowledgeable in general musicianship, the church music director should be knowledgeable in prayer, Christian preaching, prophesy, choreography, and sound engineering for effective gospel music directing in the context of Christian worship (Ojo, 2023). Gospel music in Nigeria has grown from Christian outreaches to becoming the mainstay of church music in many Christian denominations in Nigeria, as well as the genre of church band music in Nigeria. A director's role in ensuring proper preparation for effective performance cannot be over-emphasized. While the article focused on gospel music performative dimensions in Nigeria and their implications for church music directing, the findings are not exclusive to gospel music in Nigeria. In America, and Europe, gospel music as a genre of church music is performed with speech, prayer,

sound engineering, and dance. These practices define gospel music artistry in church music wherever it manifests. The church music director should engage knowledge from Christian worship, Christian preaching, choreography, and sound engineering for effective music directing of the music.

### Recommendations

To realize the gains of this study:

- a. the concept of gospel music as a form of church music should be reviewed to include its performance dimensions,
- b. gospel music artistry should be course in church music education in seminaries and universities offering church music,
- c. church music education in Nigerian universities should include courses such as Theology, Christian Preaching, and Christian Worship,
- d. further studies are recommended to shed more light on the evolution of gospel music in Nigeria;
- e. further studies are recommended to ascertain the relationship between church functions and church music in Nigeria.

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