



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Stylistic Diversity in the Musical Compositions of J.H. Nketia

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### **Abstract:**

*Musical compositions with idioms are often created out of the kind of social experiences and influences that a composer goes through in life and which to a large extent distinguishes one composer from the other. These interactions and experiences are drawn from two distinct factors: first, that part of the composition which embodies the fullest and deepest expression of himself as a man with artistic and aesthetic endowment, and second, that part dealing with his experiences as a social being (making use of the interactions and resources around him). This article seeks to examine how J.H.Kwabena Nketia has successfully been able to utilise these social influences and interactions in his compositions. It highlights the extent of inclusion of diverse traditional idioms merged with Western musical systems and their application. It is worth noting, however, that Nketia's compositions unveils a variety of stylistic inspirations through the exploit of both Western and African elements extensively that identify his stylistic diversity in his compositions. It is important that the African children who learn music are introduced to African musical concepts in order to enrich or diversify their repertoire within a tradition desirable to them.*

**Keywords:** Diversity, composition, J.H. K. Nketia, African music

### **1. Introduction**

Diversity in musical composition can be viewed from the various individual styles employed in composition. It can also be looked at as a generational characteristic of musical artefacts. Stylistic Diversity may often treat the fact of coexistence of styles of musical compositional thoughts emerging from the idioms as well as the sound culture of different populations and social groups. Thus, it is possible for a composer to use a single musical tradition such as the patterns of a particular drum in a particular ensemble of the Ewe community of Ghana and adding traits of Western classical musical period to create a musical hybrid that may identify his stylistic diversity. J.H.K.Nketia is one of the few Ghanaian composers who generate their compositional materials from traditional sources to create their own styles. His compositions are recognised both locally and internationally. His background as an ethnomusicologist, a sociologist as well as his studies in linguistics coupled his various researches into the musical traditions of many cultures other than his own has greatly influenced his musical thinking and his compositional identity.

Floyd (1999, p.890) says this of him; “he is hailed as one of the most prominent figures in African music throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – active as a scholar, teacher, administrator and composer. A unique aspect of Nketia’s compositional activities is the extent to which his compositions have been influenced by his creative ingenuity”. There are quite a number of existing publications and articles on the profile of Kwabena Nketia as a scholar, a composer and a music educator. These are found in the works of Eric Ayisi Akrofi, (2002). George Dor (1994), Floyd (1999), Festschrift, among a host of articles. However, this paper focuses on the features that identify his stylistic diversity in music composition dwelling mostly on the influences he had from his childhood musical environment and education. The ensuing discussion, therefore settles on Nketia’s perception and knowledge in African music and his compositional style.

### **2. Traditional versus Western Music**

Caught up in the wake of the resurgence of traditional cultures and national longing in protest against the institutionalization of Western music, there arose quite a number of Ghanaian composers (with Ephraim Amu as the trailblazer) who were no longer looking at one side of composition but a combination of materials within and outside their environment. This new kind of music which is a synthesis of both Western and African indigenous musical idioms created the platform for composers to bring up their traditional music to a new level and also showcase their creative ingenuity. However, one must be well vested in the creative resources of African musical practices to be identified with this new music. That is to say that an African art music composer must undergo a cultural orientation of the basic African traditional musical themes or language to be able to compose music is truly African.

Nketia underscores this fact, stating that “a composer versed in a particular tradition carries its system of musical thought.” He goes on further to say that “one must be familiar not only with some of the rhythmic patterns, but also the principles of pattern formation and a sense of the logic that seems to control motivic combinations and pattern sequences”(Nketia 1995:7).

### 3. Stylistic Diversity

It is worth noting that composers of African art music, a hybrid of Western and African indigenous music, are faced with the problem of validity- that is, how they can maintain and package their compositions to reflect their creative disposition devoid of blatant imitation of Western musical styles and practices and yet appeal to a wider audience. My decision to write about the musical style of Nketia stems from several factors:

A composer’s approach to his work and his perspective and style is influenced by several factors, in particular his nurture, training, cultural background, personal philosophy, response to the colonial encounter, and musical experiences. According to Warburton (1963, p.1) “no work of art can be fully appreciated without an understanding of the life and circumstances of the composer, of the period in which he lived, and of the forerunners and contemporaries who affected his work”. Nketia’s stylistic diversity in his compositions is understood from his socio-cultural background, educational influence and his mentors.

#### 3.1. Socio-Cultural Influence

Nketia was born into a culture where music making is part of a fabric that teaches about their culture and ideas. That is to say that music making was part of their daily activities and sometimes people are identified by the type of music they make. Nketia found himself surrounded socially with musical experiences made up of traditional Akan music and dance and a corpus of creative verbal expressions. His early exposure to performances of traditional music coupled with the active participation in traditional musical performances by other family members greatly influenced to his numerous compositions. This exposure can be described as a process that started with the early exposure to all forms of traditional music, beginning from his associations with the activities of the palace as a royal, to the collection of them which evolved in the cultivation of a compositional style.

The cultural environment taught him the names of trees, birds, animals and other important sources of imagery in traditional poetry. He was also exposed to the various sounds of nature and their modes of meaning and participated and observed recreational singing, drumming and dancing. Nketia might have been influenced by such musical experiences or activities that existed in the society and which subsequently helped to inculcate in him the cultural foundations of the African, particularly, the Akan people. This explains his exclusive use of African materials in his compositions.

Indeed both the conception and the realization of all his works are in the African idiom. It was his interest in composition and the desire to increase his awareness of the organisation of the composite elements of his native music which later gave birth to his humanistic studies in African music (Dor 1994, p.24). His compositional styles were acquired largely through the early learning of the intricacies of the art in his community and also through social experiences. By this experience, he composed a lot of solo pieces because traditionally the African, or Ghanaian, accompanies every activity with a song which is a way of energizing him to work harder. The register or vocal range of most of his compositions does not go beyond the octave. Most of his voice solo with piano accompaniment begins from the high register and moves down depicting the indigenous way of singing. Additionally, he uses such devices as call and response, sequences and imitations which he found in his tradition.

#### 3.2. Educational Influence

The other aspect of influence that Nketia had was the formal education he received, both within and outside Ghana. His interest in traditional musical experiences, its context and organisation led him to the study of other disciplines – sociology, linguistics, etc. Nketia’s musical life began when he entered Presbyterian Training College at Akropong (1937 – 1941) to train as a professional teacher. It was at Akropong that he was introduced to the fundamentals of both African rhythm and Western music as well as the art of composition. Robert O. Danso, who took over from Ephraim Amu (father of art music in Ghana) as the music teacher at the Presbyterian Training College saw in Nketia a very desirous student who was eager to learn more about African music and therefore decided to encourage him.

Having noticed Nketia’s musical ambition, Otto Boateng, a famous composer at Larteh leased out his Macpherson book on harmony to him to encourage him. With sheer determination and by dint of hard work to acquire more musical knowledge, Nketia plunged into serious self tuition in harmony using the theory of music book he borrowed. He also assisted his music teacher, Robert O. Danso, copying his music for him and playing at church services whenever his teacher was unavailable. This really enhanced his musical abilities. Subsequently, he was appointed music master at his alma mater a year after completing his studies.

The outcome of this spirit of determination culminated in the composition of his earliest choral works in Akan language of Ghana such as,

	<b>Song title in Akan</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
1.	<i>Hann no beda adi</i>	The light will be made manifest
2.	<i>Monna N’ ase</i>	Thank Him
3.	<i>Monkamfo No</i>	Praise Him

Table 1

Some of his solo songs with piano accompaniment were also composed during this period, these are:

	<b>Song title in Akan</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
1.	<i>Wonya amane a na wohu wodɔfo</i>	A friend in need is a friend indeed
2.	<i>Yaanom! montie</i>	Countrymen, Listen!
3.	<i>Onipa beyɛɛ Bi</i>	A man came to do part
4.	<i>Maforo pata hunu</i>	I have climbed the ceiling in vain
5.	<i>Mmere nyinaa nse</i>	Times change

Table 2

These were all composed between 1942 and 1944. Nketia tried to develop his own personal compositional style using the traditional musical resources – call and response, parallel movements, singing in thirds and unison – due to his familiarity and collection of many Akan folk songs.

Between 1946 and 1960, Nketia undertook various studies in linguistics (school of Oriental and African studies), Harmony and counterpoint (Trinity College 1946 – 1949), Advanced Composition (Julliard School of Music, 1958 – 1960). These courses enabled Nketia to gain more insight and exposure to Western Musical styles, but which could also not erase the kind of influence that his traditional music already had on him. Like Floyd (1999) states, “as a Composer, Nketia’s multidisciplinary background in linguistics, traditional African music and Western music as well as his experience as an educator constitute an extraordinarily rich spectrum of influences that together inform his work”. It continues to state that because of “his indepth knowledge of the structure and organisation and the poetic configurations of the Akan language it is always his style to use poetic text in his compositions”. These experiences were quite fascinating for him as it enriched his compositional skills. As he himself puts it, “It enabled me not only to continue to compose songs in the traditional style but also to explore ways of creating meaningful synthesis of the techniques and materials I acquired abroad with those of my own culture” (Nketia 2004: 20).

A critical look at the style of the composition reveals a synthesization of modes and materials from both African and European musical circles. His studies in advanced composition, theory and counterpoint in the United Kingdom began to influence his compositional style with more elaborate harmonic systems, but with the same kind of melodic flow and lilt of his tradition. Some of the solo songs he composed in this period using some advanced techniques are:

	<b>Song title in Akan</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
1.	<i>Wo ho te sen</i>	How are you
2.	<i>Dwaben Heneba Foriwa</i>	Foriwa, Daughter of the chief of Dwaben
3.	<i>Aprannaa sa me</i>	Pursued by Thunder
4.	<i>ɔbarima Nifahene</i>	Valiant chief of the Right Wing
5.	<i>Obi reba a, mane me</i>	Send me something when someone is coming this way

Table 3

His studies in linguistics improved his use and knowledge in the prosodies and verbal procedures of the Akan language which contributed in no small measure to his well-knit language and melody relationship and the use of poetic text in his songs. Nketia’s quest to study the music of his tradition (Akan) and other traditions as a social anthropologist and an ethnomusicologist led him to collect, extensively, many songs as possible from various cultures in Ghana and in other parts of Africa – “Builsa, Kassena Nankani, Dagara, Anlo – Ewe of Ghana, the Fon of Benin, Ijaw of Nigeria; Bashi of Congo, Baganda of Uganda; Zaramo, Nyiramba, Nyamwezi and Sukuma of Tanzania” (Nketia 2004:22).

Similarly, he came into contact with the stylistic and performance features of diverse song forms – work songs, funeral songs, songs for religious rites, songs for initiation rites, etc., which he collected and used as models. Though his compositions are a blend of Western compositional styles and African elements, he relies more on his native materials due to his desire to have his music always connected to his heritage. As a result of his long association with traditional African musical characteristics, he has come to develop a personalized way of using these in his art compositions. This then identifies his diverse ways of his compositional styles.

### 3.3. Influence from Mentors

Nketia’s musical experience was also influenced by his mentors encompassing his teachers as well as his colleagues. One such personality was Rev. Robert O. Danso who was Nketia’s music teacher at the Presbyterian Training College, Akropong (1937 – 41). He had a lot of interaction with Robert O. Danso who was a great source of influence on his musical taste and style of playing the harmonium and also on his compositions. Nketia (2004, p.18) himself states “accordingly, I substituted for him (Robert Danso) when he was unable to play at church services, served as his music copyist and teaching assistant at the college as well as an Assistant Director of the local Singing Band that sang his compositions and those of Amu and later the choral works of Danso encouraged me to write”. This is evident that Nketia received his first tutorials in composition through Danso’s guidance and encouragement and also through the copying of his songs. In a chat with Nketia, he confirmed that he did get a lot of influence and guidance from Danso,

especially the model of his solo pieces was derived from Danso's own solo compositions which he listened to – *Meye ena ba ko* (orphan's song), *Korle Bu* (an arrangement of a Ga popular song).

In Ghana, particularly, two prominent composers stand out among a host of others; one as the pioneer (Ephraim Amu), and the other as the successor (J. H. K. Nketia). Through their efforts a new musical idea was developed which has been sustained over the years to the present. Amu composed a lot of choral pieces using traditional materials with Western harmonic materials. Nketia continued with this line of composition but with a personalised characteristic.

Ephraim Amu, the pioneer of Ghanaian art music compositions, was Nketia's greatest mentor in the art of composition. According to Nketia, during a conversation with him, Amu's first advice, on their first meeting, which was very candid but jokingly said, was "youngman I gather you are interested in composition. Don't copy my music". As Nketia speaks of his interaction with Amu (Vieta, 1999:466) which "... began a long period of friendship. On each occasion I visited Amu, he inspired me to do further research and compose new songs. He almost always advised me not to copy his style but develop my own. Amu became my model from that time". Nketia accepted this advice to be 'original' took up that challenge and collected and compiled a number of traditional songs such as, *adowa*, *mmobone*, *nwomkro*, *adenkum* and *asaadua*. Amu encouraged Nketia to study traditional African Musical sources and use them as creative resources. So, Nketia's collection coupled with his personalised treatment of traditional African Music in his compositions was achieved, it is believed, through the inspiration and encouragement he received from Amu. For example, his solo pieces were composed using Amu's *Bonwire Kente*, and *Akwaaba Ndwom* as a model.

Similar sentiments were expressed in America for a distinctive music that could be distinguished as "American". American composers were advised to study and use their heritage of folk music, which includes their Negro spirituals. A storm of this kind of 'traditionalism' also began to stir up in the African Musical circles. One can talk about compositions that were suffused with the spirit and substance of Yoruba, Akan, Ewe, Ibo, Baganda, Zaramo etc. folk songs from Africa and the Czech and Slovanic folk songs from Eastern Europe. Among European composers who dwelt on their heritage of folk music were Bela Bartok, Zoltan Kodaly, Anton Dvorak, Smetna, etc. It seems that all these composers made conscious efforts to dwell on folk elements of their tradition in their compositions.

Nketia was also inspired by the works of Bela Bartok who used a lot of folk materials in his composition. In fact, Nketia can be described as the Bela Bartok of Ghana because of his mastery of the approach prescribed by Bartok. Bartok's collection and study of folk music culminated in compositions that sounded like folk music without reference to any existing folk melodies. Bartok spent a considerable time of his life researching on traditional and folk music, not only in his homeland, but also in different parts of the world. It came as no surprise therefore that Bartok incorporated Magyar peasant music into his compositions. And that is how Nketia also approaches his compositions. Like Bela Bartok, Nketia is more traditional, and also more intricate like a craftsman who adds touches to a work that will never be seen, but are a necessary part of his preconceived design. Other personalities like Henry Cowell, composer and ethnomusicologist and Nketia's lecturer at Columbia University in New York also influenced his compositional style. (Bartok 2015:322)

#### 4. His Music

Kwabena Nketia does not limit himself to one mode of composition and therefore his compositional style mirrors the in-depth knowledge he has of the musical elements of other cultures, other than his own. His compositions cut across both choral and instrumental modes and they can be formed into four main clusters – Choral works (made up of both sacred and secular), Instrumental works (includes piano and instrumental arrangements) and an array of Solo art songs which he calls 'Sankudwom'. These works really manifest Nketia's diversified disposition. As much as he believes in diversity in his compositions, some of the compositions employ materials from other cultures as well. A cursory glance at some of these works reveal Nketia's desire to remain an African, thus, his strict adherence to the principles of traditional music in his choral and solo works. He starts his solo songs with long melodic phrases through which he reiterates his opening message in sequence. The widest range that Nketia uses in most of his songs (both solo and choral) is an octave and a major third above it. This means that Nketia works within a narrow compass of the voice which is a borrowed practice from the Akan tradition. He however compensates this limitation by giving the piano a wider range to operate. He avoids the use of chromaticism as Akan traditional songs are devoid of chromatics except the use of flattened sevenths which is widely practised in Akan traditional songs. His piano and instrumental works employ a diversity of elements from across cultures. For example, one of his finest piano pieces 'Play Time' is "based on two sources: a popular dance song in Nzema, a language spoken in Ghana, and a song from Eseni Ogho, a traditional music and dance type of the Ijaw of Nigeria" (Euba 1999:28). The Volta Fantasy another piano work also reveals the use of tonal and rhythmic elements the Anlo of Southern Ghana.

It is worth stating that so far, Nketia has composed about fifty-five (55) works for solo instruments (Violin, Cello, flute, piano) and twenty-two (22) choral pieces. Each of these pieces uses vastly varied styles of both Western and African Music idioms that pull out the stylistic diversity of his compositions.

#### 5. Conclusion

Nketia's stylistic diversity in his compositions provides a framework for researchers with a means of quantifying variability for a number of cultural forms, and of exploring the forces responsible for diversity and conformity. His successful utilization and application of African transcultural idioms as well as Western musical systems unearth his compositional style. This stems from his kind of social experiences, educational influence and experiences from his mentors. He is distinguished of his compositions that embody the fullest and deepest expression of himself as a man with artistic and aesthetic endowment. I wish to conclude by agreeing

with Nketia (1982, p.1) that “African children should be taught African music alongside European music [...] only in this way can we expect to create an African School of composition which necessarily has to be a fusion of African and European idioms”.

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