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African Pianism: Illustrations from 'Yiawo Kple Yibɔawo' On the Utilisation of Solely the Black Keys on the Piano

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Abstract:

This article gives a narrative of the thought processes of a composer while composing *yiawo kple yibɔawo* a composition that explored the use of solely the white keys of the piano in a three-movement work and solely the black keys in another. It recounts his personal experiences during his research and creative process which was characterised by uncertainties, frustrations, and an eventual sense of victory. The illustrations offer a guide for listeners to think creatively through the music. It then presents an analysis of the second part of the composition which dealt solely with the black keys of the piano. The composition exemplifies Euba's theory of African pianism and Nketia's syncretic approach to contemporary African art music composition.

Keywords: Creativity, African pianism, composition, analysis, narrative, thought process

1. Introduction

During the 2018 – 2019 academic year, the University of Cape Coast created a new course called Academic Writing. Fortunately, we happened to be the first batch of students offering the course. As part of the continuous assessment for the programme, we were asked to do a synthesis of ten articles on Academic Writing. Having perused the articles, there were a number of the studies that employed the narrative as a methodological approach of conveying their personal experiences in their field of endeavour. This gave me a sense of permission to try to put into words the subjective experience of engaging in a particular creative act.

This article charts my creative process in the composition of a piece of music entitled *Yiawo kple Yibɔawo* while pursuing my Master of Philosophy degree in Music Theory and Composition at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The narrative epitomises my journey towards the research and creative process which was characterised by uncertainties, frustrations, and an eventual sense of victory.

Against this background and in a reflective assessment of my experiences, I first offer an account of the theory that underpins this paper. Then outline my quest for an M.Phil, move further to focus on my engagement with the music composition (which is the creative part) and conclude with the analysis.

2. Theoretical Background

I adopted Nketia's (1983) syncretic approach to contemporary African art music composition and Euba's (1992) theory of African pianism in this paper. They argue that indigenous music and oral traditions are sources for creative ideas. In developing the theme of African pianism, Euba stated that techniques used in the performance of (African) xylophones, thumb pianos, plucked lutes, drum chimes [...] and the poly rhythmic methods of African instrumental music in general would form a good basis for an African pianistic style. Supporting the argument above Nketia (1994) stated that:

African Pianism refers to a style of Piano music which derives its characteristic idiom from the procedures of African percussion music as exemplified in bell patterns, drumming, xylophone and mbira music etc. It may use simple or extended rhythmic motifs or the lyricism of traditional songs and even those of African popular music as the basis of its rhythmic phrases (p. iii).

Both Euba and Nketia advocated that indigenous music is pivotal for creative ideas and may influence a composer's mode of expression and enable them to have a blend of indigenous and Western contemporary compositional techniques. They further reiterated that composers of contemporary African art music can make good use of African rhythmic resources to create unconventional harmonies and still maintain the desired dance lilt. Furthermore, to blend music across-cultures could lead to African classical pieces that would use western ingredients to make contemporary African compositions with indigenous melodic models that could draw on their traditional resources so that the composition will sound rhythmically, melodically and traditionally African in character (Herbst et al. 2003:159; Ansah 2009:15; Mereku 2012:40).

When we take a closer and critical look at the works in which elements of African pianism have featured such as Euba's *scenes from traditional life* (piano, 1970), Nketia's *African pianism* (1994), Gyimah Labi's *5 Dialects* (1994) and many others, they have diligently and tactfully employed generative resources of African descent as mentioned above. The need to compose using exclusively the black keys as found on the piano for a three-movement work, exploring the techniques

mentioned above would be an innovation. In other words, a composer from a non-western culture can also bring to bear the musical interculturalism African composers are striving to achieve in the twenty-first century.

3. Towards Obtaining My Master of Philosophy

I studied music at the Department of Music and Dance, University of Cape Coast, a preferred public university for many students in Ghana, and graduated as a professional and practicing musician. Thereafter I assisted in the teaching of music theory and composition, and also served as a piano accompanist for most music students offering voice, brass and wind as their applied musical instruments. I was later employed as a Senior Research Assistant at the same institution and served for two years after which I enrolled as a post-graduate student.

In the quest to pursue further studies, it dawned on me that for many years as a pianist, I have not played a single piano work devoid of the combination of the black and white keys as found on the piano. So, I approached my supervisors with the idea of the possibility of composing for solely the black and solely white keys of the piano with the argument that performers of piano music play various genre of music from preludes and fugues, nocturnes, sonatas and concertos which run through an array of keys. However, I have not sighted one solely written either for black or white keys of the piano especially in a large piano work. Surprisingly, my supervisors asked that I do a thorough search and get back to them. In my search however, I came across Etude op. 10. No. 5 by Frederic Chopin (1830). This piece was written for black keys in G flat major. It is characterized by rapid triplet figurations played by the right hand exclusively on the black keys with the exception for one note F natural which represents the only white key on the right-hand staff in the revised editions. (Wikipedia). Similarly, I have sighted a number of compositions on YouTube including *BGH Music entitled Play Only Black Keys* (2017) which is a song for the piano employing solely black keys and sounds jazzy. I also came across *Explore Your Inner Music- Play Only Black Keys* (September, 2018) which is more or less experimental where the composer plays anything he desires on the black keys. The composer is of the view that music does not care if the technique is silly, simple or advanced. Music comes from the heart and that is what matters. Contrary to the above examples, I have not sighted the written music or score of such music except for Chopin's Etude however, his has a note which is F natural.

4. Engaging with the Research Proposal and Thesis

A common feature of graduate studies is the stage where one needs to defend their proposal before they can be permitted to proceed with the thesis. According to Punch (2000), the proposal is a phase, plan, process, and product in the entire graduate research. There consists of a board of graduate studies, department, and a thesis committee whose concern is to assess whether the topic is suited to a graduate level of study, whether the research scope is acceptable; given the time constraints, whether there is likely to be difficulty in accessing sources to fulfil topic objectives, and what technologies might be needed to be learnt and used.

In presenting my master of philosophy proposal, I argued that Johann Sebastian Bach in his Well-Tempered Clavier wrote preludes and fugues for all the twenty-four major and minor keys for the harpsichord. The question, however, is, has anyone ever played through Bach's musical works which cuts across all the keys and ended up playing solely the white or solely black keys of the piano? Definitely not, even the masters such as Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Clementi etc. on the Western divide and Akin Euba, Gyima Labi, Kenn Kafui, Nketia, etc. on the African divide have perhaps not written any piano music solely for the white or black keys. Arguably one would have thought that key C major solves the envisaged problem but even in key C major, there may be the introduction of some accidentals and modulations to other keys common and central to any "good music". This curiosity ignited the urge in me to pursue this work called *Yiawo kple Yibɔawo* (meaning solely black and solely white). The problem my proposal seeks to uncover is twofold; first, to present a work that deliberately attempts to create a piece of music that can employ solely white keys of the piano for a three-movement work, and secondly solely black keys for another three-movement work, and still sustain the aesthetic interest in the music.

Even though I was confident that I had a good proposal to start with, my supervisors differed in their opinion. One argued that the black keys as seen on the piano, though pentatonic in nature sounds d r m s l, therefore, it can also be replicated on the white keys in terms of transposition and makes my argument weak. While the other agrees with me that it is possible and doable if we limit it to solely the black keys of the piano and restrict any form of transposition and state that the music was solely written for the black keys and not any other. Not quite certain about the outcome, I had to persistently argue my case until finally the thesis committee approved my proposal which gave impetus for me to start the thesis proper.

5. Creating Yiawo kple Yibɔawo

The composition *Yiawo kple Yibɔawo* was initiated by the desire to have a piano work that is composed solely for the black keys of the piano as well as for the white. But for the purpose of this paper, particular focus is geared towards the composition for solely the black keys as can be deduce from the title of this paper.

At the time work begun, and considering the nature and scope of the work coupled with time constraints, data were collected from secondary sources. The instruments for the collection of data were audio-video recordings, books, virtual and documentaries. A total of twenty enhemitonic pentatonic melodies were collected through the purposive sampling method and transcribed. Thereafter three were randomly sampled and used for the composition for the black keys. The transcription of the music was done using a music manuscript and pencil after which it was later transferred into computer software called Finale. Below are the three *ŋɛlɔ* melodies transcribed and notated for the work.

Mia Wo Ya Mie Gbɔna fe Ga Me

De Srɔ La Fe

Aklie Ɖo Go Ka Me

Figure 1

As indicated earlier, my sources of data collection were secondary in nature. The criteria for the analysis of the songs were primarily based on melody and rhythm. This is because my objectives were to ensure that the melodies lend themselves to the black keys of the piano. The enhemitonic pentatonic melodies do not have semitones as members of the scale as shown in the figure below.

Figure 2

Having this in mind and being conscious of the fact that not all *Anɔ* pentatonic melodies are exclusively enhemitonic in nature, I did the following:

- Sang through the songs.
- Analysed the melodic structures.
- Grouped all melodies that are enhemitonic pentatonic.
- Finally transcribed the melodies.

After collecting the twenty songs, I used the random sampling method to sample out the three melodies transcribed above. What I did, was to write the titles of the twenty songs and put them into a bowl. After every shake of the bowl, I picked one song until I exhausted the three.

5. The Compositional Process

Having a preconceived notion that without the combination of the black and white keys of the piano, “good music” cannot be achieved is a myth I desired to unravel at that stage of my musical career as a Master of Philosophy Music Theory

and Composition Student. Looking at the data before me and the fact that I was composing for only the black keys of the piano, which limits me to just five pitches to experiment with was quite a daunting and herculean task. But in this state of flux, there was a glimmer of hope, when according to Scholes (1991), as cited by Mereku, Addo, and Ohene-Okantah (2005), posits that “the composer’s mind is fertile soil in which seeds of new music may be cultivated”. Scholes says ‘ideas do not spring out of thin air and that everything in this world has a source’. Going by the above, I embarked on the creative process.

As I pondered on how to proceed, these compositional devices (motifs, sequences, repetition, variation, fragmentation, transition, ornamentation, and ostinato) became obvious choices as they are means by which music can be meaningfully put together and also used in describing the various techniques and structures of music. The idea of *Anlo* drum patterns (especially *Agbekor/Agbadza* bell patterns) became a prominent feature and used as ostinato patterns throughout the composition either in full cycle or in fragments.

6. Analysis

The analysis of the work is purely a descriptive one. This is because I have decided not to refer to keys and modulations in my work since I am dealing solely with the black keys of the piano. I also envisaged a problem of pivot chords which are very essential should one refer to modulations which are evidently absent in my compositions because of the limited pitches I had to deal with. Therefore, one should analyse the composition through this lens.

6.1. First Movement

The first movement of the composition for solely the black keys of the piano is based on a song from the *Anlo* traditional area in the Volta Region of Ghana titled *Mi Dzra Mɔa Ɖo*. The first 16 measures serve as the introduction of the work. The *Agbadza/Agbekor* bell pattern was briefly introduced in measure 17 with a modified refrain of the theme which ends at measure 34.



Figure 3: Excerpt of the Agbadza Bell Pattern in the LH

The theme is fully stated from measures 35–58 in coupling (unison) as sung by the *Anlos*. Measure 59–84 was a total digression from the theme where there was a tensed rhythmic passage accentuated in the left hand (LH) and right hand (RH). Measure 85–92 saw the reintroduction of the refrain of the theme. After, a fragment of the theme was presented sequentially at different stages and levels from measure 93–102. Finally, the whole theme was restated with the bell patterns serving as an accompaniment to end of the piece at measure 129.

6.2. Second Movement

This movement is also based on a song by the *Anlos* titled *Ɖe Srɔ La fe Ne Gbewhich* which takes off with a 7-measure introduction which has a feel of the theme embedded in it. The brief theme now emerges from the bass (LH) with a drum pattern in the RH serving as an accompaniment to the theme from measures 8–12 using the rhythmic pattern of *kroboto* in the ensemble of *Atsiagbekor*. Suddenly, the theme switches into a frenzy fast tempo serving as a digression for 4 measures. Eventually the whole theme song is presented this time in the RH with an *Agbadza* bell pattern accompanying from measures 17–31 in the LH. It is interesting to note that the bell pattern accompaniment keeps changing with other drum patterns along with the theme.

Figure 4: Excerpts of the Theme and Bell Accompaniment

Subsequently, the end of the theme was extended sequentially for six measures in unison (coupling). From measures 38–46 there was a dialogue between the RH and LH alternatively somewhat like a call and response as shown in the example below.



Figure 5: Dialogue between LH and RH

This was followed by the reintroduction of part of the theme with bell pattern accompaniment. In a similar fashion part of the somewhat call and response was reintroduced which subsequently led to the restatement of the entire theme that led to the end of the piece in measure 72.

6.3. Third Movement

The last movement is also based on a song by the *Anjls* titled *A Klie Do Go Ka Me*. It opens with a 14-measure introduction which subsequently leads to a two-measure bell and drum pattern accompaniment after which the theme emerged in measure 17–28. Moving on, after every two measures of rhythmic interplay, comes a measure of the concluding part of the theme. This lasted for 12 measures as shown in the example below.



Figure 6: Fragments of the Recurring Theme

In measure 39–44 there was a dialogue between the RH and the LH which culminates into a unison (coupling) from measures 45–48. Thereafter there is the reintroduction of the rhythmic interplay as shown in example 12 above. However, in measure 59, a motif of the theme was introduced in the LH with decorations in the RH for four measures long as in the example 13 below. This, thereafter, culminates into the unison that emerged earlier in measure 45–48.



Figure 7: Excerpts of Motifs in the LH and Decorations in the RH

From measures 69 the theme was restated exactly as in measure 17–28 and quickly followed by the four-measure motif and decorations as in Figure 7. Finally, the piece ended with a heavy unison (coupling) in both hands from measure 87–92. The following are the scores of the three compositions for solely the black keys of the Piano.

XIGBOAWO GBĀTŌ

MI DZRA MŌA ĐO

Piano

102

mf

rit.

p

mf

rit.

p

a tempo

8

ff

mp

accel.

ff

17

p

mf

p

p

25

mp

mf

33

f

41

mp

49

mp

57

65

f

f

73

mf

Figure 8

Figure 9 is a musical score for piano and bass. It consists of seven systems of staves. The first system includes a tempo marking 'a tempo' and dynamic markings 'rit.' and 'mp'. The second system has a dynamic marking 'f'. The third system has a dynamic marking 'p'. The fourth system has a dynamic marking 'f'. The fifth system has a dynamic marking 'mp'. The sixth system has a dynamic marking 'mp'. The seventh system has a dynamic marking 'f'. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 9

XIGBOAWO GBATO
MI DZRA MJA DO

Piano

Figure 10 is a musical score for piano and bass, titled "XIGBOAWO GBATO MI DZRA MJA DO". It consists of eight systems of staves. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first system includes a tempo marking 'Piano' and dynamic markings 'mf' and 'f'. The second system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The third system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The fourth system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The fifth system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The sixth system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The seventh system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The eighth system has a dynamic marking 'mf'. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 10

XIGBOAWO EVELIA
DE SRO LA JE

The image displays a piano score for the piece 'Xigboawo Evelia de Sro la Je'. The score is written in 3/8 time and consists of ten systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The piece begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 96. The dynamics range from *mf* (mezzo-forte) to *pp* (pianissimo). Performance instructions include *accel.* (accelerando) at measure 11 and *a tempo* at measure 16. The score features various rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and rests. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Figure 11

Figure 12 is a musical score for piano and bass. It consists of five systems of music. The first system starts at measure 46 and ends at measure 55. The second system starts at measure 56 and ends at measure 60. The third system starts at measure 61 and ends at measure 65. The fourth system starts at measure 66 and ends at measure 70. The fifth system starts at measure 71 and ends at measure 77. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *mf*.

Figure 12

ΣΙΓΒΩΑΩ ΕΤΟΛΙΑ
ΑΚΛΙΕ ΔΟ ΓΟ ΚΑ ΜΕ

Figure 13 is a musical score for piano and bass, titled "ΣΙΓΒΩΑΩ ΕΤΟΛΙΑ ΑΚΛΙΕ ΔΟ ΓΟ ΚΑ ΜΕ". It consists of six systems of music. The first system starts at measure 1 and ends at measure 6. The second system starts at measure 7 and ends at measure 12. The third system starts at measure 13 and ends at measure 18. The fourth system starts at measure 19 and ends at measure 24. The fifth system starts at measure 25 and ends at measure 30. The sixth system starts at measure 31 and ends at measure 37. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *f*, *rit.*, *p*, and *mf*.

Figure 13

Figure 14

7. Conclusions

The composition demonstrates that it is possible to write for solely the black keys of the piano and still have “good music” using traditional African idioms. Normally, music is written for the piano usually by combining the black and white keys and the results are the determination of a tonal centre which paves ways for modulations to the dominant, subdominant, relative minor and other remote keys. But in this work modulations to other keys are restricted or partially absent because some members of the chord are unavoidably absent. This adds to the novelty of the research work.

In an attempt to create *Yiawo kple Yibɔawo* in piano music, it is important to note that I carefully or purposefully chose songs that are enhemitonic pentatonic in nature for the black keys. This is because of the common features and similarities that exist between the enhemitonic pentatonic melodies and the black keys of the piano. Thus, the enhemitonic pentatonic scales already lend themselves to the arrangements of the black keys as found on the piano. Therefore, in composing for the black keys, drum and bell patterns of *Agbadza* and *Atsiagbekor* were employed. This goes to reiterate what Euba and Nketia said with regards to African pianism where techniques used in the performance of (African) xylophones, thumb pianos, plucked lutes, drum chimes and the polyrhythmic methods of African instrumental music are good basis for an African pianistic style.

From the study, it is fascinating to allocate, in an innovative manner, various rhythmic patterns to the black keys on the piano to invoke traditional tendencies so as to make the work sound traditionally African and percussive. The

structuring and allocation of these patterns involves the expressions of the drum patterns explored in the dances. As observed by Anku (1997), individual instruments do not merely coexist but are positioned deliberately with each other to weave a characteristic lilt (composite or kinetic resultant) which becomes a rhythmic mode, serving as foreground, on which a vocal repertoire may be superimposed.

Some musical devices were used in the compositions for the black keys of the piano. Notable among them was the ostinato (recurring pattern) which was employed in the accompaniment to depict the rhythmic bell pattern of *Aḡlɔ* songs and other recurring drum patterns. Imitation was also used as a dialogue between the right hand (RH) and the left hand (LH) to make the work interactive. Sequences were also used to present fragments of the theme at various stages of the development section to make the work interesting. It is now obvious that the enhemitonic pentatonic melodies and the black keys of the piano have the same pitches as members of the scale. Therefore, one could easily write for the black keys using enhemitonic pentatonic melodies from *Aḡlɔ* without much difficulty as demonstrated in the compositions.

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