

AFRICA, MY AFRICA
(Choir and Chamber Orchestral)

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A Musical and Interpretive Analysis of *Africa, My Africa* by Isong Isong Akpan

Africa, My Africa is a lyrical and patriotic choral-orchestral composition for SATB choir and chamber orchestra, with text and music by Isong Isong Akpan. Originally written for voices in 2023 and orchestrated in 2025, the work celebrates the beauty, resilience, and enduring hope of the African continent. Central to the composer's imagery is the metaphor of a flower, symbolising Africa's innocence, unity, and capacity for renewal.

The piece opens with a radiant orchestral introduction in which strings, brass, and flute interweave to create a bright, uplifting texture. The choir then enters unison on the tonic, a gesture that evokes a powerful sense of continental unity before the ruptures of colonial history. As the music unfolds, the choral writing blossoms into rich harmony, invoking images of flags, flowers, freedom, and divine blessing. Cast in a ternary structure, the central section adopts a more lyrical and prayerful tone, while the final section builds towards a triumphant affirmation of Africa as "the hope of all continents." The work concludes with a reverent benediction, "May the good Lord make His face to shine on you", bringing together African identity, Western choral tradition, and Christian spirituality in a single expressive arc. The result is a vibrant testament to pride, faith, and continental aspiration.

Harmonic and Structural Overview

Opening Section (Bars 1–8, Andante)

The work begins in E major, with the orchestral introduction establishing a warm tonal centre. The strings carry the principal thematic material, while the brass and flute provide imitative responses that enrich the texture. The atmosphere is one of brightness and expectation.

Bars 9–24: Choral Entry and Thematic Establishment

The choir enters in unison on the tonic E with the text "Africa, my dearest continent," reinforcing the symbolism of unity. The flower motif, representing innocence and beauty, is introduced here. Harmonically, the writing is predominantly diatonic, moving between tonic and dominant (I–V–I) in a hymn-like manner that supports the ternary design.

Bars 25–40: Expansion and Dialogue

This section features interplay between soprano and tenor lines, with moments of unison intended to emphasise togetherness, particularly in the phrase "Raise all your flags and brightly shine." The subsequent harmonic expansion, supported by subtle flute embellishments, prepares the listener for a more reflective and contemplative middle section.

Middle Section (Bars 41–56): Lyrical and Prayerful

The music briefly shifts to the relative minor (C minor) before returning to E major through a firm cadence. The text, “Africa the hope of all continents, riches and undying joy recline”, is set with greater harmonic adventure, including secondary dominants and modal inflections. Triplet figures introduce rhythmic fluidity, complemented by pizzicato strings. The texture becomes more contrapuntal, with overlapping vocal lines rather than strict homophony. Symbolically, this section evokes themes of freedom, renewal, and divine blessing, underscored by Christian ethical references such as “Love your neighbours, that’s God’s commandment.”

Coda and Closing Benediction (Bars 57–End)

The final section returns firmly to E major. The choir expands into full harmony with a crescendo to fortissimo on the declaration “All my days, I’ll ever love you, Africa, my Africa.” The harmonic language broadens, featuring plagal cadences (IV–I) and a sustained tonic pedal that heightens the spiritual character of the closing. The orchestra doubles the choral lines, enriched by trills, sequences, and brass fanfares that evoke solidarity, freedom, love, and patriotism. The benediction, “May the good Lord make His face shine on you”, is delivered with reverence, supported by a rich yet controlled orchestral texture. The work concludes prayerfully, with a quiet, settled cadence reminiscent of a liturgical “Amen.” The full duration is approximately 3 minutes and 17 seconds.

Rehearsal Considerations

Several practical challenges arise in preparing this work for performance.

- **Unison entries** require careful tuning, as early inaccuracies can undermine the intended atmosphere of unity.
- **Diction** must be clear and well-articulated; rehearsing the text rhythmically before adding pitch can support clarity.
- **Triplet passages** demand precision and may require subdivision to maintain ensemble cohesion.
- **Balance** is crucial in tutti sections; the orchestra should support rather than overpower the choir.
- **Cadential transitions**, particularly the plagal cadences, should be rehearsed to avoid abrupt or uneven cut-offs.

Interpretive Notes

The conductor should foreground the imagery embedded in the text, flowers, flags, freedom, and divine blessing, as these images shape the emotional colour of the performance. The work is not merely patriotic; it carries a spiritual dimension that calls for sincerity rather than sheer volume. The intended audience impact is one of upliftment and reverence, culminating in a sense of blessing.

Tenors and basses should aim for resonance without heaviness, while triplet figures across the choir should feel natural and speech-like rather than mechanical. Orchestral colour, particularly from clarinet and flute, should remain transparent beneath the choral texture.

Phrasing should be shaped in long, expressive lines, avoiding fragmentation between measures. The climactic phrase “Africa, the hope of all continents” should be delivered with full resonance at a controlled mezzo piano. Brass and strings swell with the choir but remain sensitive to textual clarity. Rhythmic drive should build towards ritardando passages before releasing into *a tempo* with grandeur. Cut-offs require unified execution to preserve dignity and poise.

Final Benediction (Bars 61–End)

The closing benediction demands a warm, prayerful tone. Dynamics should remain gentle and moderately soft, with the orchestra sustaining a delicate texture, particularly in the strings, where bow pressure must remain light. The final cadence should be treated as a quiet, settled “Amen,” with the conductor maintaining a still, reverent tempo to avoid rushing the concluding bars.

Programme Note

Africa, My Africa by Isong Isong Akpan is a vibrant choral-orchestral celebration of African identity, unity, and hope. Originally composed for voices in 2023 and orchestrated in 2025, the work blends Western choral tradition with African imagery and Christian spirituality.

The piece opens with a radiant orchestral introduction before the choir enters in unison, symbolising continental unity. As the music unfolds, the harmony blossoms into rich textures that evoke flowers, flags, freedom, and divine blessing. The ternary structure moves from joyful affirmation to a lyrical, prayer-like middle section, before rising to a triumphant declaration of Africa as “the hope of all continents.”

The work concludes with a gentle benediction, “May the good Lord make His face shine on you”, leaving the listener with a sense of reverence and uplift. With its accessible melodic writing, expressive orchestration, and thematic depth, Africa, My Africa stands as a musical testament to pride, faith, and the enduring spirit of the African continent.

Score Study Guide

1. Form and Structure

- Ternary form (A–B–A’)
- A (Bars 1–40): Bright, patriotic, hymn-like; unison opening symbolises unity.
- B (Bars 41–56): Lyrical, prayerful; brief move to relative minor; contrapuntal textures.
- A’/Coda (Bars 57–End): Triumphant return to E major; plagal cadences reinforce spiritual tone.

2. Tonal and Harmonic Features

- Primary key: E major.
- Middle section briefly shifts to C# minor before returning to the tonic.

- Harmony is largely diatonic with occasional secondary dominants and modal inflections.
- Closing cadences often plagal (IV–I), enhancing the benedictory character.

3. Texture and Orchestration

- Orchestral introduction establishes brightness through strings, brass, and flute.
- Choir moves from unison to four-part harmony, reflecting thematic growth.
- Middle section features pizzicato strings, triplets, and overlapping vocal lines.
- Final section thickens with brass fanfares, sustained strings, and choral crescendos.

4. Rhythmic Considerations

- Predominantly steady and hymn-like in the outer sections.
- Triplets in the middle section require unified subdivision across choir and orchestra.
- Maintain natural speech rhythm in text-driven passages.

5. Text and Interpretation

- Key images: flowers, flags, freedom, blessing.
- Encourage singers to internalise imagery for warmth and sincerity of tone.
- The final benediction should feel prayerful, not declamatory.

6. Rehearsal Priorities

- Unison tuning at the opening, establish pitch centre early.
- Diction clarity, especially in consonant clusters.
- Balance in tutti passages, ensure orchestra supports rather than overwhelms.
- Cadential control, smooth, unified releases to preserve dignity.
- Triplet precision, rehearse slowly before integrating into full tempo.

7. Conducting Notes

- Shape long phrases; avoid breaking the musical line between bars.
- Manage brass dynamics carefully in climactic passages.
- Prepare clear cues for cut-offs and transitions, especially in the benediction.
- Maintain a calm, reverent tempo in the final bars to allow the “Amen-like” cadence to settle.

Africa, My Africa

For Mixed Voices of SATB and Chamber Orchestra

Words & Music by
Isong Isong Akpan

4

Andante

Flute *mf*

Clarinet in Bb *mf*

Trumpet in Bb *mp*

Trombone *mp*

SOPRANO
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

Violin I *f*

Violin II *f*

Viola *f*

Violoncello *f*

mp

mf

A - fri - ca my dear - est, con - ti - nent, blessed Land that she is mine...

mp

mp

mp

18

Heart and mind like flowers, so in - no - cent, rise all your flags and bright - ly shine. Rise to your free - dom.

p

p

p



23

time is far spent, fill your jar with new - est wine.

6

Speak the truth and nev - er be ti - leat; Rise to the faith and love di - vine. A - fri - ca, my dear - est, con - ti - nent, blessed, I am that she is mine;



29

Heart and mind like flow'rs, so, in - no - cent, raise all your flags and bright - ly shine.

32

Rise to your free - dom, time is fur spent, fill your jar with new - est wine

35



36

Speak the truth and nev - er be si - lent, Rise to the faith and love di - vine

39

53

Speak the truth... and nev - er be si - lent. Rise... to the faith and love di - vine.

This musical system contains measures 53 through 56. It features a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a prominent triplet pattern in the right hand and a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4.

57

All my days, I'll e - ver love you, A - fi - ca, my A - fi -

This musical system contains measures 57 through 60. It features a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a complex, fast-moving melodic line in the right hand and a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. Dynamics markings include *mp* and *div. f*.

10

ca. May the good Lord, make His face to shine, to shine on you.

ca.