

# Ebi Npa Wa!

(We Are Hungry!)

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## Abstract

*Ebi Npa Wa!* (“We Are Hungry!”) is a contemporary Nigerian SATB choral composition that transforms the nation’s current economic hardship into a powerful musical statement. Scored for mixed choir with piano accompaniment, the work draws on Yoruba linguistic expression and communal lament traditions to articulate collective frustration, deprivation, and resilience. Its through-composed structure, reinforced by recurring motivic refrains, enables the text to unfold with emotional immediacy, while call-and-response textures, homophonic clarity, and contrapuntal layering heighten its expressive intensity. The harmonic language blends diatonic tonality with modal inflections and moments of dissonance that mirror social instability, supported by a rhythmically active piano part that evokes indigenous percussive patterns. Beyond its aesthetic qualities, the composition functions as a socio-musical archive, capturing the lived realities of inflation, food scarcity, and migration pressures. *Ebi Npa Wa!* ultimately positions choral music as a medium of civic reflection, communal solidarity, and subtle resistance within contemporary Nigerian society.

**Keywords:** African Choral Expression, Economic Hardship, Musical Social Commentary, Nigerian Art Music, Yoruba Lament Tradition

### Introduction

Choral music in contemporary Africa has increasingly become a vehicle for articulating collective anxieties, socio-political critique, and communal resilience. As economic instability, inflation, and widening social inequalities continue to shape everyday life in Nigeria, composers have turned to structured musical forms to document lived realities and give voice to public sentiment. *Ebi Npa Wa!* (“We Are Hungry!”) emerges from this creative and socio-historical moment, transforming economic hardship into a powerful artistic statement. African musical traditions have long positioned music as a medium through which communities negotiate crisis, express solidarity, and assert agency in the face of structural pressures (Waterman, 1990; Turino, 2008). Within this framework, choral composition becomes not merely an aesthetic exercise but a mode of civic engagement.

Scored for SATB choir with piano accompaniment, *Ebi Npa Wa!* draws on Yoruba expressive culture, where declarative utterances and communal lamentation function as both social commentary and emotional release. The work’s textual refrain, built around the phrase *Ebi npa wa*, encapsulates a shared experience of deprivation while invoking the collective pronoun *wa* (“we”), thereby reinforcing communal identity. The choral idiom, deeply embedded in Nigerian educational, ecclesiastical, and civic traditions, provides an accessible platform for encoding contemporary concerns within a familiar performance practice (Gbeho, 2014). Through its integration of Western harmonic structures, indigenous rhythmic sensibilities, and socially charged text, the composition exemplifies the intercultural creativity that characterises modern African art music.

In this context, *Ebi Npa Wa!* operates simultaneously as artistic expression, cultural documentation, and subtle resistance. Its musical language mirrors the instability of the socio-economic environment, while its structural clarity and communal textures affirm the enduring capacity of Nigerian choral music to articulate national consciousness and foster collective reflection.

## Background and Socio-Cultural Context

*Ebi Npa Wa!* (“We Are Hungry!”) is a contemporary Nigerian SATB choral composition with piano accompaniment that emerges directly from the lived economic realities of twenty-first-century Nigeria. The work is situated within a socio-historical moment marked by persistent inflation, currency instability, rising food insecurity, and intensified migration pressures. The title, drawn from the Yoruba expression *Ebi n pa wa*, functions simultaneously as lament, communal outcry, and socio-political indictment. In Yoruba communicative aesthetics, declarative utterances of this kind often transcend literal meaning to embody collective consciousness and shared suffering, situating the composition within indigenous traditions of socially responsive art (Barber, 1999).

Recent economic conditions in Nigeria have been characterised by dramatic increases in the prices of staple foods such as rice, beans, garri, yam, and maize. Escalating fuel prices, transportation costs, and currency devaluation have further strained household economies, disrupting food distribution chains and limiting access to necessities. Reports from the National Bureau of Statistics consistently show that food inflation has outpaced general inflation, intensifying concerns about nutrition, livelihood sustainability, and social stability. These pressures intersect with broader systemic challenges in the health and education sectors, including rising tuition fees, infrastructural decay, intermittent industrial actions, and increased medical costs. Such conditions have contributed to the contemporary *Japa* phenomenon—the mass emigration of skilled professionals and young graduates seeking stability abroad. Thus, *Ebi Npa Wa!* resonates not only as a cry of hunger but as a metaphor for deprivation, frustration, and displacement within a fragile socio-economic ecosystem.

The composition aligns with long-standing African traditions in which music functions as social commentary and communal documentation. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s oeuvre exemplifies this role, demonstrating how Nigerian music has historically served as a vehicle for political critique and mass mobilisation. Similarly, the choral idiom, deeply rooted in church, school, and community traditions, has become a powerful medium for encoding contemporary anxieties within structured musical forms (Okafor, 2005). By adopting the SATB choral texture with piano

accompaniment, the composer situates the work at the intersection of Western art-music conventions and Nigerian choral practice, enabling accessibility across academic, ecclesiastical, and civic performance contexts.

The work therefore operates on multiple levels:

- **Aesthetic:** employing structured harmonic and melodic devices characteristic of art-music composition.
- **Cultural:** drawing upon Yoruba linguistic expression and communal lament traditions.
- **Socio-political:** responding to inflation, rising living costs, weakened public institutions, and migration pressures.
- **Advocacy:** framing choral music as an instrument of civic reflection and subtle resistance.

Consequently, *Ebi Npa Wa!* transcends mere artistic production; it becomes a socio-musical archive of contemporary Nigerian realities. By embedding economic commentary within harmonic, melodic, and textual structures, the composition affirms the enduring African principle that music is inseparable from lived experience (Nketia, 1974). It positions Nigerian choral art not only as a performance tradition but as a responsive intellectual discourse capable of articulating national anxieties and aspirations.

### Textual and Thematic Structure

The textual framework is built around repetition and declamatory phrasing that heighten emotional urgency. The refrain *Ebi npa wa* reinforces collective identity and shared struggle, while the use of the Yoruba language strengthens authenticity and audience identification. Thematically, the work engages economic hardship, food scarcity, social inequality, and communal resilience. Rather than presenting despair alone, the musical setting suggests solidarity, an important characteristic of African choral traditions (Akuno, 2010).

### Musical Structure and Form

The composition follows a through-composed structure with recurring motivic refrains. Key musical features include:

- **Call-and-response textures**, rooted in indigenous performance practice.
- **Homophonic passages**, emphasising textual clarity.
- **Contrapuntal layering** in climactic sections.
- **Dynamic contrasts (p–ff)** that mirror emotional intensity.

These features align with African dialogic aesthetics, where musical structure often mirrors social interaction (Agawu, 2003).

### Harmonic and Rhythmic Language

The harmonic language blends:

- diatonic tonal harmony,
- modal inflections reflective of Yoruba melodic idioms,
- occasional dissonance representing tension and instability.

Rhythmically, the work employs:

- syncopation characteristic of Nigerian popular and folk idioms,
- steady ostinato figures in the piano,
- percussive articulation that enhances textual emphasis.

The piano part functions both as harmonic support and rhythmic driver, occasionally imitating African drum patterns, a technique consistent with African pianism (Uzoigwe, 1998).

### Performance Considerations

Effective performance requires:

- clear diction and expressive phrasing,
- careful dynamic shaping,
- balanced sectional voicing,
- rhythmic precision in syncopated passages.

Conductors are encouraged to foreground the socio-political intent of the work, ensuring that performance communicates both urgency and collective solidarity.

### Discussion of the Musical Analysis

*Ebi Npa Wa!* exemplifies contemporary Nigerian art music's negotiation between Western harmonic structures and African socio-musical consciousness. The opening in E-flat major establishes tonal stability; however, as Ekwueme (2002) argues, tonal adoption in Nigerian choral works often functions not as imitation but as adaptive recontextualisation within African expressive frameworks. The six-bar piano introduction acts as a mood-setter, consistent with Nzewi's (2003) assertion that instrumental preludes in African-derived art music contextualise communal narrative.

The unison choral entry is particularly significant. Nzewi (2003) notes that communal vocal alignment signifies shared social identity, while Akuno (2010) emphasises that African choral expression privileges collective consciousness over individual display. Thus, the unison texture musically embodies the communal pronoun *wa* ("we").

At bar 13, the introduction of a ii(add9) resolving to V expands harmonic colour. While extended tertian sonorities derive from Western tonal theory, Omibiyi-Obidike (2001) observes that Nigerian composers frequently manipulate such resources to intensify text-driven affect. The antiphonal exchange between upper and lower voices (bars 15–18) reflects African dialogic aesthetics. Okafor (2005) argues that call-and-response structures function as democratic sonic spaces, distributing expressive agency across ensemble strata. Nzewi (2003) corroborates this view, describing African ensemble dialogue as participatory rather than hierarchical.

The cyclical harmonic progression (I–vi–iii–ii–V) reinforces tonal direction while aligning with Uzoigwe's (1998) observation that African art music often employs repetition-with-variation as a means of intensification. The modulation to F major at bar 39 represents an upward tonal shift. Euba (1990) notes that African composers frequently use modulation symbolically to articulate transformation or heightened communal emotion.

The concluding divisi major sonority embodies harmonic expansion as affirmation. Ekwueme (2002) argues that contemporary Nigerian choral writing often culminates in expanded vertical sonorities to signify unity-in-diversity, a metaphor for communal resilience. Thus, the divisi texture transforms lament into layered solidarity.

In synthesis, *Ebi Npa Wa!* aligns with African art-music traditions that integrate Western tonal grammar with indigenous dialogic structure, socio-political commentary, and communal identity formation. The work exemplifies what Uzoigwe (1998) describes as intercultural compositional modernism, rooted locally, articulated structurally, and resonant socially.

# Ebi Npa Wa

We are hungry!

Michael Bakare

5/2/2024

*Spirito Andante* (♩ = 80)

Piano

rit. Ped. *mp* *a tempo*

5

SA  
TB

Ga ri ti won o e bi npa wa e po ti

Ga ri ti won o e bi npa wa e po ti

Pno.

9

SA  
TB

won gbo gbo re lo d'o ju ru Nai ji ri a i lu to' san fun

won gbo gbo re lo d'o ju ru Nai ji ri a i lu to' san fun

Pno.



Ebi Npa Wa

3

12

SA wa ra a t'o yin Nai ji ri a i lu mi

TB wa ra a t'o yin Nai ji ri

12

15

SA ga ri di wi won' i su ko' se ra e lu bo di go' lu a ra e gbo

TB ga ri di wi won' i su ko' se ra

15

18

SA i re si lon je a won o lo wo o jo nse se ge se ge ko' ro de de mo

TB e lu bo di go' lu a ra e gbo i re si lon je a won o lo wo o jo nse se ge se ge ko' ro de de mo

18

4 Ebi Npa Wa *rit.*

SA  
o ti su mi o se o si ma da ra? ga ri ti

TB  
o ti su ga ri ti

Pno.

21 *a tempo*

SA  
won o e bi npa wa e po ti won gbo gbo re lo'o ju ru Nai ji ri

TB  
won o e bi npa wa e po ti won gbo gbo re lo'o ju ru Nai ji ri

Pno.

25

SA  
a i lu to' san fun wa ra a t'o yin Nai ji ri a i lu mi so'

TB  
a i lu to' san fun wa ra a t'o yin Nai ji ri

Pno.

29



Ebi Npa Wa

5

33

SA  
di gba ti nba ja pa e bi npa wa ko si o wo ko si i na ko si a bo

TB  
so' di gba ti nba ja pa e bi npa wa ko si o wo ko si i na ko si a bo

Pno.

37

*rit.* *a tempo*

SA  
e po ti won do llar ti bo ri o ga ri ti won o e bi npa

TB  
e po ti won ga ri ti won o e bi npa

Pno.

41

SA  
wa e po ti won gbo gbo re lo d'o ju ru Nai ji ri a i lu to' san fun

TB  
wa e po ti won gbo gbo re lo d'o ju ru Nai ji ri a i lu to' san fun

Pno.

Ebi Npa Wa

6  
45

SA  
wa ra a t'o yin Nai ji ri a i lu mi ki O lo run

TB  
wa ra a t'o yin Nai ji ri

Pno.

45

SA  
k'o mu wa bo ri i lu o ro' gbo i' yan mu O lo run

TB  
i lu o ro' gbo i' yan mu

Pno.

49

SA  
*molto rit.* sa' nu fun wa e bi npa wa e bi npa wa e bi npa wa **Fine**

TB  
sa' nu fun wa e bi npa wa e bi npa wa e bi npa wa

Pno.

53

53



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