

Oyoma

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Abstract

Oyoma is a contemporary piano composition that fuses atonality, pitch-cell organisation, and African rhythmic logic to create a distinctive Niger Delta sound world. Structured in an extended binary form, the work unfolds through a sequence of tightly constructed pitch cells that generate tonal ambiguity while enabling motivic transformation. Its harmonic language is shaped by drones, chromatic inflections, modal colouring, and intervallic emphasis on simple and compound thirds. Rhythmic design forms the core of the piece’s identity, featuring imitation, diminution, syncopation, hemiola, and a striking episode of rhythmic phase shifting that produces subtle temporal displacement. Drawing inspiration from Udje dance patterns and Urhobo percussive aesthetics, the composition integrates indigenous rhythmic vocabulary with contemporary pianistic techniques. Through its interplay of cellular construction, evolving textures, and culturally grounded rhythmic processes, *Oyoma* offers a sophisticated and intellectually engaging contribution to modern African piano repertoire, demonstrating the expressive potential of intercultural compositional practice.

Keywords: Atonal Pitch-Cell Design, Intercultural African Pianism, Niger Delta Rhythmic Aesthetics, Phase-Shifting Techniques, Urhobo Musical Idioms

Introduction

Contemporary African art-music continues to expand through experimental approaches that integrate indigenous rhythmic logics with modern compositional techniques. Within this evolving landscape, the piano has become a significant medium through which African composers explore new sonic identities, reinterpreting local musical principles through innovative structural and harmonic frameworks. *Oyoma* exemplifies this creative trajectory, drawing on Urhobo rhythmic aesthetics, pitch-cell construction, and atonal exploration to articulate a distinctly Niger Delta pianistic voice. Such intercultural experimentation aligns with the broader African modernist movement, in which composers seek to assert cultural agency by embedding indigenous musical thought within contemporary art-music practice (Bankole, 2010; Nwamara, 2019).

The work's reliance on motivic cells, rhythmic phase shifting, and percussive articulation reflects African compositional strategies that privilege repetition, transformation, and layered rhythmic interaction. These features resonate with the structural tendencies of Niger Delta performance traditions, where interlocking patterns and temporal elasticity shape musical expression (Omibiyi, 1987). Through its synthesis of atonality, modal inflection, and culturally grounded rhythmic vocabulary, *Oyoma* contributes meaningfully to the expanding repertoire of African piano music, demonstrating how local musical identities can be reimaged within contemporary compositional discourse.

Analysis of *Oyoma*

Oyoma is a piano composition that reflects the composer's exploration of atonality, rhythmic phase-shifting, and the percussive aesthetics characteristic of Urhobo musical culture in the Niger Delta. The title, meaning "fine", encapsulates both the expressive character of the work and the intricacy of its African rhythmic architecture. Composed in August 2024, the piece draws inspiration from the experimental rhythmic processes of Steve Reich and the African pianistic idioms championed by Akin Euba, whose work foregrounds the adaptation of indigenous rhythmic and melodic principles within contemporary art-music composition (Euba, 1992).

Structurally, the work is cast in an extended binary (AB) form, though each section is internally organised into smaller pitch-cell units that shape its tonal ambiguity. Section A is built from five carefully selected pitch classes, while Section B expands this palette to incorporate both

five and six pitch classes. This cellular construction aligns with broader African compositional approaches in which motivic fragments serve as generative building blocks, a practice Agawu (2016) identifies as central to African musical thought. Additional tonal resources include chromaticism, the Phrygian mode, and a heptatonic scale. A chromatic line appears between cells 1 and 2 in bars 6–7 and returns a tone higher in bars 52–53. Section A closes with a shift into the Phrygian mode, articulated through an imperfect authentic cadence (vii^o6–I), while the first transition in Section B (bars 29–31) introduces the heptatonic idea.

Harmonically, *Oyoma* employs drone notes that remain relatively stable in Section A but become more mobile, often by semitone, in Section B. The intervallic language favours simple and compound thirds, contributing to the work's distinctive sonority. The rhythmic design is equally rich, featuring imitation, diminution, syncopation, and hemiola. A particularly striking episode occurs between bars 40 and 51, where the second voice undergoes rhythmic phase-shifting, creating a subtle but compelling temporal displacement.

A closer examination reveals that the rhythmic vocabulary draws directly from *Udje* dance patterns and popular musical practices within Urhobo culture. This cultural grounding enriches the work's already intricate rhythmic framework, embedding it within a recognisable Niger Delta aesthetic. For performers and listeners seeking an African piano composition with a demanding, intellectually engaging rhythmic and tonal design, *Oyoma* offers a compelling and sophisticated example.

A summary of the musical events in each pitch cell is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Structural Layout of Oyoma

Section	Cell number	Measure	Pitch class/Scale	Remark
A	Cell 1a	1	C C# G A# <0179>	Introductory cell
	Cell 1b	2 – 5	D Eb E F Ab <23458>	Houses the main theme of the piece.
	Cell 2a	6 – 7	Chromatic scale	Transition
	Cell 2b	8 – 11	Db D Eb E G <12347>	Imitates the main theme above
	Cell 3	12 – 13	D Eb E F Ab <23458>	Reintroduction of the main theme from cell 1b above.
	Cell 4	14 – 20	C Db D F Gb G Ab Bb B <0125678te>	An adaptation of the main theme from cells 1 and 2 in the fourth voice, an augmented 6 th down. However, the pentatonic arrangement was maintained in the first voice.
B	Cell 1	21 – 24	C Eb E G Ab <03478>	Introduction of a new theme with hemiola.
	Cell 2a	25 – 28	Eb E G Ab Bb <3478t>	Contains a flowery melody.
	Cell 2b	29 – 31	Heptatonic scale	Transition
	Cell 3a	32 – 39	Db F Ab A Bb B <1589te>	Contains a hexatonic pitch arrangement
	Cell 3b	40 – 51	C Db D Eb E F G Ab A Bb B <012345789te>	Contains the phase shifting and rhythm grafting.
	Cell 4	52 – 56	C Db D Eb E F Gb G Ab A Bb B <0123456789te>	Starts based on the first transition within measures 6 and 7 above.

Oyoma

$\text{♩} = 120$ Wole Aro



4

7

10

13

16

19



Musical notation for measures 19-22. The system consists of a treble and bass staff. Measure 19 features a melodic line in the treble with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 20 continues the melodic line with a repeat sign. Measure 21 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 22 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes.

23



Musical notation for measures 23-26. The system consists of a treble and bass staff. Measure 23 features a melodic line in the treble with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 24 continues the melodic line with a repeat sign. Measure 25 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 26 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes.

27



Musical notation for measures 27-30. The system consists of a treble and bass staff. Measure 27 features a melodic line in the treble with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 28 continues the melodic line with a repeat sign. Measure 29 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 30 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes.

31



Musical notation for measures 31-34. The system consists of a treble and bass staff. Measure 31 features a melodic line in the treble with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 32 continues the melodic line with a repeat sign. Measure 33 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 34 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes.

35



Musical notation for measures 35-38. The system consists of a treble and bass staff. Measure 35 features a melodic line in the treble with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 36 continues the melodic line with a repeat sign. Measure 37 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 38 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes.

39



Musical notation for measures 39-42. The system consists of a treble and bass staff. Measure 39 features a melodic line in the treble with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 40 continues the melodic line with a repeat sign. Measure 41 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes. Measure 42 has a melodic line with eighth notes and a bass line with eighth notes.

43



Musical score for measures 43-46. The piece is in a minor key (one flat) and 4/4 time. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes.

47



Musical score for measures 47-50. The right hand continues the melodic development with some rests, and the left hand maintains the eighth-note accompaniment.

51



Musical score for measures 51-53. The right hand has a more active melodic line with accents, and the left hand features a more complex accompaniment with some chords and rests.

54



Musical score for measures 54-56. The right hand has a melodic line with accents, and the left hand features a more complex accompaniment with some chords and rests.

References

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