

***Kabiyesi* Hossana and the Evolution of Nigerian Art Music: A Structural and Cultural Reinterpretation**

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Abstract

Kabiyesi Hossana is a Yoruba nationalistic art composition for solo piano, derived from a 1972 liturgical chorus by the hymnologist Dapo Taiwo. The work exemplifies the hybridised aesthetics characteristic of Nigerian art music, where African identity is foregrounded through the creative transformation of pre-existing indigenous musical materials. The composition employs metric variation, modal change, modulation, thematic and rhythmic variation, register shifts, and improvisatory digressions to achieve its expressive aims. This article analyses the structural logic of the work and situates it within the broader discourse of African compositional musicology. It recommends further scholarly engagement with African art-music practices and the publication of such works.

Keywords: African Identity, *Kabiyesi* Hossana, Nigerian Art Music, Solo Piano Composition



Introduction

The emergence of Nigerian art music in the twentieth century represents one of the most significant developments in modern African musical scholarship. It marks a moment when African composers began to assert cultural agency by integrating indigenous musical idioms into Western compositional frameworks. This creative movement was shaped by broader intellectual currents, including African nationalism, cultural reclamation, and the desire to indigenise Christian worship. Scholars have noted that the introduction of Euro-American hymnody by missionaries created a tension between imported liturgical forms and indigenous musical sensibilities, prompting African musicians to develop new forms of hybridised creativity that affirmed cultural identity within sacred and secular spaces (Ayandele, 2004; Omojola, 1995).

Within this evolving tradition, Nigerian composers increasingly turned to African folk songs, traditional melodies, rhythmic idioms, proverbs, and liturgical choruses as foundational materials for art-music composition. This practice not only affirmed African identity but also contributed to the decolonisation of sacred, popular, and concert spaces. The work of composers such as Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, Ayo Bankole, and Laz Ekwueme demonstrated how African musical identity could be expressed within Western art-music frameworks, thereby establishing a robust intercultural compositional tradition (Omojola, 1995). Contemporary scholarship continues to highlight how African composers draw on indigenous musical resources to articulate cultural identity and challenge colonial musical hierarchies (Morohunfola, 2024).

Kabiyesi Hossana for solo piano belongs to this lineage of intercultural creativity. Drawing on a Yoruba liturgical chorus composed by Dapo Taiwo in 1972, the work exemplifies how African composers transform indigenous musical materials into sophisticated art-music structures. The composition's structural design, thematic development, and modal exploration reflect broader aesthetic tendencies in Nigerian art-music practice. This article offers a detailed structural analysis of the composition, situates it within the historical development of Nigerian art music, and examines its thematic and intercultural logic. It aims to demonstrate how *Kabiyesi* Hossana contributes to contemporary African compositional musicology and how its structural design reflects the evolving aesthetics of African art-music creativity.



The article is organised into several sections. The background section outlines the historical foundations of Nigerian art music and Yoruba hymnody. The thematic material section examines the source hymn and its cultural significance. The general description and structural analysis provide detailed insights into the compositional design. The discussion section synthesises these findings within broader African art-music discourse. The conclusion reflects on the work's contribution to contemporary African compositional practice.

Nigerian Art Music and Yoruba Hymnody

The foundations of Nigerian art music were laid in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shaped by the activities of nationalists and African intellectuals who sought to indigenise Christian worship and cultural expression. The introduction of Euro-American hymnody by missionaries created a tension between imported liturgical forms and indigenous musical sensibilities. This tension inspired a generation of African hymnologists, including Josiah Ransome-Kuti, Akin George, and Emmanuel Sowande, who began composing hymns that reflected Yoruba melodic and rhythmic aesthetics (Omojola, 1995).

Subsequent hymnologists such as Ola Olude, T. K. Bankole, and G. B. Oriere expanded this creative movement, producing works that blended Western harmonic structures with African melodic and textual idioms. The emergence of Nigerian art music as a formal compositional tradition is often attributed to Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, whose pioneering work in organ composition and pedagogy laid the groundwork for later composers such as Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, Ayo Bankole, and Laz Ekwueme. Their works demonstrated how African musical identity could be expressed within Western art-music frameworks, thereby establishing a robust intercultural compositional tradition (Omojola, 1995).

In contemporary practice, composers continue to draw on African folk songs, traditional melodies, rhythmic forms, and liturgical choruses as thematic materials. This creative approach has been shown to contribute to the decolonisation of sacred and concert spaces, as demonstrated in studies of Dayo Dedeke's hymnody (Morohunfola, 2024). *Kabiyesi* Hossana emerges from this broader historical and cultural context, exemplifying the continued vitality of African identity in art-music composition.



Thematic Material and Source Context

The Hymn “Kabiyesi Hossana”: Liturgical and Cultural Significance

Kabiyesi o Hossana o, meaning "Hosanna to the King," is a Yoruba liturgical chorus composed in 1972 by Joel Oladapo Taiwo. The hymn is characterised by its simple melodic contour, strong rhythmic pulse, and text that affirms the kingship and eternal nature of Jesus Christ. Its widespread adoption across Nigerian churches reflects its cultural resonance and its suitability for art-music transformation. The melodic structure of the hymn, with its clear tonal centre and rhythmic regularity, provides fertile ground for thematic development in instrumental composition.

Kabiyesi o Hossana

Dapo Taiwo

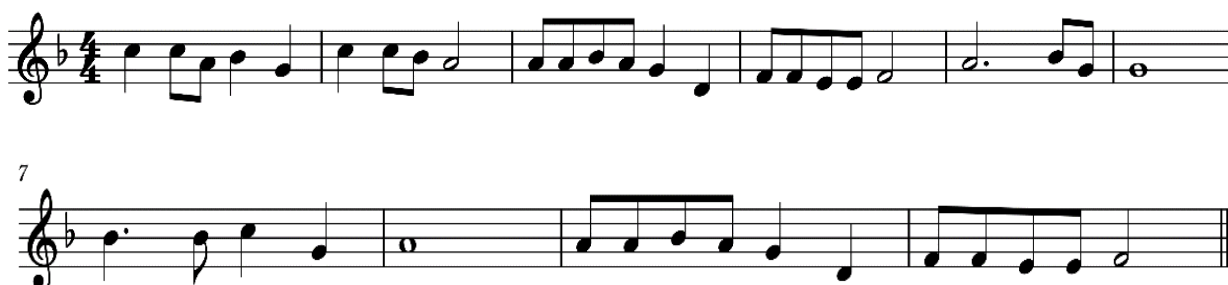


Figure 1. *Thematic Material: Original Melodic Line of Kabiyesi Hossana*

Joel Oladapo Taiwo: Biography and Compositional Legacy

Joel Oladapo Taiwo (1942–2021) was a distinguished hymnologist, choirmaster, and administrator whose contributions to Yoruba hymnody remain significant. Born in Sekondi, Ghana, Taiwo received musical training both locally and internationally, beginning his musical journey as a choirboy at the First Baptist Church, Sekondi. His early exposure to recorder and guitar performance shaped his musical sensibilities, and his compositional talent emerged during his secondary school years.

Upon returning to Nigeria in 1965, Taiwo joined the First Baptist Church, Idikan, Ibadan, where he later became Choirmaster. He composed more than one hundred and fifty songs, many of which became staples in Yoruba Christian worship.

His involvement with the interdenominational choir formed by the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation and Western Nigeria Television in 1972 marked a significant moment in his career. It was for this choir that he composed *Kabiyesi Hossana*, which received its first performance on 23 April 1973. The hymn quickly gained national prominence and later inspired Ghanaian composer James Yankey, who used it as thematic material for a Yoruba choral art composition.

General Description of the Piano Composition

Kabiyesi Hossana for solo piano is scored in a mixed structural pattern that combines thematic presentation, variation, development, and cyclical return. The work centres tonally on F major and D minor, with a time signature of 12/8 that imparts a dance-like rhythmic character throughout. The harmonic language is predominantly diatonic, employing primary and secondary chords, with occasional chromatic inflections that enrich the tonal palette.

The composition spans four octaves and a major sixth, from F sharp 1 to E flat 6, demonstrating a wide registral range that enhances its expressive depth. The tempo is moderate, marked at 67 beats per minute, and the piece runs 76 bars, with an approximate performance duration of four minutes and thirty-five seconds. The work's structural design reflects the intercultural aesthetics of Nigerian art music, combining Yoruba melodic identity with Western pianistic techniques such as register shifts, thematic fragmentation, and improvisatory elaboration.

Structural Analysis

Introduction (mm. 1–8)

The composition opens with a two-bar introduction characterised by an ascending, indirectly undulating melodic contour supported by a steady bass pulse. This introductory gesture establishes the tonal centre and rhythmic character of the work. Measures 3 to 8 elaborate this material through varied repetition, each iteration concluding with a distinct melodic cadence.



Figure 2. *Introductory Motif (mm. 1–4)*

First Presentation of Theme (mm. 9–16)

The principal theme appears in measures 9 to 16, marked by a change in metric value that distinguishes it from the preceding material. The latter portion of the theme exhibits improvisatory tendencies, foreshadowing the extended digression that follows.



Figure 3. *First Thematic Presentation (mm. 9–16)*

First Developmental Digression (mm. 17–24)

Measures 17 to 24 depart entirely from the thematic content, introducing new melodic material and harmonic exploration. This section demonstrates the composer's improvisatory approach, employing rhythmic variation and register shifts.

Thematic Return and Left-Hand Transfer (mm. 25–30)

The thematic chorus returns in measures 25 to 30, with the melodic line transferred to the left hand toward the close of the passage. This transfer creates textural contrast and highlights the theme's adaptability.



Figure 4. *Left-Hand Thematic Transfer (mm. 27–30)*

Extended Development (mm. 31–42)

Measures 31 to 42 constitute a substantial developmental episode constructed independently of the primary theme. The section explores harmonic areas beyond the tonic, employing chromatic inflections and rhythmic intensification.

Reintroduction of Introductory Motif (mm. 43–50)

Measures 43 to 44 reintroduce the introductory melodic fragment, leading into a cyclical passage in measures 45 to 48 that traverses the tonic, subdominant, and dominant harmonic areas. Measures 49 to 50 restate the introductory motif, concluding in the parallel minor.



Figure 5. *Introductory Motif in Minor (mm. 49–50)*

Modal Shift to Minor (mm. 51–68)

The modal shift to D minor persists through measures 51 to 68, synthesising thematic material recast in minor with continued improvisatory writing. This section deepens the expressive character of the work and highlights the intercultural logic of modal transformation.

Transition and Final Thematic Restatement (mm. 69–73)

Measures 69 to 70 form a transitional passage that prepares the return to F major. The theme is restated in measures 71 to 73 with rhythmic modification, creating a sense of culmination.

Coda (mm. 74–76)

The work concludes with a brief coda that synthesises earlier materials and affirms the tonal centre. The coda provides structural closure and reinforces the thematic identity of the composition.

Discussion

Kabiyesi Hossana exemplifies the intercultural aesthetics that define Nigerian art music. The work's reliance on a Yoruba liturgical chorus as thematic material situates it within a long tradition of African composers who draw on indigenous musical resources to articulate cultural identity within Western art-music frameworks. The structural design of the composition, with its thematic presentation, variation, modal shift, and improvisatory digressions, reflects the hybridised nature of African art-music creativity.

The modal shift to minor, the transfer of thematic material between hands, and the cyclical traversal of harmonic areas demonstrate how African composers adapt Western compositional techniques to express indigenous musical sensibilities. This aligns with broader scholarly observations that African art music often employs thematic transformation, rhythmic intensification, and intercultural synthesis to articulate African identity (Omojola, 1995). The work's structural logic also resonates with the compositional approaches of Fela Sowande, whose organ works frequently integrate Yoruba melodic idioms within Western harmonic frameworks, and Akin Euba, whose theory of African pianism emphasises the adaptation of African rhythmic and melodic principles to Western keyboard instruments.

Kabiyesi Hossana contributes to contemporary African compositional musicology by demonstrating how liturgical choruses can serve as fertile ground for art-music transformation. The work's structural design reflects a sophisticated understanding of thematic development, modal exploration, and pianistic writing. It also highlights the importance of documenting and publishing African art-music compositions, as such works provide valuable insights into the evolving aesthetics of African musical creativity. The composition stands as a testament to the continued vitality of African identity in art-music practice and underscores the need for further scholarly engagement with African compositional traditions.

Conclusion

Kabiyesi Hossana for solo piano stands as a compelling testament to the evolving landscape of contemporary Nigerian art music. It demonstrates with clarity how indigenous liturgical materials, deeply rooted in Yoruba Christian musical culture, can be imaginatively transformed into sophisticated art-music structures that retain their cultural resonance while achieving new expressive possibilities. The



composition's structural organisation, its nuanced thematic development, and its sensitive negotiation of modal and textural contrasts reveal a mature intercultural logic that reflects the broader aesthetic tendencies shaping African art-music practice today.

The work affirms the creative potential inherent in African liturgical and traditional materials, showing how such sources can serve not merely as thematic inspiration but as catalysts for extended compositional thought. Through its integration of variation, improvisatory digression, modal shift, and pianistic reconfiguration, Kabiyesi Hossana illustrates the capacity of African composers to engage Western art-music techniques without compromising indigenous musical identity. It also highlights the importance of recognising African hymnody as a legitimate and fertile foundation for contemporary art-music creation.

This study underscores the need for sustained scholarly engagement with African compositional musicology, particularly in documenting, analysing, and theorising works that emerge from hybridised creative processes. As African composers continue to explore the intersections of tradition and innovation, works such as Kabiyesi Hossana offer valuable insights into the aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual currents shaping twenty-first-century African musical creativity. The publication and critical study of such compositions remain essential for enriching global understandings of African art music and for ensuring that the continent's diverse compositional voices are fully represented within international musicological discourse.

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Appendix: A Full Score of *Kabiyesi* Hossana

KABIYESI FOR PIANO

Kavode Morohunfolo



The musical score is written for piano in 12/8 time, featuring a key signature of one flat (Bb). The score is presented in six systems, each with a treble and bass staff. Measure numbers 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 20 are indicated at the beginning of their respective systems. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings.



51

55

59

62

65

68

72

75

