

Iya (Mother): A Structural and Compositional Analysis

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Abstract

Iya (Mother) is a contemporary African art-music composition that blends Western melodic instruments with African percussion timbres to create a vivid sonic portrayal of maternal symbolism. Set in C major and cast in ternary form, the work unfolds at a Moderato tempo that supports its lyrical, expressive character. The composition employs a diatonic pitch framework, a compound duple metre, and a carefully organised melodic contour that spans a perfect eleventh. Motivic repetition, call-and-response dialogue, and rhythmic vitality contribute to its structural coherence. The interplay between flute, piano, shekere, congas, and agogo produces a hybrid timbral palette that reinforces the expressive narrative. This article offers a detailed analysis of the work's form, melodic organisation, rhythmic design, harmonic language, and textural strategies, demonstrating how these elements collectively articulate a culturally grounded yet structurally sophisticated musical statement. The study highlights the piece's contribution to contemporary African art-music composition and its expressive engagement with the theme of motherhood.

Keywords: African Art-Music, Instrumental Timbre, Melodic Contour, Rhythmic Structure, Ternary Form



Introduction

The composition *Iya (Mother)* occupies a distinctive place within contemporary African art-music, a field characterised by the creative negotiation between indigenous musical logics and Western compositional frameworks. African composers have long explored this intercultural space, drawing on indigenous rhythmic structures, timbral identities, and melodic contouring while employing Western notation, harmony, and formal design (Agawu, 2003; Omojola, 1995). The theme of motherhood resonates deeply within African expressive cultures, often symbolising nurture, continuity, resilience, and communal identity. Musical portrayals of maternal figures frequently employ gentle tempi, lyrical melodic lines, and timbral warmth, aligning with broader African aesthetic values surrounding care and relationality (Nketia, 1974; Agawu, 2016).

Iya (Mother) exemplifies these tendencies through its integration of flute and piano with shekere, congas, and agogo. The work's ternary form, motivic clarity, and rhythmic vitality make it a compelling subject for analytical study. This article provides a comprehensive examination of the composition, exploring its structural organisation, melodic architecture, rhythmic design, harmonic language, and textural strategies. The aim is to illuminate how the work constructs expressive meaning through its musical materials and how it contributes to ongoing developments in African art-music composition.

Contextual and Theoretical Background

African art-music is shaped by a long history of intercultural creativity, in which composers engage indigenous musical principles while adopting Western structural and notational systems. Scholars have noted that African composers frequently incorporate rhythmic layering, call-and-response dialogue, timbral diversity, and motivic repetition as foundational elements of their compositional practice (Agawu, 2003; Vidal, 2012). These features reflect broader African musical aesthetics, where rhythm, timbre, and communal interaction play central roles.

The symbolic theme of motherhood carries significant cultural weight. In many African societies, the mother is associated with continuity, protection, and generational transmission. Musical representations of motherhood often emphasise gentleness, stability, and expressive warmth. The use of percussion instruments such as shekere, congas, and agogo situates *Iya* within an African sonic world, while the



flute and piano provide melodic and harmonic scaffolding that align with Western art-music traditions. This hybrid instrumentation reflects the intercultural nature of African art-music and provides a rich foundation for analytical exploration.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this article is based entirely on the score of *Iya (Mother)*. A transparent, multi-layered analytical approach was adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the work's musical architecture. The methodology combines structural segmentation, melodic contour analysis, intervallic study, rhythmic and metric examination, harmonic interpretation, and textural evaluation.

Structural segmentation was carried out using bar numbers to identify major sections and formal boundaries. Melodic analysis involved tracing contour, intervallic vocabulary, phrase structure, and motivic repetition. Rhythmic analysis focused on metre, rhythmic motifs, rests, and the interaction between melodic and percussive layers. Harmonic analysis examined chordal vocabulary, cadential patterns, and harmonic rhythm. Textural analysis explored the interplay between instruments, shifts between monody, homophony, and polyphonic layering, and the expressive role of timbre.

Throughout the analysis, score excerpts are inserted as figures to illustrate key points. These excerpts are drawn directly from the score and referenced by bar numbers to maintain analytical precision.

Structural and Formal Analysis

The composition is set in C major and cast in compound duple metre, marked *Moderato*. This establishes a gentle, flowing character that supports the expressive theme of motherhood. The instrumentation comprises flute, shekere, agogo, congas, and piano, creating a hybrid timbral palette that blends Western and African sonic identities.

The overall form is ternary (A–B–A'), articulated as follows:

Bars 1–8: Percussion and piano introduction

Bars 8–22: Opening section (A)

Bars 23–52: Contrasting section (B)

Bars 52–68: Return of opening section (A')



Each major section concludes with a perfect cadence, reinforcing tonal stability and structural clarity. The texture shifts between monody, homophony, and polyphonic layering, contributing to the expressive and structural variety of the work.

Blessing O. Ugen

Moderato



Moderato

Figure 1. *Opening percussion and piano phrase (bars 1–4).*

Melodic Analysis

The melody begins in bar 8 on the dominant (G) with an anacrusis, ascending a perfect fourth to C in bars 9–10 and sustained through bars 11–12. This opening gesture establishes a stable tonal centre and a clear melodic contour. The phrase in bars 8–12 reappears in bars 15–18, creating structural coherence through repetition.

The contrasting section introduces a new melodic idea beginning on the mediant (E) in bars 23–30. This phrase is repeated in bars 31–38 using a call-and-response pattern, adding dialogic energy to the section. In bar 39, the melody rises to the submediant (A) with a galloping rhythmic pattern, intensifying

momentum. A tonal sequence appears in bars 45–48, each entry beginning a second higher, before descending a perfect fourth in bar 49.

The final section returns to the opening material and culminates in bar 68 with the highest pitch in the composition, completing a pitch range of a perfect eleventh.



Figure 2. *Opening melodic ascent from dominant to tonic (bars 8–12).*



Figure 3. *Call-and-response melodic repetition (bars 21–24).*

Rhythmic and Metric Analysis

The compound duple metre provides a lilting rhythmic foundation that supports the expressive character of the work. The percussion instruments articulate characteristic African rhythmic patterns, with the shekere and congas providing interlocking ostinati and the agogo adding punctuating accents. Rests function as structural punctuation, shaping phrasing and creating breathing spaces throughout the composition.

The galloping rhythm in bar 39 intensifies momentum, while the rhythmic consistency of the percussion anchors the melodic fluidity of the flute. The interplay between rhythmic stability and melodic movement contributes significantly to the expressive narrative.



Figure 4. *Galloping rhythmic pattern at bar 39.*

Harmonic Analysis

The harmonic language is diatonic, employing primary and secondary triads with occasional seventh chords. The piano provides harmonic grounding, while the flute carries the melodic line. Cadential design is clear, with perfect cadences marking the ends of the A, B, and A' sections. Harmonic rhythm remains moderate, supporting the Moderato tempo and contributing to the work's structural clarity.

Textural Analysis

The work's texture shifts fluidly between monody, homophony, and polyphonic layering. Monody appears when the flute carries the melody alone, while homophony emerges when the piano supports the flute with harmonic accompaniment. Polyphonic layering occurs when the percussion instruments interlock with the melodic lines, creating a rich, multi-layered texture. This interplay reflects African ensemble aesthetics, where timbral layering and rhythmic interaction are central to musical expression.



Figure 5. *Harmonic support and textural layering (bars 45–48).*

Extended Interpretive Discussion

The expressive theme of motherhood is conveyed through multiple musical dimensions. The Moderato tempo establishes a gentle, nurturing character, while the diatonic pitch framework and stable tonal centre evoke emotional clarity and warmth. The melodic ascent to the highest pitch in bar 68 symbolically suggests culmination, fulfilment, or emotional climax, aligning with cultural associations of maternal strength and resilience.

African musical aesthetics often emphasise relationality, continuity, and communal identity (Agawu, 2003; Nketia, 1974). These values are reflected in the composition's use of call-and-response, motivic repetition, and rhythmic interlocking. The call-and-response passages in bars 23–38 evoke communal dialogue, while the repeated melodic phrases reinforce continuity and stability. The percussion's rhythmic vitality contributes to a sense of groundedness, reflecting the

cultural significance of rhythm as a stabilising force in African musical expression (Vidal, 2012).

The hybrid instrumentation further enhances the expressive narrative. The flute's lyrical quality conveys tenderness and emotional nuance, while the percussion instruments evoke cultural rootedness and communal identity. The piano serves as a harmonic anchor, bridging the composition's Western and African elements. This intercultural synthesis aligns with broader trends in African art-music, where composers negotiate cultural identity through structural clarity and expressive depth (Omojola, 1995).

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that *Iya (Mother)* is a structurally coherent and expressively compelling composition that integrates African rhythmic idioms with Western melodic and harmonic frameworks. Its ternary form, motivic repetition, diatonic pitch organisation, and timbral interplay contribute to a distinctive African art-music aesthetic. The work's expressive engagement with the theme of motherhood is articulated through melodic contour, rhythmic vitality, and textural richness. By blending indigenous and Western musical elements, the composition exemplifies the intercultural creativity that characterises contemporary African art-music. The study highlights the work's contribution to the repertoire and suggests avenues for further exploration, including performance practice, comparative analysis, and pedagogical application.

References

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Appendix: Full Score of *Iya*

Iya (Mother)

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Moderato

Flute

Shekere

Congas

Agogo

Moderato

Piano *mf*

5

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



9

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.

mp



13

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



17

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



21

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.

p



25

Fl. *f* *p*

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno. *mf*



29

Fl. *f*

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno. *mf* *mp*



33

Fl. *mf*

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno. *mp*



37

Fl. *mf* *f*

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



41

Fl.

mp

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.

mp



45

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



49

Fl. *mp* *mf*

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



53

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno. *mp*



57

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



61

Fl.

mp

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.



65

Fl.

Shek.

Congas

Agogo

Pno.

ff

