

# Negotiating Nigerian Church Melodies Through Contemporary Compositional Practice: Seun Owoaje's *Iyanu l'Oluwa*

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## Abstract

Contemporary Nigerian art music continues to evolve through sustained interaction between indigenous musical traditions and Western compositional techniques. This study examines Seun Owoaje's piano fantasia *Iyanu l'Oluwa*, focusing on its use of Nigerian church melodies, contemporary pianistic procedures, and African–Western musical synthesis. Employing a qualitative case-study approach that integrates documentary research, biographical inquiry, an interview with the composer, and detailed structural and stylistic analysis of the score, the study investigates the work's formal organisation, thematic construction, rhythmic and metric processes, harmonic language, chordal vocabulary, texture, and expressive strategies. It pays particular attention to how five Yoruba sacred melodies are identified, transformed, and embedded within the fantasia framework, revealing techniques of development, fragmentation, reharmonisation, layering, and octave displacement. The study argues that *Iyanu l'Oluwa* exemplifies a contemporary Nigerian compositional approach in which African musical materials function as substantive structural agents rather than decorative additions. It further highlights Owoaje's integration of jazz-derived harmony, African Pianism, and Western pianistic techniques. Overall, the study contributes to the documentation of Owoaje's compositional practice and to broader discourse on African musical identity, Nigerian art music, and intercultural approaches to piano composition.

**Keywords:** African Pianism, Compositional practice, Nigerian art music, Nigerian Church Melodies, Western art music



## Historical and Cultural Foundations of Nigerian Art Music and Owoaje's Creative Trajectory

Music has long served as a primary medium through which people articulate emotions, values, and communal identities. As Vidal (2012) observes, “The Primordial man used music to express fear, pain, and anger. Music was an important part of oriental mysticism. The various people living in Nigeria are not exceptions; they use music to express the values of their institutions, communities, and culture.” Onyeji (2016) similarly describes music as a universal art present in all human settlements, noting its capacity to cut across cultural, social, educational, and political spheres and to facilitate intercultural borrowing and enjoyment. Within this broad human experience, music has also functioned as a central medium of worship, both individually and corporately.

The Christian church has played a decisive role in shaping art music in Nigeria. Euba (1993) affirms that music was a strong feature of African traditional religions and that its presence in Christian worship attracted early Nigerian converts. Through church activities, Nigerians encountered Western classical music, including hymns, anthems, and instruments such as the harmonium, organ, and piano. Singing in school and church choirs became widespread from the colonial period, partly because music formed a core part of the school curriculum. This early exposure cultivated discipline, musical literacy, and performance habits that later informed the creative development of many Nigerian composers.

This environment nurtured composers who discovered their musical abilities in childhood through choir participation and informal church training, later consolidating these foundations through formal study. Seun Owoaje exemplifies this trajectory. Beginning as a church choir boy, he learned piano in the Christ Apostolic Church and subsequently pursued formal music education at university. As Onyeji (2016) notes, African art music composers produce diverse creative outputs, including anthems, instrumental solos, operas, intercultural works, choral compositions, avant-garde pieces, and keyboard works. Owoaje has emerged as a significant figure within this tradition, with more than 400 compositions and arrangements across choral, instrumental, and piano genres, including *Iyanu l'Oluwa*.

Composing for piano within the African art music idiom presents notable challenges. Owoaje (2007) identifies the need for mastery of piano compositional techniques, familiarity with pianistic performance practice, and ingenuity in synthesising African and Western sound worlds, especially given the piano's Western origins. He also emphasises the importance of understanding the African instruments being represented and of engaging with existing African art music piano repertoire to cultivate a distinct creative voice.



Although earlier scholarship has examined Western and African piano composers from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, including figures such as Akin Euba and Ayo Bankole, limited attention has been given to contemporary Nigerian composers whose piano works reflect new compositional perspectives. As Onyeji (2016) notes, composition accommodates creative contributions at various levels of proficiency, and contemporary developments have introduced fresh ideas that only a few African composers have explored. In this context, there is a clear need to examine how prominent composers negotiate evolving musical trends to remain relevant and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of African art music.

This study therefore investigates Seun Owoaje's contemporary compositional approach through an analysis of his piano fantasia *Iyanu l'Oluwa*. It examines his musical background, influences, and creative practice, alongside the structural and stylistic features of the work. It also identifies the African musical elements embedded in the composition and explores how Owoaje integrates African and Western techniques to create a contemporary Nigerian pianistic idiom.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the concept of African Pianism as articulated by Akin Euba. African Pianism provides a cross-cultural framework through which processes and resources inherent in African music are adapted for piano composition (Euba, 1989, p. 152). Euba identifies four core ingredients that define this approach: “thematic repetition; direct borrowings of thematic material (rhythmical and or tonal) from African traditional sources; the use of rhythmical and or tonal motifs which, although not borrowed from specific traditional sources, are based on traditional idioms; percussive treatment of the piano” (Euba, 1989, p. 152). He later adds a fifth ingredient, namely “making the piano behave like African instruments” (Euba, 1999, p. 9).

Together, these principles establish a compositional and performance paradigm in which the piano is reconceptualised as an instrument capable of articulating African rhythmic logic, melodic contour, timbral nuance, and textural organisation. African Pianism therefore offers a coherent theoretical lens for examining how African musical materials are transformed, recontextualised, and structurally integrated within contemporary piano works such as Seun Owoaje's *Iyanu l'Oluwa*.

### Methodology

The study employs a qualitative case-study design to investigate Seun Owoaje's compositional approach in *Iyanu l'Oluwa*. The research process integrates



four complementary procedures: documentary research, biographical inquiry, an interview with the composer, and detailed structural and stylistic analysis of the piano score. Documentary sources provide contextual information on African art music, African Pianism, and Nigerian church musical traditions, while the biographical component clarifies the formative influences that shape Owoaje's creative practice.

The interview supplies first-hand insight into the composer's intentions, stylistic choices, and technical considerations. Score analysis constitutes the core of the study. This involves systematic examination of the work's formal organisation, thematic and melodic construction, rhythmic and metric procedures, harmonic language, chordal vocabulary, textural design, scale usage, pianistic writing, and expressive strategies. Listening to the available recording supports the score analysis by enabling close attention to articulation, dynamic nuance, pacing, and interpretive detail.

Across these procedures, the study evaluates how African musical materials are identified, transformed, and structurally integrated into the fantasia. The combined methods allow for a coherent and culturally grounded interpretation of Owoaje's contemporary compositional techniques.

### **African Music**

African music embodies complex rhythmic, textural and structural logics grounded in indigenous epistemologies. By Western standards, it is often described as polyrhythmic, heterophonic and polyphonic, yet African musicians do not typically conceptualise these principles abstractly. As Monro (1974) observes, the unhesitating participation of community members in performance reflects underlying but largely unverbilised musical principles. Leader–chorus relationships, antiphonal exchanges and improvisatory variation on short motifs express deeper cultural logics of relationality and collective expression.

Polyphonic techniques such as overlapping antiphony, responsorial singing, polymelody, parallel intervals, ostinato and drone-ostinato frequently intermingle, producing stacked vocal or instrumental textures (Harvard Dictionary of Music, 1969). African ostinato, typically short and confined to a narrow pitch range, may appear intermittently or continuously above or below the principal melodic line. Hocketing, often executed by horns or flutes producing single pitches, further demonstrates the communal distribution of musical roles.

Chordal relationships arising from polyphonic combinations do not conform to Western major–minor harmonic systems. Their functions include tension–release, dissonance–consonance, formal balance and cluster-based harmonic patterning (Harvard Dictionary of Music, 1969). These vertical structures reflect indigenous

conceptions of sonic density and relational harmony rather than Western tonal hierarchies.

African scholarship reinforces these perspectives. Nketia (1974) emphasises the inseparability of African music from its social and ritual contexts, while Nzewi (1997) highlights rhythmic and structural logics grounded in indigenous theories of time, embodiment and communal agency. Agawu (2003) critiques Western misrepresentations of African rhythm, insisting that African musical logic must be theorised from within African epistemologies. Authority and Arihi (2026), in the attached article, further demonstrate that African musical systems encode cosmology, ethics and identity, functioning as epistemic formations rather than mere aesthetic artefacts.

### **African Art Music**

African art music represents a modern intercultural tradition shaped by composers who recontextualised indigenous musical principles within Western classical frameworks. Emerging during the colonial period, it reflects broader socio-political transformations across Africa (Obijiaku, 2024). Composers adapted Western notation, harmony and form to articulate African musical identity, producing a hybrid tradition that speaks to local realities while engaging global musical discourse (Sofola, 2023; Obijiaku, 2024).

The rise of music literacy and the expansion of training institutions across Africa strengthened this tradition, enabling composers to integrate indigenous rhythmic cycles, tonal inflections and structural idioms into literate frameworks (Owoaje & Sofola, 2021a). Sofola (2025) notes that African art music continues to evolve through composers' engagement with contemporary aesthetics, urban cultures and indigenous epistemologies.

Authority and Arihi (2026) argue that African art music constitutes a modern epistemic formation shaped by the encounter between African musical thought and Western literate traditions. Composers such as Sowande, Euba and Uzoigwe exemplify this synthesis, embedding African rhythmic logic, motivic development and cultural symbolism within concert-oriented structures. Their work demonstrates that African art music is neither derivative nor imitative; it is a modern intellectual project negotiating African identity within global modernity.

### **African Pianism**

African Pianism, introduced by Akin Euba, proposes that African rhythmic, melodic and structural principles can be meaningfully adapted to piano composition. Euba (1989) defines African Pianism as a technique grounded in the performance practices of African xylophones, thumb pianos, plucked lutes, drum chimes and

polyrhythmic instrumental methods. Omojola (1995) expands this definition, describing African Pianism as a compositional approach that evokes the rhythmic, textural and formal characteristics of traditional African music through the piano. Oyadiran (2002) similarly emphasises its capacity to capture African rhythmic, melodic and harmonic textures.

Scholarly debates highlight tensions within the concept. Valee (2000) questions whether African Pianism has fully realised its potential, while Omojola situates it within broader intercultural activity. Li Xin (2011) raises methodological questions about evaluating African Pianism through Western or African analytical lenses.

Oluranti (2012), however, affirms African Pianism as a valid and evolving compositional concept, emphasising the need for a theoretical framework grounded in African stylistic elements. Authority (2025), in the attached article, reinforces this view by demonstrating how African rhythmic epistemologies can be structurally embedded within piano composition. His findings show that African Pianism gains theoretical strength when interpreted through indigenous epistemologies rather than Western analytical assumptions.

### **Hybridity, Syncretism and Drummistic Piano Style**

Beyond African Pianism, contemporary African art music is sustained by techniques such as hybridity and syncretism. Obijiaku (2024) describes hybridity as the fusion of African traditional music with Western classical traditions, a foundational principle of African art music since the colonial era. Sofola (2025) notes that hybridity has expanded to incorporate urban cultures, producing new compositional forms that reflect Africa's evolving socio-cultural landscapes. Syncretism, as Ofuani (2014) explains, involves blending different musical traditions to create new musical languages.

The drummistic piano style represents another significant contemporary technique. It transfers African drumming principles to the piano, capturing melorhythmic idioms and percussive gestures (Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education, 2002; Onyeji, 2008). Authority (2026), in the attached article, demonstrates that drummistic composition embodies indigenous rhythmic epistemologies, translating pulse, repetition, and communal memory into pianistic structures. His analysis of Onyeji's works shows that drummistic piano style is not merely a technical device but a culturally grounded epistemic intervention that redefines the expressive possibilities of the piano.



### **African Art Music Composers**

African art music composers have developed diverse creative styles, including African Pianism, Research Composition and drummistic piano composition (Onyeji, 2014). These composers engage in the composition, documentation, and dissemination of indigenous musical knowledge (Onyeji, 2013). Omojola (1987) identifies Nigerian contemporary art musicians as those trained in universities and conservatories who integrate African elements into Western-derived structures.

Mensah (1998) categorises African composers into three groups: those who follow Western rules strictly, those who blend African and Western elements, and those who apply substantial African musical elements. Onyeji (2014) expands this list to include Uzoigwe, Nzewi and himself in the third group. Beyond these, composers such as Sadoh, Olusoji, Oluranti and Owoaje have contributed significantly to the development of African art music, creatively fusing African and Western idioms in their piano works.

Authority's (2025, 2026) studies further highlight the contributions of contemporary composers who embed indigenous epistemologies within modern compositional frameworks, demonstrating the intellectual sovereignty and evolving aesthetics of African art music.

### **Biographical Profile of Seun Owoaje**

Oluwaseun Bababusola Owoaje, born on 25 March 1970 in Odogbolu, Ogun State, is a distinguished Nigerian composer, pianist, arranger, and music educator whose work spans choral, instrumental, orchestral, and contemporary African art music traditions. He received his early education at Sunny-Luba Primary School, Ijebu-Ode, and New State High School, Mushin, Lagos, before proceeding to Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly the University of Ife), where he studied Music between 1986 and 1990 and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree. He later obtained a master's degree in music from the University of Lagos in 2007 and completed a PhD in Music Composition in 2026.

Owoaje grew up in a musically vibrant household, where the presence of a piano and the active musicianship of his siblings fostered early artistic curiosity. His father, Choirmaster of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Yaba, ensured that all his children passed through the church choir, providing a formative environment rich in Western classical repertoire, Yoruba sacred music, Juju, Fuji and jazz traditions. Although his formal piano training was delayed until after secondary school, he received foundational instruction from Elder Ayo Adeusi and Mr Annan (now Director of Music at CAC Yaba), preparing him for Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) examinations, in which he attained Grade 8 in music

theory. His musical development was further shaped by his participation, as a teenager, in the renowned Laz Ekwueme Chorale.

Professionally, Owoaje has lectured at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, served as an adjunct lecturer at the University of Lagos, and is currently a lecturer at Mountain Top University, Ogun State. Beyond academia, he is active as a pianist, composer, arranger and consultant to numerous organisations and government bodies. He is the founder and music director of the Urban Peace Choir, Lagos, and Managing Director of Centre Techniques Music Ltd.

Across more than three decades, Owoaje has produced, directed and arranged music for major national and international events, including the All-Africa Games (COJA), Hymnodia, and projects commissioned by the Cross River and Lagos State Governments. His extensive catalogue comprises over three hundred works spanning choral, instrumental, piano, orchestral, film score, Big Band, solo and fake-book genres. Many of these works have been performed, recorded, analysed and researched within Nigeria and internationally, establishing him as a significant voice in contemporary Nigerian art music and African pianistic creativity.

## Analysis

### *Iyanu l'Oluwa*

The setting, *Iyanu l'Oluwa*, is a 207-measure piano composition consisting of five (5) Yoruba (a language of the Southwest people of Nigeria) sacred melodies. Seun Owoaje composed this work in 2007 to express his yearning for God's miracle in his life and family. The church's influence on Seun Owoaje shaped his compositional techniques and the themes of his works. *Iyanu l'Oluwa* employs several styles and techniques, fusing Western and African musical idioms to create a contemporary approach. While there is an endless list of discoveries, some important ones are discussed:

#### **Melody:**

Melody is the tune of the music. In this case, it also creates the theme of the music. Seun Owoaje (2007) stated that “in Yoruba music, instrumental or vocal, the ‘art’ and indeed ‘heart’ of the music lie in the ‘song’”. Yoruba concept is that there is no music without the song. Samuel Akpabot (1986) earlier expressed this when he stated that “African instrumental melody in many instances make use of folk tunes”. In this case, Seun Owoaje derived the melody of this piano work from the sacred tune.

*Iyanu l'Oluwa* comprises five (5) known Yoruba sacred melodies common at prayer and revival services in the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) where Seun Owoaje grew up. The melodies were played clearly in each section and mostly repeated in higher octaves for emphasis. For each melody, he continues to use



development, fragmentation, rhythmic alteration, layering, and reharmonization as the music progresses. Each melody is stated and analysed separately below.

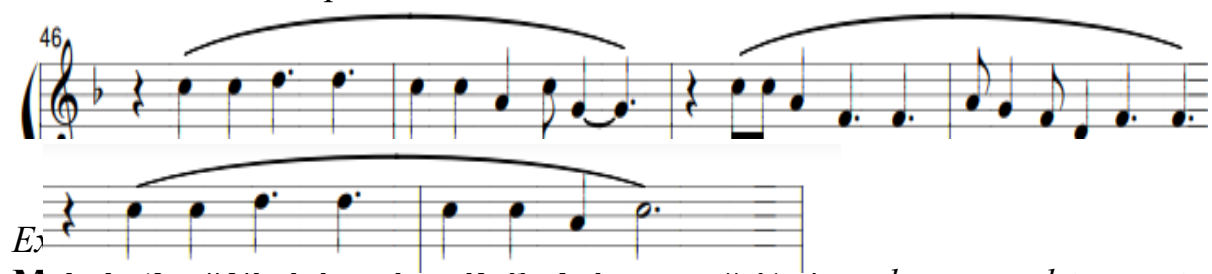
**Melody 1: *Iyanu l'Oluwa, O wa s'aye mi d'iyanu... etc. (The Lord is the miraculous)***

This melody plays in the introduction with lots of variation from measures 1–5, but it is not clear until it plays out clearly in measures 20–31 and repeats at the octave with full chords in measures 32–43. The form of the melody is conjunct with short leaps. An excerpt is seen in Example 1.



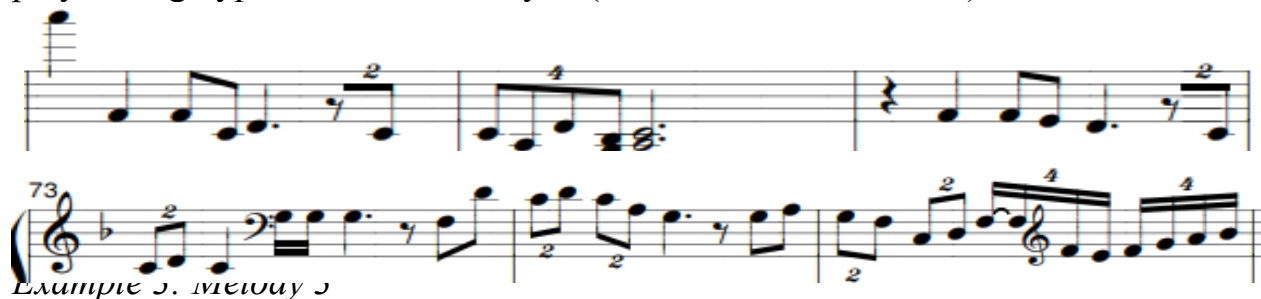
**Melody 2 (The second melody): *Alagbara l'Olorun mi etc. (My God is Powerful,)***

This melody is another popular prayer song that begins in measures 44–51, stately in the right hand. As expected, Seun Owoaje repeats the melody in octave thereafter. See Example 2.



**Melody 3: “*Gbolohun kan l’ofi s’eda aye...*” God used one word to create the world and man,**

This melody plays in m. 70–75, as seen in example 3. It then repeats an octave with harmony. The melody is played repeatedly (three more times) in another higher octave for emphasis and to duplicate the ‘cry’ and ‘seriousness’ required of the prayer song, typical of the CAC style. (m. 76–81; 82–89; 91–97)



**Melody 4: *Tal'o m'oruko Re? emi m'oruko re.* (Do you know His name, I know His name)**

This melody is another call-to-prayer song in B major, and it is rather long because of the repeated motifs (m. 108–122). This is in call-and-response form, in which the lead asks a question and the chorus answers. This theme plays throughout in harmony.



**Melody 5: *Igba gbogbo sa l'ayo mi* (I rejoice every time).**

This melody is the final melody outlined from measures 173–180, and it repeats at measures 182 through 189 in a higher octave. This joyful melody is a good roundup.



**Harmony:**

The piece, *Iyanu l'Oluwa*, is a creative composition that blends African and Western styles, especially in its use of chords and scales. Seun Owoaje (2019) stated in an interview that “My music is eclectic, a good mix of classical and African styles. I am aware of the influence that goes into my compositions”.

**Extended Chords:**

The composition uses a combination of chords and styles from African, Jazz, and classical music. Extended chords are chords built above a triad. The regular use

of extended chords such as seventh (7th) chords (m. 11; m. 16), diminished 7th (m. 64, 49), and tenth (10th) chords (m. 61, 42) makes the piano work unique.

### Block Chords:

Block chords are a technique for harmonizing a melodic line with full, dense chord voicing. Some world-renowned pianists, such as Lennie Tristana, Oscar Peterson, and George Shearing, practice this technique. According to Merriam-Webster (2019), Block chords are a succession of musical chords produced by the component voices or parts moving in the same rhythm.

This style was developed by Milk Buckner, popularized by George Shearing, and used to great effect by Red Garland. Typically, the voicings have one note in the left hand and three or (more often four) in the right hand. The voicings are in close positions, which means that the chosen notes in the chords are as close together as possible, usually within the space of an octave.

Seun Owoaje employs block chords to harmonize the music, *Iyanu l'Oluwa*. This appears in measures 42 and 52 in example 6.



Example 6: Block chords

**Scale:** Most of the scales in this composition are in the diatonic major scale. At measures 93-94, arpeggios are in a pentatonic scale. Arpeggios also appear in different formats.



Example 7: Arpeggios in pentatonic scale.

### Stride Piano style:

Stride Piano is a jazz style in which the right hand plays the melody while the left hand plays a single bass note or octave on the strong beat and a chord on the weak beat. Seun Owoaje employs the stride piano style in many sections of *Iyanu l’Oluwa*. Measures 16 through 28, 31 to 39, and 44 to 59 are examples of stride piano in this composition. This is also a contemporary piano compositional technique.



*Example 8: Piano Stride*

### Piano Riffs:

A piano riff is usually a cluster or a group of musical notations or chords where a pattern is played in a loop or as a part of the song or an instrumental. This part is usually different from the rest of the song, or it may be played as a loop on the bass of the song.

### Form:

This piano work, *Iyanu l’Oluwa*, is a fantasia. A fantasia is a musical composition with a free form and often an improvisatory style. It is also a musical composition based on several familiar tunes or with different forms or styles. This is obvious, as it is a piano composition with a medley of 5 known melodies and no strict form.

### Key:

The composition *Iyanu l’Oluwa* is mostly in F major, with a tonal shift to E-flat major from measure 88 to 105. Also, there is a major change of key to B major in measures 108 through 139, then a modulation to E-flat major (m. 140 – 160) with a short transition to the key of G major (m. 161– 168) before arriving at the original key (F major) from measure 169.

### Rhythm:

This piano piece is a polyrhythm. A polyrhythm is a musical texture in which there are multiple overlapping, interweaving, and contrasting rhythmic layers or elements occurring simultaneously. Because this composition embeds many jazz styles, polyrhythms are a defining rhythmic feature of many styles of jazz music and

African music. Seun Owoaje maximizes polyrhythmic movement in this piece, *Iyanu l'Oluwa*, as seen in measures 77, 79, and 85, using duplets in a compound time of 12/8.

“For those with a healthy historical/social curiosity, most music scholars argue that the polyrhythmic aspect of jazz is the legacy of African – American musical practices and preferences that ultimately trace their roots back to Africa, especially West Africa” (Joshua Boornazian, 2018).

### **Call and Response:**

Call and Response is a compositional technique that works similarly to a conversation. Call and response has its roots in traditional African music. It is a musical form in which a melody is stated in a phrase (the call) that is then followed by a second phrase (response) that completes the idea. The call-and-response form appears in measures 108–122, where the lead asks a question and the chorus answers.

### **Piano Voicing:**

Piano voicing is a description of the range or spacing of the two hands on the piano. In this composition, Seun Owoaje spaces the two hands up to 7 octaves apart, nearing the limits of the piano.

### **Texture:**

*Iyanu l'Oluwa* is polyphonic. Polyphony is a musical texture employing two or more simultaneous but relatively independent melodic lines. This is seen throughout the composition.

Throughout the music, we notice other contemporary compositional techniques sparsely scattered, such as irregular rhythms, intermittent meter changes, interlocking chords, and more.

## **Conclusion**

*Iyanu l'Oluwa*, Seun Owoaje's piano fantasia, represents a significant contribution to the evolving landscape of Nigerian art music. The work demonstrates a contemporary compositional vision in which African musical principles, Yoruba sacred melodies and modern pianistic idioms coalesce into a coherent artistic statement. Owoaje's integration of African Pianism with jazz-derived harmony, stride technique, pianistic riffs and extended chordal voicings illustrates a sophisticated negotiation of African and Western musical resources, advancing the expressive and structural possibilities of African art music for the piano.

Owoaje's compositional identity is shaped by a rich constellation of influences. His early immersion in church music at Christ Apostolic Church, Yaba, his participation in Laz Ekwueme's Chorale, and his exposure to Western classical repertoire, Juju, Fuji, and jazz traditions collectively inform his eclectic musical language. His professional experience as a jazz pianist in clubs and hotels further

broadened his stylistic palette, enabling him to incorporate improvisatory gestures and contemporary harmonic vocabulary without compromising the integrity of his African musical grounding. These intersecting influences have produced a composer whose work is simultaneously rooted in indigenous aesthetics and responsive to global musical developments.

In *Iyanu l'Oluwa*, Owoaje employs core elements of African musical thought, including call-and-response, ostinato, repetition, polyrhythmic layering and pentatonic scalar organisation. These features are not merely decorative; they function as structural drivers that shape the fantasia's thematic development, textural density and expressive trajectory. The work thus exemplifies how African musical materials can be embedded meaningfully within modern piano composition, reinforcing the relevance of African Pianism as a theoretical and creative framework.

Overall, *Iyanu l'Oluwa* affirms Seun Owoaje's position as a leading figure in contemporary Nigerian art music. His ability to synthesise African rhythmic logic, sacred melodic heritage and modern pianistic techniques contributes to the ongoing expansion of African art music and offers a compelling model for future explorations of African pianistic creativity.

### Recommendation

This study recommends the deliberate and systematic development of contemporary compositional techniques within Nigerian art music, particularly in piano writing. Strengthening African art music requires not only preserving indigenous musical principles but also advancing modern creative strategies that reflect current artistic realities.

The study further recommends extending contemporary compositional exploration to a wider range of instruments. Broadening the application of African Pianism, drummistic techniques and intercultural synthesis across instrumental families will deepen the expressive and structural possibilities of African art music and support its continued evolution.

Finally, sustained scholarly engagement with the works of Seun Owoaje is essential. His oeuvre represents a significant and under-examined contribution to Nigerian art music, and further analytical, stylistic and contextual studies will illuminate his role in shaping contemporary African pianistic practice and compositional thought.



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