

‘*Tiwa ati Tiwon*’ (Ours and Theirs): Interrogating the Intersection Between Western Musical Training and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Composing African Art Music

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Abstract

African art music has generated sustained scholarly interest, particularly regarding its identity, pedagogical foundations, and the creative strategies through which composers negotiate the relationship between Western musical training and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). This study interrogates the intersection of these two epistemic domains and examines how their interaction shapes compositional practice, cultural identity, and audience reception. Drawing on archival materials, manuscripts, recorded works, and published scholarship, the paper demonstrates that African art music attains cultural authenticity when composers are thoroughly grounded in the indigenous musical traditions of their communities, including their performance practices, tonal systems, rhythmic structures, and aesthetic philosophies. The analysis identifies composers who have successfully integrated indigenous elements into Western-derived art music idioms and highlights the techniques through which such fusions are achieved. Findings reveal that meaningful hybridity requires not only technical proficiency in Western compositional methods but also deep immersion in indigenous musical epistemologies. The study recommends strengthened bi-cultural training, expanded field research, and increased institutional support through grants and commissions to enable composers to produce works that are both artistically rigorous and culturally rooted.

Keywords: African art music, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Western training, identity, structural fusion, decolonisation.



Introduction

The question of what constitutes a distinctly African identity in art music has long preoccupied scholars across musicology and related fields. Over several decades, researchers have explored the nature, scope, and creative possibilities of African art music, proposing new terminologies, techniques, tonal systems, and theoretical models through which its aesthetic and cultural character might be understood (Olusoji, 2026; Olusoji, 2013; Onyeji, 2020; Uzoigwe, 2001; Omojola, 2001; Irele, 1993). These debates converge on a central concern: how African composers might craft works that are intellectually rigorous, structurally sophisticated, and globally intelligible, yet remain rooted in the cultural logics and sonic epistemologies of their indigenous traditions.

This study examines that creative negotiation by interrogating the relationship between what may be termed “Ours” and “Theirs”. “Ours” refers to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompassing the undiluted musical practices of African cultures transmitted through oral traditions, folk repertoires, ceremonial and social performance contexts, and the diverse typologies embedded in communal and sacred life. “Theirs”, by contrast, denotes the European classical idioms, notational systems, formal structures, and compositional techniques acquired through Western musical training. The paper explores how these two epistemic domains intersect, collide, or hybridise in contemporary African art music, and how composers navigate this terrain in ways that preserve cultural identity while engaging the global art-music tradition.

Within this interrogation, several guiding questions shape the analytical trajectory. The study considers how Western-trained composers draw on indigenous musical resources and whether African art music, as a category, is conceptually and aesthetically possible. It further probes the nature of the intersections between Western classical and traditional African musical systems, asking whether African art music must necessarily reflect indigenous identity and how such identity is negotiated in practice. Finally, it reflects on the work of composers who have successfully fused indigenous materials with Western techniques, using their creative strategies as evidence of the evolving relationship between training and tradition.

By engaging these questions within a single narrative arc, the Introduction establishes the conceptual foundation for a deeper examination of the epistemic, aesthetic, and cultural dynamics that shape African art music in the twenty-first century.



Basic Themes and Concepts

It will be of utmost importance to further discuss and restate the basic themes, terms and concepts being interrogated in this study. The "Ours" (Indigenous Knowledge Systems - IKS), as earlier mentioned, is rooted in oral traditions, functional and utilitarian music such as, music for ceremonies, social gatherings, folk music, social music, and other musical resources based on legends, myths stressing how these emphasize, incorporate, and fuses traditional rhythms, improvisations, and other indigenous-derived elements into art music. It is quite emphatic to state that, African literary giants such as Léopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Camara Laye, Kenneth Kaunda and others have successfully fused African themes into their plays and poems. I have mentioned this Indigenous knowledge System (IKS), and made reference to the contributions of these iconic personalities elsewhere (see Olusoji 2026). Also see diagram from the education of master musician below, suggesting possible curriculum for mastering traditional talking drums through indigenous knowledge systems and education (Olusoji, 2013).

Table 1. *Informal Apprentice Scheme for Learning Dundun/Bata Drumming*

Stage(s)	Objectives	Scope and Duration	Content	Philosophy	Evaluation
1	Familiarity with instruments and ensemble	May last from ages 2–6 when cognitive and psychomotor ability are well-developed	- Learning names of instruments, getting attuned to sound made on the instrument, learning simple rhythms on the instrument	To develop and engender pupils' interest in the family art	Pupils/apprentice asked to name instruments at random or through music appreciation
2	Exposure to simple rhythms and idioms used in the ensemble	May learn from age 6 to maturity or depending on adulthood cognitive ability of the learner	- Tapping of rhythms based on established models in an ensemble/community, learning basic accompaniment rhythm of the ensemble	To develop and establish a sound musicianship for ensemble music	Same as above
3	Introduction to more complex rhythms	Continuous exercise done to firmly establish the learner's musical foundation	- Accompaniment rhythm, ostinato rhythm, cross rhythm, polyrhythm, interlocking rhythm, nuances and modes of community	To inculcate a strong sense of rhythm	Drummers asked to take leading roles in an ensemble session
4	Improvisation	Usually taught to would-be band leaders or master drummers or musicians	- Art of generating themes, familiarity with community idioms/history, familiarity with different occasions in the community calendar	General musicianship and band-master leadership ability	Drummers asked to improvise within an established thematic framework

5	Basic repairs	Specialised training for all members of the group to effect minor repairs on their instruments	- Getting used to the structure of instruments, simple maintenance, handling of repair tools, sourcing for materials	To develop comprehensive knowledge of the ensemble and its workings	Drummers asked to effect repairs on damaged instruments
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The "Theirs" (Western Musical Training) was introduced through colonialism and missionaries, who introduced Western education; this system centers on Western musical literacy notation, functional tonality, and structural order, often individualistic compositions and others learnt formally in music schools, conservatories, and others. The burning question being asked here is: how can African art music composers use their training to impact their immediate environment by creatively incorporating knowledge learnt through Western training with traditional knowledge systems (IKS).

Integrating Western Training with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The history of African art music demonstrates that Western-trained composers from Africa and the African diaspora have long engaged in deliberate, sophisticated processes of fusion, drawing deeply from Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to create works that are both structurally rigorous and culturally grounded. Many of the most illustrious figures in the tradition exemplify this creative negotiation. Fela Sowande (1905–1987), for instance, embedded folk motifs from Ghana and Nigeria into his *African Suite* for orchestra, crafting a symphonic language that is unmistakably African in its thematic material yet shaped by Western orchestral practice. Adam Fibresima (1926–2003) similarly drew on Ijaw-Okirika musical elements in works such as his *Highlife Symphony* and *Opera Opu Jaja*, demonstrating how indigenous rhythmic and melodic idioms can be reimaged within Western art-music forms.

Akin Euba (1935–2020) advanced this intercultural project through both scholarship and composition, developing concepts such as “African pianism” and applying them in works including *Igi nla so*, *Six Yoruba Folk Songs for Voice and Piano*, *Chaka the Opera*, and *Scenes from Traditional Life for Piano*. His oeuvre illustrates how analytical study of traditional music can inform new compositional paradigms. Similar strategies appear in Nketia’s *Volta Fantasy*, Uzoigwe’s *Ukom*, *Bata*, and *Dundun* for piano, Ekwueme’s *Missa Africana*, Amu’s *Yen Ara Asase*

Ni, Bode Omojola's opera *Funmilayo*, and Fred Onowheruosoke's piano studies, among many others.

A proper understanding of the musical elements, nuances, medium, functions, and dynamics of the music of a particular culture and its utility as a phenomenal art will help composers in writing their works and properly aligning it with their Western training to represent and promote the musical and cultural identity of their culture. Though art music is regarded as high art that may not necessarily reflect a particular culture, it is rather conceived to show scholarship, craftsmanship, artistry, aesthetics, professionalism, dexterity, creativity, and proficiency in a specialized area. Omibiyi-Obidike (2001) opined that:

It is generally accepted that any kind of music- whether folk, popular, religious or art-should necessarily bear a strong cultural stamp of the people who produce and use it. In other words, it must have an identity that distinguishes it from the mainstream of world music. As a result, African art music has been developing since the late nineteenth century when African musicians became aware of the need and began to forge an identity in their compositions (Omibiyi-Obidike, 2001; viii).

Whether in choral music or pieces meant for soloists, instrumental ensembles, and pieces for several other combinations, composers of African art music have applied a variety of musical techniques which crisscross and intersect Western and traditional compositional techniques. Ekwueme (2001), identified some of these techniques as used in choral music to include antiphony, tonality, ostinato, traditional African harmony (parallel harmony, counterpoint), pedal point harmony, and others. Though these are basically Western terminologies, they intersect with traditional practices and have been found in the works of several first-generation composers as well as contemporary ones.

Along the same line, composers of African art music have explored some sort of bricolage-creatively fusing various techniques that are employed in Western classical music, particularly using Western structural forms with traditional African music, evolving syncretic styles in their works. Some of these works could be purely academic exercises and studies, characteristic pieces, research-based compositions written after visits to the field, experimental compositions, arrangements of popular tunes/ folk songs, nationalistic works, exploration of nonsensical

syllables, concept-based pieces, e.g., works espousing some new concepts and ideas such as "African pianism", "African vocalism", "intercultural music", "Ghanaian pianism", "Drummistic", "singing piano", "Bi-culturalism", "Tone painting", etc. in their music. In achieving these fusions, African rhythms, melodies, scales, and forms were employed to birth a new syncretic style where Western training and traditional knowledge (IKS) intersect. How then, can we sustain this marriage between training and tradition?



Figure 1. *Melorhythmic Nigeriana performed by National Youth Orchestra conducted Voldart Michael.*



Figure 2. *Discussing my works at Alessandro Scarlatti Conservatory, Palermo, Italy(Courtesy Erasmus).*

Recommendations

For African art music to reflect the worldviews, beliefs and lived realities of African societies, the music curriculum requires a fundamental rethinking. It must be redesigned in ways that move beyond the simple inclusion of African content and towards a genuine transformation of pedagogical approaches that recognise indigenous musical epistemologies as core knowledge. Decolonising the curriculum is therefore essential for the effective training of future music educators and composers. Bi-cultural training that integrates Western and indigenous musical systems should be prioritised. Composition students should be encouraged to undertake apprenticeships with master musicians, talking drummers or traditional dancers, gaining first-hand understanding of indigenous artistry, performance practice and creative processes.

Such an approach enables the emergence of hybridised compositions that embody both “Ours” and “Theirs”, producing post-colonial, postmodern and poly-stylistic musical identities. These works demonstrate how pentatonic scales, ostinato techniques and homophonic parallelism can be meaningfully combined with Western harmonic systems to create new compositional languages that honour both traditions.

To strengthen this creative foundation, composers should engage more actively in field-based research, collection, notation and transcription of folk materials. These activities support musical documentation for posterity and provide valuable resources for education. The nationalistic composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Anton Dvorak, Bela Bartok, Peter I. Tchaikovsky, the Russian Five, Le Six, Claude Debussy and Jean Sibelius, as well as eminent African art music composers, demonstrated the importance of such work in shaping culturally grounded art-music traditions.

Institutional support is equally crucial. The Federal Ministry of Education, cultural ministries, and embassy cultural attachés should provide grants for research into folk music and commission composers to produce new works. Regular competitions and workshops can help identify emerging talent, nurture younger composers and sustain a vibrant community of African art-music creators.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the vitality of African art music depends on a deliberate engagement with Indigenous Knowledge Systems, understood as the musical philosophies,



performance practices, tonal structures and cultural meanings embedded in African communities. When composers are firmly grounded in these traditions and combine them with the technical resources of Western training, they create works that are structurally refined, aesthetically compelling and culturally authentic. The examples discussed illustrate that successful fusion is achieved through deep immersion in indigenous musical knowledge rather than superficial borrowing, and through a clear understanding of how traditional soundworlds can inform contemporary art-music creation.

The implications are both pedagogical and institutional. Music education must embrace bi-cultural training that values fieldwork, apprenticeship and indigenous musicianship alongside Western theory and notation. Institutions should support this work through grants, commissions and documentation initiatives that enable composers to research, create and disseminate music rooted in African heritage.

The challenge before African composers is to contribute confidently to a growing community of creators who see composition as both artistic craft and cultural responsibility. The goal is not to replicate the monumental achievements of Handel, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Amu or Sowande, but to illuminate the creative space each composer occupies and to draw from the richness of African sonic traditions to shape new futures for art music. By publishing, circulating and sharing their works, composers can help build an enduring legacy that affirms African musical knowledge as a vital force in global art-music discourse.

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