



## Study of some Music Conducting Practices among Selected Music Directors in Delta State, Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

*Although choirmasters have their unique ways of directing performances, conducting has undergone changes, thus, resulting in a proliferation of unethical practices. This study focuses on interrogating music conducting practices with specific focus on Church-based music directors and conductors in Delta State, Nigeria. The study utilized ethnographic, observation and analytical methods as well as interview research tool in data gathering. Seven conductors were randomly selected from different Church denominations in Delta State. In all the church denominations visited by the researcher, conducting practices in areas like beat patterns, facial and body gestures, posture, cues, cutoffs, kinetic use/responses, and the creative philosophies that informed the use of such practices were studied. Findings also reveal that although there are a plethora of conducting practices used by many conductors that can be referred to as unconventional, some of them can still be adopted into art music performances. The research recommends that in adopting some of these unconventional practices, conductors must apply caution so as not to jeopardize the fundamental ethics of the art of conducting.*

### INTRODUCTION

Music as a practice-based and performing art is rooted in styles and philosophies that guide the entire stages of its creativity. Vocal and instrumental ensemble performers rely on certain techniques and practices to thrive and advance their art. The survival of any music ensemble and the successful exhibition of their skills are largely dependable on the unique practices or artistic styles utilized by the ensembles as a group or even individualized patterns. These practices may have been in use over a long period of the ensemble's existence or may have been modified to suit certain performances since change in art is an inevitable phenomenon. In Nigeria, for example, the inevitability of change has led to the birth of new musical styles like Nigerian art music and the formulation of theories and techniques by different scholars that guide its practice. In the area of music conducting, Nigerian conductors have, over time, modified their conducting patterns in the manner they execute cues, cut-offs, attacks and in the interpretation of the music scores. All these vary from one conductor to another as well as the ensembles being conducted or managed. Modifications can also be influenced by such factors as personnel, philosophy, policy, exposure, repertoire and other technical considerations and extra-musical nuances. Even in Europe, renowned conductors like Felix Mendelsohn and Bela Bartok developed their unique styles and conducting

techniques by which they were not only known, but have over time culminated in a corpus of scholarly enquiries. Suffice it to state that in Nigeria also, different conductors have carved a niche for themselves while exhibiting their conducting prowess through artistic demonstration of their profound grasp of both the so-called conventional and self-created or unconventional conducting practices, gestures and nuances. These are evident from existing literature on veterans like A.T. Olude, T.K.E Philips, Laz Ekwueme and Kanu Achinivu, Emurobome Idolor who were active Church musicians. Other notable names like Timothy Eru, Emeka Nwokedi and Onyee Nwankpa further popularized the versatility of Nigerians in the art of conducting to international audiences thereby leading to enhanced global appreciation of their skills. Since the advent of Western conducting practice in Nigeria with the activities of Christian missionaries in the mid nineteenth century, it has since become an established art form. Practiced by both professionals and nonprofessionals, music directing and conducting has evolved into one of the most fascinating aspects of music performance. Virtually every Church-based or secular music ensemble has a conductor that directs its affairs with peculiar approaches. This study is, therefore, an effort in the direction of interrogating some of the techniques and practices utilized by conductors with special reference to Church-based choral ensembles in Delta State.



Although the art of conducting as viewed from a Western standpoint is not new in Nigeria, advanced formal studies remain exiguous while the number of in-depth researches into the area as an academic aspect of music is abysmally low, despite the barrage of formally educated Nigerians who engage in Church music practice. The Church appears to be the chief employer of labour for formally trained musicians in Nigeria where they function as conductors/choirmasters and organists. While this has enriched the technical aspect and professional practice of the art, scholarly enquiries into the field of conducting is still sparse. This has led to a dearth of literature in conducting and ensemble management in general. Although there is an existing study in the area of conducting practices in Nigeria, the work was limited in scope to formally trained musicians who own secular music chorales. But the fact remains that the Church has been the melting pot for many musicians and the springboard for many who later became renowned artistes. The lack of scholarly enquiries into the conducting practices of Church-based conductors and the documentation of same therefore leaves a big lacuna from the perspective of standard and ethical practices. It is, therefore, necessary to fill this yawning gap in music research with a view to unearthing some of the unconventional practices, techniques and styles that characterize conducting and directing choral ensembles in the area under study. Conductors are individuals with different musical upbringing, exposure and education. Thus, conducting techniques and practices may vary because of some of these peculiarities.

## **BACKGROUND ON CONTEMPORARY MUSIC CONDUCTING IN NIGERIA**

Music performance is a worldwide phenomenon that is present in all cultures of the world. Despite the universality of music performance, which conducting constitutes an integral part, serious scholarly enquiries into the art can still be said to be relatively new and intangible in Nigeria. It is, therefore, necessary to view conducting as a parlance in music, and all other terminologies that are cognate and central to its practice. The art of conducting is rooted in the use of gestures that are vital to the effective interpretation of musical works to ensemble members who in turn communicate to the audience. Conducting combines techniques and strategies involving musical and extra-musical nuances. Viewed from a Western perspective, conducting has been in Nigeria since the advent of Methodist missionary activities on September 24, 1842. Consequently, the art of conducting started from early choirmasters who conducted during Church services and Church-related activities.

Music ensembles may comprise singers, instrumentalists and other artistic personnel or a combination of these. Depending on the philosophy of the ensembles, they may be for entertainment, worship, recreational purposes, or for enactment of cultural values. But just as every man is different in the way they interact and do things, so also do organized entities differ in their modes of operation and

delivery. In music, for example, the way a specialized secular highlife band operates will surely be at variance with their *Ena* or *Ijurhu* music counterparts. The conductor on his part is sacrosanct to the effective completion of any creative process of choral or orchestral music, which had begun from the composer and ended with performance and later audience feedback. Each conductor is equally different in his/her technical approach to music conducting and directing, thus, resulting in the use of techniques, practices and nuances that may be short of ethical standards, herein referred to as unconventional conducting practices. It, therefore, becomes necessary to undertake a study of some of these nitty-gritties and conducting patterns of ensemble music conductors across Delta State. It is also crucial to study the different conducting practices that characterize Church music making with specific reference to the conductors of ensembles.

Furthermore, over the years, a number of gestures, concepts, techniques and philosophies that guide the art of conducting have been adopted and developed. But advancements in all spheres of human Endeavour and more particularly music in the 21st century, have led to changes in these concepts and techniques. These advancements have rubbed off on conducting because of modified performance situations and societal needs. This, therefore, naturally prompts the conductor to modify his technical approaches in conducting as well as ensemble management methods to suit contemporary yearnings. This is because, change remains a constant phenomenon. Nettle (1997, p.7) asserts that—all music have a history and all of them change, though at various rates and not always in the same direction. Adopting some conducting gestures from other musical styles into art music may therefore be necessary, depending on what the conductor wants to achieve with his ensemble.

## **THE CONCEPT OF CONDUCTING**

Over the years, the art of conducting has progressed from primarily keeping tempo and maintaining rhythmic pulses. Contemporary choral conductors now, aside establishing tempo, have put on the garbs of expressive artists who thrive in interpreting musical works to bring out the very best of all the compositional nuances employed during a creative process. Even though this evolution became palpable in the nineteenth century, conductors have continued to develop idiosyncratic gestures that culminate in a gamut of communication languages used in choral performances. Perhaps, this is so because the 'musical traditions in Africa provide the most important expressive medium for the projection of the rich resources of folklore that abound on the continent' (Omojola, 2005:165). Conducting as a very technical aspect of expression and communication, is arguably the most intrinsic and abstract musical skill in the broad area of music performance. Dannenberg, Siewiorek and Zahler (2010:1) aver that—from a musicological perspective, conducting builds links between notation, theory, gesture, and sound. Conducting offers insights into music and music

practice, with implications for music education'. Virtually all vocal and/or instrumental performances in the Western classical music tradition that involve group renditions as opposed to solo, often require the services of a conductor who can be described as the one chiefly saddled with the onus of coordinating an ensemble to guarantee melodic, harmonic and rhythmic organization in the delivery of a composed material. In other words, art music renditions by vocal, instrumental or mixed ensembles rely on a conductor who directs and ensures that all scripted music are well interpreted. The conductor uses different gestures unique to him/her with the main objective of getting the performers to execute a scripted work with precision and finesse. Schramm et al (2015:243) refer to the conductor as –a person whose gestures are intended to synchronize the performers|. In a more holistic description, aside using body gestures to communicate in an expressive manner and directing a performance, the conductor assumes other responsibilities like that of a teacher, director and leader (Carnicer, Garrido and Requena, 2015). Sharing the same view, Brooks (2016:4) notes that –though the activities of a conductor are highly specific, it is evident that the task of conducting falls within the very definition of leadership. In whatever capacity the conductor functions, –the role of the conductor is vital in ensuring the smooth operation of any group of musicians, big or small (Carnicer et al, 2015). Commenting further on who a conductor is, Friddle (2019:1) describes him as –the chief virtuoso and artifex, [who] is called upon to see that the whole is harmoniously articulated and that it receives a living form|. Van Der Sandt (2013) also adds that conductors are those who unlock the beauty and joy of the printed score to the singers. He is the observant artist who sees and hears what other musicians may not hear. Buttressing this fact is Vidal (2015:129) who describes artists as people that are very –observant especially in our cultural milieu since they have to communicate with the society in which they live in their creative works. The conductor can therefore be described as a gestural communicator and imaginative genius whose main task is to ensure artistic cohesion of the members of his ensemble that culminates in a beautiful sonic output during rendition before an audience. In doing this, the conductor, after a thorough score study, elects the gestures that he/she deems suitable for different passages or sections of the work being conducted, from his expectedly robust repertoire of gestures. Garofalo and Battisti (2009:1) observe that –The quality of musical sound that is produced by an ensemble (orchestra, band, chorus, or chamber ensemble) is greatly affected by a conductor's gestures, body language, and facial expressions – nonverbal cues. This may partially explain why different conductors obtain different results and sounds from the same performing ensemble.

From the submissions of the authors cited above, the researcher is of the opinion that an effective conductor and ideal ensemble manager should at the minimum possess the following abilities:

1. Effective utilization of the left hand for appropriate gestures.
2. Have an in-depth knowledge of the musical score.
3. Be conversant with and correctly apply beat patterns suitable for performed pieces.
4. Effectively interpret the music being performed, such that the intentions of the composers are well captured.
5. Possess good musical and non-musical communication skills.
6. Have artistic discipline in keeping tempo and seamlessly changing same if need be.
7. Use appropriate teaching methods during rehearsals.
8. Possess psychological skills to understand individual needs and challenges of ensemble members.
9. Acquire technical versatility in music.
10. Have a robust repertoire to meet audience needs.
11. Innovation and spontaneity in making correct decisions.
12. Prudence and ability to manage ensemble finances.
13. be able to manage time in teaching songs.
14. Proficiency on the piano or any other musical instrument.
15. Possess very good aural ability.
16. be approachable.
17. Have the ability to handle pressure.
18. Firmness in taking decisions.
19. Ability to work with ensemble members from different ethnic and family backgrounds.
20. be musically creative.

The twenty qualities listed above go to show that a conductor's role goes beyond mere beating of time before an ensemble. Apart from having a robust gestural vocabulary and graceful swinging of arms and facial expressions, the conductor needs other characteristics to make musical renditions superlative. A conductor, therefore, can be defined as a musician who uses a wide range of communicative gestures in directing an ensemble during a performance, in addition to being a teacher, administrator, instrumentalist, and a versatile musical colossus that exudes style, elegance and confidence before ensemble members and his audience.

## **FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS ON SOME CONDUCTING PRACTICES**

### **On what techniques and practices are your conducting hinged?**

Conducting and music directing in the Church in Delta State, Nigeria, is hinged on the philosophies, ideas, and conceptual basis of Western music, wherein the conductor is expected



to be a master of his craft, directing, interpreting, creating, and recreating what has been created, and utilizing a variety of techniques in content delivery. Even though the origin of conducting is often linked to Europe, where it became ingrained as an art in Western classical music, it is not a surprise to the researcher that most conductors in Delta State are greatly influenced by Western perceptions and practices in both technical and administrative areas of leading their ensembles.

Interviewees such as Otamere (2022), Mimiko (2022), Nwoko (2021) all attest to the Western influence on the art of conducting in Nigeria. They maintained that this influence makes it almost impossible to practice conducting without utilizing gestures and techniques which have become known as conventions that are indispensable in performance setting.

This notwithstanding, the researcher also observed the use of Nigerian performance practices (like dancing and clapping) by a number of conductors, especially as they performed or rehearsed Nigerian art works. This may not be far from the fact that before the advent of Western art music in Nigeria, traditional ensembles had a peculiar way of directing a performance. While this may not be very vivid as it is in Western music, it is possible to adapt some of the practices associated with traditional music into art music conducting. One notable practice is the use of body movements in conducting Nigerian art pieces.

### **Do you have a specific pattern or style when conducting gospel or art songs? Explain**

Some conductors interviewed for the study opined that the major aim of conducting is to communicate; therefore, utilizing gestures, techniques and practices that may seem away from the Western conventions of conducting art music is not out of place. Edafe (2022), Erhabor (2022) and Ossaiga (2021) all suggested that art music should be more dynamic in accommodating other practices and in view of current trends and dynamism in the contemporary world. While the researcher shares in the above opinion of the interviewees, he wishes to add that caution must be applied while adopting these Nigerian and contemporary nuances into conducting, so that the art does not lose its purpose, and the ethical standards not jeopardized. This is because the practices become unconventional when they are used indiscriminately and without control. For example, the researcher observed that most of the conductors from the Pentecostal denominations were audible in their verbalization, uncontrollably stamped their feet, swung their arms, with poor postures. Although they gave reasons that the gospel musical style naturally informs them to move in that manner, the researcher observed that the techniques were most times unnecessary and not in tandem or conformity with the song being rendered. However, even though the few conductors from the Pentecostal denomination that had formal training in music still used some of the unconventional practices, it

was more controlled. This underscores the importance of formal music education.

### **How do you use verbalization/mouthing when conducting?**

Findings from the study also reveal the use of verbal communication by many gospel music conductors. The researcher observed that many contemporary conductors communicate verbally by miming or muttering certain words, which the choristers and instrumentalists are expected to read and decode from the lips of the conductor. While this practice is being frowned at by most formally trained conductors, many conductors visited used verbal communication to great advantage, as the singers and instrumentalists are able to comprehend and respond to what is being mimed at first instance. However, in using verbalization during the public recital, the researcher ensured that it does not interfere with the sound resonating from the choir. In other words, it is more of mouthing technique. It was also observed that for some conductors, verbalization is a habit that they find impossible to jettison. In other words, their verbalization is not done for musical reasons of helping to make entries clearer and emphasizing the longevity of texts. For instance, Monday Mimiko, unconsciously uses verbalization because it seems to have become ingrained in his subconscious that he cannot conduct without it. While making verbalization become habitual should be discouraged, it can be used intermittently and in a manner that it does not interfere with sound, nor is not heard by the audience especially for art music performances.

### **Do you study scores before teaching? If yes, does the use of musical score affect your conducting gestures during performance?**

Interviews with Oborakpororo Itedjere (2022) and Monday Mimiko (2022) underscored the over-dependence on score sheets by many conductors in Delta State, when conducting art music. But on the contrary, contemporary conductors of other musical styles do not rely on scores or papers containing the text of the songs. The researcher observed that looking at the score hinders effective communication between the conductor and the choir. It also limits the freedom of the conductor to express himself. In a bid to be free from the constraints of using score, the researcher-conductor conducted all the songs in the concert without any score. This was possible because of the time he had dedicated to score study and audio-visual playback of pre-recorded materials. Through this, he was able to communicate better with the choir and express himself. It was observed that even though there is one conventional pattern of beating each meter, there are significant differences in conductors' bounce, ictus, and the way they beat staccato and legato passages.

Choral music conducting in Churches in Delta State is hinged on the use of several hand and facial gestures. They differ from one conductor to another. It is an important aspect of performance, because if properly used, understood and

executed by the choir, all melodic, harmonic and rhythmic aspects of the piece are well interpreted. The composer's intentions are better brought to life, and the work is given more meaning thereof.

## CONCLUSION

The research noted that since conducting became an established art in Nigeria, it has witnessed modifications in different aspects, even as change has remained a constant phenomenon in its practice. Hence, certain areas of conducting continue to bow to the forces of change as it intermingles with different music traditions and styles. Nevertheless, scholarly works on the art are still largely reflective of Western music prototypes, which may be relatively because conducting developed into a formal art in the common practice period. It is significant to state that since its origin, conducting has advanced further than the tenets of the common practice period. But sometimes, conducting practices that are not Western-oriented are often not utilized because they are largely seen as unconventional, especially by individuals with formal music education. The reason for this is not farfetched, as most of the unconventional practices used can sometimes be likened to comic gesticulations that seem to make a mockery of the art of conducting. But for the sake of knowledge proliferation, the study established that not all the gestures used in contemporary times should be discarded, thus, the need arises for the incorporation of some conducting nuances and performance practices that may have hitherto been underutilized. Some of the techniques and practices observed are in areas like body movements, repeat signs, voice part indications, verbalization, use of scores, mouthing, and hand clapping. Having examined the meaning of conducting from different standpoints, conducting was defined as the use of gestures and other communicative musical and non-musical signs to direct an ensemble during rehearsals, practice sessions and performances. While a number of scholars opine that indeed gestures and other types of body languages are the most essential tools for conducting, some scholars also believe that verbalization is critical to the art of conducting.

Thus, interviews, participant and non-participant observation of selected choral conductors formed the basis for collecting primary data. Findings from the study revealed that the art of conducting in Delta State is not limited to Western conducting nuances, but also comprises the use of techniques and practices in leading choirs in ways that reflect traditional music principles, performance contexts, ensemble compositions and individualized or self-created patterns. This means that, the multi-music cultures, musical style and performance contexts have significant influences on the art of conducting in Delta State, Nigeria. Although most of the conductors are Nigerians, they have over the years, benefitted from Western and popular music cultures which they imbibed through their exposure to formal/informal music education, the mass media, or environment. While most of the conductors ascribe their

conducting abilities to their acquaintance with Western classical music, most of the conductors are also influenced by indigenous and contemporary music nuances in directing their ensembles during performances. As observed by the researcher during fieldwork, Western conducting traditions manifested in the use of gestures, beat patterns and posture, and are mainly used to elicit tempo and coherence while performing Western European art pieces. On the other hand, European and Nigerian music nuances and practices are used to elicit sonic and kinetic elements from the ensembles. The elements found in conducting gospel music involve audible (verbalization) directives to ensemble members, used to elicit choreographed body movements and acoustics from the choirs. It is therefore recommended that some of these nuances can be adopted into conducting and directing art music; however, caution must be applied so as not to jeopardize the artistic process.

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## **INTERVIEWS**

**Osarodion Otamere** is holds a B. A Music from Delta State University, Abraka, and is Music Director, Benin City Chorale, and the Diocese of Benin, Anglican Communion.

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