Refocusing Musical Performances Adjudication in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

Not much is considered by most musical performances adjudicators during competitions other than to select the best three groups and dismiss all other entrants into the competition with a wave of hand. Against this background, this duo examines in detail musical performances adjudications within the Nigerian context. In the course of this investigation it opined that while the musical awareness of donor agencies maybe limited, the onus is on the performances adjudicators to give technical advice to them and also design a blue print for a true and thorough assessment of performers because in getting to rehearse for a musical competition, the musicality of the entire competitors are usually biffed up. This in turn enhances musical proficiency in the region. Musically speaking, the era of “he who pays the piper calls the tune” is over because such trends are capable of asphyxiating musical craftsmanship.

Keywords: musical performance, musical competition, musical adjudication, musicality and musical sensitivity.
Introduction

The title of this paper first evolved as-Group D came first, A, second and H, third: Issues and counter issues in musical performances adjudication in Nigerian schools. While sharing ideas about the issues this paper intends to address the authors collectively resolved to have it read as it is currently. This is exactly the usual scenario in the adjudication of performances. However, we have cursorily made an immediate reference to this so as to guide its readers directly into the thrust of this presentation. Apart from teaching and conducting researches in areas of interest and specialty in the field of music, most Nigerian musicologists and music educators are organists, Choir leaders and music directors. There are many avenues in Nigeria for musical performances. This is so in that the Nigerian society was in the first case traditional before yielding itself to contemporary tendencies. Even at that, there is retention of selected traditional avenues of musical performances and this has enlarged the current frequency of performance adjudications in Nigerian communities. For Example, beyond town, district, local government, state and national competitions for schools, there are those occasioned by churches, distinguished personages, music enthusiasts, wealthy individuals, and other ancillary donor agencies. At the fore of such preparations and organizations music personnel’s inputs are sought and relied on.

Some Preliminary Reflections

We consider it apt to present the remark of Albert Oikelome, an ethnomusicologist, conductor, singer and lecturer at the University of Lagos. On Tuesday March 13, 2012, Albert Oikelome, the music director of Best Spring Chorale, Lagos published what he called the ‘Ten Commandments for choir leaders’ on Facebook, one of the globally patronized internet social networks and it read:

1. Thou shall be prepared for rehearsal.
2. Thou shall wear a happy face
3. Thou shall present thy choir well for any engagement
4. Thou shall know thy choristers by name
5. Thou shall challenge the musical knowledge of thy choir
6. Thou shall NOT allow any other responsibility during the rehearsal
7. Thou shall make full delegation when thou must be absent
8. Thou shall cultivate an ear that is hungry for more and more choral literature
9. Thou shall be sensitive to the personal problems of the Choristers
10. Thou shall dismiss at the correct time.

That these commandments were posted on Facebook and have attracted many likes and positive comments are indicative of the fact that the music scholar is being looked upon for directions and technical advice and expertise.

Early in time, Archibald (1965:1) remarked that:
An average choral conductor needs a well trained ear, ability to cope with full score, knowledge of orchestral instruments and orchestral routine, acquaintance with musical theory, form, harmony and counterpoint, acquaintance with the history of music and especially literature of music, the requirement of Piano forte playing and of singing,...sense of humour, enthusiastic leadership and ingenuity.

Without doubt, when one adds the thoughts of Oikelome to the expectations of Archibald, there is a tendency to feel that the A-B-C of Choir training, management and directing is already at our finger tips. However the end product of training is performance and performances can be held not solely for the sake of entertainment but to improve on the musical craftsmanship of the performers. This then takes us to musical competitions and adjudications.

**What is a musical competition?**

Put simply, competition means a contest for a prize or award. Musical competition is a public event designed to identify and award musical ensembles, soloists and musicologists (www.en.m.wikepedia.org)

Globally, festivals are organized by different nations among other things to showcase their culture and music remains a major part of it. Preparing to showcase ones musical culture goes with inconsiderable hours of rehearsals. Such preparations in turn raise every contestant’s level of musicality. For example, while examining the scenario in East Africa, Barz (2004:40) remarked that:

... musical performances throughout East Africa often occurs within highly competitive events, constituting an important form of and contribution to popular entertainment that include song, duel, choir competitions, drumming and dance contests, sporting events, religious rituals and games. Though competitive music performance is certainly not particular to East Africa, the ability of competitive music making to be a fundamental community-shaping institution in these areas of African continent is truly significant.

From Barz’s position, we see that competitions go beyond engendering the spirit of competitiveness to fundamental community-shaping.

In his personal account, Foley (2010) recounts:

When I was a student I looked with dread upon the fearsome weeks of the local music festival. I would prepare my pieces for months beforehand, work them up to a performable level, then walk in terror up to the piano and play my piece with varying degrees of success.

From the testimony of Foley, entering for competitions or festivals go with high degree of preparation which could span through months. And such preparations require each candidate to rehearse his/her pieces to performable level. This obviously involves setting targets and meeting them up.
Some Concerns on the Nature of Musical Competitions in Nigeria

In Nigeria, it is one umbrella ministry that is in charge of youths, sports and culture, under sports, football overshadows all others. Apart from overshadowing all other sporting activities, football remains the major concern of all. While other administrative organs have been put in place for the promotion of football, issues relating to youths and culture are perfunctorily implemented. However, there are some private companies, establishments and donor agencies who on their own have identified the neglect of certain aspects of our cultural heritage and are therefore struggling to promote it. This struggle has culminated to the organization of some contexts like Naija Sings sponsored by Globacom, West African Idols by Pepsi and Etisalat, Peak Talent Hunt by Peak Milk (Friesland Campina WAPCO Nigeria Plc) and Star talent Hunt by Nigeria Breweries Plc.

Put side by side, there is without doubt a wide gap or dichotomy which exists between music adjudication in schools and many other strands which may be secular or sacred in nature. Before drawing any further line of distinction, the opinion of Bessom et al. (1980:264) is informative here, when they posit that:

The process of rehearsing school performance groups is often too confused with that of rehearsing professional organizations. In the world of professional music, the performance is the goal toward which all efforts are directed. In the school, on the other hand, the rehearsal itself is the centre of interest, the vehicle for learning, and the product of evaluation, whereas the public performance is more a resume of what has been accomplished in the real activity of the rehearsal hall.

About three and half decades ago, Bessom and his other researchers drew a distinguishing line between the process of rehearsing school performance groups and professional organizations. They opined further that it is often a misplaced priority which has muddled up the whole idea. Between then and now, we still do not find a clear cut distinction between these two divides. If the foundation is weak, nothing can stand. It is thought that these fundamentally wrong concepts are the major variables responsible for poor results.

Musical Activities in Government Public Schools Today

A random check of the musical activities in public Secondary Schools reveals that musical culture of the organization of concerts and competitions are almost extinct. While in the privately owned and missionary schools, they go beyond normal music classes to the organization of musical society, separate classes for musical instrument playing, none of such exists in most public schools. To further demean the essence of music in our Schools, at the Junior Secondary School level, it is not a major teaching subject. It is unfortunately just a strand of four subject component – Dance, Drama, Music and Fine Art (Cultural and Creative Art).
Composition of Adjudicators and Interests of Donors

In his sixteen ideas for first-time music festival adjudicators, Foley (2010) says:

1. On the first day, arrive at the venue well ahead of time, sign what you need to sign before you start, learn the marking system that the festival uses, befriend your assistant, always keep a backup copy of all marks, organize your territories, determine the festival’s stand on copyright, write clearly, speak clearly and accessibly, strike a balance between positive and negative critique, strike a balance between speaking to the class as a whole and each individual performer, know whom you are talking to, change the focus of your talks frequently, take a second look and make sure you have selected the right person for first place and then, thank everybody.

The expressions above are unique and fit perfectly into our next level of this discussion. Above all, the task of taking a second look and making sure you have selected the right person for first place in any contest is contingent on certain variables. Some harm is usually done 1. When one music specialist is sandwiched between two music enthusiasts. 2. When the assessment template is decided by the donor agencies and not the music specialist. 3. When the donor insists that a particular group should come first. 4. When the donor says since a particular group has consistently been emerging first annually, this time around the first position should go to the next in line.

These issues often weight down the good process of getting the best out of the contest. To be able to effectively perform the role of a good adjudicator, one must first ask self:

a. What are the general aims of the exercise?
b. What are the aims of the donor or organizing agencies?

1. What are the general aims of the exercise

It is always proper to know the aim of any enterprise. When musical contests are organized, there ought to be a straight forward objective. For example, could the aim not be to enhance the general musicality of the school choirs in the community, to develop musical sensitivity, to enhance the repertoire of the choristers and to train them in the art of performing before large audiences? In the view of Besom et al (1980:265), “…our efforts in rehearsals should be directed toward the goals of both skillful musicianship and aesthetic musicality.”

There is the need to stress that musical competition is not about the trophy but about the development of skills which will aid a move towards professionalism.

Counter Issues: what should be the role of the music educator with particular reference to musical adjudication as the musical torch bearer in the community. This is of course where the music educator should as a matter of community service and in an effort to stand for the
enhancement of musicality in the area initiate programmes and talk shows where the right norms would be inculcated into the community which obviously is made up of students, school dropouts, young adults, adults and elders who are music lovers at different degrees.

For example, while giving account of the musical adjudication exercises which take place in schools in the State of Texas, Floyd (2010) remarks that:

"The purpose of this adjudication is not only to assign a division rating to a performance, but rather to provide a concise evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each musical demonstration and offer recommendations for continued musical growth."

2. What are the aims of the donor or organizing agencies?

As a matter of fact, musical adjudication goes with selecting the best out of the lot and when selecting, discrimination comes in invariably. Early in time, this paper established the fact that adjudication of musical performances in a school setting is different from other forms and far more tasking. It looks beyond the immediate expectations of school managements, trophy donors, competition financiers and other variables to recommend that: The music educator who is always at the hub of the musical activities should be active in the design of the template for the assessment of performers, that music enthusiasts who do not know the mechanics of and the reason for musical competitions should not serve on the panel and that since the context is aimed at improving the musicality of the schools within a given locale, who gets the trophy is insignificant, hence good/ideal consolation prizes should be given to all the groups that entered into any given competition.

Conclusion

The thrust of this article has been to reappraise how musical performances could be adjudicated in Nigerian secondary schools. As a matter of fact, musical adjudication goes with selecting the best out of the lot and when selecting, discrimination comes in invariably. Early in time, this paper established the fact that adjudication of musical performances in a school setting is different from other forms and far more tasking. It looks beyond the immediate expectations of school managements, trophy donors, competition financiers and other variables to recommend that: The music educator who is always at the hub of the musical activities should be active in the design of the template for the assessment of performers, that music enthusiasts who do not know the mechanics of and the reason for musical competitions should not serve on the panel and that since the context is aimed at improving the musicality of the schools within a given locale, who gets the trophy is insignificant, hence good/ideal consolation prizes should be given to all the groups that entered into any given competition.
References


