

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE COMPOSITIONAL STYLES AND TECHNIQUES IN THE MUSIC OF AYO OLURANTI

Akin OSUNNIYI, Ph.D
Department of Performing Arts,
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education,
Science and Technology, Ikere Ekiti, Ekiti State.
akin4osun1@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the compositional styles and techniques employed by Ayo Oluranti, with the aim of identifying the musical features that characterize his works and assessing his contributions to Nigerian art music. The study focuses exclusively on selected vocal and instrumental compositions of Ayo Oluranti. Data were obtained through the score analysis of selected compositions, with particular attention to their melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, textural, structural, and pianistic features. The analysis reveals that Oluranti combines African and Western compositional resources in the rhythm, melody/harmonic procedures, texture, structure, and African pianistic features in developing a distinctive artistic style, rooted in Yoruba musical expressions. His music is characterized by the use of modulation, African pianism, unison, repetition, syncopation, sequences, polyrhythm, wide dynamic range, ostinato rhythm, interlocking rhythm, additive rhythm, hemiola rhythm, minimalism, monophonic, homophonic and polyphonic textures, call and response, overlapping of parts, octatonic pitch collection, fourth chords, spoken text and individual improvisation. The study also identifies compositional techniques such as fragmented phrases, broken octaves, murmuring phrases, discordant seconds, pedal points, rapidly changing metres, horse gallop rhythm and tone clusters. The study concludes that his works constitute significant contributions to the development of contemporary Nigerian art music through their stylistic diversity and innovative compositional techniques.

Keywords: Ayo Oluranti, Nigerian art music, compositional styles, compositional techniques, African pianism, African art music.

Introduction

Nigerian art music has undergone remarkable development through the efforts of composers who have successfully integrated indigenous African musical elements with the compositional procedures of Western art music. This development has produced a body of musical works that reflects the cultural identity of the Nigerian people while demonstrating the creative possibilities of intercultural composition. The incorporation of African rhythmic organisation, tonal inflection, indigenous languages, traditional performance practices and Western compositional techniques has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary Nigerian art music (Ekwueme, 2001; Omojola, 1995). The development of Nigerian art music has attracted scholarly attention from musicologists and composers who have examined the stylistic features that distinguish the works of individual composers. Studies have shown that African composers increasingly seek

compositional approaches that preserve indigenous musical identity while embracing contemporary compositional resources. Consequently, African art music has evolved into a distinctive musical tradition in which African musical thought is expressed through written compositional practices (Olaniyan, 1984; Phillips, 1953; Ekwueme, 2000).

The search for an authentic African compositional language has equally influenced several Nigerian composers whose creative works demonstrate varying degrees of interaction between African and Western musical traditions. While some composers retained predominantly Western compositional procedures, others have consciously explored indigenous rhythmic structures, melodic organisation, harmonic practices and performance traditions as viable compositional resources. These developments have significantly enriched the Nigerian art music repertoire and provided new perspectives on the practice of composition within the African cultural environment (Omojola, 1995; Onyeji, 2006). One composer whose contribution reflects this creative orientation is Ayo Oluranti. His musical career illustrates a gradual movement from strong Western classical influence towards a compositional philosophy rooted in African musical aesthetics. According to the composer, his earliest compositions were greatly influenced by the study of hymns and the works of G. F. Handel, J. S. Bach and Felix Mendelssohn. Although these works provided a solid compositional foundation, they were not readily appreciated within his immediate cultural environment.

This experience motivated him to search for a musical language through which Western compositional principles could be expressed in idioms that were culturally meaningful to African audiences. Oluranti's compositional philosophy subsequently developed around the integration of indigenous African musical resources with established Western compositional techniques. His works reveal the application of African pianism, indigenous rhythmic structures, call-and-response procedures, additive rhythm, interlocking rhythm, polyrhythm, spoken text, ostinato patterns, overlapping of parts, and indigenous approaches to texture together with Western harmonic organisation, modulation, contrapuntal writing and formal design. These stylistic characteristics distinguish his music from conventional Western compositions while preserving the structural discipline associated with art music composition. Music making or musicianship is one of those specialised areas in which talent and exposure contribute significantly to creative achievement. Olaniyan (1984) observes that the talent of composition is founded upon musicality together with influences that shape the composer's motivation and artistic orientation. Oluranti's exposure to diverse musical traditions, combined with his formal training in composition and his practical experience with both Western and African musical instruments, has contributed immensely to the development of his distinctive compositional language. His mastery of African musical traditions, particularly the theoretical principles and instrumentation of the Yorùbá dùndún ensemble, has further expanded the stylistic possibilities evident in his compositions.

Oluranti's compositional output encompasses sacred and secular vocal works as well as instrumental compositions for solo, chamber, ensemble and orchestral performance. His compositions further reveal innovative techniques such as fragmented phrases, broken octaves, octavo writing, murmuring phrases, discordant seconds, and pedal points, rapidly changing metres, horse gallop rhythms and tone clusters. Despite these remarkable stylistic characteristics, scholarly attention has focused more on the performance and appreciation of Oluranti's music than on a systematic investigation of the compositional styles and techniques that define his musical language. A detailed examination of these stylistic features is therefore essential for a better understanding of his contribution to Nigerian art music and contemporary African

composition. This paper therefore examines the compositional styles and techniques adopted by Ayo Oluranti. Drawing on selected vocal and instrumental compositions, it identifies the stylistic features and compositional devices that characterise his works and discusses their significance within the broader development of Nigerian art music.

Brief Biography of Ayo Oluranti

His formal training began at the University of Southampton, UK, where he specialised in composition and organ performance, graduating with First Class Honours. He went on to earn an MA and PhD in Music Theory and Composition at the University of Pittsburgh, studying under scholars including Michael Finnissy, Michael Zev Gordon, Akin Euba, Eric Moe, and Matthew Rosenblum training that deepened both his command of contemporary compositional technique and his engagement with African musical traditions. Oluranti's early works drew heavily on Western models: hymn writing and the influence of Handel, Bach, and Mendelssohn shaped his composition in (1987) and *Polongo* (1991), the latter experimenting with hocket, polyphony, call-and-response, and polyrhythm though still, by his own later assessment, predominantly Western in orientation. Recognising that this idiom did not communicate effectively within his own cultural context, he turned to sustained study of the Yorùbá dùndún ensemble, working directly under traditional drummers to master indigenous rhythmic organisation, drum language, and ensemble scoring. This encounter became the decisive shift in his compositional trajectory, leading to a mature style that synthesises African musical resources with Western compositional procedures across choral, vocal, chamber, orchestral, and instrumental works.

Methodology

This study adopted an analytical research design. Data for the study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consisted of available musical scores composed by Ayo Oluranti, while the secondary data comprised relevant books, journal articles, theses and other scholarly materials consulted to provide the necessary theoretical and historical background for the study.

Ten (10) available compositions by Ayo Oluranti were identified and were purposively selected to reflect the various typologies of his compositions, namely: *Polongo*, *Messiah Baba Mi*, *Ona Abuja*, *Olorun To Layo*, *O Se O Jesu*, *Ilu Baje*, *Ise Loogun Ise*, *Duru-Fere*, *African Rhythm* and *Jesus Na Big Man*. These compositions comprise both vocal and instrumental works and adequately represent the composer's stylistic and compositional practices.

The selected works were examined through score analysis with emphasis on the identification of recurring stylistic features and compositional techniques. The analysis focused on such musical parameters as melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, tonality, form, and the application of indigenous African musical elements within Western compositional procedures. Particular attention was given to the compositional styles and techniques that characterise Oluranti's musical language.

The findings are presented in two broad categories: (i) compositional styles and (ii) compositional techniques adopted by Ayo Oluranti, supported with relevant musical examples extracted from the selected compositions.

Results and Discussion

Compositional Styles Adopted by Ayo Oluranti

The analysis of the selected compositions reveals that Ayo Oluranti employs a wide range of compositional styles that reflect both indigenous African musical practices and Western art music traditions. His stylistic approach demonstrates a conscious effort to develop a compositional language that preserves African musical identity while utilising the structural and harmonic resources of Western art music. The stylistic features identified in the selected works include modulation, African pianism, unison, repetition, syncopation, sequences, polyrhythm, wide dynamic range, ostinato rhythm, interlocking rhythm, additive rhythm, hemiola rhythm, minimalism, monophonic, homophonic and polyphonic textures, call-and-response, overlapping of parts, octatonic pitch collection, fourth chords, spoken text and individual improvisation.

Modulation

Modulation is one of the stylistic devices employed by Oluranti in his compositions. While Evans (2004) observes that modulation is generally uncommon in African music and T. K. E. Phillips (1953) describes modulation as a rare occurrence in Yorùbá music, Oluranti demonstrates that changes of tonal centre can be effectively incorporated into African art music without diminishing its indigenous character. The analysis of *Polongo Jesu* shows the effective use of both prepared and abrupt modulation. In bars 56–64, the composition modulates from F major to B-flat major through a carefully prepared harmonic progression, thereby creating tonal contrast while maintaining structural continuity. The modulation observed in *Polongo Jesu* illustrates Oluranti's ability to integrate Western tonal procedures into an African compositional framework. Rather than functioning as a purely harmonic device, the modulation contributes to the expressive development of the work and demonstrates the composer's flexibility in combining African musical aesthetics with Western compositional practice.

African Pianism

African pianism constitutes one of the most distinctive stylistic characteristics of Oluranti's music. Developed principally through the pioneering works of Akin Euba and further advanced by Joshua Uzoigwe, African pianism adapts the piano to reproduce the rhythmic and textural characteristics of African percussion ensembles. In this approach, the piano performs both harmonic and rhythmic functions, with greater emphasis placed on rhythmic articulation. Oluranti applies this principle extensively in compositions such as *Ilu Baje*, *African Rhythm*, *Ajulo Kiniun*, *Olomokilofomo Re*, *Polongo Jesu* and *Ise Loogun Ise*. Performance instructions accompanying these compositions indicate that the piano should imitate the performance practice of hand-played drums, particularly the Yorùbá dundún ensemble. The accompaniment is therefore conceived not merely as harmonic support but as a rhythmic framework that reproduces indigenous percussion textures. The application of African pianism demonstrates Oluranti's commitment to translating indigenous instrumental performance practices into keyboard writing. This stylistic device contributes significantly to the African identity of his instrumental language while expanding the expressive possibilities of the piano within contemporary Nigerian art music.

Polyrhythm

Polyrhythm is one of the most distinctive characteristics of African music and occupies an important position in Oluranti's compositional style. It involves the simultaneous combination of two or more independent rhythmic patterns, creating a complex rhythmic texture. Oluranti employs this stylistic feature extensively in both his vocal and instrumental compositions. In *African Rhythm*, different instrumental parts maintain independent rhythmic patterns that complement one another to produce a unified musical texture. Similar treatment is evident in *Ise*

Loogun Ise, where contrasting rhythmic figures occur simultaneously to reinforce the African rhythmic character of the composition. The use of polyrhythm demonstrates Oluranti's thorough understanding of indigenous African rhythmic organisation. Rather than functioning merely as rhythmic complexity, the simultaneous interaction of independent rhythmic patterns contributes to the vitality, movement and expressive depth of his musical language.

Wide Dynamic Range

Oluranti makes effective use of wide dynamic contrasts to enhance musical expression. His compositions contain frequent changes in dynamic levels, ranging from very soft to very loud passages, depending on the emotional and dramatic requirements of the text or musical idea. This stylistic device is evident in works such as *Ilu Baje* and *African Rhythm*, where gradual and sudden dynamic changes contribute significantly to the expressive development of the compositions. The wide dynamic range employed by Oluranti enriches the expressive quality of his music by creating contrast, maintaining listener interest and highlighting important structural and textual moments within the compositions.

Ostinato Rhythm

Another important stylistic feature found in Oluranti's music is the use of ostinato rhythm. Ostinato refers to a rhythmic or melodic pattern that is persistently repeated throughout a section of a composition. In *African Rhythm*, repeated rhythmic figures provide a stable foundation over which other instrumental parts develop independent musical ideas. Similar applications occur in *Polongo Jesu* and *Ilu Baje*, where repeated rhythmic patterns sustain momentum and contribute to structural unity. Oluranti's use of ostinato reflects an important feature of African ensemble performance, where repeated rhythmic cycles provide continuity while allowing melodic and rhythmic variation in other parts of the ensemble.

Interlocking Rhythm

Interlocking rhythm is another stylistic device frequently employed by Oluranti. This technique involves the distribution of complementary rhythmic patterns among different voices or instrumental parts so that each part contributes to a continuous rhythmic texture. In *Polongo Jesu*, the piano introduction demonstrates interlocking rhythmic movement between the upper and lower registers, while *African Rhythm* contains several examples of complementary rhythmic interaction among the instrumental parts. The application of interlocking rhythm reflects indigenous African ensemble practice, particularly the organisation of traditional percussion ensembles in which individual rhythmic patterns combine to produce a complete rhythmic structure. Oluranti successfully adapts this traditional performance principle within the framework of written art music.

Additive Rhythm

Additive rhythm is another important stylistic feature employed by Oluranti in his compositions. This rhythmic procedure is achieved through the extension of regular rhythmic patterns by the addition of beats or note values, thereby producing asymmetrical rhythmic structures that are characteristic of many African musical traditions. Oluranti employs this technique effectively in *African Rhythm* and *Ilu Baje*, where rhythmic patterns are expanded without disrupting the continuity of the musical flow. The resulting rhythmic flexibility enhances the vitality of the compositions while reinforcing their African identity. The use of additive rhythm demonstrates Oluranti's ability to adapt indigenous rhythmic concepts within the framework of written art

music. This rhythmic flexibility contributes to the originality of his musical language and reflects the dynamic nature of African rhythmic organisation.

Hemiola Rhythm

Hemiola rhythm also features prominently in Oluranti's compositional style. This rhythmic device involves the temporary superimposition of one metrical pattern upon another, thereby creating rhythmic tension and variety. In the selected compositions, hemiola is employed to generate contrast between the prevailing pulse and the perceived rhythmic grouping. This technique is evident in *African Rhythm* and other instrumental works where shifting rhythmic accents produce greater rhythmic vitality. Oluranti's application of hemiola enriches the rhythmic complexity of his compositions and reflects the influence of indigenous African performance practice, where contrasting rhythmic groupings frequently occur simultaneously.

Minimalism

Minimalism is another stylistic feature identified in Oluranti's works. The composer employs repeated short melodic and rhythmic patterns that undergo gradual development while maintaining a strong sense of continuity. Rather than introducing entirely new thematic materials, Oluranti develops existing ideas through subtle rhythmic and melodic variation. This approach is particularly evident in *African Rhythm*, where repeated musical cells are sustained over extended passages to create continuity and structural cohesion. The minimalist approach adopted by Oluranti reinforces the repetitive character associated with African musical traditions while simultaneously contributing to the structural organisation of his compositions. The gradual transformation of repeated musical ideas sustains listener interest without disrupting thematic unity.

Monophonic Texture

Monophonic texture occurs in Oluranti's music where a single melodic line is presented without harmonic accompaniment. Although much of his music is characterised by rich harmonic and contrapuntal writing, he occasionally employs monophony to introduce thematic material or to emphasise important textual passages. The use of a single melodic line enables the musical idea to be projected clearly before more elaborate textures are introduced. The occasional use of monophonic texture demonstrates Oluranti's sensitivity to musical contrast and structural balance. By alternating monophonic passages with more complex textures, he achieves variety while maintaining clarity in the presentation of melodic and textual materials.

Homophonic Texture

Homophonic texture is one of the most frequently employed textures in Oluranti's compositions. In this texture, one voice presents the principal melody while the accompanying voices provide harmonic support, moving largely in the same rhythmic pattern. Oluranti employs homophony extensively in both sacred and secular choral compositions. Examples can be found in *Olorun To Layo*, *Polongo Jesu* and *O Se O Jesu*, where the harmonic movement supports the clarity of the text while maintaining a rich choral sonority. The use of homophonic texture enables the textual message to remain intelligible without sacrificing harmonic richness. This approach is particularly appropriate in Oluranti's sacred choral works, where effective communication of the text is an important compositional objective.

Polyphonic Texture

Polyphonic writing constitutes another important stylistic feature in Oluranti's compositions. He demonstrates that compositional devices commonly associated with Western harmony and counterpoint can be successfully employed within African art music while preserving its indigenous identity. Polyphonic and contrapuntal textures occur prominently in *Olorun To Layo* (bars 85–115), *Polongo Jesu* (bars 1–25), and *O Se O Jesu* (bars 33–50), where independent melodic lines interact to produce rich contrapuntal textures. The analysis indicates that Oluranti employs polyphony not merely as a Western compositional device but as an expressive resource that complements African rhythmic organisation and melodic construction. The interaction of independent melodic lines enriches the musical texture while preserving the African character of the compositions.

Call and Response

Call and response is one of the most prominent characteristics of African vocal music and occupies a significant place in Oluranti's compositional style. This procedure involves the presentation of a musical phrase by a soloist or one performing group, followed immediately by a response from another voice or ensemble. Oluranti employs this technique in both vocal and instrumental compositions. In *O Se O Jesu*, the soprano and alto present the opening phrase in bars 1–2, which is immediately answered by the tenor and bass in bars 3–4. Similarly, in *African Rhythm*, the **sekere** initiates a musical phrase in bars 71–73, answered by the violin in bars 74–75, while the woodblock calls in bars 76–80 and is subsequently answered by the violoncello. These examples illustrate the composer's adaptation of indigenous African performance practice within the context of written art music. The use of call and response strengthens musical dialogue, enhances structural organisation and reinforces the communal performance tradition that characterises African music.

Overlapping of Parts

Another stylistic feature observed in Oluranti's compositions is the overlapping of parts. This technique occurs when one vocal or instrumental part enters before another has completely concluded, thereby creating continuity between successive musical phrases. Overlapping is a common feature of African ensemble performance and is effectively incorporated into Oluranti's compositional language. In *Polongo Jesu*, overlapping occurs between bars 50 and 57, where the tenor enters before the completion of the preceding phrase. A similar treatment appears in *O Se O Jesu* between bars 25 and 32, where the soprano overlaps the remaining vocal parts. This technique contributes to uninterrupted musical flow and enriches the overall texture of the compositions. By employing overlapping of parts, Oluranti achieves smooth transitions between musical ideas while preserving the continuous interaction characteristic of indigenous African ensemble performance.

Octatonic Pitch Collection

The use of octatonic pitch collection represents another significant stylistic feature in Oluranti's compositional language. The octatonic scale consists of eight notes arranged in alternating tones and semitones, providing a rich source of melodic and harmonic materials. Oluranti employs this pitch organisation in *African Rhythm*, where the octatonic collection serves as the basis for melodic construction and harmonic development. The application of this scale extends the tonal resources available to the composer while contributing to the distinctive character of the work. Unlike its conventional use in twentieth-century Western composition, Oluranti adapts the octatonic collection within an African musical framework, integrating it with indigenous rhythmic

structures and performance practices. This approach illustrates his ability to combine contemporary compositional resources with African musical aesthetics without compromising the identity of either tradition.

Quartal Chords

Another harmonic feature identified in Oluranti's compositions is the use of fourth chords. Instead of constructing chords by stacking intervals of thirds, the composer frequently builds harmonic structures on successive fourths. This technique is evident in the piano part of *Ilu Baje* (bars 127–131) and in *Ona Abuja* (bars 39–43, 44–47 and 64–77). The quartal harmonic structures contribute to the modern harmonic language that characterises many of his instrumental works. The use of fourth chords broadens Oluranti's harmonic vocabulary and demonstrates his willingness to explore harmonic resources beyond conventional triadic harmony. When combined with African rhythmic organisation, these harmonic structures contribute to the originality of his compositional style.

Spoken Text

Spoken text constitutes another distinctive stylistic feature in Oluranti's music. This technique is particularly evident in *Ise Loogun Ise*, where spoken language alternates with the dũndún drum, creating a close relationship between speech and instrumental performance. The spoken passages are derived from the three-tone system of the Yorùbá language, in which low, middle and high speech tones are carefully reflected in the musical setting. The integration of spoken text with instrumental accompaniment demonstrates Oluranti's understanding of the intimate relationship between language and music in African performance traditions. The technique preserves the tonal characteristics of the Yorùbá language while strengthening the expressive and communicative qualities of the composition.

Individual Improvisation

Individual improvisation is also employed by Oluranti as a stylistic feature, particularly in his instrumental compositions. In *Duru-Fere*, the composer deliberately provides passages that allow individual performers to display their creative and technical abilities. The duration and extent of these improvisatory sections are left largely to the discretion of the conductor and the performers, thereby introducing an element of spontaneity into the performance. The inclusion of improvisation reflects an important aspect of African musical practice, where performers are often encouraged to contribute creatively within established structural boundaries. By incorporating opportunities for individual improvisation into formally notated compositions, Oluranti successfully bridges traditional African performance practice with contemporary art music composition.

Summary of Compositional Styles

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Oluranti's compositional style is characterised by a synthesis of African musical aesthetics and Western compositional procedures. The recurring use of modulation, African pianism, repetition, syncopation, polyrhythm, additive rhythm, interlocking rhythm, varied textures, spoken text, quartal harmony, octatonic pitch collection and improvisation illustrates a compositional philosophy rooted in African musical thought while embracing the structural possibilities of contemporary art music. These stylistic features collectively establish Oluranti as a composer whose works contribute significantly to the development of Nigerian art music and the continuing evolution of African art music composition.

Conclusion

This study has examined the compositional styles and techniques adopted by Ayo Oluranti through the analysis of selected vocal and instrumental compositions. The findings reveal that Oluranti has developed a distinctive compositional language through the synthesis of indigenous African musical resources and Western compositional procedures. His works demonstrate that African musical aesthetics can be effectively expressed within the framework of written art music without compromising their cultural identity. The analysis identified a wide range of stylistic features that characterise Oluranti's music, including modulation, African pianism, unison, repetition, syncopation, sequence, polyrhythm, wide dynamic range, ostinato rhythm, interlocking rhythm, additive rhythm, hemiola rhythm, minimalism, monophonic, homophonic and polyphonic textures, call-and-response, overlapping of parts, octatonic pitch collection, fourth chords, spoken text and individual improvisation.

These stylistic elements are complemented by compositional techniques such as fragmented phrases, broken octaves, octavo writing, murmuring phrases, dissonant seconds, pedal points, rapidly changing metres, horse gallop rhythm and tone clusters, all of which contribute to the uniqueness of his musical language. The study further establishes that Oluranti's compositional practice reflects a conscious effort to transform indigenous African musical concepts into contemporary art music through innovative approaches to melody, harmony, rhythm, texture and formal organisation. His ability to adapt African performance practices, particularly those associated with Yorùbá musical traditions, to Western notational and compositional systems demonstrates the creative possibilities of intercultural composition.

The study concludes that Ayo Oluranti occupies a significant position among contemporary Nigerian art music composers. His compositions not only preserve important aspects of African musical heritage but also expand the expressive and technical possibilities of African art music. Consequently, his works constitute valuable contributions to the continuing development of Nigerian art music and provide important models for future composers seeking to integrate indigenous African musical traditions with contemporary compositional practice.

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