

# Ayo Bankole's *FESTAC Cantata*: A Paradigm for Intercultural Composition

Godwin Sado



Ayo Bankole at the Guildhall School of Music, London, 1960s

Choral music in Nigeria can be broadly divided into two categories: (1) traditional choral repertoire, and (2) Western-influenced choral works known as modern Nigerian art songs. Traditional choral singing can be observed in naming ceremonies, funeral rites, religious worship, children's activities, folk tales, royal events, wedding ceremonies, and at recreational gatherings. The performance techniques of indigenous choral songs include call-and-response, hand clapping, dancing, and instrumental accompaniment supplied by diverse kinds of drums, iron bells, *sekere* [maracas], or other types of idiophones such as bottles, calabash, sticks, and wooden clappers. On the other hand, Western-influenced choral works are usually performed in churches, colleges and universities, and public concerts. This article discusses the imprint of European and Nigerian musical elements in Ayo Bankole's *FESTAC Cantata*.

## Short biography

Ayo Bankole was born on May 17, 1935, at Jos, in Plateau State of Nigeria. He was a chorister at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, in the 1940s, under Thomas Ekundayo Phillips (1884–1969), the then organist and master of the music. It was Phillips who gave Bankole his early musical training in music theory, piano, and organ. In August 1957, Bankole left Nigeria on a Federal Government Scholarship to study music at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London, where he concentrated on piano, organ, and composition. During

his studies at Guildhall, Bankole experimented with advanced techniques based on twentieth-century tonality.

After four years of study at Guildhall, Bankole proceeded to Clare College, Cambridge University, London, where he obtained a B.A. degree in music in 1964. While at Cambridge as an organ scholar (1961–1964), Bankole earned the prestigious Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists (FRCO), making him the second Nigerian after Fela Sowande to receive the highest diploma in organ playing given in Great Britain. At the end of his training at Cambridge University in 1964, Bankole received a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship to study ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

After a brief service at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (now Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria) in Lagos, he was appointed in 1969 to the position of Lecturer in Music at the University of Lagos, where he embarked on in-depth research on Nigerian traditional music and presented scholarly papers at conferences. At the University of Lagos, Bankole combined the roles of music educator, composer, choral conductor, performer, and musicologist. Bankole composed for several musical genres, including organ, piano, choral works, and solo art songs. He did not write any purely orchestral pieces, except choral works accompanied by the orchestra. Unfortunately, Bankole was brutally murdered by his own half brother in Lagos in 1976, while he was still in his creative prime.

## *FESTAC Cantata No. 4*

Out of all his numerous compositions, the last work written by Bankole shortly before his untimely death was the *FESTAC Cantata No. 4* for soloists, chorus, organ, orchestra, and Nigerian traditional instruments. According to Afolabi Alaja-Browne, the *FESTAC Cantata* was commissioned in 1974 by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in commemoration of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC).<sup>1</sup> The festival took place in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria, one year after Bankole's demise. The cantata was actually premiered in 1976 at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, under the direction of the composer. The soloists included Tope Williams, bass, and Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko, soprano. The choir was from the Baptist Church in Lagos, where Bankole was the organist and choir director. The cantata is one of Bankole's most mature works and represents a summation of his entire creative experience in the art of intercultural composition.

This composition demonstrates Bankole's fluency in both the European convention and Nigerian traditional music. The use of Western forms such as overture, fugue, and aria, along with techniques such as orchestration, contrapuntal devices, chromatic passages, tonal shifting, atonality, pandiatonicism, and polytonality attest to his mastery of Western classical music theory. In terms of Nigerian traditional practice, Bankole draws from his vast experience with various types of indigenous creative procedures to bring the music to its cultural roots and attract the Nigerian audience to it. The Western orchestra in *Cantata No. 4* consists of flutes, clarinets, picco-

los, trumpets, euphonium, triangle, and bass guitar, while the Nigerian traditional instruments include *sekere* (shaking idiophone or gourd rattle), high- and medium-pitched *agogo* (hand bell), small and large *ikoro* (slit-drum), *iyeku* (talking drum or hourglass tension drum), and *gudugudu* (single-headed kettle drum). The text of the entire cantata is derived from the Old Testament (Psalms 14, 24, 53, and 91). Indeed, the *FESTAC Cantata* is a truly multicultural composition.

Structurally, *Cantata No. 4* is divided into twelve sections. The opening instrumental overture is written for organ, trumpets, flutes, and clarinets. It is in the style of a typical French overture in three distinct sections, but having a very slow trumpet fanfare as introduction. (See Example 1. Bankole, *Overture* [from *FESTAC Cantata No. 4*, mm. 1–21, on page 26.]) The fanfare from the *Largo* introduction transforms into the principal theme played by the euphonium in the A section *Andante*, while the flutes play fast-moving eighth notes over the theme. The flutes' tune is a diminution of the ostinato of the tenor and bass voices in *Fun Mi N'Ibeji Part II*, another choral work by Bankole. The euphonium plays the principal theme in the bass. The B section, *Allegretto*, scored for organ and flute solo, is based on a phrase heard in several keys with the use of sequences. From measures 87 to 95, the principal theme from the A section reappears in modified form. The A section *Andante* returns to close the overture, but this time played on the organ.

The second section of the cantata is a tenor recitative and chorus. The tenor

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# OVERTURE [from *FESTAC Cantata No. 4*]

Lya Bankole

lo that is accompanied by organ sings  
Onare o, enikan o mo, Awamaridi ni  
"Nobody knows your ways, they are  
mysterious"). The vocal melody starts in  
major but modulates to F in m. 136  
to prepare the incoming chorus for its  
tonal center. The final chorus is accom-  
panied with *agogo*, playing the popular  
West African time-line pattern (a.k.a. the  
*onkonkonlo* rhythm among the Yoruba  
of southwest Nigeria).

The third section of the cantata is an  
instrumental *Allegro* scored for several  
Nigerian traditional instruments, West-  
ern flutes, and clarinets. It opens with  
the *sekere* and *agogo*, followed by small  
*ororo*, and later enters large *ikoro*, *gugu-  
udu*, and finally the full orchestra plays  
to the end. The fourth section of the  
*FESTAC Cantata* is a chorus, "Nitori iwo  
oluwa" ("Because of you Lord") accom-  
panied by brass, flute, euphonium, clari-  
net, and organ. All the instruments come  
in at various points, while the organ plays  
through the entire section. Section five is  
soprano recitative and duet accompa-  
nied only by organ and *sekere*.

Section six is a tenor aria preceded by  
fanfare played by two trumpets. The  
aria is not consistent with the formal  
structure of a seventeenth-century aria  
(ABA); rather, it is through-composed.

The aria is accompanied with a passac-  
glia theme on the organ and clarinet. The  
passacaglia helps to maintain the phras-  
ing of the vocal line and to reinforce the  
harmonic progression of the entire mus-  
ical fabric. As in most passacaglias, the  
theme moves between the pedal and the  
manuals of the organ. The passacaglia is  
coated with various shades of harmonic  
colors and diverse rhythmic figurations  
to embellish the repetitions, develop the  
thematic material, and to create contrast  
between each appearance of the theme  
in different sections.

(See Example 2. Bankole, *Chorus*  
[from *FESTAC Cantata No. 4*], mm.  
264–266.)

The seventh section of the *FESTAC  
Cantata* is a chorus, "O nse kisa, Olu-  
run Oba" ("God the king performs won-  
ders"), accompanied with improvised  
drumming, *sekere*, trumpet, and organ.  
The eighth section is exclusively tradi-  
tional Nigerian. It demonstrates the  
composer's experience, expertise, and  
musical research into the tradi-  
tional music of the Yoruba culture. It is  
an *ege* (a.k.a. *oriki*, a praise chant) and is  
accompanied only by *seke* that is shaken  
all through the section. *Ege* is a chant to  
be performed by an experienced praise  
singer. In the eighth section of the can-

# CHORUS [from *FESTAC Cantata No. 4*]

Lya Bankole

tata, the *ege* or *oriki* is in praise of God  
Almighty. It sings of God's power over  
nature and humankind, and his ability to  
fulfill his purposes (this is the choral re-  
citative sung by the sopranos and altos).  
The *ege* is chanted by a soprano or tenor  
soloist. It is not written down in the score  
as practiced in the oral tradition of the  
Yoruba, and consists of five-verse poetry,  
with each verse separated by the choral  
recitative of the female voices.

Section nine of the cantata is an in-  
strumental *Andante* scored for trump-  
et, *agogo*, triangle, gong, *sekere*, wood  
block, small and large *ikoro*, *ogido* (an-  
other type of slit-drum), and *iya-ilu*.  
This is an instrumental interlude in the  
cantata, similar to the "Sinfonia" or  
"Pastoral Symphony" in Handel's *Mes-  
siah*. "Inter" culturalism is further bro-  
ken down in Bankole's cantata into "in-  
tra" culturalism. The variety of musical  
resources in this section displays an ar-  
ray of instruments from the three major  
ethnic groups in Nigeria: the trumpet  
(*Algaita*) is from the northern region;  
the gong and *ikoro* are often found in  
the music of the Igbo from the southeast  
region, while the *sekere* and *agogo* are  
commonly featured in the music of the  
Yoruba region of southwest Nigeria.

Of all the orchestral instruments, the  
trumpet, *agogo*, and *sekere* are more ac-  
tive, playing repetitive rhythmic and me-  
lodical phrases all through. The trumpet  
melody consists of a three-note phrase—  
B, G, D—with the exception of measure  
555 where it plays the only E. Most tradi-  
tional flutes in Africa have three to five  
holes, meaning that they can effectively  
play three to five notes. Additional notes  
can be realized on such instruments by  
overblowing. Bankole understands the  
theory behind the organology of tradi-  
tional African instruments. Thus, in  
spite of the fact that the Western trum-

pet employed in this section is capable  
of producing several notes, Bankole as-  
signs only three notes to it as observed in  
Nigerian traditional music. Section nine  
closes with the full orchestra playing *ff*.

Section ten of the *FESTAC Cantata* is  
made of multiple chorus units and is  
accompanied by organ, flute, bass guitar,  
and improvised drums. It is structurally  
formalized into three main units:

A – Soprano solo, tenor solo, SA cho-  
rus, and TB chorus (mm. 582–608)

B – Duet between soprano and tenor,  
alto solo and chorus (mm. 609–618)

A – Soprano solo, tenor solo, SA cho-  
rus, and TB chorus (mm. 619–634).

Section eleven of the cantata is writ-  
ten for a bass solo with chorus. (See  
Example 3. Bankole, Bass Solo [from  
*FESTAC Cantata No. 4*], mm. 645–654,  
on page 27.)

The final section of the *FESTAC Can-  
tata* is based on Psalm 24. It consists of  
an instrumental introduction and cho-  
ral fugue. The introduction is a fanfare  
for trumpets and organ conceived in  
bitonality, where the trumpet plays in  
D major and the organ is in C major.  
The choral fugue follows the structure  
of a standard fugue. The low brass in C  
major introduces the fugue theme from  
measures 833 to 840.

In the exposition, the tenor and bass  
first sing the subject, while the soprano  
and alto sing the answer. (See Example  
4. Bankole, Choral Fugue [from *FES-  
TAC Cantata No. 4*], mm. 841–851, on  
page 27.) In the episode, the SA cho-  
rus and soprano solo present the fugue  
theme in C major. In the keys of G and  
E major, soprano solo and contralto solo  
with SATB chorus exchange the fugue  
theme "Ti Oluwa ni ile" ("The earth is the  
Lord's") from measures 920 to 945. The  
finale presents the last entry of the fugue  
theme from measure 1043 in the SATB

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### Bass Solo [from *Festac Cantata No. 4*]

Ayo Bankole

Adagio 60

THE DIAPASON

chorus, while the soprano solo, alto solo, and tenor solo sing a new phrase, “O nse kisa, Olorun Oba” (“God the king, does wonders”) over the fugue theme. The trio solos close the fugue segment with the fugue theme in augmentation. There is a stretto between the tenor and bass solo in measure 1033. The *FESTAC Cantata* closes with an instrumental postlude for organ, piccolo, flutes, clarinets, trumpets, euphonium, bass guitar, triangle, *agogo*, *sekere*, *ogido*, and *iya-ilu dum dun* from measures 1063 to 1086.

#### Conclusion

Ayo Bankole’s *FESTAC Cantata* represents one of the first experimental attempts in Nigeria to successfully incorporate Western and indigenous Nigerian instruments as well as creative procedures in a large major choral work. Bankole succeeded in creating a truly multi-cultural work that freely conjoins elements of two musical worlds to create such masterpieces of Western art music and indigenous Nigerian music in the way that he meticulously crafted this masterpiece into one organic entity. The way he shaped and molded the two cultures together in this work shows that Bankole remains a force to be reckoned with in the field of modern Nigerian music and intercultural musical composition.<sup>2</sup> ■

#### Notes

1. Afolabi Alaja-Browne, “Ayo Bankole: His Life and Work” (M.A. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1981), 74.
2. For further reading on the life and music of Ayo Bankole, see Godwin Sadoh, *Intercultural Dimensions in Ayo Bankole’s Music* (New York: iUniverse Publishing, 2007).

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*Godwin Sadoh is a Nigerian organist-composer, pianist, choral conductor, and ethnomusicologist with degrees in piano and organ*



Bankole at the Italian Embassy, Lagos, Nigeria, 1972

performance, composition, and ethnomusicology. He is the first African to receive a doctoral degree in organ performance from any institution in the world. Sadoh is the author of six books and his scholarly essays on Nigerian music appear in various journals and magazines, including *African Journal*, *Composer-USA*, *Moving Music*, *Choral Africa*, *Organ Encyclopedia*, *Percussive Notes*, *MLA Notes*, *The Organ*, *THE DIAPASON*, *Organists’ Review*, *Organ Club Journal*, *Royal College of Organ-*

*ists Journal*, *The Hymn*, *NTAMA*, *Music Times*, *Vox Humana*, and the *Contemporary African Database*. Sadoh’s compositions have been published, recorded, and widely performed all over the United States, Canada, Europe, and Africa. He has taught at numerous institutions, such as the *Obafemi Awolowo University*, *Nigeria*, the *University of Pittsburgh*, *Europe*, and the *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*. Sadoh is presently a Professor of Music at Talladega College.

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