

The Centenary Celebration of Christopher Oyesiku: Nigerian Basso Profundo and Conductor Extraordinaire

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Abstract

Original Research Article

In the late nineteenth century, Nigerian musicians began traveling abroad to formally study Western classical music in Europe and the United States, specializing in areas such as organ, piano, voice, violin, trumpet, conducting, theory, history, and ethnomusicology. Upon returning to Nigeria, they contributed significantly as music lecturers and performers in radio, television, churches, and academic institutions. Among these distinguished musicians was Christopher Oyesiku, Nigeria's foremost bass singer, exceptional choral conductor, dedicated music educator, accomplished scholar, concert promoter, and broadcaster. For over six decades, Oyesiku played a vital role in preserving and promoting classical music traditions in Nigeria. This essay honors his centenary, celebrating his invaluable contributions to the nation's cultural and musical heritage.

Keywords: Christopher Oyesiku, Nigerian classical music, choral conductor, music education, Western classical music, music heritage, bass singer.

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INTRODUCTION

It was about the late nineteenth century that Nigerian musicians began traveling abroad to formally study Western classical music in Europe and the United States. Their areas of specialization range from organ, piano, voice, violin, trumpet, conducting, theory, history, to ethnomusicology. Upon return to their native country, they gained employment in Radio and TV stations, churches, colleges, polytechnics, and universities as Music Lecturers. In addition to their primary assignments at their paramount jobs, they were actively engaged in organizing and performing in classical music concerts as instrumentalists, singers, or choral conductors.

Christopher Oyesiku belongs to this exclusive and dignified group of classical music connoisseurs in Nigeria. He was Nigeria's foremost bass singer, exceptional choral conductor, music educator, astute scholar, concert promoter, and broadcaster. He was highly esteemed among a selected group of professionally trained Nigerians who vigorously and painstakingly nurtured and preserved classical music tradition in Africa's most populous nation. His contributions spanning over six decades are priceless. It is for all these outstanding qualities and meritorious services to his fatherland that Oyesiku is specially honored with this astute essay to

commemorate his centenary.

Formative Years in Lagos

Christopher Oyesiku was born in Lagos, Nigeria, on October 7, 1925. Oyesiku began his secondary school education in Lagos at Saint John's Primary School, Aroloya, and at CMS Grammar School, but completed it at the Ibadan Grammar School in 1947. It was around 1933 that Oyesiku began his earliest musical training as a choir boy at the Anglican Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, under the tutelage of Thomas Ekundayo Phillips (1884-1969).ⁱ It was Phillips who gave the young Oyesiku his first music lessons in the theory of music, musicianship, and voice. Phillips also coached the young Oyesiku for the graded external examinations of the Trinity College of Music, London.ⁱⁱ

During his time as chorister at the cathedral, Oyesiku rose to become one of the leading trebles and later became the best bass in the choir. As his voice deepened, he became a lay clerk under the eminent Nigerian Organist and Master of the Music, Ekundayo Phillips. He remained a member of the choir until he left to study music in Great Britain. Oyesiku joined the Lagos Musical Society Choir in the late 1940s and took part as a leading bass soloist in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas, such as the *Trial by*

Jury, *HMS Pinafore*, and *The Mikado*. Oyesiku also sang the part of Elijah in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, a work that has become one of his favorite oratorios. Oyesiku won the silver medal in singing at the Festival of Arts Competition in Lagos in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

After graduating from high school, Oyesiku was apprenticed to the Nigerian Railway Printing Press on April 1, 1948. At this company, he was taught the rudiments of printing for two years. This provided an excellent foundation for his future career, evidenced by his ability to ensure the exquisite quality of his concert programs. In 1950, he joined the Social Welfare Department in Lagos as a Probation Officer. This gave him a clear and deep insight into the behavioral patterns of humankind, particularly concerning the relationship of parents and guardians to their children and wards. In 1952, Oyesiku joined the staff of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, now Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria or Radio Nigeria, and three years later, he was awarded a Federal Government Scholarship to study music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London.

Musical Training in England

Oyesiku arrived in England to study music in 1955 with his voice teacher, Ellis Keeler. While in England, Oyesiku took part as a soloist in several secular and sacred concerts, two of which were very memorable: The Commonwealth Gala Concert in May 1958, in the presence of HRH Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone; and a concert of Three Bach Cantatas in Sherborne Abbey, in December 1958. The concert was conducted by Paul Steinitz. Oyesiku was also the leading bass at St. Michael's Church, Chester Square, London, where Sir Arthur Sullivan of the Gilbert and Sullivan duo was organist from 1861 to 1872. Oyesiku made his debut on BBC Television on June 19, 1960, having passed the required singing auditions. He also participated in various programs for the BBC overseas services. At the end of five years of study and career activities in England, Oyesiku earned several diplomas of music:

1. Associate of the Guildhall School of Music in Teaching (1958).
2. Associate of the Guildhall School of Music in Singing Performance (1959).
3. Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music in Singing Performance (1959).
4. Licentiate of the Trinity College of Music (1959).
5. Teacher Training Certificate of Music, Guildhall School of Music (1959).
6. Fellowship of the Trinity College of Music (1960).

Professional Career in Nigeria

On his return to Nigeria in 1960, Oyesiku rejoined the staff of NBC, where he introduced the first analytical programs of Nigerian music on Radio Nigeria in the southwest region at Ibadan, and commenced his lifelong career of choral training and conducting for recording purposes. He also participated as a soloist in

performances at the premier University College, Ibadan, now the University of Ibadan.ⁱⁱⁱ He was called to act as a judge at the 1961 Festival of the Arts competitions in the southwest region, in which he donated a cup for the best solo singer.

When he was transferred from Ibadan to Lagos in 1962, Oyesiku took over the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Choir from Olaolu Omideyi,^{iv} and trained it to a level of such excellence that it was widely acclaimed for its rendering of both secular and sacred music. In Lagos, Oyesiku became the first Controller of Music at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Nigeria. As Head of Music, and Music Research, Controller of Music and Assistant Director of Programs in Radio Nigeria, Oyesiku carried out various administrative and program duties, such as the recruitment, promotion, discipline of staff, the allocation of apartments, the preparation of budgets and control of expenditure in the departments under him. He presented weekly programs such as 'Concert Hour' and recorded Christian services for broadcast every week, using the NBC Choir in most of them. Below is a synopsis of some of the programs created and produced by Oyesiku while in the service of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation:

Concert Hour

This weekly program was one of the oldest music programs on Radio Nigeria. It was broadcast on Sundays, with a repeat on Wednesdays. Oyesiku inherited it in 1952 and handed it over to Clara Akinsemoyin in 1981. In those days, there were no secretaries and computers, hence, the scripts had to be handwritten with a carbon copy every week. The program comprised European classical music and was greatly enjoyed by all classical music *aficionados* in Nigeria. Nigerian composers of art music were also included. One of the most significant musical Oyesiku had the honor of broadcasting was a concert given by Fela Sowande at Carnegie Hall, USA; it was a historic occasion. His works were performed by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and were conducted by Fela Sowande himself. The two-hour recording was sent to Oyesiku by the United States Information Service in Ibadan. The Master of Ceremonies of the program was Joe Atuana, one of Nigeria's most reputable broadcasters. The program included Sowande's *Folk Symphony*, specially composed for Nigerian Independence in 1960 (Sadoh, 2011).

Meet the Artists

This was a weekly fifteen-minute program that Oyesiku created and presented. It ran for over ten years from 1965 to 1978. The program featured Nigerian and international artists of different musical skills and virtuosity. They performed mostly Western classical music but included Nigerian art music when available. The artists were introduced to the Nigerian listeners through their recordings and, when possible, live performances. These artists include:

Victoria de Los Angeles – Soprano

Elizabeth Schwarzkopf – Soprano
 Vladimir Horowitz – Piano
 Dinu Lipatti – Piano
 Margaret Evans – Piano
 Richard Lewis – Tenor
 Boris Christoff – Bass
 Norman Walker – Bass
 Fela Sowande – Organ
 Olaolu Omideyi – Organ
 Charles Oluwole Obayomi Phillips^v – Organ
 Albert Schweitzer – Organ
 Christopher Oyesiku – Bass

These were a few of the artists whose programs were exciting. Visiting artists who were invited by embassies or their cultural institutes were often recorded and included in the series.

Choral Singing

It was one of the most popular and cherished music programs that catered to the Nigerians' natural love for singing. They listened enthusiastically to enjoy the programs and learned from them. The programs were designed to enhance the standard of singing through radio broadcasts. Oyesiku presented the series and featured national and international choirs of high-quality standard. Nigerian church choirs and other choral groups were invited to participate. Before recording, Oyesiku would visit the choirs at least twice to train them in the techniques of breathing, good intonation, blending of voices, balance, and presentation of their programs to improve the quality of their performances. These helped enormously with the final production of each program. Many choral groups wrote to request inclusion in the series.

Music of the Masters/Meet the Composers

This series that Oyesiku introduced in 1965 and produced by himself, ran initially for six months. It was a series on the music of famous European composers presented by Nigerian professional musicians. The duration was thirty minutes, during which the presenter discussed the life and compositions of a particular composer, such as Handel. Although introduced initially for six months, it kept being included in the schedules because of the inexhaustible nature of the musical personalities and materials. It practically became an annual program.

Traditional Music

Various music programs illustrated and presented music of traditional rulers such as the Obas (kings) and chiefs of the south, the Emirs (kings) of the north, the Obis or Igwes (Kings) of the southeast, and the Obongs (Kings) of the south-south. The music in these programs expressed the pomp and dignity of the courts of the rulers. For example, the Shehu of Borno's band or the drumming in the courts of Yoruba Obas. Particular programs in which the music of Nigerian rulers including that of the Niger

Delta regions, have been presented are:

1. Drums and Voices
2. Our Kind of Music
3. Our Musical Heritage
4. Yoruba Music and Customs

Guide to Nigerian Music

The last program Oyesiku initiated and produced was Guide to Nigerian Music. This series, was presented by Nigerian composers of art music. Presenters included William Wilberforce Echezona, Lazarus Ekwueme, and Ayo Bankole. In the series, they explained and analyzed various types of Nigerian music, describing fully the origin, purpose, and form of the music. They also explained the vocal techniques of the singers and the structures of the musical instruments.

Teaching Career

Between 1982 and 1987, Oyesiku was the Chair of the Department of Music, Oyo State College of Education, now Osun State College of Education, Ilesha. As the head of the music program, his mantra was to train the future breed of excellent Nigerian musicians. The educational standard set by Oyesiku was so high that all the students who obtained the requisite Ordinary Level diploma^{vi} at the college were admitted to the bachelor's music program at the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. In addition, Oyesiku encouraged the students to enroll for the external examinations of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, London. They performed well enough in the first year for the ABRSM examiner from London to come to Ilesha and examine the students in voice and piano at the college.

In 1987, Oyesiku was officially invited to the University of Ibadan as an Artist-in-Residence by the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ayo Banjo, to revitalize the musical life of the institution and to develop a reputable choir for the school. As the Artist-in-Residence for ten years (1987-97), Oyesiku fulfilled the expectations of the Vice-Chancellor and left an indelible mark in the form of the well-established university choir and a thriving audience for classical music who attended most of the over fifty concerts he organized. His duties as Artist-in-Residence at the university included imparting the art of voice production to all the undergraduate students at the Department of Theatre Arts, training the University Choir as well as organizing musical events for the entire university community, including the musically inclined populace of the surrounding towns of Ibadan. In addition to participating in many of the concerts, the choir also performed regularly at Commencements or graduation ceremonies. Oyesiku, as the Director of the University of Ibadan Choir and President of the Music Circle, University of Ibadan branch, organized, directed, and took part in the following musical events:

****Celebrity Concert in honor of the Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1986, Professor Wole Soyinka, on March**

7, 1987.

**The Inaugural Concert of the University of Ibadan Choir on October 12, 1987.

** On November 10, 1987, Oyesiku organized and took part in a recital given by a visiting British concert organist, Peter Stevenson. The recital was held at Saint Peter's Anglican Church, Aremo, Ibadan.

** He collaborated with the British Council in Nigeria to organize a jazz concert for the "Itchy Fingers," a British jazz band, on March 9, 1988.

**Concert to commemorate the Silver Jubilee Anniversary of the University of Ibadan, School of Drama and the Department of Theater Arts, at the Trenchard Hall, on Friday, July 22, 1988.

**Youth Concert of Classical Music for the Children's International Summer Village, Nigeria, at the Trenchard Hall, University of Ibadan, on Wednesday, August 17, 1988.

**Fortieth Anniversary Celebration Concert of the University of Ibadan, sponsored by ELF Nigeria Limited, at the Trenchard Hall, on Saturday, November 12, 1988, in the presence of Professor Ayo Banjo and Mrs. Alice Banjo.

** On November 23, 1988, Oyesiku participated in the All-Stars Night Concert to mark the seventieth Choir Festival of the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos.

To protract a continuous high standard, Oyesiku invited the best artists available, both Nigerians and foreigners, to perform as soloists and accompanists at his concerts. These included Femi Akinkugbe, Funmilayo Boamah, Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko – Sopranos; Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike – Mezzo-soprano; Lazarus Ekwueme – Tenor; Michael Hudson and David Williams – Baritones; Ajibola Meshida – Violin; the late Ace Trumpeter, Zeal Onyia; and the Pianists – Godwin Sadoh, Christopher Ayodele, Ayo Bankole Jr., Emmanuel Boamah, Edward Boamah, Richard Bucknor, Thora Dubois, Amorelle Inanga, and Joyce Lowe. Most of the concerts took place at the Trenchard Hall of the University of Ibadan.

Choral Conducting Career

Christopher Oyesiku graced Nigerian musical platforms in Lagos, Ibadan, Ilesha, and Nsukka, with some of the most tuneful choral songs ever performed in that country. These songs were written by famous composers worldwide—African, American, Latin-American, Caribbean, European, and Nigerian. From a period that spanned 1963 to 1997, the indefatigable impresario single-handedly directed four magnificent choirs: the Lagos Musical Society Choir, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Choir—Radio Nigeria, the Osun State College of Education Choir, and the University of Ibadan Choir. He trained these choirs to perform at a very enviable

world-class standard that always left their audiences screaming for an encore at the end of every concert. Their performances were always eclectic, electrifying, emotive, joyful, impeccable, crisp, energetic, flawless, and intercultural. The intonation, diction, phrasing, enunciation, balance, and attack were always precise and accurate. One may then ask at this juncture, how did Oyesiku pulled off this extraordinary feat in a nation where art music belongs to an exiguous moiety of the populace? How did he arouse the interests of his Nigerian choirs to sing global intercultural songs in multiple tongues? How did he train and motivate his choirs to sing European classical music? How did he wow his audiences? And what were the secrets behind his consistent successes in choral concerts?

Choral Training

Out of the four choirs he directed, Oyesiku created the University of Ibadan Choir and that of the Osun State College of Education. In his approach to the training and working with all these choirs, he adhered strictly to what he regarded as the 'essentials of voice production,' which include:

1. Breathing and vocal techniques.
2. Exercises at every choir practice to gain vocal quality and strength.
3. The establishment of choral unity and blending of the voices.
4. Good diction.
5. Interpretation of the music, and
6. The establishment of firm discipline, while maintaining a cordial relationship with the choir.

Lagos Musical Society Choir

Practices and performances with the Lagos Musical Society Choir from 1963 to 1970 were enjoyable because there was less difficulty in making the singers understand instructions. The choir was composed of both Europeans and Nigerians who had reasonable musical knowledge and were thus able to learn pieces without too much drudgery. As the years went by, both the Europeans and Nigerians with practical singing skills reduced in number, and more time had to be spent on teaching vocal techniques to each part separately. Less time was spent on learning the music. Despite Oyesiku's efforts to recruit new members, the size of the choir dwindled, and practice venues became difficult to find; thus, he had to disband the choir in 1981.

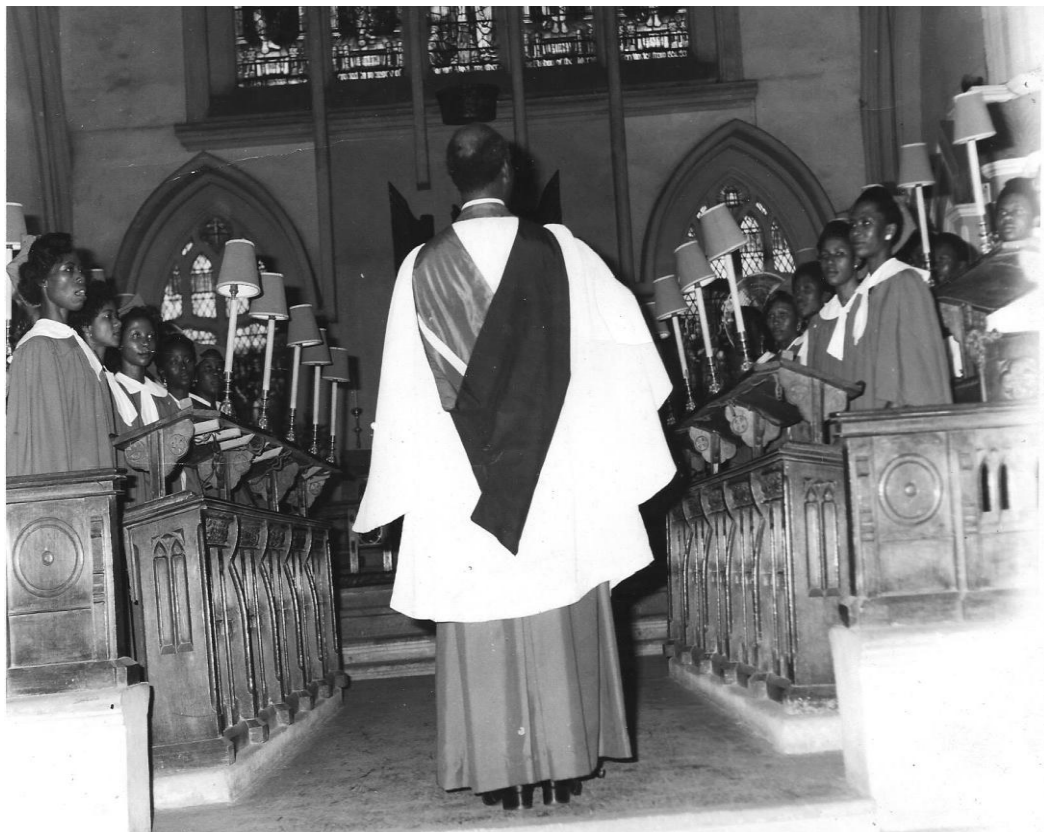


Christopher Oyesiku Conducting the Lagos Musical Society Choir in 1968.

Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Choir

In recruiting for the NBC Choir, Oyesiku had to audition and admit sopranos with no musical knowledge. Oyesiku based his selection on those with good education and a flair for music, as well as those who were willing to work hard. The men were better positioned, as most of them came from church choirs and had some musical experience, though they lacked vocal training. They had three rehearsals a week with emphasis on training for the

ladies at one of them, since most of the ladies could not sight-read music. Apart from training the voices, Oyesiku had to drum the music into their ears. Surprisingly, all the hard work paid-off and despite various setbacks, he achieved an excellent standard and was able to perform sacred and secular choral works, including the challenging music of the Cathedral Church of Christ Choir, Lagos, such as anthems, Responses, chanting of the Psalms of David, and special settings of Canticles.



Christopher Oyesiku Conducting the NBC Choir at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, in 1974.

During those years, the choir broadcast an evening service every Sunday on Radio Nigeria. The choir was also in demand for special services and other state occasions. It formed the core of the choir that recorded the National Anthem of Nigeria. It also served as a beacon for other choirs by setting the tone and exemplary standard. The NBC Choir, apart from singing weekly services and taking part regularly in concerts, presented several command performances for current and former Heads of State, including Generals Yakubu Gowon and Olusegun Obasanjo, at the former Head of State's residence, Dodan Barracks, Lagos. These performances usually took place during the Easter and Christmas seasons. Oyesiku's annual

Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols held on December 24 was so popular that even though it was always a live broadcast, the venue, Saint Peter's Anglican Church, Faji, Lagos, was often packed full thirty minutes before the commencement of the service. Obviously, with all these accolades, Oyesiku was convinced that the NBC Choir fulfilled the purpose for which it was founded, that is, to set a high standard of singing in both secular and church music. This outstanding achievement was only possible through the hard work and dedication of choir members. Similar to the Lagos Musical Society Choir, Oyesiku directed the NBC Choir from 1963 to 1981.



Christopher Oyesiku (far right) with the NBC Choir and Former Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon (middle in white native attire) and His wife, Victoria Gowon (standing next to her husband in the middle), at the State House, Dodan Barracks, Lagos.

Osun State College of Education Choir

In 1982, after Oyesiku accepted an invitation to chair the Department of Music at the Oyo State College of Education, Ilesha, he formed the school's choir, and taught singing, history, and rudiments of music. Oyesiku worked with the students from morning till late in the evening, and the students often practiced at night. As would be expected, it was immensely strenuous, but was rewarded by the fact that the students responded with enthusiasm and appreciated the efforts of the music faculty. All the students studied singing—a principal study in school music, and had to join the choir where they learned the essentials of voice production, speech, and acting, as well as repertoire for class teaching. In the second year of training, the choir performed its first concert. It was a big success, and the concert became a quarterly event.

The choir performed concerts regularly on campus and surrounding vicinity of the institution. The college choir was well known for its annual Festival of Lessons and Carols during the Christmas season. These

concerts attracted elite audiences from various parts of southwest Nigeria, including music lecturers from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, and the University of Ibadan. The choir was so popular that it was invited to perform Christmas carol concerts at the Anglican and Methodist Cathedrals in Ilesha.

University of Ibadan Choir

In January 1986, Oyesiku received an official invitation from Professor Ayo Banjo, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan. The purpose was to help to resuscitate the musical life of the academic community and to raise a choir for the university. Oyesiku accepted the position of Artist-in-Residence on March 1, 1987, at the premier institution. He regarded this appointment as a great opportunity to restore the musical life of the university and encourage the appreciation of art music; to develop a university choir of international repute, and to cultivate musical interaction between the town and gown.^{vii} During his ten years of meritorious service to the

university, Oyesiku was able, without the assistance of any other music faculty or any music vote, to achieve most of his objectives with huge successes. Initially, it was an uphill, daunting task as there was no music department in the institution at the time.^{viii} He was attached to the Department of Theater Arts, where there were no music courses and no music students. Consequently, Oyesiku

was back to square one again; that is, building the music foundation from ground zero. He had to recruit singers from any department of the university who were willing to join the choir. To further complicate the process, he had to teach each part of the songs separately as most of the singers could not sight-read music nor had any vocal training.



Christopher Oyesiku Directing the University of Ibadan Choir at the Trenchard Hall.

Oyesiku successfully raised a sixty-voice choir, and with dogged determination and hard work, coupled with perseverance, he was able to keep the choir going until he retired in 1997. This was despite the incessant strikes by administrative staff, faculty, and students. The choir members often stayed for little more than one semester in the group; it was not until his last couple of years that he had up to 30% of the members who had taken part in the previous concerts. Another disincentive factor was that the choir members could not receive any credits for their participation in the group, even though they spent six hours a week at rehearsals. In addition, music was not widely appreciated on the university campus at the time hence, friends of the choir made fun of them in classrooms and in the dormitories.

On a positive note, by the time Oyesiku retired, the choir had become very popular, and recruitment was

easier. He worked the choir tirelessly on breathing exercises, vowel shaping, breathing, resonance, and flexibility. The songs were learned by rote; each part separately and then together. As Oyesiku had several years of experience in teaching voice production, he was successful in obtaining good-quality singing from his fourth choir. The reward of his assiduous tenacity manifested in the frequent demands for the university choir at various celebratory occasions; in fact, it performed at the wedding of the daughter of Chief Emeka Anyaoku, former Secretary General of the Commonwealth. The choir's first major concert was for the fortieth anniversary of the University of Ibadan, in November 1988, where the university anthem was premiered. The anthem became a regular feature at commencement ceremonies and at other events.



Christopher Oyesiku and the University of Ibadan Choir at the Trenchard Hall, University of Ibadan.

During Oyesiku's tenure as Artist-in-Residence, the University of Ibadan Choir participated in fifty-one concerts: thirty-six for the university and fifteen for the Music Circle of the university, of which Oyesiku became the President during his first year at the institution. Oyesiku is grateful to the lovers of classical music in Ibadan, who generously donated funds to organize the concerts. He thoroughly enjoyed his years at Ibadan. His only regret was that he could not persuade the university authorities to develop a Department of Music. That dream came to fruition sixteen years after he departed from the institution. Oyesiku is deeply thankful to Professor Ayo Banjo for giving him the wonderful opportunity to contribute his musical skills and knowledge to the great premier University in Nigeria.

Solo Career

Running parallel to all these extremely hectic choral schedules was Oyesiku's bass solo career at several concerts, including the NBC Cultural Nights, embassy concerts, and other high-profile events organized in Europe, Lagos, Ibadan, Nsukka, and other West African countries such as Ghana and Cameroon. Indeed, Oyesiku was divinely blessed with a magnificent bass voice unparalleled by none before or after him in Nigeria. One of the high points of his career was the invitation from the renowned British composer and choral conductor, late Sir David Willcocks (1919-2015), to sing at Saint Jude's Anglican Church, Ebute-Metta, Lagos, in the solo part of the Carol, *Three Kings*. In this elite performance, Oyesiku sang with the choir of King's College, Cambridge, conducted by Willcocks himself, during their visit to Lagos in 1972.



Christopher Oyesiku Singing Solo in *Three Kings* with King's College Choir in 1972.



Christopher Oyesiku and Emilia Jonakieva Hodgeva at the Nigerian Institute for International Affairs, Lagos, in 1975.

Encomiums

Christopher Oyesiku has been praised and honored by several personalities, diplomatic corps, institutions, newspaper journalists, and organizations in Nigeria and worldwide for his extraordinary contributions to the development of classical music in Nigeria. One of his contemporaries, Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko,^{ix} lauds the nonagenarian: "Christopher was larger than life itself. He was the greatest. I do not know of any other musician in Nigeria today who can boast of, or put up a claim close to what he did, or the legacy he left. Christopher was the busiest musician in Lagos."^x Honorable Kayode Esho, after the NBC Choir had sung at the wedding service of his daughter, admits: "This is to thank you for the most wonderful performance you and your choir put up in Ilesha at the wedding of my daughter. It is the consensus in Ilesha that there had been nothing like it since the inception of Christianity in that town" (Esho, 1981). Chief E. O. Okunowo, following the NBC Choir's performance at the wedding of his daughter, remarks: "I cannot adequately express how joyful I was, other than to say that I was wonderfully impressed by your excellent performance, and I wish to assure you that the memory of the occasion will be an indelible one in me and that generations yet unborn will learn of it from my record" (Okunowo, 1981). A music journalist, after a concert held at Saint Peter's Anglican Church, Aremo, Ibadan, recounts: "The *Messiah* followed and Christopher Oyesiku's voice was a sheer delight. This was followed by Purcell's, *An Evening Hymn* sung by Christopher Oyesiku, standing at the head of the aisle, his voice filling the entire church building with its booming splendor" (*Daily Sketch*, 1987). Professor Dapo Adelugba of the Department of Theater Arts, University of Ibadan, eulogizes the maestro in an article titled, "Tribute to a Virtuoso":

It gives one great joy to see the growth of an audience for music concerts at the University of Ibadan since the arrival on the staff of the Department of Theater Arts of veteran singer and choir trainer, Christopher Oyesiku, who has only just begun his third year as Artist-in-Residence. The University of Ibadan has been treated to a steady diet of music concerts and of evening of performance by the University Choir that Oyesiku has built from among professionals, amateurs, and student singers in Ibadan. Among the highlights of the university choir's achievements is the impressive rendition of the new University of Ibadan anthem. The tact, warmth, and aesthetic tastes of Uncle Christopher Oyesiku have made it possible for him to treat the Ibadan community to evenings of concerts by guest pianists, guest singers, guest librettists, and guest composers. These musicians come from as far away as Lagos and Ile-Ife, to participate in carefully chosen pieces for the musical concerts that have now become a regular fare at Trenchard Hall, and that draw full houses. To fill the lower and upper floors of Trenchard Hall as the musical concerts of recent years have done means to bring together almost one thousand people to an evening performance. The audiences have always been a mixed grill of the old and middle-aged couples and younger people. While the university staff and students constitute a good half of the audience, the university has been able to bring to Trenchard Hall from Ibadan city, the other half commute gladly to the university campus anytime a concert is announced (Adelugba, 1989).

CONCLUSION

Christopher Oyesiku dazzled the Nigerian elitist music caucuses with his extraordinary bass voice and exceptional conducting techniques for decades. His outstanding performances brought smiles, laughter, joy,

and admiration to the faces of his faithful patrons, patronesses, and audiences. Nigeria has never seen nor heard anything like Oyesiku's magnificent voice, which was best described as *bel canto* and *basso profundo*.

One of the salient features of Oyesiku's distinguished solo and choral career was his meticulous and innovative song repertoire that was always globally intercultural. His choice of songs ranged from Euro-American classical to African-American spirituals, Latin-American, Caribbean, to indigenous Nigerian folk songs, and of course, modern Nigerian art songs such as Ayo Bankole's *Three Yoruba Songs for Baritone and Piano* (Bankole, 1976).

The biography of Oyesiku is the quintessential example of a successful musical career in twentieth-century Nigeria. Oyesiku's story shows how art music is taught and learned, organized, directed, performed, promoted, managed, transmitted, patronized, and preserved by the elitist group in contemporary Nigeria. In other words, the Oyesiku concerts are representative of art music decorum in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the performance practices, and a mirror through which one could examine the ethos of this style of music in twenty-first-century Nigeria.

Even though he has retired from an active music career, Oyesiku's ingenuity lives on. His impeccable activities have touched the lives of many Nigerians, including his colleagues and, more importantly, the younger generation that carried on the baton from where he left off. The process to seek those who would fit into Oyesiku's shoes is indeed a herculean 'mission impossible.' There might never be another bass singer like Oyesiku in Nigeria. We have patiently waited for twenty-eight years for another star to rise and fill the vacuum, but none has shown up. It is difficult to find in this generation young minds with such dedication, discipline, passion, and tenacity as exuded by Oyesiku. It is noteworthy to say that

Oyesiku was the first Nigerian professionally-trained musician to attain the rarefied nonagenarian status. He lived on to the ripe age of ninety-four and departed this world in London, England, on March 20, 2020.

Acknowledgment

The research and writing of this historic article would not have been possible without the extensive contributions from the celebrant, Christopher Oyesiku, who obliged and granted the author several interviews in which he answered every single question asked him about his life and astonishing musical career. The interviews occurred on June 20, 1990; March 15, 2007; August 2, 2010; September 22, 2010; October 20, 2010; October 26, 2010, and October 2, 2014. Oyesiku further provided all the relevant documents, rare photos, newspaper reviews, personal letters, and concert programs utilized in this article. For all these priceless materials, we are extremely grateful to Oyesiku.

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ⁱ Thomas Ekundayo Phillips was the Organist and Master of the Music at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, from Trinity Sunday 1914 to Trinity Sunday 1962.

ⁱⁱ Trinity College of Music is now called Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London.

ⁱⁱⁱ The University of Ibadan is the premier university in Nigeria.

^{iv} Olaolu Omidéyi was one of the pioneer Organists and Choirmasters in southwest Nigeria.

^v Charles Oluwolé Obayomi Phillips succeeded his father, Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, as the Organist and Master of the Music, at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, from Trinity Sunday 1962 to Trinity Sunday 1992.

^{vi} The Nigerian Ordinary Level diploma from a college of education is equivalent to the United States community college diploma.

^{vii} Town and gown is a Nigerian phrase denoting the regular people or citizens in the surrounding community of a college or university, which is the town, and the academic coterie on the actual university campus, the gown. Hence, town and gown, or public and campus.

^{viii} The Department of Music was established at the University of Ibadan in 2013, sixteen years after Oyesiku had left the premier institution.

^{ix} Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko was the second Nigerian woman to receive a PhD in music. She earned her terminal degree from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1981. Joy Nwosu and Christopher Oyesiku worked together at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos, in the early 1970s before she was appointed Music Lecturer at the Department of Music, University of Lagos.

^x Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko, e-mail message to this author, July 10, 2014.