MUSIC AND THEATRE ARTS IN AFRICA
UNIT 8

MUSIC IN THE THEATRE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract
The role of music in theatre is fundamental to the success or otherwise of any standard play production. Unfortunately, some play productions, as experience has revealed, don’t showcase the fundamental roles of music in play production. Music is sparingly and sometime merely employed as an appendage to the production. What is worse, the music when it is there at all is poorly composed and orchestrated. This trend, if not curtailed, is detrimental to the act of play making and play production as it is capable of further endangering the already fragile health of live theatre in Nigeria. In order to reaffirm the fundamental roles of music in play production this paper attempts a historical overview of the roles music played in play production with a view to documenting, for the prosperity of posterity, the essential functions of music in play production. The paper therefore defines music, attempt to categorise its genre and surveys how music was used in the theatre of old. It then concludes by itemising and explaining the essential functions of music in the theatre.

Introduction
Music is the rhythmic, melodious and harmonic organisation of sounds. The art of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce a synergy of form, harmony and expression of motion. The term theatre is loosely employed here as the act of play making and play production.

From the very beginning of theatre, music had been actively involved. It is not out of place to say music and theatre are undoubted siblings of common etymology. Theatre historians are of agreement on the fact that tragedy got it name “tragoedia” meaning “goat song” and comedy from phallic song. Seen from whatever angle, tragedy, the earliest form organised “drama” started with the singing of a choral lyric, called the dithyramb, which of course was in honour of Dionysus. It was, as history says it, performed in an arena, a circular dancing space. This was one by a group of men who impersonate satyrs by wearing masks and dressing in goat-skin. This was of course where the Greek word “tragoedia” which means “goat song” emanated from. In the words of Anthon (1853)

No one knows exactly, what sorts of steps the chorus performed as if sang. But choral song in tragedy are divided into three sections: strophe (“turning, circling”) antistrophe (“counter-turning, counter-circling”) and epode (“after-
song”) so perhaps the chorus would dance one way around the orchestra (“dancing-floor”) while singing the strophe, turn another way during the antistrophe, and then stand still during the epode.

On the other hand comedy is derived from the classical Greek word “komoida” which means village revel or a singing. The implication of these is that music was involved even in the evolution of theatre and it has continued to play significant and substantial roles in the act of play making and play production. The foremost theatre theorist, Aristotle, succinctly opines, in his Poetics; “that drama originated in the singing of the dithyrambic choruses; a masked actor was first used to respond to- the chorus as an individualized “character” in the mid-sixth century BCE...”

Again the above underscores the fact that music is an essential feature of theatre. As a matter of fact the chorus was an essential part of Greek theatre. In form, the organization of Greek drama is based on the singing and dancing of the chorus. In fact, some of the plays were named after the chorus. The classical theatre of Japan like that of Asian theatre coordinates acting, dance, music and spectacle. Liturgical dramas in the 9th century Medieval England were essential musical tropes, which were elaborations of the authorised liturgy. They were written to amplify the scriptural text and enhance its impact and appeal. These dramas were set to music and sung in antiphonal.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries made good use of music in Elizabethan theatre. The Elizabethan theatre made use of music and props for effects. Manifold (1956), opines,

Different sounds were used to create special effects; the most obvious sound affect was music. Musicians were employed to enhance the overall theatre experience. One of the balconies above the stage housed the musicians. Elizabethan composers were commissioned to write music and songs to accompany the works of playwrights such as William Shakespeare. The most famous Globe theatre composer was Robert Johnson, (1582-1633). Robert Johnson composed “Full Fathom Five” and “Where the Bee Sucks” which were written for The Tempest by William Shakespeare.

The tradition of using music in the theatre started with the evolution of theatre itself as pointed at earlier. Copious facts are evident of how significant music was used in Shakespeare’s plays. Manifold (1956), says

Music in Elizabethan theatre was an unwritten factor in the script or a piece of theatre. Music was a force and social presence that is important to consider when taking a full view of any piece of drama or its presentation from that period. The use and role of music has especially interesting implication in Loves Labour’s Lost because of the poetics and self-awareness of the lines.
Music, a fundamental element of theatre, plays specific roles in the making and production of plays. Unfortunately the importance and perhaps the statutory roles of music in play production seem to have been deemphasised as it becomes increasingly apparent that the role of music in play production has been in some cases relegated to mere entertainment, as a mere appendage or just a fulfilment of all righteousness. It is worthwhile, at this juncture, to clarify the concept of music particularly for the understanding of budding theatre artists whose attention is needed for the appropriate fusion of music and play production in order to safeguard the sanctity of the significance of music in play production.

The Wikipedia, the free Encyclopaedia, (n.d) defines music, “as an art form whose medium is sound and silence. Its common elements are pitch (which governs melody and harmony), rhythm (and its associated concepts tempo, meter, and articulation), dynamics, and the sonic qualities of timbre and texture.” Though what constitute music is culturally determined, generally, music is an organised composition, harmonious and pleasant to listen to. The basic elements of music include melody, rhythm, harmony, texture, form, tempo and dynamics. Its instruments among others are voice, string instrument, wood and wind instruments, brass instruments, percussion instruments etc. Its type include but not limited to art music, popular music and traditional or folk music.

Music performs many functions in the society. Music and society are closely related. Music reflects and creates social conditions. Among others, music facilitates communication more powerful than the spoken words and it enables meaning to be shared. Music promotes the growth and sustenance of individuals, groups, cultural and national identities. Music has the ability to induce physiological mood, emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses in individuals. Music has therapeutic power. It promotes relaxation, it reduces anxiety and pains. Today as it was in the past, people variously employ music to alter their own moods, reduce stress, and diminish boredom during and after serious and intellectual tasking activities. In a nutshell, the role of music in society cannot be overemphasised. Since theatre is a reflection of life, it follows therefore that music in the theatre ought to play these functions depending on what aspect of life a particular play production is reflecting.

Traditionally playwrights included at length one song in every play, with the exception of profound tragedies in accordance with Seneca model, which sometimes left out music but for sound of trumpets and drums. Notwithstanding this tradition, William Shakespeare’s defied this practice and made use of song uniquely and movingly, particularly in Othello, King Lear and Hamlet. Even though songs featured in virtually all Shakespeare plays, they were more evident in the comedies than the histories. For instance, Shakespeare used songs to set mood in Othello. Take for instance, Desdemona’s willow song. The mourning song in Cymbeline is yet another example of music setting mood in Shakespeare’s plays. He used songs to describe a character, an instance of which is found in Ophelia’s songs in her mad scenes in Hamlet. Songs were used to fill a space in the Merchant of Venis, of reference is the song “where is fancy bred” in the play. The playwright in question used music to create a joke in other to heighten the comic depth in As You Like It, a good example of which is “huntsman’s song”. He structurally employed music to advance the plot of the play Midsummer’s Night Dream with
the injection of “The Fairies' Lullaby”. The entertainment of Shakespeare audience was increased with the use of “Who is Sylvia” in *The Gentlemen of Verona*. The entrances of royal characters were preceded with instrumental music. As done by the Greek chorus, Shakespeare employed incidental music to underscore the thematic preoccupation of his plays.

The knowledge of the past demystifies the past, clarifies the presence and illuminates the future. It can therefore be safely assumed that in as much as music was in the theatre of old, and it played specific significant roles, the use of music in the play production today is justified. The essences of this paper being to categorize the role of music in the theatre, therefore the following are the specific roles that music must perform in the theatre. Music in the theatre is not and should not be just for cheer aesthetics, rather it is and should be for socio-aesthetics harmony. In order for music to play its primordial role in the theatre, it should consciously be used in the following ways:

**As Incidental Music**
An incidental music is used in a play as a background, to create or enhance a particular atmosphere. This could be to underscore the thematic or composed to accompany the action of a drama or to fill intervals between scenes. The idea is that an incidental music usually is composed for the particular play or some songs that have precise relevance to the play; incidental music could be used to set an appropriate mood. It is advisable to play music that relates to the mood of the play to be watched the moment the house is opened for audience to come in. Unfortunately the common practice in Nigeria today is to usher in the audience with all kinds of popular music. The practice of playing just any music related or not to the mood of the play to usher in the audience to the theatre is not in tune with the fundamentals of music in play production. The music the audience hears as they file in to the theatre should prepare them for they play they have come to see. During scene changes, the songs/music should either be reinforcing previous scene or setting the mood for the next.

**For Character Development,**
Music is used for character development; it is used to introduce and describe a character. The entrance of a notorious character can be announced with a song itemizing his personality and character traits. An example was given above of Ophelia’s songs in her mad scenes. Also the passage of Eleshin Oba in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, through the street to the market is accompanied with songs describing and satirising him.

**Entertainment**
Music can also be used just for entertainment purpose, to create a joke or heighten the humorous depth of a play.

**To Serve the Function of the Plot**
Music can be used to advance the play; that is to move the action forward. A character could commit murder as a result of being provoked by a song another character has rendered. The
murder may then be the point of a turnaround for the plot. In a nutshell, the role of music in the theatre is a major one; so significant that a play may not be “complete” if devoid of music. Therefore the instrumentality of music should be made standard. The song must be sang to tune, the instrument must be apt and adequate for the specific demands of given production. As a result, specialists are needed to put a play together, for instance, the director, actors, theatre technicians, critics and the choreographer, etc, are expected to work together, so also a musicologist is needed to perfect the musical needs of the play. The coaching of performers for music essentially should be handled by professionals. It is an error for theatre specialists to assume that the service of a musicologist or music specialist can be done without in a play production. Particularly when the play is one that needs music and most plays need music. The melodrama is different ball game all together, as the live band must essentially be composed of musicians.

Conclusively, it is evident today that music in the theatre is not given the necessary attention it deserves. Theatre has not employed music as well as it ought to. A perfectly placed song is able to heighten a scene to its dramatic pinnacle. Music is a diversified way of articulating strong feelings, as a result, having the right music at the right time in a play production can make the play more effective and reach out to the audience in a way so personal that all stakeholders will connect better to the play and grasp it thematic preoccupation fully.

It is lightly imperative to get the right type of music and inject it at the right time in the play in order to achieve the expected effect in the theatre. To set the right music and not just any music is the exclusive responsibility of a music expert. The practice of the cast of a play coming together during a rehearsal to evolve the music component of the play without the service of a music expert is grossly inadequate and amount to professional trespass. A right music can make the play and a wrong one, can mal it beyond redemption. An appropriate song not properly sang can turn off the audience and make the play a total failure. Music, when done properly, is pleasing to ear and vice versa. It is a music expert, a musicologist or someone with exceptional talent that can set the music right. He/she therefore must be present in the composition, and help to coach the singers as appropriate. Take for instance, songs sang into parts and with the right quantity and quality of melody can attract passersby to the theatre. When the music expert is involve in the play production process, the music will be well rendered to elicit the desired emotions as may be demanded by the play. It is only there and then that music can play its fundamental role in the theatre.

In some cases, some casts and theatre drummers just assemble musical instruments and use them to accomplish all songs rendered in the plays; this may be disastrous in the sense that there are some music instruments that go with some particular songs. Someone singing a Yoruba folk song for instance and accompanied by an Igbo flutist will make the Yoruba audience wander off the play as the strange musical element will alienate them rather than involve them in the song. As a result, there are no tenable excuses that can justify the exclusion of a musicologist in a play production. When the music is right, then it is the duty of the director to know the appropriate
part of the play to situate a particular song. A fast-paced song may not be appropriate for a sober scene, however relevant the lyrics may be. We therefore suggest that students of Theatre Arts be mandated to take compulsory elective courses in Music. This will avail them the opportunity of acquiring necessary and appropriate knowledge of music to be able to get right the musical elements of a play production.

References


