**INDIGENOUS MUSIC THEORY IN YORUBA CULTURE: THE HEINRICH SCHENKER’S APPROACH**

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Abstract

Africa is a continent of multi-ethnic culture with attendant multi-ethnic indigenous music. The practices of music, being an important aspect of day-to-day activities of multi-ethnic people requires a unitary theory that cut across ethnic barriers for the purposes of wider understanding and globalization in the changing times. To achieve these complex objectives, this paper, immediately start to philosophize about the appropriate unitary theory behind the sounding materials of Yoruba indigenous music. With this as our focus, the paper beams it searchlight into the appropriateness and relevance of Heinrich Schenkers indigenous music theory as a philosophical yardstick in understanding Yoruba indigenous music. The paper strives to bring to bear the suitability of Schenkerian folk music theory citing a Yoruba indigenous music and then posits these findings as suitable to serve as a unitary theory to analyze the Nigerian multi-ethnic musical genres.

**Keywords:** Changing times, indigenous, multi-ethnic, unitary, searchlight, yardstick.

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**Introduction**

The search for the appropriate theory to analyze and understand Nigerian indigenous music beyond cultural barriers and tribal sentiment is presently the ‘in-thin’ among the Nigerian musicologists. However, divergent opinions emerged about the appropriate approach to the search, which invariably constitutes the slow pace in arriving at the Nigerian Music Philosophy. Philosophy, which literarily means ‘theory’, is a systematic analysis and critical examination of fundamental problems in any human endevours, therefore, the present exercise focused on the search for appropriate Nigerian Music philosophy. Music theory distils any statement, beliefs, conception of or about music and the socio-scientific parameters of any given sound. A question arises that; what are the appropriate theories to analyze and document Yoruba indigenous music? Regarding the complexities of the Nigeria indigenous music Vidal (2007:10-11) states:

With its diversities of research studies, and orientation towards information gathering and the absence of a unitary field theory that can guarantee cross-cultural communication and understanding … one is tempted to ask whether musical scholarship…?

The above submission is also the present state of Nigerian indigenous music, including the age long folk music. So far as music is concerned; the only clear – cut criterion of nationality is language. The nature of a people’s language inevitably affects the nature of its music not only in obvious and superficial ways but fundamentally.

The objective of this paper is to create an avenue for a meeting point of these diverse styles and to have a precise degree of scientific cross-cultural communication theory through Heinrich Schenker’s indigenous music approach. This, in essence, will help the Nigerian indigenous musicologists to have a collective medium to analyze their music and its structures. Characteristically, Nigerian indigenous music is largely antiphonal and tonal, which means that there is a tonal centre around which the music dwells. Therefore, one fundamental and relevant proposition of Heinrich Schenker is the concept of ‘*Ursatz’*: that is the tonal centre or the basis of music, its fundamentals, or the underlying counterpoints in indigenous music of the world; which is also the essential framework in this study. The idea of tonality in Nigerian indigenous music in which ‘several tones’ relate to a ‘tonal centre’ is inherent in Schenkerian *Ursatz* concept.

Most Nigerian musicologists have identified discrepancies in the wrong application of Western music terminologies in the analysis of Nigerian indigenous/African folk music. Adedeji (2011:37) solicited for a rethink, to chart a new course out of a self-destruct voyage we had embarked upon. Therefore, in the continuation of Adedeji’s (2006:37) enterprise in transformative musicology of the exploration of ways of changing the diabolic use of technology positively in our music practice, this paper takes a voyage. Many elementary descriptive analysis of Nigerian indigenous music have appeared, but the present exercise is an all embracing and convincing musicological exposition of the theoretical principles behind Nigerian indigenous music Vidal (2007) emphatically states that:

After ten decades of music scholarship in Nigeria, do we now have in existence a dictionary of musical terms with which we can connote or denote certain phenomena both in the music of the area or area we all have been studying and researching in Nigeria, nay in Africa?

The above submission should be of concern to every Nigerian musicologist because the problem is endemic. Agu (2001) has argued that, the contemporary African Art Musicians have been face with the task of providing the relevance of African characteristics and traditional backgrounds and practices… through authentic art idiom’ and in another instance, Agu (2001) proposed that: to actualize this dream, the contemporary art musicians should have learning towards African music theory and practice, hence the focus of this paper.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study allied with the theory of symbolic-reference in music; which deals with the concept of musical communication in codified symbols and terminologies that address various subjects in human society. Idamoyibo (2012:18) quotes Fiagbedzi (1985:41) re-visit the symbolic theory of interpreting music phenomenon advanced by Langer (1967) and reinvent the argument that the human brain, as a great transformer, continually concerts sense-data into symbols. He postulates that creative impulse delves into the worlds unknown, to deeply search for new knowledge and idiom that may be simple or complex, with a primary objective to put the whole ideas forward to an audience in various symbols. It is, in view of these that this article aims to emphasize already prognosis concepts by Vidal and Adedeji (2010:33) that:

it is pertinent to point out the limitation of any academic field that is studied in single-dimensional approach science and technology which have developed greatly and achieved several feats in solving problems have necessitated the need for the artistic study of arts … humanities needs an additional approach termed scientific study of the arts and humanities.

Therefore, this paper takes a multi-dimensional approach in the scientific search for the appropriate philosophical yardstick in understanding Yoruba indigenous music.

**Relevance of Schenkerian Theory to Yoruba Indigenous Music**

The fact, not withstanding, that Heinrich Schenker was not a Nigerian man, his ideology of three structural levels in all tonal music is very relevant to a deeper understanding of Yoruba indigenous music. This is intended to help in alleviating the present state of confusion and thus build a framework for a creative and logically integrated development into folk music. It is an acknowledged fact that all African indigenous music is repetitive (antiphonal) in nature. This rendition technique of regularly recurring refrain is the focal point of Schenkerian thematic materials (*Ursatz*) in the melody which has a direct link to Yoruba indigenous melody and a justification for it application.

Heinrich Schenker was a practicing musician in Vienna in the early years of the Twentieth century. He played the piano accompaniments in the great Viennese and Germanic literature with the great soloists of his time and became intimately familiar with his literature. Being a Professor of Music, (Theory and Composition) University of Northern Colorado School of Music and a creative person by nature, he tossed out ideas one after the other, which have become the basis for a system of music analysis. Besides, the several theories propounded by him are enunciated in several treaties culminate in ‘*Der* *Freie* *Satz*; 1935 (Ekwueme, 1975: 27-35).

Perhaps, at this juncture, it is appropriate to ask the question, “What is Henrich Schenker analysis?” ‘Schenkerian analysis’ - is the idea that music (tonal music) contains three layers, which include background, middle ground and the foreground. Schenkerian concept is also of the opinion that the great composer is instinctively aware of an “*Ursatz’* (fundamental line or underlying counterpoint) and then composes an elaboration around it so as to produce the full, large scale composition, and that, it is this basic line, which gives the large-scale piece its tonal direction and impetus. According to Robert Ethle, C, (2006)

Schenker would say that the unique qualities and values in a musical composition are to be found here in the elaboration of the *Ursatz* on a middle ground level. Without this awareness, a musical composition becomes a “pastiche”, or “pasted together” piece, which lacks a clear sense of direction.

Taken a clue from the above, the idea of a composition springing from an elaboration of the *Ursatz* in the “subconscious mind” of the genius (composer) is very relevant to Yoruba indigenous music analysis. In his discussion on forms in African music titled ‘structural levels of rhythm and forms in African music’, Ekwueme (1975) stated thus;

…a comparison with architecture will help illustrate the principle. A building is first constructed with a skeleton, the frame that marks out the main structure. This is made of some durable materials, like steel or concrete, able to bear the weight of and lend support to other materials that may be laid above or beside it. This frame stands for the background. Then comes the middle ground structure of the building the walls, rooms, doors, windows, roots, cellars, stairs, chimneys and such other features that define the building and its purpose. At the foreground level of this building laid such things as the paint, the furniture, the chandelier or lampshades and the translucent glass of the bathroom windows.

The adaptation of the above is intended to analyze the Yoruba indigenous music beyond cultural boundaries in this science conscious generation and the changing times. In the present exercise, the application of the great most important idea is that of the ‘*Ursatz’* (Fundamental line) in the analysis. This involve that a deeply imbedded background layer of music involving the scale steps 3, 2, 1 (m r d) over the chord-root, I, V and I, totally built on a single harmonic series. These according to Schenker may be elaborated (composing out) at the next layer up with various versions such as 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 (s f m r d) or 8, 7, 6, 5, 4 3, 2, 1, (d t l s f m r d), 3 2 1 (m r d), particularly in the binary forms. The idea is made vivid in such Western folk tunes such as; *Twinkle*, *twinkle*, *little* *star*, *home* *on* *the* *range*, and *Pop* *goes* *the* *Weasel*. Besides, it is obvious upon a little consideration that Nigerian indigenous music, being a tonal music also possessed the above character, in such Yoruba music as *Ojo* n *ro, Ile awa dun, Omo ye eke, Ara orun ara orun,* andas seeing in the analyzed traditional Nigerian indigenous music titled: *Ile* *Awa* *Dun* :‘Pleasant family’.

The Analysis

The song, ‘*Ile* *Awa* *Dun’* possessed a basic format of antiphonal alternation between solo and chorus. In the Schenkerian analysis of the song, we shall discuss the song under the following headings: *Ursatz* (scale steps, 3, 2, 1), chord – root I, V, I (harmonic series), possibility of an elaboration (composing out), form, as well as the voice leading graph.

**The song text:**

*Ile awa dun, oko lon ponmi,*

*Ile awa dun, oko lon lota*

*Ile awa dun, oko lon foso*

*Ile awa dun, oko lon ponmi*

**English Poem**

We have a pleasant family, our husband fetch water,

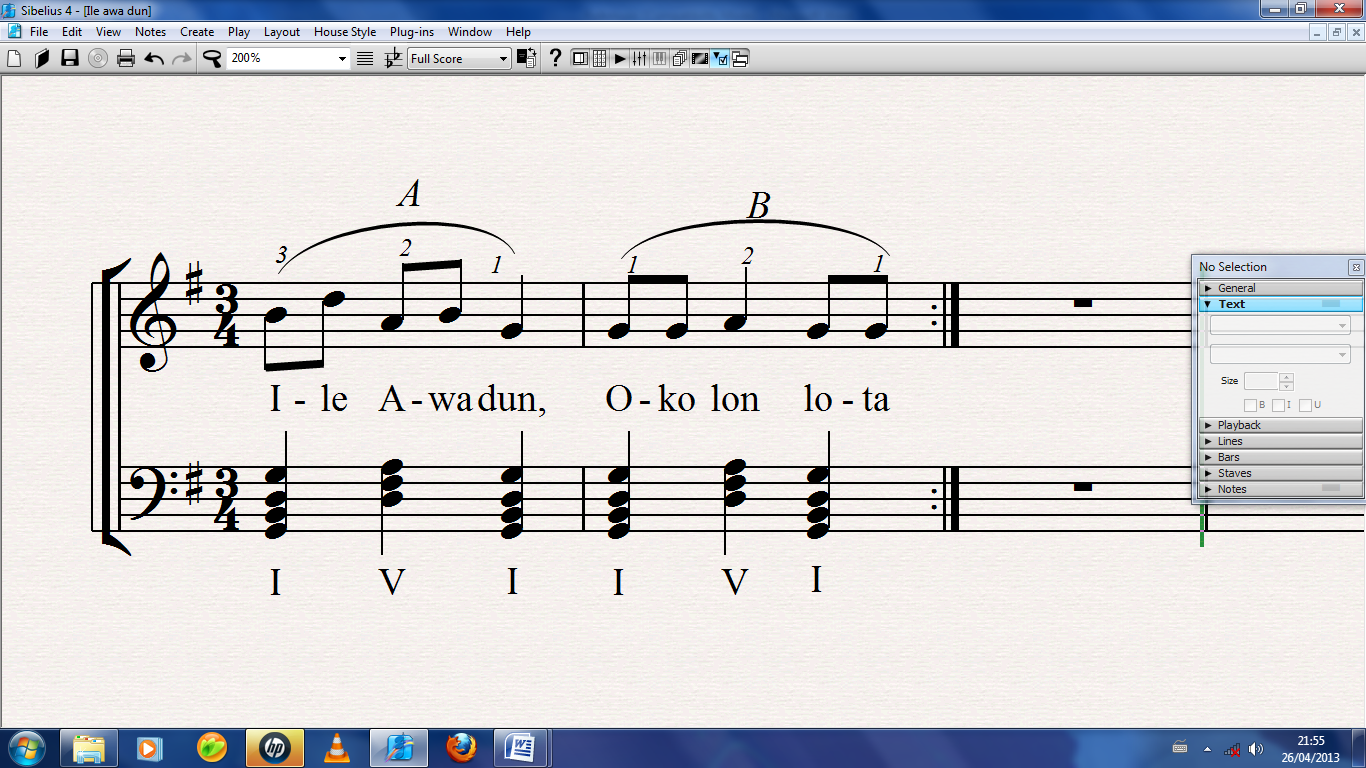
We have a pleasant home, our husband grand pepper,

We have a pleasant family, our husband wash clothes,

We have a pleasant home, our husband fetch water.

**Music Notation of the song ‘Pleasant Family’**

**Largo**



***Ursatz***:Is the imbedded background layer on “Scale steps 3, 2, 1. In the Schenkerian theory, scale steps are pitches that predominate in a particular region of the composition. The song melody consists of scale steps, 3, 2, 1 (m, r, d) predominate in the ‘call phrase’ serving as the scale steps (upper case); while 5 and 2 (s, m) is the scale steps (lower case). In other words, the primary pitches, 3, 2, 1, are the background, while pitches 5 and 2 are the foreground level of passing tone (inflexion tones). The background pitches 3, 2, 1 coincide with the beginning of each word in the melody. Linguistically considered, in the Yoruba tonal music in which the emphasis are always on the beginning of words. The complete words are:

I–le a – wa dun, O–ko lon pon – mi

***Scale Steps (Upper Case)3 (M) 2 (R) 1 (D), I (D) 2 (R) 1 (D)***

***Scale Steps (Lower Case) 5 (s) 2 (m) 1 (d) 1 (d)***

The emphasis on the above analysis is that the upper case step pitches gives a clear scale steps of the background level of the music. Hence, the rising inflexions of words are accounted for in the lower case step pitches of the foreground level. The scale steps in the ‘Upper case’ are ‘stressed’ than others, therefore fall on the ‘accents’ and invariable constitutes the most important syllables. Therefore, it is obvious that the *Ursatz* (background underlies) of the song is in conformity with Schenkers formulas, 3, 2 and 1.

**Chords**: In the musical arrangement, the melody is completely on a single harmonic series I-V-I. It should be noted that both the ‘call’ and the ‘responses’ series maintained the same principle I-V-I. Also, to further confirm the ‘*Ursatz’*, the chords actually coincide with the upper case scale steps, (stressed important syllables).

**Scale Steps (Upper Case) 3 (M) 2(R) 1(D), 1(D) 2(R) 1(D)**

**5(s) 2(m) 1(d) 1(d)**

**Scale Steps (Lower Case) d**

**S r d d d**

**m t s s r s**

**d s m m t m**

**D d s d**

**Chords** I V I, I V I

Analytically, chords V above consist of strange steps in the lower case, which is 2 (m) and l (d). This is to further confirm the existence of lower case steps in the song melody. Most pitches of the scale serves as passing tones, neighbouring tones, free tones or some other things such as boundary play (pitches above the highest sounding scale step). Hence, 2m and lm over chord V are serving as neighbouring passing tones.

**Ausktomponierung** (Composing out): There is a great possibility of an elaboration of the song melody. According to Schenker, “the unique qualities and value in a musical composition are to be found in the elaboration of the *ursatz* on a middle ground level”. The song is in binary form of an “unending” variation of style in which the ‘call’ is ‘constant’ but the ‘response’ varies over the basic harmonic series I-V-I. This was vivid in two ways thus; a cursory look at the musical score shows the repetition sign combined alongside ‘*dal* *capo’* sign, to pave way for several repeats. Also, in the ‘text’ of the song, each response ends with different actions that are; fetch water, grand pepper, and wash clothes.

Taken into consideration the above natural principles of African music form (call and response variant styles), a composer may elaborate the song, while using such special devices in contrapuntal writing as augmentation, diminution, retrograde as well as canon and rounds.

**Form**: The folk tune under consideration has an antecedent section, which is answer be a consequent of equal length. In the song, the call is usually by a small ground, and the whole group takes the response. However, it should be noted that the ‘call’ phrase is ‘constant’ while the ‘response’ is ‘variable’. Nevertheless, the structure of the music still retained it antiphony – in which the response still has the same musical material as the call.

This idea of the mixture of constant and variable in Schenkerian analysis is known as interruption between (3, 2) or (3, 2, 1) particularly in the binary forms as noted in the form.

**Voice Leading Graph**: One of the most influential of Schenker’s idea is that the three layers of music (background, foreground and middle ground) may be represented with graph as a means of conveying in the most direct fashion one’s understanding of the layers of a piece of music, sometimes called ‘voice leading graph’. A further scrutiny of the Yoruba wedding song suggests the following graph representation:

‘VLG’ (Voice Leading Graph)

VLG of *Ile* *Awa* *Dun*

DC

UCS 1

UCS 3

LCS 3

UCS 2

UCS1

LCS1

UCS2

LCS1

UCS1

LCS 5

**Chords** I V I I V I

UCS – Upper Case Steps

LCS – Lower Case Step

Therefore, the explanation of ‘VLG’ of the three layers is as follows:

Background Layers – UCS 3, 2, 1 and 1, 2, 1

Foreground Layers – LCS 5, 3, and 1, 1

Middle ground layers – UCS + LCS Elaboration (D.C and Repeat sign).

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

To conclude, it seems that for Yoruba indigenous music to reach a wider audience in this globalised world and the changing times, the music must be positioned scientifically and pragmatically. This pragmatic scientific approach is one of the best ideas given by Heinrich Schenker. Schenker analysis is more valuable to us because it deals with the basic principles of music. He discovered one or more principles, which are universal and applicable to all music, especially the idea of the functioning of tonality in the ‘*Ursatz’* – background layer of music.

Most Nigerian indigenous languages are tonal. Tone refers to the use of pitch in language to distinguish words. How the tones of syllables behave in tonal music depends on the rise and fall in the language tradition. To understand and account for syllabic conduct and its ‘basic theoretical principles’ behind Yoruba music, Schenkerian analysis is being recommended. A language consists of words and words consist of syllables. Those syllables that are stressed are said to have accent. The rhythm of a sentence therefore is determined by the ‘accent’ which falls on the important syllables (Upper Case) and the ‘un-stress is in the (lower case).

Finally, it is hope that our Schenkerian analysis has brought to the fore the “*Ursatz*” – background layers of the music, especially the voice-leading graph, which have clearly demonstrated distinctively the background, foreground and the middle ground. The adoption of Schenkerian theory to ‘natural composition’ (music in culture) of Yoruba indigenous tune has further confirms the natural disposition of African to music. This is in conformity to Schenkers claim that ‘composer cannot be trained; a basic genius (African disposition to music) must be present. However, in order to have a total breakthrough in the analysis and deeper understanding of Nigerian indigenous music, we must be flexible, tolerant and democratic in our approach to theory formulations. Furthermore, new ideas and innovations must be allowed and encouraged in the search for appropriate theories and practices in our music, which hopefully will boost the artistic presentation, analysis, and understanding of music in a multi-ethnic culture African.

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