Simplicity Can Be So Difficult to Perform Well: The Music of Grace Oforka

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I discovered Grace (Graciedion) Bernard Oforka's compositions through Midori Samson's presentation and performances at the First Virtual Symposium of the International Double Reed Society on July 28, 2020. During the presentation, Samson interviewed several African composers and performed their works.[1] The melodic nature, ebullience, and attractiveness of two of Oforka's solo bassoon works, *Chegharia* and *Nkowa*, caught my attention immediately, and shortly thereafter I contacted Ms. Oforka to commission what would turn out to be several works for bassoon and flute.

There are ironic tensions in Oforka's works that make the pieces fascinating to perform. On the surface, her works are technically easy and can be played by musicians with just two or three years of training. But the musical simplicity of her compositions is deceptive. The works' melodic structures, sense of time, accompaniments, and spiritual content yield deeper complexities.

The ***melodic structures*** in Ms. Oforka's pieces are unlike those found in the standard Western European literature commonly presented to young musicians. First, examine a typical melody for young bassoonists: the first solo in Graham Sheen's *Going Solo Bassoon* (Figure 1).[2]

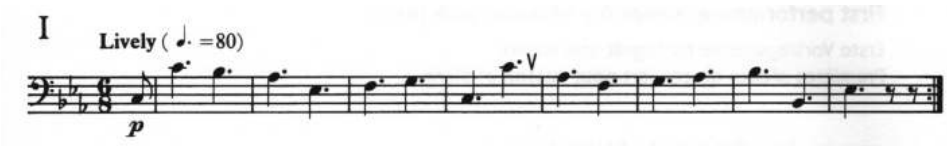


Figure 1. Jig by George Frideric Handel, mm. 1–8.

Like so much of the literature for young musicians receiving classical musical training, the Handel excerpt is drawn from music of the European Common Practice period. Melodies in this period are generally written in four-measure phrases. Notice that Mr. Sheen has even included a breath mark where the two primary phrases are divided. In addition, Common Practice dictates that phrases typically come to rest on the tonic or dominant scale degrees of the key signature. Here, Handel provides resolutions in the minor tonic of the first phrase (m. 4, C minor) and the major tonic of the second phrase (m. 8, Eb major). (These resolutions also match the key signature.) Overall, there is a sense of harmonic and melodic predictability in the music.

Contrast this structural regularity with the opening of the solo bassoon work by Oforka titled *Aklunon Kou Noun Bla wou Miton* ("Lord Have Mercy") (Figure 2).[3]

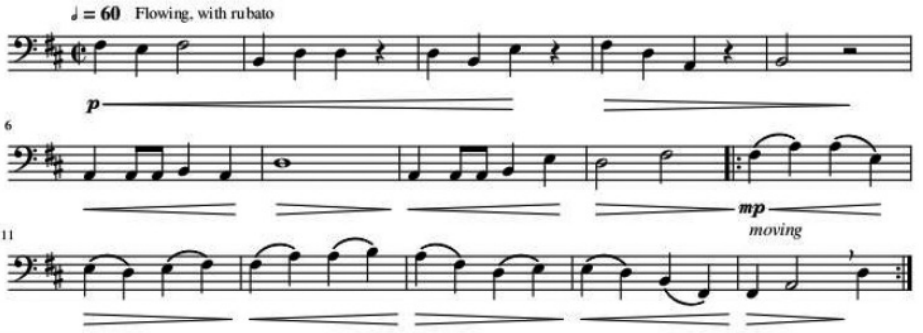


Figure 2. Oforka, *Aklunon Kou Noun Bla wou Miton,* mm. 1–15.

In the first nine measures, the three phrases have varying lengths (five, two, and two); these are followed by two-measure gestures between the repeat signs. The opening five-measure phrase immediately challenges the Common-Practice listener to engage with the phrase structure in a new way. There is no sense of European-style melodic or harmonic resolution at the end of the phrases. The V-I cadences so typical of Common Practice music are not part of Oforka's compositional language. So, while the work is no more difficult to finger or physically execute than the Handel excerpt in Figure 1, the melodic gestures found here are much more complex and demand a deeper understanding from the performer.

Varying phrase lengths are found throughout Oforka's compositions. In some instances, melodic phrases feature added measures that break up what would otherwise be regular patterns. The seven-measure phrase at the start of *Ekpere m* ("My prayer") is composed of three two-measure rhythmic figures (quarter, half, quarter, half, half) separated by a measure of eighth notes in the middle (Figure 3). In her composition *Abù nke abù* ("Tunes for the book of Song of Solomon"), the melody in measures 78-79 unexpectedly changes with the addition of an extra measure in the repeat (Figure 4). These variations give the melodies interest and beauty. Other examples of mixed-length phrases are found in *Ije Muna Chim* ("My Journey with God"). This composition starts with two three-measure phrases but concludes the first section with a four-measure phrase (Figure 5).

The call-and-response form typical of some African music also finds its way into Oforka's compositions. *Chima Obi'm* ("God Knows My Heart"), for solo flute and voices, provides an excellent example of this compositional style. The flute provides instrumental introductions and interludes to bookend the interplay between the solo voice (call) and the vocal group (response). A brief portion of the composition is presented in Figure 6.[4]

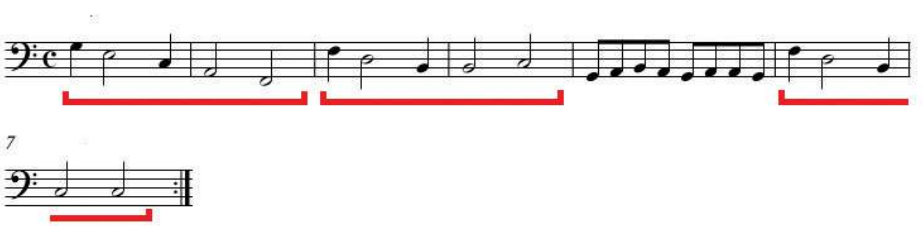


Figure 3. Phrase structure in Oforka, *Ekpere m,* mm. 1-14.

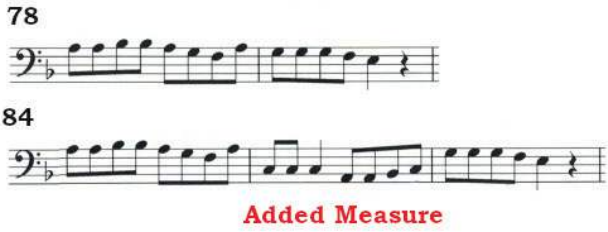
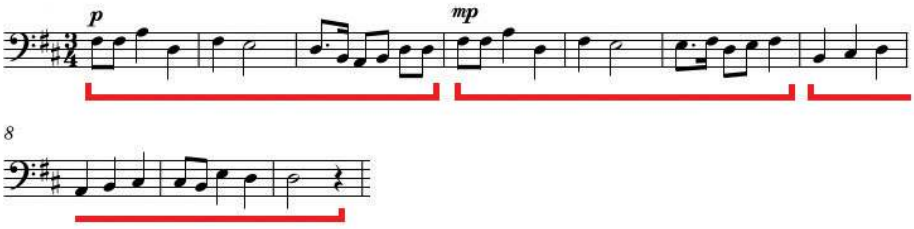
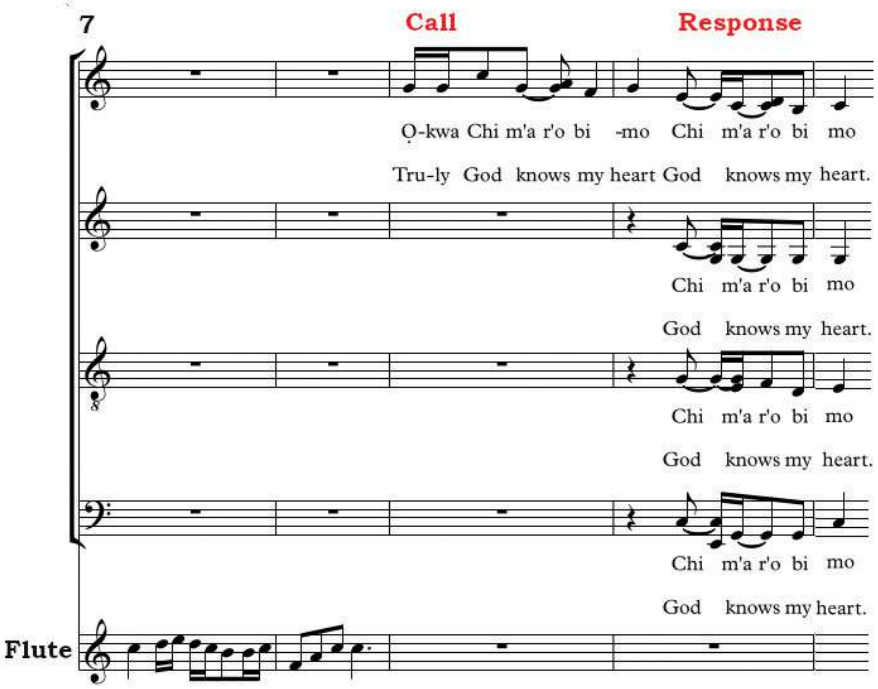


Figure 4. Orofka, *Abù nke abù*, showing added measure in repeat of melody.



Example 5. Phrase structure in Oforka, *Ije Muna Chim*, mm. 1-10.



Example 6. Call and response in Oforka, *Chima Obi'm*, mm. 7-11.

Chima Obi'm brings up additional differences between Ms. Oforka's compositions and European Common Practice traditions. The ***sense of time*** is not urgent in her compositions. Unlike many Western compositions that have a teleological drive with characteristic underlying patterns (e.g., Schenker's *Urlinie*), Oforka's compositions do not necessarily push forward toward an ending.[5] Rather, instead of hurrying to a destination, they seem to enjoy the journey. For instance, *Abu nko abu* never departs from F major. From start to finish, there is no musical urgency to leave the key or to create a specific harmonic framework for the composition. The work explores stasis and satisfaction in the context of a single key. Similarly, *Chima Obi'm* lingers, setting the text first in Igbo and then repeating it in English. No apologies are made for the composition's length, and there is no need to rush to a conclusion. Instead, the listener is invited just to listen and to enjoy the message. To Western ears accustomed to quick satisfaction and rapid changes, this approach may seem tedious or even boring—but it simply requires performers and listeners alike to cultivate a different musical mindset and to develop new skills of patient listening.

Aspects of some of the ***accompaniments***, particularly those with piano, also suggest African origins. *Abu ngo abu* provides hints of the instrument called the *mbira* or thumb piano. The music presented in Figure 7 recurs frequently throughout the composition in various guises. In some respects, the music presented in the piano part is more important rhythmically than harmonically. In this instance, the piano does double duty, substituting for a rhythmic accompaniment as well as providing an underlying harmony for the bassoon and flute.

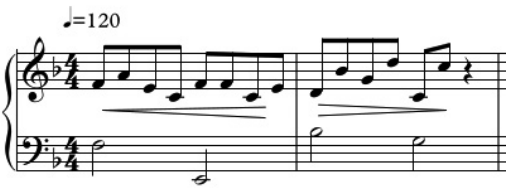


Figure 7. Piano figure in Oforka, *Abù nke abù*, mm. 1-2.

Grace Oforka's expression of the aspirations, hopes, and faith of her Igbo Christian community through her compositions can be particularly challenging for secularists from the Western European traditions common to North America (USA and Canada), Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. A wellspring of inspiration for her music comes from songs and hymns she heard in her youth, and the ***spiritual content*** of her compositions remains one of her most distinctive compositional elements. For instance, concerning *Chegharia* and *Nkowa,* she says, "These are beautiful songs by the grace of God. They have the feel of the Igbo traditional people from the Eastern part of Nigeria."[6] As noted in the titles of the compositions discussed above, Oforka expresses a deep affection for God and her Christian community in Nigeria. Her description of the compositional process reveals an active relationship with God, which includes divine activity expressing itself in her work. For instance, concerning a solo bassoon work, she writes:

> *Ekpere m* (My prayer) starts softly as the instrument is gentle in calling God, adoration and thanksgiving. Then it begins to build by asking God for mercy. Then invites the Holy Spirit. Then asks the Lord for intentions and finally goes back to thanking the Lord. These are the ways I imagined while writing this piece.[7]

This idea of divine activity expressed in the composition and performance of music is not entirely foreign to Western European musical traditions. For instance, Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) testified to numerous revelations from God. Her work as a composer was widely acclaimed during her day in large part due to recognition of the divinely inspired nature of her work. Several other composers in Western musical traditions also claimed divine activity in their lives.[8] In addition, one of the USA's greatest lyricists and hymn writers, Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), also drew upon divine inspiration. Her spiritual and religious compositions were so popular that many USA Christian churches held "Fanny Crosby Days" devoted entirely to singing her works.[9] To this day, Crosby remains one most widely published poets and hymn writers. However, composers who profess divine inspiration and compositions that express divine activity may seem very strange to contemporary musicians.[10] Yet, this is perhaps the most notable feature of Ms. Oforka's body of work.

In conclusion, the music of Grace Bernard Oforka provides refreshing, interesting, and important additions to the woodwind repertoire. Some of her solo works for bassoon are particularly remarkable because they can be performed by young instrumentalists, yet they are imbued with rich complexities of melody, sense of time, novel accompaniments, and spiritual content. There is nothing quite like these compositions in the current repertoire for young or even advanced performers.

Terry B. Ewell has commissioned or premiered several works including those mentioned above by Grace Oforka. Additional commissions include Michael Albaugh's Three Pieces for Bassoon and Guitar; Robert A. Duisberg's Airs and Divisions *for Bassoon, Harpsichord, and Percussion; the chamber version of An-lun Huang's Bassoon Concerto in C, Op. 81c; Jonathan Leshnoff's chamber version of the Double Concerto for Clarinet, Bassoon, and Orchestra; Leshnoff's* Night Whispers*; Alireza Motevaseli's* The Cave *for Flute and Bassoon; and Craig Weston's* Two Microtonal Studies *for Bassoon and Controlled Sonic Environment.*

Endnotes

1 Dr. Samson's performance of these works can be heard at youtu.be/dRNN8esBH64 (Accessed Oct. 17, 2021).

2 Graham Sheen, arranger and editor. *Going Solo Bassoon: First performance pieces for bassoon with piano.* England: Faber Music, 1987.

3 A full performance of this work is available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdqVx1vbuzk.

4 This composition can be heard in its entirety on YouTube at http://youtu.be/u5BhlzQY23E.

5 For an introduction to Schenkerian analysis, see Allen Forte and Steven E. Gilbert, *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982.
6 See http://youtu.be/dRNN8esBH64, Accessed Nov. 17, 2021.
7 Grace Oforka, email message to Terry Ewell, Jan. 07, 2020.
8 For instance see, Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers, Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1992.*
9 http://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/crosby-fanny-1820-1915.
10 See Phillip McIntyre, "Paul McCartney and the creation of 'Yesterday': the systems model in operation," *Popular Music* (2006) 25/2: 201-203. It is noteworthy in this article that divine inspiration or mystical inspiration of any kind is never considered as a real possibility for any artistic work. This article well expresses secular ideas on the creation of artistic works.