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The Musicality of Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* as a Performance Poetry

Oluwatosin John IBITOYE

Department of Performing Arts,

Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.

oluwatosin.ibitoye@kwasu.edu.ng; +2347064296296

Abstract

Poetic compositions and its performative realities through music are in tandem. Hence, poetic compositions especially in Africa are best performed in sine qua non with music. Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* exemplifies a collection of poems embedded with musical aesthetics. Therefore, this study reviews and analyses selected poems in the collection from the perspective of a musicologist. This study reflects on the musical and realistic performance aesthetics of *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* as illustrated by Olu Obafemi in his writing. This study reveals that, the collection is unarguably a performance poetry. The literary piece creates an ambience of different creative explorations for a willing music director. Obafemi draws his compositional tools, devices and materials in the collection from his immediate socio-cultural environment. The poetic lines create dramatic, historical and nostalgic images in the minds of readers which give a directorial clue for a holistic musical and artistic interpretation. This study concludes that the structure of the poems creates an atmosphere for experimental musical expression and it is best interpreted and enjoyed as a performance poetry.

Keywords: Music, Musicality, Poems, Performance poetry.

Introduction

Poetry, a form of literature and a medium of performance does not exist in vacuum especially in Africa where poets source from oral tradition. From the visual aesthetics and imageries depicted in reader's mind, the performative tendencies are not farfetched. Grabner asserts that "performance poems use elements that appeal to the oral and the aural, and not exclusively to the visual. This includes music, rhythm, recordings or imitations of nonverbal sounds, smells, and other perceptions of the senses, oftentimes performed simultaneously with other elements of signification" (1). Major performance arts (drama, music, dance) and other literary arts such as prose and poetry mirrors and reflects the society in other to teach, inform and correct

even as they entertain the audiences. "Poetry as a medium has the potential to connect with audiences on an emotional level, and through this connection it touches hearts and minds in a way that traditional academic dissemination of research fails to reach" (Hodges et al 2).

Poems are usually written in deep expressions. Its use of language is laced and interlocked with details, images, facts or fictions and details which captivate the minds of the reader when unlocked and interpreted. Interpretations differ based on perspective, feelings, mood and knowledge of individuals on the context for which it is written. Poetry has "a potential for making the unseen seen and for making the familiar strange, new and afresh" (Aadlandsvik 668). Hence, performance of such poems reveals those details through oral, aural and visual aids in a manner which is more entertaining, appealing and explicit. Grabner notes that:

> Performance poems use elements that appeal to the oral and the aural, and not exclusively to the visual. This includes music, rhythm, recordings or imitations of nonverbal sounds, smells, and other perceptions of the senses, oftentimes performed simultaneously with other elements of signification (1).

Performing poetry can serve diverse purposes. The transfer of emotions, entertainment and communication effects on the audience cannot be overemphasized. "Performance poetry is a powerful tool of communication which can touch the hearts and minds of the audience and encourage empathy" (Foster 745). Faulkner presents the effectiveness of the performance poetry as such that "the audience 'feels with' the performers rather than just about the poem" (230). Hence, an emotional connection between the performers and audience is made through the performance. "The audience is not passive but invited into a dialogue which has discursive and emotional elements" (Hordyk et al 205).

Grabner states that "performance poetry is a rich and complex art form, precisely because many of its creators have always positioned themselves at the intersection of social, political, and literary spheres" (4). Especially in developing countries as Nigeria, poets draw ideas from immediate social and cultural phenomenon with the intent of entertaining whilst influencing the society. Concepts and compositional ideas are drawn from indigenous proverbs and idioms/expression. Through narratives, music, rhythm, sound, movements and dramatic actions, performance poems are enacted on the stage. Hence, this study looks into the musicality of Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* as a performance poetry.

Music and Poetry: An interface

Poetry cannot be entirely discussed out of the context of music. Arguably, poems are written with its musicality in consideration. Especially as poetry goes in tandem with elements such as rhymes, rhythms, verse, meter, melody, which are major components and elements of music. More importantly, because poetry borrows from oral tradition, it is discernible to understand its relativity to music. As Aliyu-Ibrahim rightly assert, "song is one of the features of

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the performance mode of oral poetry and is discernible in written poetry, which borrows from oral tradition" (20). In fact, Pound sees poetry as "a composition of words set to music" (24).

Green in his explorations in conceptual blending of music and the English lyric poem submits that "it is commonplace to speak of the 'music' of poetry and the 'poetical' aspects of music, (for example in certain kinds of programme music) and poetry and music have long been combined in song" (4). Several styles and form of music are written in a poetic manner. An obvious poetic feature in some popular songs is the use of rhyme scheme. Composers adopt the poetic style as an aesthetic element and a medium of melodic flow. Other instances have poets consult musicians to set the words and texts of their poem to music. For instance, the texts of the popular 'Joy to the world' carol song were written by Isaac Watts and set to music by Lowell Mason. From the foregoing, we can deduce that the relativity of poems and music are in par.

However, Lowbury submits that "a poem transmitted through the medium of song cannot at the same time be enjoyed as a poem in its own right" (32). T.S. Eliot in his argument on 'The Music of Poetry' insists that "a 'musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one" (113). He suggests that "the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure' (113).

In contrast, Scher ultimately rejects the application of the term 'musical' to poetry. He proposed that "in the place of "musicality" or "musical" in the sentimental, impressionistic sense, we simply refer to the acoustic or phonetic quality of poetry or prose" (41). However, it is also debatable that, acoustic or phonetic discourses are relative to music as they are in relation to sound. Wagner in his opinion proposed two reasons why poetry resists setting to music. First is its 'heightened speech', and secondly because it already possesses its own musicality" (Clayton 43). Nevertheless, the practice of attempting to use musical structures and techniques in writing poems looks irresistible for many poets. Scher finds two major types of such attempt, namely: "the adaptation of larger musical structures and patterns" and "the application of certain musical techniques and devices common to both arts" (26).

Musicality of *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* as performance poetry

From our previous discussion, it is commonplace to talk about the 'musicality' of a poem, as if it were a given feature of 'true' (and perhaps all) poetry. "It is sometimes assumed that one of the problems of setting a poem to music is that the poem itself is already musical in some way and that the combination of musics produces, once again, a kind of clash or receptive overload (Scher 40). But, for a professional and creative musician or musicologist, the original musicality embedded in the poem makes the work of setting such poem to music easy. This is because, a

rhythmic flow and phrase balance might have been established. Hence, the job of setting it to music for performance is underway.

From the title, *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* and at the preface of the collection, the poet, Olu Obafemi presents his intention for the collection as it should be performed with a live music band: "Bring out the drums the flutes, Agidigbo, the castanet, and of course, honey – coated voice of the singer and the nimble feet of the dancer. These are the essential implements for engaging with Illuminations..." (Obafemi vi). He reemphasised at the last paragraph of the preface: "So, again, bring out the drums, the voices and chords; bring out the flutes, the listening ears to the old and new tales of our times – before and after today - - and join in this 'native' performance". Apparently, two poems in the collection were dedicated to Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Mariam Makeba, two leading figures in the development of African music. Hence, the musicality of the collection is not farfetched. Obafemi presents his artistic vision for the 7-movement collection as a folk performance poetry. This vision runs through the poems in the collection as use of native songs and expressions is prevalent. Obafemi draws his compositional idea from oral tradition, cultural and socio-cultural milieu as these images run through.

Movement two in the collection is titled "Songs", with 8 poems in this movement. The poetic lines are laced with a melodic flow which creates a musical performance ambience. The first poem in this movement, *Ode to Fela*, dedicated to the Afrobeat pioneer, Fela Anikulapo Kuti is composed and structured in a way which insinuates that the popular "Water e no get enemy" chorus should run through the poetic performance. That is, in its oral performance, from the beginning and after each verse, the orchestra, choir, chorus or ensemble (as it suits the Director) should repeatedly chorus "Water e no get enemy" with zeal and zest. While the verses are being recited, narrated or sung, the same chorus at piannisimo (*pp*) level could go on underground.

Apparently, the Afrobeat music with prevalent use of rhythms (drums and percussions) and the wind instruments is in par with the vision of the poet. Hence, the poem can start with an instrumental overture of the theme, "water no get enemy" before the very first line, "Abami Eda – Mysterious one" (Obafemi 17) alluded to Fela Anikulapo Kuti is said, and subsequent verses of the poem flow in musical rendition. Consequently, the performance of *Ode to Fela* can then end with the full chorus:

> Water, e no get enemy!
> Omi o l'ota o
> Water, e no get enemy!
> If you fight am, unless you wan die
> Water, e no get enemy!

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I say water no get enemy
Water, e no get enemy!

Afterwards, an instrumental outro can be introduced. Olu Obafemi dedicated the 11th poem in the collection, *A Song for Ogunde and Awolowo* to Hubert Ogunde, the doyen of African theatre and Obafemi Awolowo, a foremost Nigerian Nationalist and statesman. Obafemi juxtaposed Ogunde and Awolowo as two important figures in the development of African theatre and Nigeria respectively. The mood of the poem depicts an ecstastic roll of drums into frenzy at the very beginning of the performance. More importantly, a mix of the bata and dundun drums ensemble will perfectly create a complex rhythmic atmosphere as an expression for the subjects involved. The chant, "Awo mimo" comes in occasionally. The chant can be taken in the call and response form of the African music while the narrative technique is adopted for the verses with the rhythmic undertone from the ensemble.

Call: Awo mimo, l'awo awa
Response: eeeeennnn!
Call: Awo Alafia l'awo awa
Response: eeeeennnn! (Obafemi 22)

Good Night, Mother of Songs as the 12th poem in the collection was dedicated to Miriam Makeba, the empress of African popular music, popularly called Mama Afrika. The first three verses of this poem can be set to Makeba's Afropop style in honour of Miriam Makeba. The lead female singer should be costumed in Makeba's signature and should perform in the charisma she is known for. The poem creates a nostalgic feeling through the allusions made to popular musicians such as Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley, the Jamaican reggae maestros, Sunny Okosun and Orlando Owoh, evergreen popular musicians in Nigeria. For each of the musician the poet alludes to, the live band for the performance poetry can be made to perform a song each from their records. For instance, after these lines:

Jimmy Cliff
The solo tune looking up at the mountains
Beckoning,
Clutching a song for music maker
Singing a simple song for departing Yeye (Obafemi 26).

The band then picks a popular Jimmy Cliff's song, such as "Wonderful World, Beautiful People", after which Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" can be raised. "No Babylonians can stop the song" (Obafemi 27), a biblical allusion reminds of Boney M's "Rivers of Babylon":

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered Zion

At this point, the level of purgation of emotions begin to increase in deference to the departed Afropop Empress, Miriam Makeba. In *Papa at Ninety and One*, Obafemi presents a musical aura, through Agbelege male leisure Orchestra in Kabba, Okura, the Bunu masquerade ensemble and Agidigbo, the plucked lamellophone of the Yoruba people.

> Wait,
> For the Agbelege orchestra have gone to the cities
> The Okura season of the Masquerade is not nigh…
> But you shall renew your dance yet
> When the drums and the Agidigbo
> Roar back to life at the next Ajon. (Obafemi 78)

In *Homage to Ajon*, Obafemi projects the melodious appeal and rhythmic complexity of the Agidigbo:

> I Strike
> The slender sticks
> That summon the early morning melodies
> On the wooden membranes of Agidigbo
> Your rousing rhythm
> You, maker of pristine Olu-King (Obafemi 4)

Succinctly, this is best accompanied with the Agidigbo undertone to crescendo. He further creates an aura with the Agbelege:

> I shall roll Agbeleges' drums
> With its flirtatious orchestra
> To light the embers
> That illuminate the darkling dusk
> Before the rise of wake of dawn (Obafemi 5)

In *This Age has Lost its Song*, Obafemi laments the absence of the originality of the African music culture and creative depth in the 21st popular music productions.

> A single string of the Guitar
> Makes the rhythm of their music
> A single line of a verse
> Makes their song
> A single drum-beat
> Builds their dance (Obafemi 63)

He reiterates the lack of content and the negative influence of such music to the society:

> This age has lost its song

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The melodies in the air
An avalanche of gritty threats;
They Yahoo the streets to blindness
They wound the world to deafness
Their song is an ominous rage;
A preparation for rap-py wars (Obafemi 63).

Reflecting on societal realities in contemporary Nigerian popular music, Ibitoye stress that "music is a factor in the changing society as well as a receiving end of the growth or decline of a society" (6). "As music produced gets to the society, it influences the activities and thought process in the society. The cyclic nature of society-music, and music-society moves in continuum as society's influence is evident in music and vice versa" (Ibitoye 1).

Tap the beat with a solo rhyme;
Yahoo- o o
You go wound o
Gongo A so – trouble will break
Scatter scatter – fonka sile
Haba! Today,
The world will fold up
Into a single Rap!
They cannot sing a simple song
They cannot hit a single gong (Obafemi 63).

Apparently, in its oral performance, a swift transition of the melodies can be taken from the popular "Yahoo – o o", to "You go wound o", "Gongo a so", "fonka sile" to depict the appalling state of the contemporary popular music which the poet express in *This Age has Lost its Song*. It is worthy to note that, as the poems entertains, the poet uses them as a social reawakening; ridiculing societal ills, giving hope to the hopeless. He affirms "Let all those who suffer humiliation forever grab and clutch Illumination" (Obafemi 1). Also, as a reminiscence of figures and personalities, especially in the arts (musicians and dramatists), political space who left indelible marks on the sands of time. He borrowed indigenous proverbs, idioms and idiomatic expressions from his Yoruba/Okun origin. Aliyu-Ibrahim attests that "Obafemi employs various forms of oral literature, such as proverbs, songs and folktales from his Yoruba/ Okun heritage not only to comment on the socio-economic and political conditions of the Nigerian people, but also to suggest that the collective effort of the people is what is needed as a way out" (22). "Music and words, words with music, surely amount to a special kind of musical experience, although we might speculate, and learn from the prehistory of human kind, that it is also the most natural kind of musical experience in its plenitude of engagement with human faculties" (Dunsby 4). This experience and many more are such which Obafemi seeks to sink into the minds of the audience.

Conclusion

This study is emphatic on the musicality of Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time*. The study reveals that poems as a holistic genre of literature are musical in nature and the musicality of a poem is not farfetched in essence as exemplified by Obafemi in his collection. The study reveals the point of convergence and a conceptual blend between music and poetic lines. Obafemi, an African descent projects the rich African music culture through his flowery and extensive use of music (songs, drums, ensemble, orchestra), folktales, proverbs especially from his native Yoruba/Okun. This study projects some performative attempts from the researcher's perspective. This study concludes that, *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* is best expressed, interpreted and enjoyed as a performance poetry. A willing musicologist, music director or musician must attempt different creative explorations in other to achieve the poet's artistic vision for the collection.

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