



The Emerging Roles and Challenges Facing Choir Directors in Contemporary Christian Worship

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ABSTRACT

The discussions and the assertions of this paper concur with the words of Moody (1995) who observed that the innovation of any kind exemplified in much of the present century's music is diametrically opposed to the continuation and expression of any kind of sacred traditions. Apparently every Christian movement that emerges in the present world gives rise to sacred musical idioms that are intended to advance the movement's religious aspirations and identity. This explains why there are diverse intercultural musical idioms in Christian worship today. While these religious and musical phenomena are being acknowledged by many theologians and theomusicologists (Bediako, 1992; Nercessian, 2000) as an inevitable trend, others have begun to raise the questions regarding their theological relevance and role (Begbie, 2000; Robertson, 1990). Some of the questions being raised include: to what extent are these idioms in tune with the heavenly sacred rite? Have they remained true to the word of God? In other words, are they inspired by men and women of God or by the works of the devil? These questions bring into focus challenges facing choirmasters and sacred music in the contemporary African Church and hence the need to examine their role in spearheading an effective and spiritually inspired Christian worship. Consequently, this paper seeks to correct an African misconception of what a choirmaster is about besides outlining qualities befitting a good and a result-oriented choirmaster. In addition, the paper will seek to explain the various intercultural musical idioms utilized in Christian worship today besides suggesting ways in which to determine kinds of musics that are appropriate for worship.

Key words: Choir Directors, Music, Leader, Singer, Christian Worship, African, Church Choir, Liturgical, Hymns

Preamble

In its task to correct the erroneous misconception of a choirmaster this paper will at the concept of a choirmaster as opposed to: -A chorister/Singer, Song leader, Choir leader, Choir director, Music director, Soloist, Praise and worship team leader, Choir trainer, Voice facilitator, Conductor and the choir president.

The author will move on to explain the main categories of choirmasters commonly found in African Christian environment namely; Self-trained and Formally trained. Characteristics befitting an effective choirmaster will be outlined besides looking at the role played by choirmasters in the contemporary African Christian worship. The paper will then discuss the appropriation and the suitability of the types of music commonly handled by choirmasters in African Church today.

A Choirmaster in an African Context

There are many titles that are used interchangeably in African church context to refer to the person of a 'choirmaster'. The various titles are used depending on what the individual churches prefer to call the person. Some of the designations are: conductor, trainer, choir leader, music director, choir director, choir president, song leader, worship team leader, chorister general, music ministry director and



preceptor. While some of the words may be synonymous with choirmaster, others connote a different thing altogether. Perhaps why it is inevitable to define the term choirmaster besides establishing how it is applied in the context of an African church worship.

The word choirmaster is derived from two words, choir and master. Apel (1944, p. 139) defines the term choir as a body of church singers as opposed to secular chorus. Apel (ibid) further explains that the word is also used to refer to a group of instrumentalist for instance the brass choir, the string choir and the woodwind choir among others. Ingram (1955) in Mushira (2002) defines a choir as a group, which must be trained in musical matters and languages and that the more it is trained the more musical it becomes. In Africa and Kenya in particular the authors experience has been that the word has more often than not been used to refer to any group of singer as opposed to a serious choral group as it were in the musical traditions of the west. Depending on the musical needs of an individual church the word 'choir' has in many cases been used to refer to a group of three to more than forty people. While a group of three, four or five people in the west would be referred to as a trio, quartet and quintet respectively, it is a common practice from an African perspective to find such groups being referred to as a church choir.

Therefore, if the word 'master' according to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary means a person who is superior, has control over others or that who has special skills and is able to teach others then we can conclude that a choirmaster is a person skilled to handle technical aspects of music of a given group of more than twelve singers. The usage of the word as it has been applied in the African context to refer to any individual that leads others to sing choruses, or trains other singers with hardly any technical musical skills has been a misconception. However, in a church environment, other social and religious attributes touching on the person's character and of course the needs of the individual churches notwithstanding, may be necessary to consider when defining the character and the person of a choirmaster. This brings us to the two main categories of choirmasters found in Kenya and perhaps in the entire continent of Africa; self-trained and formally trained.

Self and Formally Trained Choirmasters.

Nzioki (2002) records that in the pre-independence Kenya, churches owned most Schools in the country. The churches also owned Teacher Training Colleges where they trained teachers for schools. Although the central Government had some input into the curriculum of the schools, generally the running of schools was left to churches.

Consequently, the presence of many denominations in Kenya meant rapid expansion of education at the time. Educationists at that time were very much aware of the emotional development of the 'child' and they therefore included subjects such as music in the curriculum for that purpose. Singing and some rudiments in solfa notation reading skills formed part of the school curriculum. At the TTC, graduates were expected to teach school music, lead singing at the school devotion sessions and on Sundays assist with singing at the church. This is how the first crop of church choirmasters was produced. Among the first musicians of this generation included Graham Hyslop, Peter Adwar, Peter Kipkosya, Senoga-Zake, Washington Omondi, Henry Kuria, Paul Kavyu, Sam Otieno among others.

On the other hand, there is a crop of choirmasters who came into being through their own initiative. This initiative can be traced back from the contribution that was made by the white settlers. The settlers who were then the enthusiasts of classical music continued to propagate the music traditions of the west by establishing such as the Kenya Music Conservatoire and Kenya Music Festival (Omondi, 1884). While the conservatoire was responsible for basic music literacy through the enrolment of students for Associated Board of Royal School Examination (ABRSM), Kenya Music Festival (KMF) played the role of entertainment.



The first generation of African musician who did not get formal in training in music knowledge but who familiarised with Church music as converts got encouraged and enrolled for ABRSM. Those who passed the ABRSM in various grades were encouraged to compose and arrange their own African tunes. After 1960 (KMF, Syllabus, 2002) Kenya music festival was taken over by Ministry of Education and Africans began participation for the first time. A number of African musicians who learnt music through their own initiative for instance Dr. Arthur Kemoli began competing in various classes. In the contemporary Kenya, many choirmasters who have excelled in various music fora are those who took self-initiative to train in basic music knowledge. These include Joseph Muyale, Sylvester Otieno, Luke Khadambi, Ernst Waomba, Nick Omondi, Ominde of St. Barnabas, Fredrick Ngala, Melitus Wanyama, Bonface Mghanga among others.

Characteristics of an Effective Church Choirmaster

These may differ depending on the music tasks assigned to an individual or they be governed by worship and spiritual requirement of a given denomination. Mghanga (2002) has however tried to enumerate some of the characteristics under three broad topics namely; Leadership, Natural ability and Acquired Qualifications. According to Mghanga (ibid) a church choirmaster must be:

- An accomplished musician, a trained singer and preferably a good speaker able to communicate viable ideas.
- He should have a good understanding of the working relation of the Church.
- Technically he must have a fine sense of intonation, musically sensitive and responsive
- Patient and with a calm disposition
- The ability to inspire the singers

Mghanga (ibid) further asserts that it is not just any musician who can be a church Choirmaster. Therefore, in considering qualifications for a Church Choirmaster, spiritual commitment and portrayal of a role of an elder within the understanding of the church practice exceedingly paramount. In essence Kaleli (2002) summarises the qualities of a church Choirmaster as follows:

- He must be called of God because all God's servants must have a conviction beyond doubt that they are called by God and gifted in their particular areas of service. For instance, Fanny Jane Crosby (1890-1915) was extremely aware of God's calling in her life. Though she was blind she was able to compose more than 9000 hymns some of which include 'Blessed Assurance' and 'To God Be the Glory'
- He must be sound in Biblical and theological training. The songs he composes must be Biblically accurate. Earlier, hymn writers were men and women of sound biblical knowledge. Isaac Watts studied theology, astronomy, and philosophy and some of the hymns he wrote are the most popular English hymns. These include; I Survey the wondrous cross and joy to the world. Church choirmasters should therefore compose hymns that are not just musically attractive but also spiritually,
 - scripturally contextualized and communicative.
- He should be a person of moral and spiritual integrity. A church choirmaster should be a person who can lead devout life. Charles Wesley (1707-1788) referred to as the greatest hymn writer of all time produced fifty six volumes of hymns in a short period and learnt to maintain a close working relation with God.

The Role of a Choirmaster in the Contemporary African Christian worship

Auma (2002) is quick to note that different Christian churches (Catholic, AIC, SDA etc.) advocate for different ways and means of training their choirs for church worship. This is governed essentially by



the written or unwritten guidelines for worship service and participatory nature of the congregation in the liturgical celebrations. Churches and places of worship today require both professional and lay level leadership. Auma (ibid) is of the opinion that any church choir leader must recognize that the achievements of an effective and complete music programme relies on an individual's approach to deal with indifference to church's demands and the choir, choir members, church officials, and traditions and prejudices of the church.

Shitandi (2003) looks at the church choir management and discusses the role of a choirmaster from the significance and the role of a choir in a church worship. Shitandi (ibid) discusses the issues regarding the significance and the role of a church choir under the following subtopics.

The Significance of a Church choir

- An important entity (arm) of the Church. It unites the Church as one body of Christ and helps in lifting up the hearts of the worshipers to the Heavenly sacred rites.
- An extension of the voice from the pulpit (plays a complimentary role as in the evangelical mission of the church)

Activities of a Church choir

- Music ministry activities–trains and prepares for worship
- Spiritual –bible fellowships, retreats, consoling and praying for sick and bereaved families
- (Social activities)-Extra-musical-picnics, teambuilding, get-together party etc.

Task of Managing a Church choir

- This is about putting together choir resources to effective utilization and attainment of positive results from the same
- The most critical resource in church choir organization is the human resource. The quality and the availability of the singers is perhaps the most challenging task that officials of a choir need to bear in mind.
- The main purpose of choir management will first and fore most entail sustaining the quality of skilled personnel (choir trainers/masters/mistresses, singers, instrumentalists).
- This complimented by good management of choir facility (practice hall, choir offices, uniforms, instruments, hymnals etc.) and most importantly finances

7. Considerations for effective choir management

Effective choir management should be able to take care of the following:

Spiritual aspects of the choir

- a good choir is that which founded on strong sound Christian principles. Members should be sincere Christians, dedicated to the service of the church and with humility help in the spiritual growth of the church.
- Must have a personal living relationship with God.
- Should lead by example and mean what they sing
- Once every singer's spiritual disposition is not put to doubt then we expect very minimal problem to address in the management of the choir affairs.

Administrative aspects

- A good choir requires a good leadership that is inspirational, charismatic and directional in all aspects.
- Leaders must be God fearing and should work within the framework of God's wisdom
- The leaders must be firm, but equally important, must be seen to be fair



- The leadership must have a vision and hence be able to plan for the future of the choir. Should avoid at all cost to get out of monotonous circuit.
- A good leadership of a choir can be equated to a successful parental hood. There is really no school where one can train to be a good parent and how to bring up a child. Consequently, there is nothing exclusively academic in successful administration of the choir.
- Consistent and constant communication flow, team spirit and hard work between all the entities is very crucial. Avoid open contradiction and confrontation.
- All the officials should lead by example learn to be servants and be able to solve issues amicably and promptly.

Technical aspects (Choir Masters/Mistresses)

- Arguably the responsibility of the sustainability of the choir rests in the management of technical affairs of the choir
- In most cases teachers determine the failures or successes of a choral group
- At the end of the day the choir is as good as the choirmaster
- A choir will always reflect the personalities and values systems of their choirmasters
- In order to effectively manage the technical affairs, the group a choirmaster must be:
 - A singer and musically endowed
 - A good speaker able to communicate ideas effectively
 - Should have a good understanding of the working of the church
 - Should possess a spiritual commitment and a portrayal of the role of a church elder within the understanding of church practice.
 - Must have patience and with a calm disposition
 - Should possess the ability to inspire the singers
 - Should know and advise when to carry out the recruitments
 - Should possess the desired skills and capacity necessary for moulding the members into good singers
 - Should always set the pace and the mood
 - Must be creative and enterprising
 - Must exhibit pleasant personality and impeccable moral standards.
 - Should learn when to discipline, admonish but also when to sooth, praise besides providing the stability that allows the singer to be creative, kind to others and responsible.

Social aspects

- Every member should be made to feel the sense of belonging and share in the inspiration of the choir achievements
- Choir members need to feel motivated not just in technical domain but also in social circles.
- Members should be made to always look forward to new and exciting events
- Recognition should be selective and discriminative. Preferential treatment to certain individual should be discouraged.
- Everyone should be appreciated within the framework of her own weakness and strengths.
- Overgeneralization in making observations should be avoided
- The choir calendar should always look appetizing but within achievable limits. Organize picnics, retreats, workshops, camps, mountaineering, clean up exercise, exchange programmes, site seeing etc.



- Always seek to know the whereabouts of every individual. Visit and console those who are sick and bereaved.
- N/B. However, do not over indulge in social activities at the expense of the desired achievement of quality singing.

Common Types of Music Handled by Choirmasters in African Christian Worship Today

These can be categorised into liturgical and non-liturgical. Liturgical music would include hymns and songs that are based on the various church liturgies as may be determined by the Church's doctrines and year's circle of commemorating events in the life of Jesus. These may include:

- **Advent**- starting with the fourth Sunday before Christmas.
- **Christmas** – including the twelve days to epiphany
- **Epiphany** – January 6th and following weeks.
- **Pre-Lenten Season**, - beginning nine weeks before Easter.
- **Lent** - from Ash Wednesday to Easter
- **Eastertide** - including Ascension (forty days after Easter) and continuing to Pentecost or
- **Whitsunday** – ten days after Ascension or seven weeks after Easter
- **Trinity** – from the first Sunday after Pentecost to the beginning of Advent.

On the other hand, non-liturgical may include hymns that are not necessary bound by the church doctrines or the liturgical functions of a given church. Most hymns used in evangelical crusades are non-liturgical.

Under these two broad categories of hymns commonly practiced in African Christian churches today, there are various types of sacred music.

- **A Chant or Plainsong.** The oldest church music, which sprung from Roman Catholic Church traditions in the medieval period (Grout et al., 1960). It is characterized by an ancient style of monophonic and rhythmically free melody, which is the common possession of liturgies). Traditionally sung in Latin.
- **Sung Masses.** The highest and the most impressive service of the Roman Catholic Church liturgy. The Kyrie, the Gloria, the Credo, the Sanctus, with the benedict's and the Agnus Dei constitute the musical composition known as mass.
- **Hymns.** According to Apel (1944), hymns are songs in praise or adoration of God. There are various types namely German Chorales, Latin hymns, hymns of Eastern Churches etc. In many Christian Churches hymns are performed in a highly controlled environment.
- **Popular Gospel tunes.** Under this category there is the most liberal Christian music observable in the contemporary age. It utilises modern musical instruments and popular contemporary musical styles like the Rumba and Calypso. Musical genres found under this category include, Gospel rap, Gospel hip-hop, evangelical choruses, praise and worship hymns etc.
- **African Traditional Sacred.** Music that originates among the natives of Africa and is used to express praise, adoration, submission, awe, fear and love to deity, supernatural beings. This category of sacred music is found among the African
- **Initiated Churches** (e.g. African Israel, African Divine Churches, Roho Msanda, Akorino etc.).
- **African Art music.** These are the compositions and arrangements of African traditional tunes. Compositions are majorly a reserve of the church choirs and established singing groups. The composed music especially from the highly esteemed choirs eventually becomes common items among members of the congregation.



- **Western Art Musical.** These are compositions whose characteristics can be traced from the music traditions of the western cultures. These include great and master of baroque, classical and even romantic period.

The Role Played by Music in a Christian worship.

Fundamentally the role of music in Christian worship can be summarised by the words of Williamson (1990, in Robertson (ed.) 1990) that:

...Hymns, for example, express the common intent of the worshippers, but they must not be allowed to usurp the liturgy itself. They help the worshipers to make confession, offer adoration, express hope, or participate in any of the other elements of worship, all at the appropriate point in the evangelical order of service. But the liturgy does not become a mere setting of hymns: it retains its own logic and integrity as a reflection of and response of the gospel.

Thyaka (2002) concurs with the above sentiments and is quick to add that governed by basic church doctrines music:

- Is a Godly phenomenon and shall be used for the purpose of praising in a holy manner.
- Has a strong effect to the mental and emotional faculties of man and should therefore be used only to exert positive influence to both the performer and to a large extent, the audience, irrespective of their age, social or ethical differences. In the other words music should be used as a unifying factor in worship.
- Should be used for spiritual edification of believers rationally and intelligently. Any form of hypnotizing and emotional excitement is logically deceptive and does not lead to true worship.
- Christian music is an extension of the pulpit (Mghanga, 2002; Shitandi, 2003). It
- has a divine power if well organized and can convict of sin, and;
- Lead to Christ, a power that surpasses the elaborate sermon by the preacher.

Conclusion

Appropriate and suitable music for Christian worship.

According to Scholes (1974) in Auma (2002), 'if music heard in church is good and sincere and suitable to and experience of the words or thoughts to which it is allied, then the association of time and place will convert it to church music. Hence, performance of church music needs to be based on simplicity and beautifully achieved high quality. The choirmaster should ensure satisfactory musical standards whose objectives are to attract individuals to a living knowledge of Jesus Christ besides leading to a fuller and more spirited filled Christian life.

Dickson-Wilson (1992, p. 178) in describing the music of African Independent (Initiated) Churches and particularly the Kimbanguist Church of Zaire observed:

Kimbaguists catch songs in various ways: in dreams and visions in which they hear angels singing.... they [songs] are studied and to some extend modified to give meaning. Other songs are deleted if the meaning of the songs is not clear. The songs have to be examined to avoid those that may be inspired by the devil.

The above observation acknowledges the fact the AICs value songs whose meaning can be described as good. Similarly, they take into cognisance the fact that some songs may be inspired by the devil and such songs lack clarity in their meaning.

In conclusion, successful music or singing requires good leadership. Leadership that is inspirational, spiritual, charismatic and directional in all aspects. The leadership must be firm, but equally important,



be seen to be fair. A good choirmaster must have a vision and hence be able to plan for the future of the choir in order to avoid monotonous circuit (Mghanga, *ibid*). He should be able to lead his choir to self-actualisation and peak experiences. He is the chief executive with a committee only to assist in routine matters. A psychologist, Abraham Maslow, notes that their music is one of the ways through which people easily achieve peak experience; extreme joy, excitement, ecstasy and fullness of life.

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