Thomas Ekundayo Phillips: Pioneer in Nigerian Church Hymn Composition

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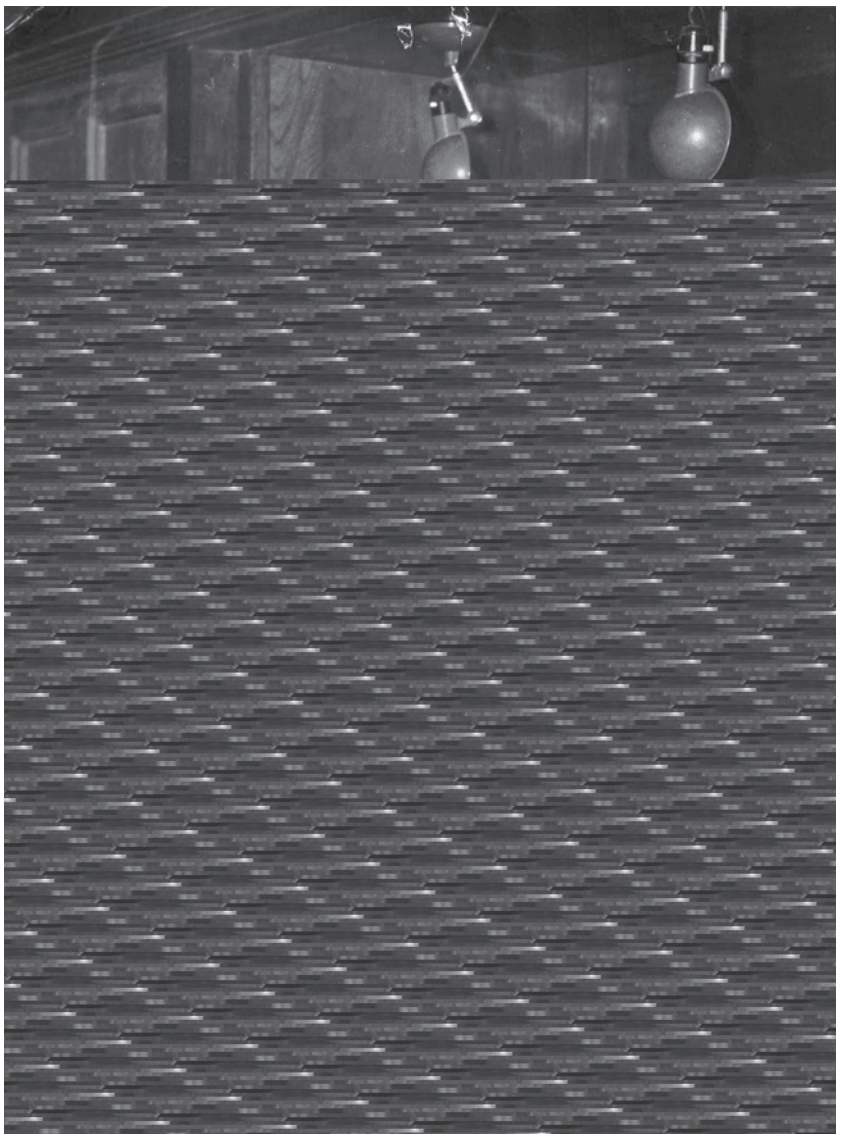
The arrival of the Christian faith in Nigeria around the mid-19th century introduced not only the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but also church music to one of the most populous African countries. At the turn of the 20th century, indigenous church musicians began to develop a repertoire of music for worship. The music included church hymns, chants for singing Psalms, versicles and responses, and choral anthems, as well as organ pieces. The pioneers of church music composition endeavored to write music that would be close to the cultural roots of the congregations through the incorporation of traditional music resources. Foremost among the first generation of composers was Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips (1884–1969), popularly referred to among Nigerian musicologists as the "father of Nigerian church music," for his immense contributions to the development, growth, and stabilization of Christian music.

Short biography

Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips was born in 1884 and he attended the Church Missionary Society Grammar School (CMS), Lagos. Phillips received his first organ lesson from his uncle, Johnson, who was an Anglican priest. At the age of eighteen he was appointed organist of St. Paul's Anglican Church, Breadfruit, Lagos, and served in this capacity for nine years. In 1911 he proceeded to the Trinity College of Music, London, to study piano, organ, and violin, becoming the second Nigerian to receive professional training in music abroad and the first Nigerian to formally study organ in a school of music (Robert Coker was the first Nigerian to study European music abroad in Germany in 1871).[1]

Upon his return to Nigeria in 1914, Phillips was appointed to the position of organist and master of the music at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos.[2] Phillips' tenure marked a great transition and a period unparalled in the history of Nigerian church music. His accomplishments far outshone those of all his predecessors at the church. He led the Cathedral Choir to great heights within a short period of time, since the choir was established to be a model for other churches. The choir sets the musical standard for choral performance in the country. In this way, Phillips succeeded in revolutionizing church music in Lagos and in Nigeria as a whole.

Phillips embarked on a massive campaign to educate Nigerian congregations in the latest repertoire. First, he concentrated on an intensive training of his choir on sight reading, vocal production and blend, and modern techniques of chanting the Psalms. Second, Phillips established a musical journal of which he was the editor-in-chief. He used the journal to disseminate cogent information about sacred music to the Yoruba congregations in southwest Nigeria, including its role in worship and its relationship to the culture of the people. Third, Phillips wrote a treatise on the compositional devices of early Nigerian church music entitled *Yoruba Music*.[3] In this monumental book, Phillips described methods that composers could use to create new forms of music that employ Nigerian indigenous music resources, such as melodies, scale, and rhythms, to which congregations could relate. Nigerian congregations tend to embrace and appreciate hymns, anthems, and instrumental works based on indigenous popular melodies and rhythms. According to Bode Omojola, Phillips' views in his *Yoruba Music* are summed up in three salient points: 1) Yoruba music is often based on the pentatonic scale; 2) harmony rarely exists in Yoruba music; and 3) Yoruba music, like all other musical traditions, is undergoing an evolutionary process.[4] Phillips'



Thomas Ekundayo Phillips at the 1932 organ at the Cathedral Church, Lagos

book represents the first musicological research and documentation of African traditional music by a professionally trained native. His postulations and research findings were circulated among church musicians through public presentations such as lectures, conferences, and symposia. His *Passacaglia on an African Folk Song for Organ* and *Variations on an African Folk Song for Organ* are representative works based on the ideas from his *Yoruba Music*. Fourth, Phillips founded the Conference of Church Organists and other musical organizations such as the Association of Diocesan Organists, which was a forum for church musicians to interact and exchange ideas on various aspects of sacred music from congregational singing to choral training to organ playing.

Phillips frequently gave lectures, addresses, and demonstrations for the improvement of musical taste and development in the church. He wrote numerous articles on harmonium and organ playing as well as on the maintenance of these instruments. At his instigation, some of the sermons at the Cathedral Church of Christ during this period were directed towards enlightening the congregation on devotional and reverential singing. The historical background of some of the hymns was also incorporated into the sermons. All these efforts led to a tremendous growth in the musical standard of the choir and the congregation in Lagos State and other parts of the country. The Cathedral Choir rendered settings of canticles, responses, anthems, hymns, and diverse choral works by famous European and indigenous Nigerian composers.

When the church was to be elevated to cathedral status in 1923,[5] the congregation decided to buy a bigger pipe organ. Phillips embarked on several concert tours at home as well as in London to seek funds for the instrument, and he was able to raise over half of the budgeted amount. Works performed by the choir during these tours included Felix Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, John Stainer's *Daughter of Jairus*, and the Yoruba songs composed by Phillips. The money was used to purchase a three-manual pipe organ built by Abbot & Smith Co. in 1932.[6] In 1964 Phillips was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for his contributions to the development of church music in Nigeria. Phillips also trained most of the prominent and internationally famous Nigerian musicians, such as Fela Sowande (organist-composer, 1905–1987), Ayo Bankole (organist-composer, 1935–1976), his son, Charles Oluwole Obayomi Phillips (organist and choir director, 1919–2007), and Christopher Oyesiku (singer, choral conductor, and broadcaster, 1925–).[7] Thomas Ekundayo Phillips directed the music ministry at the Cathedral Church of Christ for 48 years (Trinity Sunday 1914 to Trinity Sunday 1962). He was succeeded by his son, Charles Oluwole Obayomi Phillips, who served as organist and master of the music from Trinity Sunday 1962 to Trinity Sunday 1992.[8]

Issues in Nigerian hymn composition

The art of hymn composition in Nigeria is confronted with several related problems. The first issue to be tackled by a hymn writer is that of ethnic diversity: who is your audience or which of the ethnic groups is your primary target? Nigeria as a nation is made up of three major ethnic groups: Yoruba in the southwest, Igbo in the southeast, and Hausa to the north. In addition to this powerful tripartite caucus, there is a large body of minority groups including the Edo, Urhobo, Isoko, Ishekiri, Kwale, Ekik, Tiv, Ijaw, Ibibio, and Fulani. All these groups speak different languages and hundreds of dialects. When you move from one small town to another, you might neither be able to understand nor speak the language there, even though you are a Nigerian.

For illustration, I am a Nigerian born to a Yoruba mother, but my father is from Edo State in the midwest region of the country.[9] As a result of being raised in Lagos, I am very fluent in the Yoruba language; however, I can neither speak nor understand the local dialect of my father's ethnicity. Each time I go to Edo State, I communicate in English, a language common to all or most Nigerians.

It follows, then, that a hymn composer in Nigeria must always have a targeted congregation in mind when writing a new song for worship. If the composer wants his/her songs to be sung in the southwest region, the hymn must be in Yoruba. And if the primary congregation is situated in the southeast, the hymn must be in Igbo. Alternately, a wise composer who wishes to reach a larger body of Christ that cuts across ethnic barriers, would write the hymns in English. With this approach, all the ethnic groups within the nation may be able to understand the message of the hymns.

Ironically, this procedure may even create a greater problem because there are some churches that have adamantly adhered to conducting services in their indigenous language and would not accommodate songs in any other language. Among these churches, there are some educated people who could communicate well in English, and there are also those who cannot read nor write the English language.

For instance, there are several Igbo Anglican (Episcopal) churches in Lagos, a Yoruba community. The Igbo Anglican churches were founded by Igbo priests who were confronted with fierce oppositions in convincing ministers in Yoruba churches to create English services to accommodate non-Yoruba speaking natives. The Igbo priests made this move to prevent further loss of Igbo Anglicans to other denominations.[10]

The only places where English hymns thrive are the newly founded evangelical churches, chapels on college and university campuses, and a few denominational churches such as the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, where services are conducted mainly in English. These congregations have a larger population compared to small parish churches because they are pan-ethnic and globally intercultural in their modes of worship. In most of the evangelical churches, you will find Igbo and Yoruba as well as other minority ethnic groups worshiping together. On college and university campuses, English is the official language of instruction; accordingly, services are conducted in English at all worship centers including student fellowship meetings.

The second problem a hymn writer may have to grapple with is the translation of hymn texts. This may be in the form of translating English hymns to any of the indigenous languages or the translation of a particular local dialect to another within the country. In the first situation, the composer may find it difficult to translate certain English words that do not exist in Nigerian culture. For instance, we do not have snow, winter, hail, or ginger bread in the Nigerian cultural experience. Therefore, the hymn composer will experience difficulty in translating these words into an indigenous language and choosing descriptive words that can best convey the exact meaning to Nigerian congregations. In another instance, when words are translated from one language to the other, there may be

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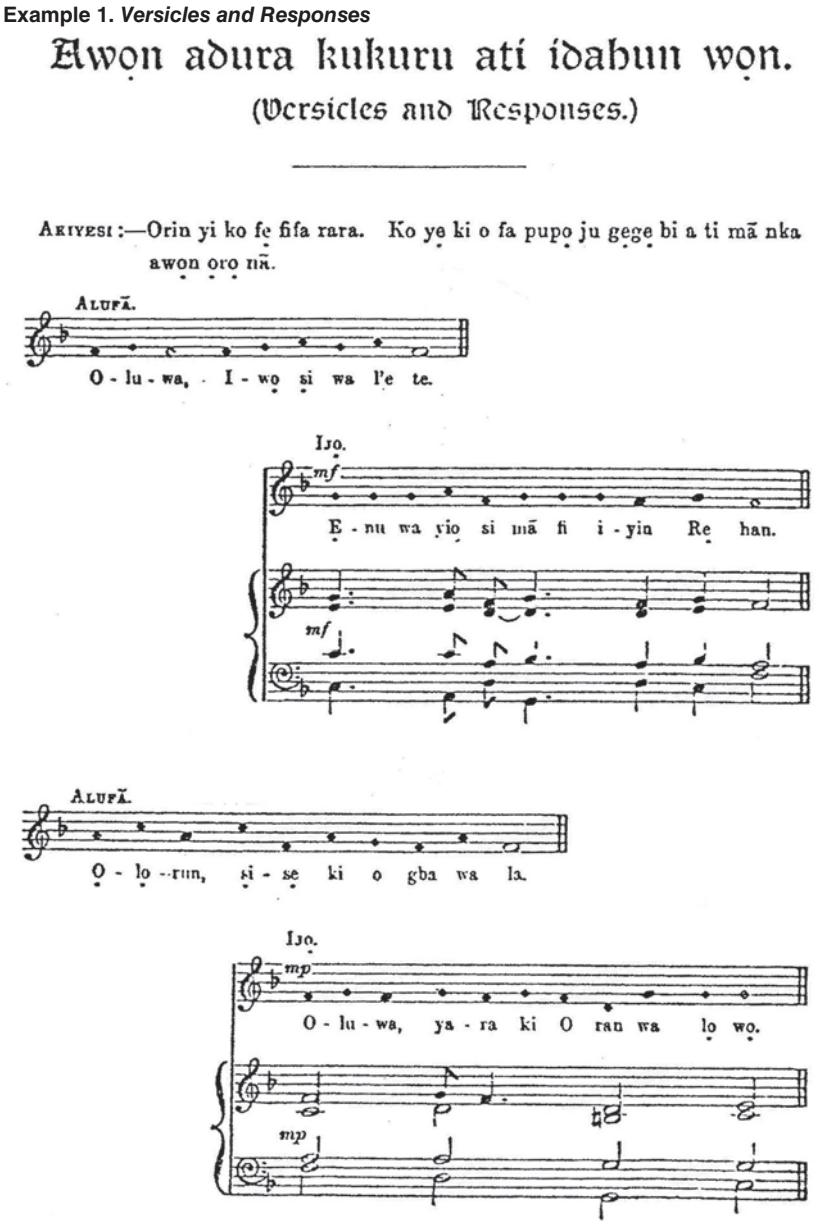
Example 1. ***Versicles and Responses***



which is commonly found in Yoruba folk songs. The vocal compass of the song is nearly an octave, making it easy for the members of the congregation to sing without straining their voices. While the melodic line employs a pentatonic scale, the organ accompaniment uses a free diatonic harmony with occasional tonicization of the dominant. The melodic contour mirrors the tonal patterns of the Yoruba text throughout the music. The translation of the first page of the *Responses* is as follows:

> Priest: *Oluwa, Iwo si wa l'e te* (Lord open our lips)
> Congregation: *Enu wa yio si ma fi iyin Re han* (Our mouths shall sing forth Thy praise)
> Priest: *Olorun, sise ki o gba wa la* (Lord make haste to save us).

Example 1 shows the first page of Phillips' *Versicles and Responses*.

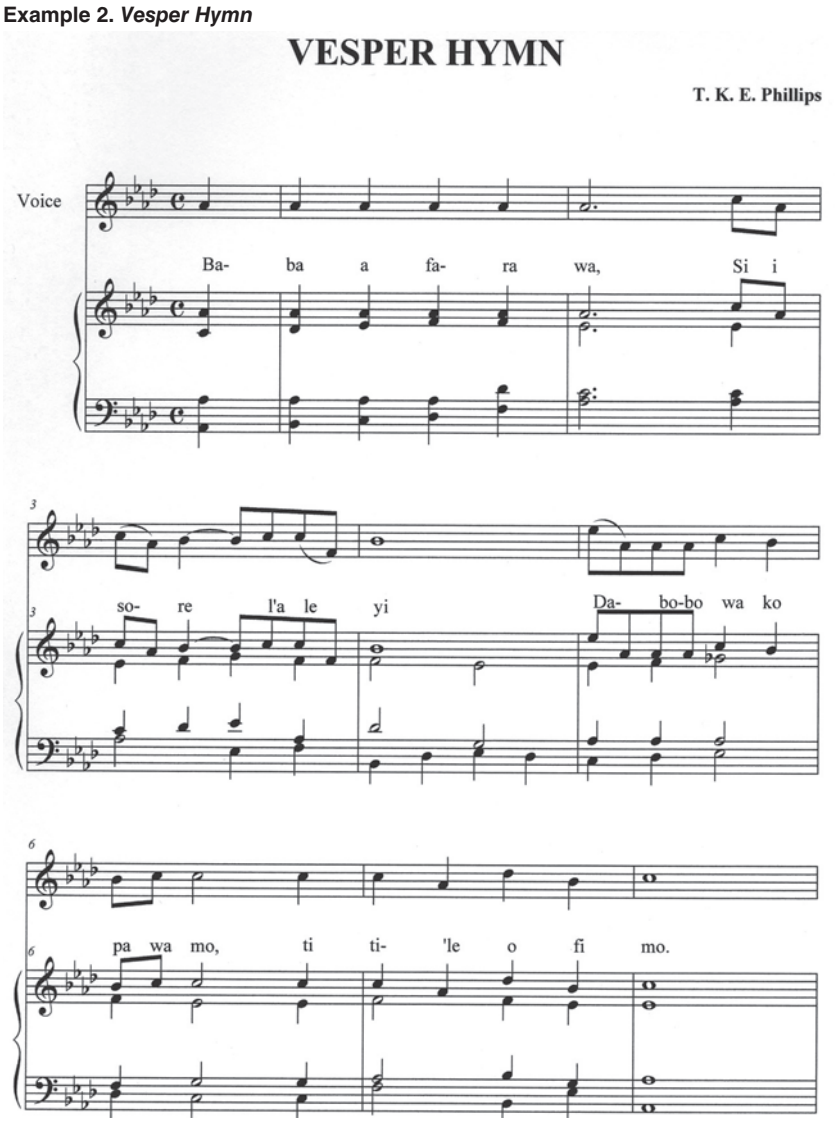
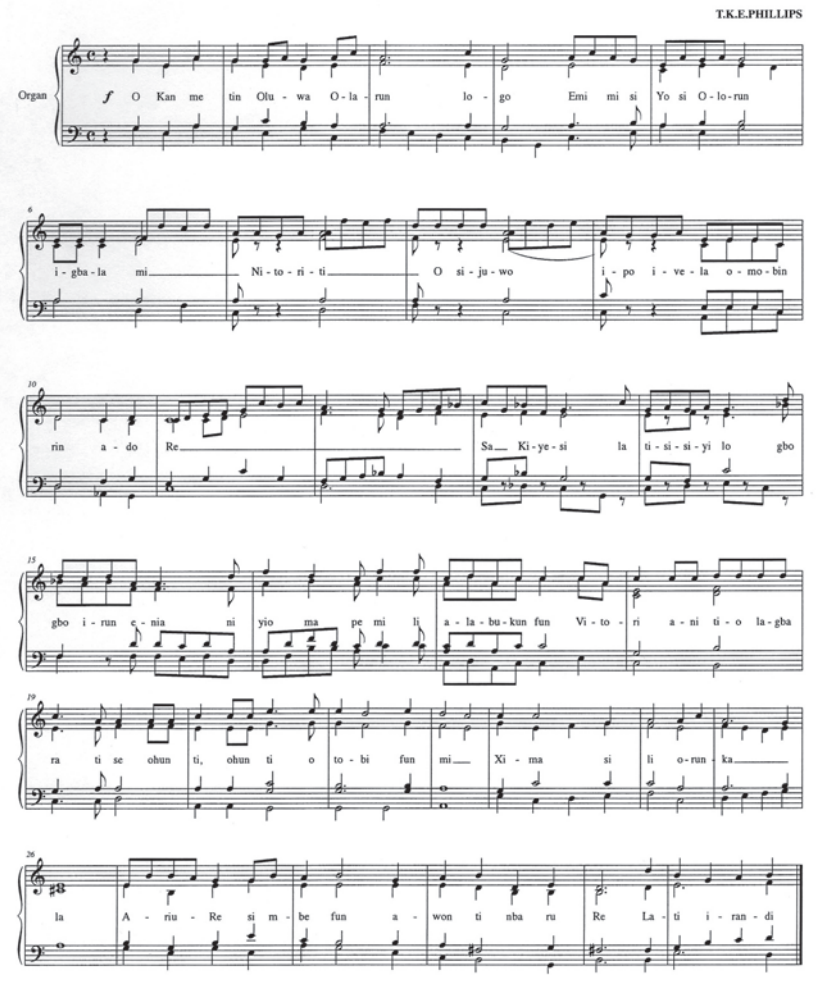
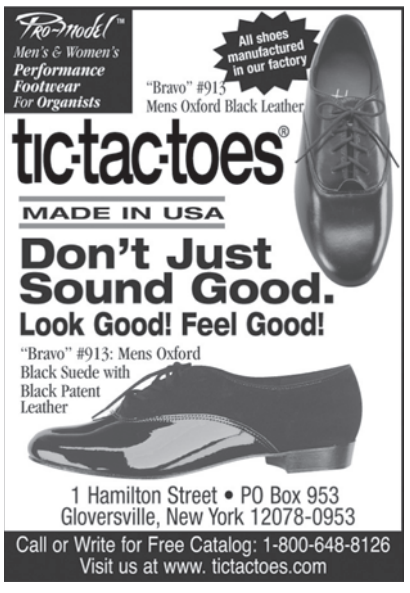
Phillips wrote a very short Yoruba Vesper hymn for the closing of evening service, entitled *Baba a f'ara Wa* (Father, we surrender ourselves). This hymn is usually sung at the end of evening worship before the recessional hymn is sung. The organist plays the first chord as written in the score, then the congregation sings the entire song as quietly as possible. Apart from one sub-dominant note, the melody is in five-note pentatonic scale (do–re–mi–so–la), and its range is a seventh. The melodic shape of the hymn strictly mirrors the tonal inflections of the Yoruba text, and it is an original hymn. Consequently, by observing the compositional rules, Phillips was able to retain the intended meaning of the Yoruba words. The congregation sings in unison, but the organ accompanies with conventional four-part harmony and closes with a plagal cadence. The song is a prayer for God's protection at night. Below is a translation of the Yoruba text:

> *Baba a f'ara wa*
> *Si iso re l'ale yi*
> *Dabobo wa ko pawa mo*
> *Titi 'le o fi mo, Amin.*
>
> Father we surrender ourselves
> Under your care tonight
> Protect and keep us safe
> Until tomorrow morning, Amen.

See Example 2 for Phillips' *Vesper Hymn*.

Yoruba Magnificat in C (The Song of Mary) is another evening hymn composed by Ekundayo Phillips. The text of this hymn is derived from Luke 1:46–55 in the King James Bible. It is a Yoruba hymn-anthem for four-part choir, congregation, and organ accompaniment. The hymn is commonly sung during a synodical or any other diocesan service that involves the Cathedral Church of Christ and other parishes in the community. Compositional technique combines monophony, polyphony, and contrapuntal devices. Structurally, the hymn-anthem is in three-parts: A) the congregation sings with organ accompaniment in C major; B) alternation of solo passages with full chorus in the key of G major; and A) full chorus with organ. Phillips maintains strict observance of parallel motion between the melodic shape and the Yoruba text. The original melody mirrors the contours of the inflection of the words. As regards tonality, Phillips uses the conventional diatonic scale for the melody, while the organ has more notes. Harmonically, there is a preponderance of thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, and unison in the vocal lines. In addition, he uses all types of dynamics—*mf, f, ff, cresc., dim.*, as well as *rallentando, allargando*, etc. Example 3 shows an excerpt from the *Yoruba Magnificat in C*.

Phillips wrote several *Antiphons to Psalms* with organ accompaniment. These short songs are all in Yoruba language and they are meant to be sung in unison before, during, and at the end of the Psalms. The melodies use tetratonic and pentatonic scales, and they are generally within the range of an octave. The melodic contours strictly imitate the inflections of the Yoruba words. The organ accompaniment is simple and of-

Example 2. ***Vesper Hymn***

Example 3. ***Yoruba Magnificat in C***



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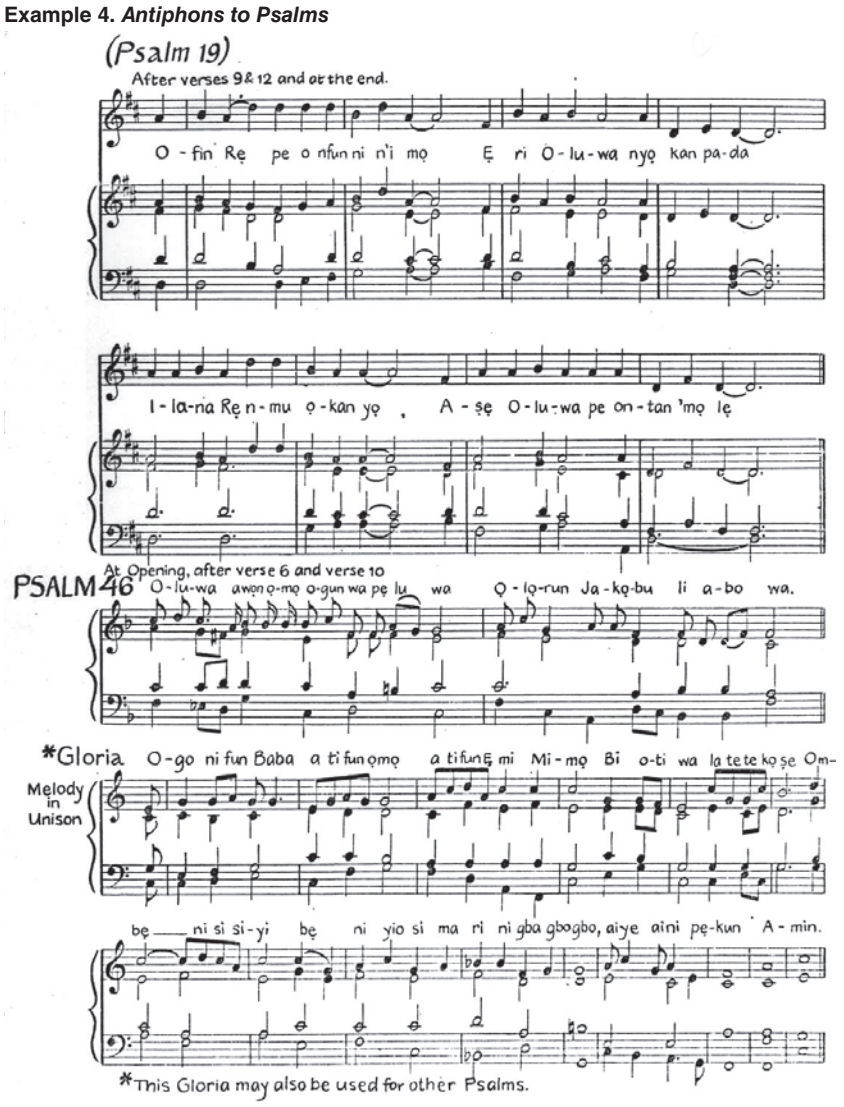
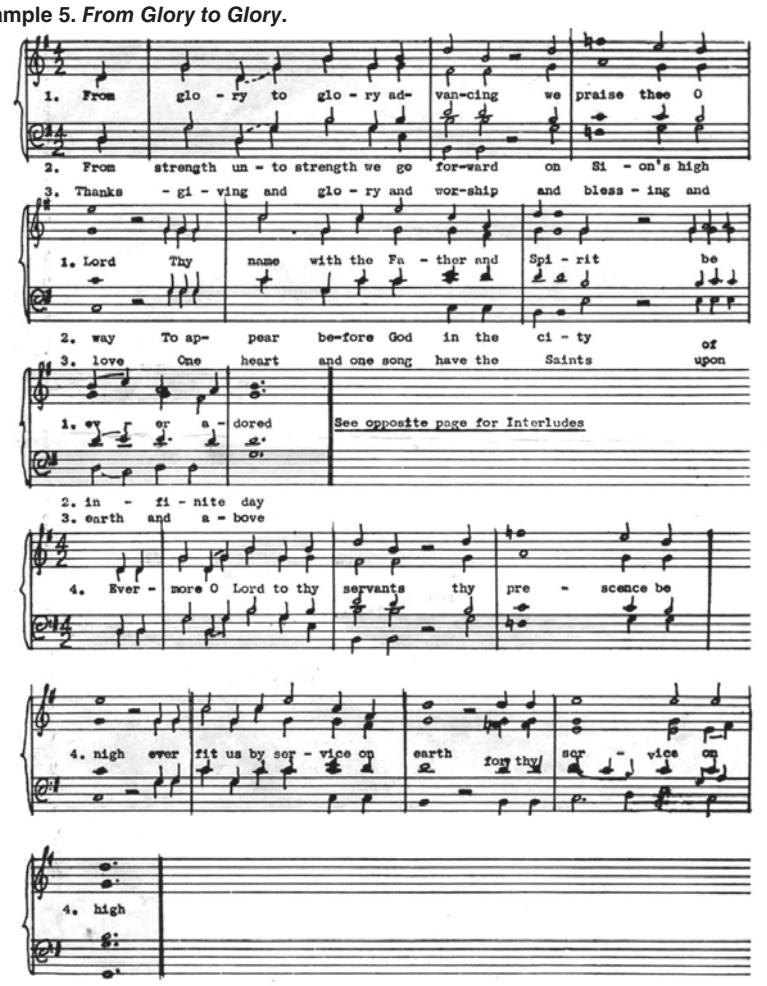
Example 4. ***Antiphons to Psalms***

Example 5. ***From Glory to Glory.***

ten closes with either a plagal or perfect authentic cadence. The composer gives clear instructions on performance technique and at which points the antiphons are to be sung in the Psalms. Example 4 shows the opening page of the *Antiphons to Psalms*.

From Glory to Glory is a four-verse English hymn by Ekundayo Phillips, written in four-part harmony with short organ interludes inserted between all the verses except the final. This hymn is frequently sung at evening services and festive occasions at the Cathedral Church of Christ. In this hymn, Phillips keeps the melodic construction simple and the harmonization diatonic. He is not compelled to observe the Nigerian indigenous creative principles because of the English text. In fact, the harmony briefly tonicizes C in the third and fourth measures. However, the singing alternates between monophonic and polyphonic phrases. Phillips' Yoruba hymns were well received and are still popular today in most Anglican churches in southwest Nigeria, especially Lagos. In fact, the current Cathedral Church of Christ Choir recorded some of Phillips' hymns and anthems in 2006 to celebrate his musical legacy. *From Glory to Glory* is shown in Example 5.

Conclusion

Thomas Ekundayo Phillips indeed is the father of Nigerian church hymn composition. He laid a solid foundation for the composition of indigenous hymns through his numerous compositions and his book, *Yoruba Music*. He continually strove to encapsulate the theoretical framework of Yoruba traditional music in his compositions for the Christian church in Nigeria. In the area of tonality, he uses the popular five-note pentatonic scale, occasionally deviating from this method in songs such as *From Glory to Glory*, which is in English. Therefore, it would not be wrong to admit that Phillips adheres strictly to pentatonality in his Yoruba hymns, but uses the diatonic scale freely in composing English hymns. Phillips solved some of the problems in composing indigenous hymns by writing original texts and melodies. This procedure enabled him to successfully juxtapose the two entities in which the melodic contours consistently mirror the tonal patterns of Yoruba text in order to convey the intended meaning to his Yoruba congregations.

A large number of Phillips' compositions are in Yoruba language, meaning that his targeted audience was the Yoruba congregations in southwest Nigeria. This corroborates the prevalent ethnic diversity among the Christian congregations in post-colonial Nigeria. Subsequent generations of composers rely on his research from well-documented field work on Yoruba music found in his book and his compositions. However, some modern Nigerian composers are making efforts to alleviate the issue of ethnic conflicts by writing songs in diverse indigenous languages as well as borrowing folk and popular songs from various ethnic groups in the country in their works. My new hymn book, *E Korin S'Oluwa,*[14] is a major contribution towards uniting the vast ethnic groups in Nigeria. The indigenous texts are in Yoruba, Igbo, as well as English language, and pre-existing songs are borrowed from all the major ethnic groups in the country. I am but one of a growing number of Nigerians who have been touched by Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips, and so his efforts to build the musical life of the Nigerian church continue after his death. ■

Notes

1. Godwin Sadoh, "A Profile of Nigerian Organist-Composers," THE DIAPASON, August 2003, p. 20.

2. The Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, is the headquarters and seat of the Archbishop of the Anglican Communion in Nigeria.

3. Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, *Yoruba Music* (Johannesburg: African Music Society, 1953).

4. Bode Omojola, *Nigerian Art Music* (Ibadan: Institute for Research in Africa, 1995), p. 30.

5. It was simply called Christ Church up to the 1920s.

6. Godwin Sadoh, "A Centenary Epitome of the Organs at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, Nigeria," *The Organ*, no. 320 (May-June 2002), pp. 28–29.

7. Christopher Oyesiku was a chorister and private pupil of Ekundayo Phillips at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, in the 1930s. He received his first lessons in voice and theory of music from Phillips. He later studied music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, from 1955 to 1960. Oyesiku returned to Nigeria in 1960 and in 1962 was appointed to the position of assistant director of programs at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Lagos. He served in this capacity until 1981. He also taught and directed choirs at the Oyo State College of Education, Ilesha (1981–1987), and the Department of Theater Arts, University of Ibadan (1987–1994). Oyesiku was well known in Nigeria, all over Africa, and Great Britain as an extraordinary bass singer. He performed bass solos in several cantatas, oratorios, operas, and variety concerts. He is an outstanding choral conductor as well as music educator. Oyesiku is presently retired from an active music career and now lives with his wife in London, England.

8. Obayomi Phillips occupied the position of organist and master of the music at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, for over 30 years. He was succeeded by one of his private organ students, Tolu Obajimi, in the early 1990s. Obajimi was a graduate of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, where she majored in piano performance and music education in the 1960s. Obayomi Phillips gave Godwin Sadoh his first lessons in organ.

9. Sunday Michael, "Thank God, We Were Pushed out of the Anglican Church of Nigeria," *Sunday Independent*, November 13, 2005.

10. Ibid.

11. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), p. 161.

12. Godwin Sadoh, "An Historical Survey of Congregational Singing and Hymnody in Nigeria," *The Hymn* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2005), p. 31.

13. Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, *Awon Adura Kukuru: Versicles and Responses* (London: Novello & Co. Ltd., 1926).

14. Godwin Sadoh, *E Korin S'Oluwa: Fifty Indigenous Christian Hymns from Nigeria* (N.C.: Wayne Leupold Editions, 2005).

Godwin Sadoh is a Nigerian organist-composer, church musician, pianist, choral conductor, and ethnomusicologist. He is the author of several books, including The Organ Works of Fela Sowande: Cultural Perspectives *(2007),* Intercultural Dimensions in Ayo Bankole's Music *(2007), and* Joshua Uzoigwe: Memoirs of a Nigerian Composer-Ethnomusicologist *(2007). Sadoh is presently Professor of Music at Talladega College, Alabama.*

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