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CHORAL MUSIC-MAKING AND ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE NEW NORMAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATORS IN NIGERIA

Toyin S. Ajose, Ph.D.

Introduction

Corona virus also known as covid-19 brought about an unprecedented disruption globally. As a public health crisis, the pandemic significantly affected the social and economic activities of many countries. In order to curb the spread of the virus certain health guidelines (covid-19 protocols) were put in place by health experts. These protocols pose some challenges on several social activities including music making and especially choral music. This article explores choral music making during the covid-19 pandemic. It focuses on the role of digital technology and choral music in the 'new normal' and then discusses its implications for music educators in Nigeria. The article calls the attention of music educators to the current realities of choral music making through collaborative performances and exploration of digital tools for local and global visibility. It concludes by challenging music educators to consider the new normal as an opportunity for capacity building in the areas of digital music technology and calls for the urgent review of music curriculum in the country in order to cope with possible future disruptions.

The Disruption: COVID-19 and Performance Spaces

One of the major disruptions witnessed globally after the WWI is the outbreak of the Corona virus also known as COVID-19. The World Health Organization declared the virus as a pandemic following its manifestations and rapid spread in different countries. The virus was said to have been discovered first in Wuhan City, China and later spread to other parts of the world through human movement. Because of the person-to-person transmission nature of the

virus, the need to combat its quick, massive and deadly spread became very imperative. Hence, both clinical and non-clinical interventions were employed in preventing the spread of the virus which had no vaccine for treatment at its inception. Such preventive measures include social distancing, use of face masks, regular washing of hands with soap and water or with alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Of all these measures, social distancing (hereafter used as physical distancing) is considered of one of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of the virus (Agusi et al. 2020; Melo and Sousa Soares 2020; Qian & Jiang 2020).

Physical distancing is a way by which people maintain a specified distance while in any public gathering. As noted on Center for Disease Control and Prevention, social distancing or physical distancing means "keeping a safe space between yourself and other people who are not from your household" (www.cdc.gov, 2020). In order to ensure physical distancing is maintained, large gatherings were initially proscribed and then later restricted in public spaces including worship centers entertainment spaces and recreational hubs. In addition, educational places such as schools at all levels were shut down in a bid to forestall the deadly spread of the virus. Lock down- partial or total were enforced in many countries when it became obvious that the more physical contact people had the more dangerous and wilder the spread of the virus could be.

Music-making activities both choral and instrumental have been significantly hampered since there were no opportunities for people to congregate following the outbreak of the Corona virus. More so, musical activity like singing is reported as a super spreader activity. According to a report by Hamner et al. (2020), almost 87% of choristers were infected with Covid-19 after having contact with one of the members who had been infected. The report suggests that close proximity coupled with transmission of aerosol aided by the act of singing might have contributed to high rate of infection among the choristers. Consequently, singing activities as well as singing groups were restricted from performing and this made choral music performances very difficult during then pandemic.

Three factors which made choral music making significantly challenging during the pandemic era include: restrictions on large gathering, physical distancing and the mandatory use of face/nose coverings. Speaking of restrictions on large gathering and choral music, it is a known knowledge that choral groups vary in

sizes depending on the type of choir. Many sacred and secular choral groups range from hundreds to thousands of singers. For example, the famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir also known as The Tabernacle Choir in the United States of America boasts of a 360-member choir. Another example is the Stellenbosch University Choir, the oldest choir in South Africa, which has a membership of 80 to 140. In Nigeria, several mega churches like The Redeemed Christian Church of God Mass Choir, Daystar Christian Centre, Living Faith Church aka Winners Chapel and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, to mention a few all have choristers in their hundreds. The numeric strength of these choirs makes it extremely impossible and risky for them to physically converge to make choral music.

In terms of physical distancing, choral music stage now appears scanty with few voices in order to adhere to the Covid-19 protocols. For choirs that must perform physically some distance must be kept away from each singer thus making the close proximity among singers seemingly impossible. A stage which accommodates say 300 voices before the pandemic may no longer take more than 50 voices with the physical distancing regulation. It implies, therefore, for a choir to still retain its full singing capacity a very spacious space is imperative. The physical distancing protocol now makes choral managers drastically downsize the number of singers per time in a space.

The use of face mask was another major challenge for singers during and after the pandemic. Because singers need sufficient breath to sing wearing of face coverings in public spaces make adequate aeration difficult for singers. Even though singing is possible with face mask, it still poses breathing challenges for some especially people with underlying pulmonary dysfunctionality (Naunheim, et al 2020: 5). Not only does face mask hinders aeration, it also impedes voice projection during singing. Normally, singers, without face mask, are required to project their voices during performance but the use of face mask to sing proves counter-productive. One noticeable trend in managing such challenge is that singers remove face masks during singing or in some instances resort to the use of face shield which makes aeration a little easy but still hinders vocal projection.

It is apt to emphasize that music – vocal or instrumental has significant effects on the musical, social, psychological and medical conditions of members of any

choral group both at individual or collective levels. For example, choral music helps to develop the musicianship of singers while various music concepts are better experienced and understood during choral music activities. For instance, the practice of harmony and vocal blend required in choral music can be better understood and felt when people sing together while listening to each other at the same time. All of these may not be easily achieved if and when singers are not allowed to meet in-persons to make music.

Furthermore, choral music making is reported to have significant positive social impact on its participants. Studies have shown that it helps to contribute to personal features such as optimism, resilience, and mindfulness. For example, 82% of respondents in a study by Chorus America (2019) agreed that they "feel a sense of purpose in life", 65% say they "believe life is meaningful" (p. 7-8). In addition, participation in choral music is associated with better socialization process among singers. In the same study, it was found that 68% of the participant reported that singing has helped them socialize better in other parts of their lives. They also reported having stronger relationships and better social skill than the public at large (2019:5).

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, choral music practices is gaining an appreciable presence in the music industry albeit not as prominent as popular music. Choral music still thrives more in concert halls and in some Christian denominations. In Nigeria, for example, choral music still enjoys patronage among the elites who visit concert halls and church musical concerts to listen to choral music (Ekwueme, 1992). Abiodun (2019:174) notes that "classical music (vocal and instrumental) is only appreciated by the academic musicians. Its performance is limited to classroom stages, academic music conferences and very few churches in Nigeria. With many Africans still non literate and most Africa being musically illiterate; classical music has not yet got a stable audience in Nigeria". While scholars have investigated the contributions of music education to the Nigerian entertainment space, there is still dearth of literature on the growth of choral music education in Nigeria.

Choral Music Education in Nigeria: An Overview

Choral music education can be traced back to the advent of Christianity in Nigeria. The incursion of the European missionaries to Africa and Nigeria in

particular brought about a significant change in the musical practice of the region. As Omojola remarks, "...the introduction of Christianity and European culture to Nigeria was bound to have a significant impact on Nigerian musical culture" (1995:6). One of such impacts is that the traditional music of the people was not accommodated during Christian worship unlike the western musical styles including hymns, chants, canticles and responses and western classical choral music. African converts were subjected to this cultural exchange on the altar of Christian religion. As a way to educate the newly converted African Christians in western choral music, the early missionaries became trainers who tutored Africans in the art of singing both in schools and churches. In Nigeria, for example, choristers in the historic churches received training in singing and organ playing. Also, boys and girls in mission schools were taught how to sing in the western SATB choral style (Omojola, 1995).

At church level, church choirs were trained in the art of performing choral music as they were introduced to western music notation including solfage system of singing. Commenting on the role of T.K.E Philips, one of the earliest known church choirmasters, Sadoh (2008:26) notes, "the Organist and Master of the Music [TKE Philips] usually devotes thirty minutes to the junior boys or those on probation from 6 to 6:30 pm before the main choir practice begins. He/she trains them in sight reading of music notation, vocal exercises, and theory of music". This form of music education continued among other church choirs with their choirmasters and directors.

In education setting, mission-based schools also played important roles in the growth and development of choral music education in Nigeria. Omojola (1995) discusses the roles of mission schools in complementing the efforts of the church in this regard. He remarks that;

the first of such schools was the Lagos Grammar School which was established in 1859. In 1872, the school formed its own entertainment society. In the same year this society staged a concert to raise money for a school harmonium. Musical training and concerts were also emphasised at a sister school, the CMS Female Institute, founded in 1872. Robert Coker, a composer who was popularly referred to as the Mozart of West Africa, maintained a high standard of musical training in the

school. The first Nigerian to study music to a professional level, Robert Coker was trained initially at the CMS Institute at Abeokuta before proceeding to England in 1880. He returned to the school — the CMS School, Lagos — to organise annual concerts with the help of another Saro, Dr. Nathaniel King, who was then the choirmaster at St, John's Church, Aroloya, Lagos. He and Robert Coker were the two most influential names associated with school and mission organised concerts in Lagos towards the end of the nineteenth century. The activities of Lagos Grammar School and the CMS Grammar Schools are only a few examples of the importance attached to musical training in the programmes of many of the secondary schools in nineteenth century Lagos. (p.30)

Secular institutions including government owned schools- secondary and tertiary, and music conservatory also contributed their own quota to the growth and development of choral music education in Nigeria. In his work on the development of music education in Nigeria, Adeogun (2018) examines the pioneering efforts of Universities by establishing departments of music. He discusses how these efforts helped in the training of music graduates for the Nigerian music and work space. Scholars have criticized the dominance of western music content in the curriculum of many music departments in the country. In these departments, choral music ensemble is a compulsory course for students. The repertoires by these choirs are more often than not western classical-oriented in style. The music students are usually featured in various choral performances during convocation ceremonies, inaugural lectures, academic conferences to mention a few (Abiodun, 2019). With the increase in the number of music departments in the country, choral music pedagogy continues to witness laudable achievement.

The proliferation of choral groups in the country is a recent development in choral musical tradition. Some of these choral groups are secular while a few are faith-based. Examples of these groups are Vocomotion Chorale directed by Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara and J-Clef Chorale directed by Jude Nwankwo both based in the Eastern part of the county. Mountain Top Chorale (MTC) is a faith-based choral ensemble and its supported by the Mountain and Fire Miracle Ministries,

one of the fastest growing neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. The MTC choir has featured and won in various choral international contests including the World Choir Games. It can then be concluded that choral music education in Nigeria started by the efforts of the early missionaries has since developed following the contributions of different music practitioners both in the secular and sacred context.

The Development: Choral Music Making and Digital Technology during Covid-19

The covid-19 pandemic has brought some disruptions to humanity. The way humans interact has been altered following the pandemic. These interruptions are evident in the social, cultural, economic and political spheres of all societies of the world. The covid-19 protocols aimed at curbing the spread of the virus have placed some restrictions on human activities. As mentioned earlier, the 'physical (social) distancing' places difficulty on physical human interactions. Physical meetings are now giving ways to virtual meetings through the aid of digital technology. Video conferencing software now make it possible for people irrespective of their locations to interact in real time situation online.

Music making which involves singing and playing of musical instruments by group of persons was affected by the pandemic. Performance places such as concert halls, event centers, theatres and even worship centers were locked down. Where religious activities were allowed to operate minimally, congregational singing was strictly prohibited. People were asked to stay indoor during the lock down thereby making social interaction physically impossible. As social animals, people found alternative ways to sustain their social connections by exploring the opportunities that digital technology offers. Social activities and interactions then migrated to the virtual space through the use of the internet and different social media platforms. Not only were these platforms used for social communications but also, they were used for music making activities.

As we have argued elsewhere (Ajose & Omotayo, 2021), that social media platforms offered a psycho-social space and served as coping strategy during traumatic times for people during the pandemic. Rather than suffer depression that was associated with the lock down because of isolation, many people took to the virtual space to continue music making. Different virtual musical performances

were seen all over the internet space by individuals and groups. Virtual choral music making were done by different people who sang from the comfort of their bed space with others from different parts of the world.

Digital technology offered numerous opportunities for such kind of music making to be possible. Video conferencing apps such as Zoom, Skype, Google meet and Zoho Meeting as well as other video recording/editing apps such as Tiktok, Triller and Video star to mention a few were explored by virtual choral music makers. While these digital applications come with some technical hitches such as delay in audio sound due to internet connectivity and distance, choral musicians have found them very useful in making music.

Various commentaries have trailed the mixed results associated with virtual choral music making. On a positive note, it provided performance space for musicians even when physical performance locations were inaccessible. Simply put, virtual space eliminates the barrier of space and time thus singers connected to make music at any time and from anywhere. The roles of these virtual "musicking" groups have been found to benefit the mental health conditions of the participants during the pandemic. Virtual choral performances provide amongst other things the opportunity for collaborative work as I will later discuss in the following section.

Some of the problems faced by singers during virtual music includes latency – that is the time a sound is processed by a computer and when its heard by the musician. Low or poor internet band were also some challenges faced during virtual performances. Poor recording devices and background noise were noted as problems experienced during virtual choral music making.

The Direction: Choral Music Post Covid-19 and the Implications for Choral Music Educators in Nigeria

The disruption occasioned by the covid-19 pandemic has brought about what is now referred to as the 'new normal' which implies that there are now new ways of doing old things normally. This new normal is evident in the way humans live and interact with each other. Social, economic, religious, and medical dimensions of human lives have been significantly impacted by this new normal. Gatherings of people is now both physical and virtual – onsite and online and this makes

attendance as well as participation in various events more accessible by people who would have been normally impeded by space.

For music educators, this new normal will in no small measure affect music making especially within the context of choral music. The covid-19 protocols and the new normal have some implications for music education and educators alike. Physical distancing implies limited number of singers on stage per time which means that choral music educators may not have the luxury of having the entire choristers during performance. One resultant effect of such restriction is the vocal intensity. The vocal intensity of a choral group of about 200 persons is not same as that of 50 voices. Since the vocal/choral programme in many schools both at primary, secondary and tertiary attracts lots of participants, choral ensembles in these schools are always largely populated.

The author's experience formerly as a secondary school choral educator and later an assistant choral director in a university in Nigeria, reveals that many students usually participate in the choir. With the new normal choral music educators should then seek new ways to manage this high number of singers who subscribe to join the choir because it is unlikely that performance stages will be clustered with singers in the new normal. Choral music educators should then begin to consider repertoires that do not require large voices for their choirs. Creating smaller choral ensembles will help singers not to be disenfranchised because of limited space, and in this way various singing groups can emerge. This will further open up the smaller ensembles to new choral materials which would not have been possible in a larger ensemble. The new normal opens up new vista for choral music making by music educators in the following areas:

Collaborative Choral Music Making through Digital Technology

Music making post covid-19 involves a lot of collaborative work. As observed during and after the lock down when musicians- singers and instrument players from all over the world engaged in different musical collaborations through the help of digital technology. Music educators get involve in different creative collaboration with musicians around the globe. Choral music educators in Nigeria can seek for joint presentation with others within and outside the country using the virtual technology. It provides opportunity for our local repertoires and talents to be showcased to the global community. Virtual performances provide the space for

digital collaboration (Galvan and Clauhs, 2020). According to music education scholar Christopher Cayari, a virtual vocal ensemble is a “video containing multiple audio-visual tracks layered together through a technique called multi-tracking. In this performance practice, a virtual vocal ensemble creator records and combines multiple tracks to make a choir of clones or works with others in collaborative or collective ways” (2016:15).

The process of making virtual choral performances involve so much collaborative efforts by everyone participating in a greater dimension compared to that of the traditional onsite choral performance. We can teach and learn music with others thereby allowing for inclusive choral pedagogy in this new normal. With the expanded space the virtual technology provides, there is no limit to the number of singers per time. For example, the virtual performance by Eric Whitacre’s virtual choir had about 17,000 singers from around the world. See www.ericwhitacre.com/music-catalog/sing-gently for more details. This kind of collaboration offers social and psychological benefits to everyone.

Skill Acquisition in Music Technology

The role of digital technology in managing and enhancing social especially creative activities has been enormous during and after the pandemic. As earlier observed, the digital space provided a sustainable alternative for creative events. For music educators to remain relevant in this highly digitized age coupled with the realities of the pandemic, there is need for necessary skill acquisition in music technology. Virtual performance is primarily a digital-enabled performance. The use of digital devices such as recording devices, computers, video editing tools among others are germane in this new normal. Educational instructions including music teaching have now gone to the digital space. Online lessons methods are now employed since physical traditional lessons are somehow impossible or restricted.

Music educators are now faced with the reality of developing capacity with the use of these online and digital music making tools. For example, a choral music educator should be able to record the choral accompaniment as well as vocal guide to help singers learn and sing their parts remotely. In some cases, choral conductors are expected to conduct virtually and send as guide to the singers. Basic skills in audio-visual editing is almost a necessity for any choral music

educator in this new normal. There are technical requirements for singers to make a virtual recording or performance. The music educator must be familiar with these processes in order to achieve an excellent virtual performance. In addition, music students now have the opportunity to learn basic recording and editing techniques and this calls for an urgent review of the curriculum in all tiers of education system in Nigeria.

Urgent Need for Music Curriculum Review

With the current and emerging realities of global disruptions such as the covid-19 pandemic, it is very important and urgent to consider an overhauling of the music curriculum in the country. The curriculum review will among other things prepare students with coping strategies for music making in uncertain moments in the future. Music has been found to be one of the coping strategies for many people around the world during the pandemic, hence music curriculum should include in its offerings courses that will explore the role of arts-music in public health. Possibilities are that there will be many more global disruptions in the future and it is necessary for music curriculum designers to look ahead and design courses and programmes that will offer useful interventions in the management of public health crisis.

The compulsory use of digital music making tools for both audio and video choral music productions through music technology courses should be emphasized in the curriculum. The current reality is that technology is permeating every sphere of human lives including how music is produced, distributed and consumed. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) gradually replaces humans in different fields from science to business to arts. With AI-enabled toolkits, new ways of engaging certain aspects of music including composition, performance and music marketization are fast replacing the traditional methods. With AI tools, it is possible to create, perform and share music without leaving one's room. In their editorial comments, Bonnici et al., (2021:1) remarks, "artificial intelligence, machine learning and computational methods have left their mark not only on the way that music is composed and performed but also on the adoption of new musical notations; different music learning approaches as well as in different marketing strategies which change the way music is consumed."

Conclusion

While we hope that music making will return to its 'normal' state where people can have the opportunity of converging in large numbers to perform, the reality is that things will be done in the 'new normal'. Musical engagements, as seen during the pandemic, can now be done by incorporating new methods especially with the use of virtual technology. This new normal offer challenging and exciting opportunities for music educators within the domain choral music to explore collaborative music making locally and globally. More creative methods are required by music educators to sustain choral music practice in the midst of this public health predicament. Music educators must continue to provide a sustainable artistic framework for 'survival' for people who are psychologically affected by the pandemic by explore AI tools in the field of music specifically choral music. A holistic reviewing of music curriculum in the different levels of education will be a step in the right direction. While the future of performing art careers may look uncertain, music educators must consider preparing their students especially in the areas of choral music performances for industry opportunities by providing theoretical and practical framework for professional adaptability in a rapidly evolving career space.

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