**THE STUDY OF AFRICAN POPULAR MUSIC:**

**A Scrutiny of Agawu’s Authorial Philosophy**

# By:

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**Abstract**

Globally, studies in popular arts (including music) have been an integral part of the educational mainstay of the West, the Eastern bloc, the Asiatic, and even the Northern African. Overall, the contemporary African popular music resulted from the political, social, and economic environment of the late 18th to early 19th centuries, and is consolidated by the dramatic transformations brought about by urbanization in the period after World War II. The paucity of reliable pedagogic publications in the field of African popular music can easily be attributed to the lackluster attitude of the continent’s competent scholars who would rather write about the traditional/primitive music of Africa and the art music of the West than the progressive and commercial popular music of the continent. This misplacement of priority has been described by Professor Kofi Agawu as academic protocol and a long-standing fascination with ethnographies of old music. This study carefully scrutinized Agawu’s authorial philosophy as contained in his book, *Representing African Music*, and concurs with the author that the socio-cultural and economic relevance of African popular music make its pedagogic pursuit a priority in our academic curricula.

**Introduction**

Conceptually, philosophy can be considered to be man’s critical approach to the acquisition and coordination of knowledge of his universe, employing such tools as thought, logic, transcendental means, etc., to demystify the so-called mysteries behind beingness, existence, reality, nature, etc. It also covers a set or system of ideas, opinions, beliefs, or principles of man’s behaviour based on an overall understanding of his existence and the universe (Masolo, 2003; Nwala, 2007; Nze, in Okolo, 1993; Okolo, 1993). Much as professional philosophers are in disagreement over a globally acceptable definition of philosophy, some definitions still carry their weight in the field of philosophical studies. One such definition is that of a foremost professor of philosophy, Nwala (2007), who argues, “No definition of philosophy can be complete without taking into account the nature of the more traditional world views, the product of ancient sages and the critical mass reflections and nature of reality including the nature of world views” (p.21).

Much as there are diverse views about the definition of philosophy, its regional application has never been as contestable as its interpretative approaches. This accounts for why we have medieval philosophy, Greek philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Western philosophy and African philosophy. It is the latter that is, indeed, the thrust of the current discourse. And to proceed, the authoritative words of another expert become expedient. Okolo (1993), in defining African philosophy, writes:

African philosophy…articulates and critically reflects on the total experience of the African, on the way or ways, for example, he perceives reality. African philosophy thus places special emphasis on the African, his world, history, values, etc., and on the significance these have for him. In general, it explores the particular way or ways the African experiences, conceives and interprets nature, society, religion, man, God, human conduct, and so on. In short, it deals with the African in his radical subjectivity, that is to say, precisely as an African (p.11).

When the philosophical implications of studying popular music are considered, the basic principles and concepts guiding the field of the study come into focus. Such issues that stand out in this consideration include:

1. What decisions must the popular music teacher make; and what actions must he take in the course of his educational responsibilities?
2. Are such actions guided by a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the dictates of the curriculum content of the subject?
3. Is the teacher consistent in his efforts at realizing the objectives of the curriculum?

The foregoing (which can be encapsulated in the phrase: The Philosophy of Popular Music Education) is summarized by Abeles, Hoffer, and Klotman (1994) in three words; thus: nationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism. The instructional value of African popular music has been a volatile issue amongst academic musicians and musicologists. The alibi that such music types are products of “cultural syncretism and stylistic diffusion” (Collins & Richards 1982, p.111), and, therefore, deserve only a cursory or no scholarly attention, happen to be among the issues that bother on the philosophy of education regarding African popular music. The problem of *what to teach*, *how to teach*, *what materials to teach with*, *who should teach*, *who to teach*, and *why teach it*, therefore, become a challenge. Professor Kofi Agawu’s approaches to the identified challenges, which are unequivocally presented in his book, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*, are quite philosophical. They are hereunder reviewed in relation to the problems of studying African popular music as a subject and academic course in African schools.

**What to teach**

Academic musicians have been accused of dismissing popular music as no music at all; it has also been argued that popular music compositions have no formal structure and, therefore, cannot be divided into sections for proper in-depth studies. Some critics have opined that the popular air resounds in the empty brain. Some musicologists have even argued that the study of popular music should belong to some place other than the music department (Adorno, 1941; Agawu, 2003; Ekwueme, 2004; Onyeji, 2002). In the foregoing, the critics of popular music studies query what to teach—since they do not see any music to study in the popular musical art.

In a philosophical turn, Agawu (2003) affirms that:

African popular music is finally music, not social text or history. Unless we give due attention to the musical elements—the notes played or sung at specific moments, by means of specific articulations, and at specific levels of intensity—we cannot hope to develop a nuanced understanding of this most vibrant of African art forms (p. xx).

Agawu (2003) further argues that some of the distinctive qualities of African popular music that are peculiar with music as a sonic and cultural phenomenon include danceable beats, singable and easy-to-remember melodies, meaningful lyrics, and relevant themes.

African popular music may be conceptualized as a layered phenomenon, a repository of musical idioms of diverse origins…arranged in such a way that a dominant element or group of elements convey(s) a ‘message’ to listeners of different social, linguistic, and musical backgrounds (p. 16).

Thus, Agawu dismisses the assertion that there is no music to teach in the art of African popular music.

Agawu’s philosophy of layered phenomenon, with “a deep musical stratum in popular music that constitutes its essence” (p. 122), is further corroborated by other scholars in African music who maintain that the African popular music, generally, is composed of a basic structural formation consisting of the verse, the chorus, and the bridge sections—the **ABC** (ternary) form. The verse is considered the **A** section, the chorus is the **B** section, while the bridge is the **C** section (Adedeji, 2007; Emielu, 2012; Okafor & Okafor, 2009; Onwuegbuna, 2012b). This disclosure further dispels the argument that popular music compositions have no formal structure and, therefore, cannot be divided into sections for proper in-depth studies.

**How to teach**

The issue of ‘How to teach’ African popular music is raised by some academics who entertain the fear that the rapidity in the production and release of popular music compositions (that are not written down in musical staff notation) poses a problem of classification for the music scholar. What these critics consider a volatile nature of churning out genres and sub-genres by pop musicians, is the basis of their argument that it is difficult to devise a realistic and workable method of implementing the curriculum—that is, if such curriculum was possible to develop.

Musicology, the scientific study of music in its widest sense—covering both the natural and the humane sciences of music, was first conceived and practised in ancient Greece as early as 600 BC; and dominated by the writings of such philosophers as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. But it was not until 1885, when Guido Adler defined the branch of musicology that deals with the regional applications of music-making that ethnomusicology emerged. Adler used the term *Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* (meaning Comparative Musicology) to refer to the broad programme of musicological comparison of melodies, scales, intervals, styles, and various performance techniques of different cultures of the world with one another (Thieme, 1966). Ethnomusicology, therefore, goes beyond the study of music within its social context, and extends to the study of music as an aspect of socio-cultural behaviour. It is for this reason that popular music, a phenomenon of socio-cultural production, fits comfortably in the ethnomusicological field. In line with the above-mentioned, Agawu (2003) argues:

Whether expressed as the study of all music, music in culture, non-Western music, non-urban music, or non-art music, ethnomusicology in principle valued all music equally. Thus popular music, with its disguised appropriation of European and American idioms, was as valid as funeral dirges, ritual music, or the praise-singing of griots. Ethnomusicology’s flexible methods made it a more suitable place to undertake research into music that was not written, dealt directly with everyday matters, did not always last, and was made by poor and rich alike (p. 119).

The alarm of the rapidity in the production and release of popular music compositions raised by the critics of popular music is, rather, seen differently by other scholars. Collins (1996) insists that the flexibility and adaptability of African popular music is what has enabled it to cross all frontiers to become directly or indirectly a major force in international music; while Emeka (2006) is of the opinion that “the strength of popular music lies partly in the situation in which every age has its brand, enabling it to interpret and reflect itself in a manner most effective and digestible” (p. 9).

While Agawu (2003) admits that the diversity of forms and the absence of widely acceptable names for the genres and sub-genres of African popular music may have caused the delay in the emergence of reliable taxonomies, he, however, philosophies that:

Perhaps we should stop dreaming of an adequate taxonomy and speak simply of *varieties* of African popular music. All acts of naming, whether of musical forms, genres, or musical instruments retain a degree of arbitrariness. Some names are assigned not with the needs of a pedantic archivist or curator in mind, but under the influence of specific ambitions for ownership, power, and a desired identity (pp. 122-123).

A consideration for classification of any artistic phenomenon should, therefore, not be divorced from the functionality and usability of such phenomenon. Such negation will amount to segregation and isolation for mere sophistication, at the expense of the arts’ intrinsic function of humanizing the society.

**What materials to teach with**

Lack of study materials (especially literature) has been cited as the major problem in considering pedagogic practices in popular music. Many academic musicians have excused their apathy towards scholarship in popular music on the scarcity of books and other materials for teaching and research in the genre. Straarup (1982) claims “for the moment, there is a scandalous lack of relevant teaching material both at the universities and at lower levels in the educational system, as well as in postgraduate studies” (p.247). And two decades after, Onyeji (2002) corroborates that literature treating popular music practices are scarce. The nagging question here is: Are there adequate teaching and research materials for implementing the curriculum?

Agawu affirms that lack of literature for teaching music, generally, is no longer a threat to music studies—courtesy of the Internet and other sources. He further informs that the instruments of popular band music are more accessible in Africa than the instruments of the Western symphony orchestra. The study in popular music is boosted by the works of such celebrated authors who have consistently and persistently defended this interesting area of music studies. They include Simon Frith, George Lipsitz, Richard Middleton, Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, James Lull, David Horn, Keith Negus, John Collins, Peter Manuel, and Kofi Agawu. Others include David Coplan, Christopher Waterman, Kazadi wa Makuna, Ronnie Graham, Atta Annan Mensah, Christopher Ballantine, Veit Erlmann, John Chernoff, Louise Meintjes, Wolfgang Bender, Tejunmola Olaniyan, and Michael Veal (Agawu, 2003).

Nardi (2009) adds that some of the journals that are devoted to popular music research and reports include Popular Music, Popular Music History, World Music, Media, Culture and Society, Public Culture, and The Rough Guide. Others include The Journal of Popular Music Studies, NTAMA – Journal of African Music and Popular Culture, Jazz Research News, Perfect Beat, Popular Musicology Online, Popular Music and Society, RPM The Review of Popular Music, Soundscapes, and Chapter&Verse. And Onwuegbuna (2012a) agrees that the much cited problem of scarcity of publications to support popular music pedagogy is only peculiar to Africa; and even at that, that such scarcity is only relative. The volume of literature treating popular music and its studies documented in various current works of African music scholars of Nigerian extraction, such as Meki Nzewi, Richard Okafor, Tunji Vidal, Bode Omojola, Femi Adedeji, Samuel Akpabot, Emeka Mbanugo, Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike, Ikenna Onwuegbuna, Austin Emielu, Ijeoma Forchu, Lawrence Emeka, Vera Ngozi Okonkwo, amongst others, are enough to dispel the alibi of such scarcity in Nigeria.

**Who should teach**

‘Who should teach’ queries the availability of enough qualified teachers to implement the curriculum. The issue of ‘who should teach’ arises from the opinion of some critics that the popular air resounds in the empty brain (Onyeji, 2002). This is further exacerbated by Agawu’s (2003) report that:

As recently as the early 1990s, the Department of Music in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana at Legon still lacked staff trained to teach the varieties of African popular music. When the intention to appoint a lecturer in that area was announced, a number of people vehemently opposed the idea, arguing that an expert in popular music belonged not in a music department but in the department of sociology or African studies—in short, some place other than the music department. The music department was reserved for those who could talk of crotchets and quavers, sonata and rondo forms, diatonic and chromatic harmony (p. 120).

The same Agawu, dispelling the lies told by the detractors of African popular music studies, informs that teaching appointments were still made, and that student enrollments in the practical and theoretical studies in popular music had remained unprecedented in the University of Ghana. In the light of the foregoing, it becomes clear that music, as a sonic material, remains music, irrespective of the category and style it belongs to; and therefore, no special qualification is required of a music teacher so as to be able to teach popular music.

**Who to teach**

The issue of ‘Who to teach’ probes the availability of prospective learners who earnestly desire the formal training in popular music-making and research. In reaction of the foregoing, Agawu (2003) writes:

Reflections would have revealed that students possess a large repertoire in memory, that some have internalized—naively, no doubt but authentically in enabling procedures, and that none would lack insight into the social meanings set in motion by sound and especially words of the popular music they had grown up with. Reflection might have led to the discovery that students are able to speak popular music as a language…complete utterances begun in it, recognize idioms, and evaluate not only the grammatical correctness but also poetic depth of other people’s performances (p. 121).

In a recent investigation carried out in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, student respondents affirmed that popular music styles like hip-hop, rhythm and blues(R&B), rap, disco, rock, reggae, ragga, dancehall, highlife, Afrobeat, makossa, calypso, soukous,etc., had been a positive influence on their enjoyment/interest in studying music, that the majority of the Western music they study in school today is quite unrelated to the music they encounter in the society every day. In addition, they agreed that learning popular music in formal school setting will make for better understanding and greater success than apprenticing under a non-literate popular musician (Onwuegbuna, 2012a).

**Why teach it**

The contested issues about intellectual, social, and economic relevance of popular music (see Adorno, 1941; Agu, 2008; Ekwueme, 2004; Onyeji, 2002) have led to the question: Why teach it in schools? In a retort, Agawu (2003) wonders why the most widely heard music in Africa is not also the most written about, the most taught in schools, and the most valued. He blames this misplacement of priority partly on academic protocol and a long-standing fascination with ethnographies of old music, and secondly on prejudices against African culture instilled by colonial education.

In the case of music, some schooled Africans “lucky” enough to be exposed to Handel, Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven stuck with them; very few listened with interest to contemporary African art music. And while popular music such as *highlife* served an important social function as dance music, its incorporation into the curriculum was slow to emerge (p. 120).

In line with Agawu’s philosophy, the socio-cultural and economic relevance of popular music make its pedagogic pursuit a priority in the academic curricula of the continent. As investigations reveal that the import of popular songs are often better understood than formal classroom lectures, it becomes important that the courses in popular (and light) music be introduced and rigorously pursued at all levels of music education in Africa, since its proceeds would benefit the continent economically, socially, culturally, and intellectually (Mbanugo, 1999; Okafor, 2005).

**Conclusion**

Evidently, there is no gainsaying that Agawu’s philosophy of music education has a deep tolerance for formal studies in African popular music. His apodictic stance regarding the study of African popular music stands in comparable heights with the philosophy shared by his contemporaries, such as Simon Frith, Richard Middleton, Christopher Waterman, David Coplan, John Collins, Allan F. Moore, Keith Negus, Patria Román-Velázquez, Roy Shuker, and Peter Manuel.

Exploration of Africa began sporadically in the mediaeval ages, while the virile scramble for and desecration of the land came with the incursions of the Portuguese seamen in the 15th century. Formal and systematized music education has been in existence in its traditional formats in Africa long before the Western system of education was introduced via colonization. The earliest history of contact with the European explorers is recorded in the Southern region of Africa in the 15th century, and Western educational system came later in the 16th century. The inclusion of African music studies in the Western educational curricula that operated in Africa was delayed until the 19th century (Encarta, 2011). And today, in the 21st century, it is still debated, surprisingly, amongst African scholars, whether African popular music is worthy of study in our institutions.

For the way forward, African music scholars (systematic musicologists, historical musicologists, and ethnomusicologists) who are of the ‘analogue’ age should try to ‘digitalize’ by adopting a positive attitude to change and innovation and availing themselves of the wealth of information on 21st century approach to music studies, which are accessible on the Internet. This will enable them to update and upgrade their knowledge and skills in current music procedures.

In consonance with Agawu’s philosophy, until African popular music is introduced and sincerely, seriously, and vigorously pursued in African schools, music scholars of African descent may never realize how much disservice they have been doing to their continent through their snobbish attitudes toward their own unique and lucrative cultural practice.

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