



## THOUGHTS ON CHORAL MUSIC WRITINGS OF SAM ASARE-BEDIAKO

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper reveals a personal thought gathered on some choral works, known and unknown processes, of Sam Asare-Bediako as far as choral writings are concerned. It is an analytical view point conducted from my study and teaching of such pieces which are of academic discourse. In my opinion, the features discussed in this paper reveal critically the elements that form the major fundamental constructions of the choral works of Sam Asare-Bediako. The works were examined through teaching, listening and critical observational study of some music scores of the Composer. Using Bent's description of such a study as musical perception, the study reveals certain unique processes the composer adapted in creating his works. The fundamental significance of the study was to unearth some stylistic thoughts on choral music compositions which are envisaged to help future generation of composers as well as scholars in the composition discipline to address issues pertaining to compositional styles.*

**KEYWORDS:** Choral Music, Unknown Processes, Music Compositions, Sam Asare-Bediako



## INTRODUCTION

In Ghana, it is very easy to identify leading figures in vocal art music which in fact, is a hybrid of African and Western musical elements. The introduction of Western hymnody in the nineteenth century by European Christian missionaries, backed by the British colonial apparatus, gave birth to Ghanaian choral music, and also the Nigerian, Zambian and many other sub-Saharan African countries (Dor, 2005; Euba, 1992; Nketia, 1974). Therefore, one must not be irritated to see elements of western practices in the construction of the melodic and harmonic sonorities in this analytical work. This study was done from personal perspective through critical observation, teaching and listening to such performances that feature the music of Asare-Bediako. In dealing with that, both the composer and his works were purposively selected, having adequately listened to his music as performed by choral groups in Ghana, taught some of his choral works and studied some of his choral scripts. Bent (1980) describes this as musical perception which dovetails into personal views about musical works. Bent is of the view that musical analysis is an activity to unravel the fundamental point of contact between mind and musical sound. It is in the same regard that Huovinen (2008) also thinks that his assignment of a particular structure to a given musical piece ultimately must be grounded on some perceptual matters in order for it to be justified, if not on his musical hearing, then perhaps on his visual impressions of the score.

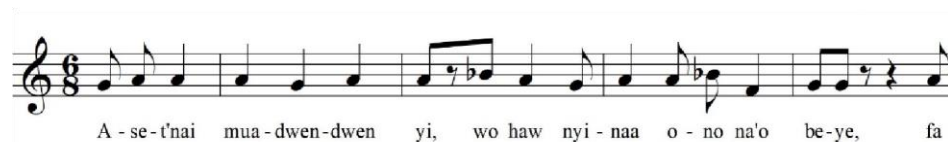
From my perception, as a music analyst, the rate at which Bediako's services were desired and also required amongst the lot (especially for amateurs), extended, but also limited his scope of delivery. The first (being the extension) permitted him to produce music in innumerable traditions and styles with diverse belief systems, theories and doctrines. Yet, he was very restricted in terms of melodic and harmonic freedom. By the time mentioned, (1980s and 90s when he rose to fame amongst the choral fraternity), most of the choruses and groups in Ghana were amateurs who couldn't read and understand music. This problematic state disallowed him from exploring in various styles, and made most of his progressions very predictable. This assertion was carefully studied after examining almost all the works produced by the composer. This is to say, observing his works critically, Bediako craves to hear his works performed by almost every choral group. After investigating and detecting his potential (through his works), he could have written music in much deeper melodic and harmonic sonorities, if not for the amateurs he wrote music for. Was he at fault? Will a composer be glad if his works are not performed regularly because of complexity? Some composers, yes, and others, no.

The argument one may raise to this belief of simplicity mentioned above is that, complexity and simplicity are contentious, because works such as *Hyira w'adwuma*, *Dede 2*, *Nyame wo yafa'i*, *Aseda*, are all described by performers as intricate. Therefore, Simplicity and complexity are relative words to describe. It is for this reason that Bunge (1962) argues that simplicity must be analyzed before using the term, unless we want it to remain vague to the point of meaningless. In this regard, and as far as this analytical work is concerned, the simplicity will be shown by concentrating on the following parameters that form the basis of my musical perception: melodic structure, harmonic sonorities, structure of extended compositions uniquely utilized in the work of the Composer, his sacred and secular music, and his love for revised editions of existing works.



## Melodic Structure

The most common time signatures Bediako will always want to use in his music are duple time signatures, being two dotted crotchet beats (6/8) or two/four crotchet beats (2/4, 4/4) in a bar. Once in a while he may introduce other time signatures. In construction of melodies, Bediako prevents leaps, and conjunct movements are very important to him as the rules of basic melody writing (in common practice) requires. His melodic progressions are very simple to remember. Let's take a look at some examples.



Excerpt 1

Excerpt 2

While Boykan (2000) believes that ‘from the purely practical point of view, it would seem hard to set up a real correspondence between words and music, since music obliterates so many of the effects poetry relies on,’ and continues to state that ‘the sound of words is an obvious instance, but music also swallows up the complexities of verbal rhythm, with its implied reference to colloquial speech and perhaps also to a theoretical construct called the natural poetic line,’ Asare Bediako believes in the principles of speech melody and rhythms. Twi is indeed a tone language. This is to clarify the fact that that “Tone is phonemic, or serves to distinguish words in much the same way as do vowels and consonants” (Nketia, 1974, p. 184). In African vocal music, most cultures in adhere to this system. For instance, Beier (1956) mentions that ‘the melodic line of Yoruba music must strictly follow the tone pattern of the African language.’ Nketia (2002) refers to this technique as Text-tune.

## Harmonic Sonorities

In writing of danceable and simple songs Such as *Menntumi mfa wo ntoto bribiara ho*, *Aseda nko'aa*, *M'aseda dwom*, *Aw'rade Nyame ye ɔdɔ*, among others, homophony plays a big role in the works of Sam Asare-Bediako. Once in a while, he creates counterpoints that serve as resultant melodies or for emphasis such as bar 9 and 10 of *Aseda nko'aa*. Let's take a look at the score below.



A - se - da nkoa na me de be ma wo Me nni  
ma wo, me - nni hwee,  
hwee en - ti gye m'a  
hwee en - ti

Excerpt 3

Once in a while, he lifts the melodies in all parts when it comes to his construction of similar motions. At this point he does not consider oblique, contrary, or other motions. I may not be able to give an accurate reason why the composer does that, but the best I can clarify is the fact that, the speech melody is of importance to him in such a way that, at times he feels that the application of the technique in the key melody (which is the soprano in almost all his works apart from free counterpoints) only, may not give a clear effect. It is for this reason that he lifts the melodies of all parts at once in some of his works. And again, it may probably be for an effect that one may not be able to detect. Excerpt 4 demonstrates the practice.

Ye den - san - ku ne nsam - bo nea sa kron - kron, Ye de yen nne

Excerpt 4

Musical score for Excerpt 5, showing a piano accompaniment with a vocal line. The lyrics are "Nya - me ba hye - ren o".

Excerpt 5

For instance in the next excerpt below, theorists may encounter a problem with the consecutive octave; Yet Bediako reads that harmony differently (as stated earlier).

Musical score for Excerpt 6, showing a piano accompaniment with a vocal line. The lyrics are "Fa ani mia, a - ho - pa - kyi".

Excerpt 6

When it comes to mode, he interchanges the major and minor for variety. He doesn't necessarily change the mode for a specific reason, as some composers may want to do in sections, or to depict a particular mood. Bediako decides to use both major and minor modes at any point in time. An Example is bar 7 to 11 in the composition Ade kro pe na menim. Though the composer decided to reduce the leading note by a half step, he was still thinking in B minor.

Musical score for Excerpt 7, showing a piano accompaniment with a vocal line. The lyrics are "A-nwa-nwa do, a-nwa-nwa do, O doi mu nni hwe-hwe bea. O- do yia nwa nwa do".

Excerpt 7



In Bar 21 to 24 of *Aw'rade Nyame ye do*, Bediako decided to move from the key of A major to F sharp minor, with the same rhythmic and textual resource (*Mo mye no, mo myeno do*, meaning let us love ourselves). It's shown in the subsequent excerpt.

Excerpt 8

The simplicity of his harmony is one aspect that must not be overlooked. He does not believe so much in Chromaticism. One may also argue that in his time, most Ghanaian choristers were not acquainted with the singing of chromatic notes, or he might have thought that Chromaticism is not cultural in Ghanaian traditions, so far as chromatics are concerned. Nevertheless, few anthems he wrote for some good choirs for competitions has few chromatics in there.

Also, the reason why he would always want to apply melodic doubling in almost all his free counterpoints (including call and responses) baffles my mind. Bediako is very much aware of for melodic doubling (especially in thirds) in Africa, and to make counterpoints simple for amateur choirs, he will always want to introduce parallelism. In the subsequent excerpt for example, the bass part doubles the melody of the tenor a third below, as the soprano and alto does different melodic and rhythmic progressions. This happened in bars 69 to 83 of the work *Dede 2*.



Mo ma yen so-re yem fa ma no, mo ma yen so-re yem-fa ma no, Twe-duam

Mon so-re, mon so-re, mon so-re myen ma ne din so e -

6 Pon se a-se-da Twe-duam-pon se nni-di; Yem-fa ma no, yem-fa ma no, twe-duam-

se no, o-sea - se-da, o-sea ye - yi, sea - bo din na yemfa ma no, ne nwu-ma ye

12 pon nwa-nwa ni Twe-duam pon na' nuo-nyam nka ne din

nya - nwa, —

Nya-me no no, e - se no, se noa en - ka ne din

## Excerpt 9

In the imitative counterpoint in *Aman mmε hwε* (bars 52 to 80). He introduced the system in various ways. In excerpt 10, closely studying the entry of the soprano, one can detect melodic doubling in disguise. Bediako wanted B flat and C (soprano), to move along with D and E flat (Alto), but he did it brilliantly through a free counterpoint which has been indicated by an arrow in the excerpt above. In the triangle, one can also detect the parallel fifth between the soprano and alto. In the rectangle above alto doubles the melody of soprano in sixth intervals respectively. The lines indicate the bass doubling the melody in soprano (i.e., from A – B to C) in thirds. The beautiful aspect of the third line is the fact that the composer gave the last note supposed to be doubles by the bass, to the alto part (i.e., A and C), and decorated the bass with another note. The pentagon describes parallelism (melodic doubling) between alto and bass. There was another similar motion (still under the influence of melodic doubling) which was done between soprano and bass in the oval. The alto completed the melody of soprano in the last bar of the oval, to enable soprano sing different melodic lines with ease. The second and third ovals are all examples of the brilliant way the composer used the bass to double the melody in the alto part, while soprano and alto decorates the doubling with free contrapuntal lines. Again in the semi-circle, the bass doubles the tenor a third below. Lastly, the tenor doubles the alto part in sixths.

Even though he will always want a fugue to be in the middle or latter part of an anthem, he will always like to apply the use of melodic imitations in his fugue; He will not always like to

structure his fugal sections like that of the baroque masters such as Bach and Handel. Once in a while, he follows the instruction of the era (Baroque), but most at times, no.

*Excerpt 10*

Bediako is very careful in the use of modulations in his works. He believes that constant modulation in music is quite artificial to the African. I am certain, that Bediako believes in James' (1992) assertion that "the concept of modulation within a piece of music is foreign to African thinking" (p.5). Though in this context, James was not really thinking of the African





art musician or performer, but rather the traditional musician. Yet, I will still agree with Bediako if he believes that lot of modulation will be abstract for the African performer, because, if the purpose of an African Art work is for the audience to appreciate, enjoy and be able to participate as we do in Africa, then conscious modulations will not be effective. I have no doubt that music written for purposes like Academic work, choral competitions, serious musical concerts for good choirs, and so many others may have some complexities in terms of constant modulations. Bediako's modulations are so smooth in such a way that, you will not even realise his pivots. Though in the case of Ade kro p[ na menim (bars 20 to 30), there was a shifted tonality from the key of G major, to A major.

### **The Structure of Extended Compositions**

Sam Asare Bediako is consumed with the desire of starting most of his anthems in Unison such as *Aha nnyε wo dea, Aseda*). The unisons announce the title of the songs. Though once a while, he introduces unisons in the middle of his music, either for decoration or emphasis.

Like Ephraim Amu, J.H. Nketia, and few other great masters and pioneers in Ghanaian art music, Bediako is reluctant to write instrumental accompaniment to his choral anthems. Most of his anthems are sung in Acapella, with piles of pauses (rests) in his music. These breaks are either created for suspension, beautification, or for singers to breathe properly, in between phrases. Apparently, in Ghana, it has been a practice for accompanists to play along with a choir, notwithstanding the nonappearance of accompaniment in his music. So, the accompanist may settle on filling in the pauses with flourishes, if he is able to do so with dexterity. Another significant reason for the breaks or silences in the composer's music is to keep the listener in suspense or ponder on the previous messages given. This happens consistently in almost all anthems of his.

### **Sacred and Secular Works**

Even though Tirro (1967) disagrees with the concept of sacred and secular music (in style), I believe strongly that the text of a vocal piece determines its category (being sacred or secular) and not the musical style. Most of the compositions of Bediako's are sacred (Christian), and some secular. His sacred works are structured in the same manner as his secular. Therefore I will agree with Tirro if he states that, 'There have been composers who wrote primarily sacred music, and there have been composers who specialized in the composition of secular music; but when one composer wrote both varieties, Palestrina included, the style did not change because of the nature of the text.' He stated again that Compositions such as Bach's coffee cantata is not so different from his sacred cantatas. He also mentioned again that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Verdi all wrote religious works in Operatic style. It is same in Ghana. For instance, sacred works of great masters such as Amu, Entsua Mensah, to mention a few, are structured in similar ways as their nonspiritual compositions.

### **Revised Editions**

One composer that is always willing to revisit a work he has done in the past is no one else, but Sam Kwaku Asare Bediako. He will always want to pick old songs of his, revise for a reason I may not be able to tell. Either he keeps pondering or reflecting in the past and realizes the need to improve on some old works, or an inclination for new ideas to modernize an old composition. His amendments are mostly done in two ways; either by extension or change of Harmony.



Rarely will he revise his melody. Works such as *Y'ahyia wodin mu*, *Gu aba pa*, *Hyeren*, *Yesu Abɔfo*, *Dwen woho*, *Yede y'aseda ma woa yenntu ngui*, were all revised after some years of composition.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, the music of Sam Asare-Bediako has introduced me to techniques that I disregarded for a period. I will not confidently claim that these are the only phenomenal practices that makes Bediako a good composer. Also, I cannot mention that the process used in this analytical work is the perfect one, and it is for this reason that Goehr and Wintle (1992) argue that there is no correct or incorrect analytical method, but only the limitations imposed by the concern to proceed logically and to avoid overstating claim. The paper, indeed, has revealed some of the known or unknown processes the composer went through in the craft of his works, which could help future generation of composers and scholars draw an attention to some of the practices Ghanaian composers go through in creating choral musical pieces for public and private performances.

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