



A THEORETICAL REVIEW TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CREATING 'NEOCLASSIC BIG-BAND HIGHLIFE MUSIC'

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ABSTRACT: *It is a truism that highlife, Ghana's first acculturated popular music, presents various styles employing various musical ensembles and playing to different audiences. However, the diverse highlife stylistic trends have declined in musical works recently due to generational differences and tastes. As a result, modern-day recorded highlife compositions sound similar and, in some cases, the same. Despite its iconicity in Ghanaian popular music, it is also quite surprising that highlife music still struggles for compositional and theoretical relevance in Ghanaian academic programmes of schools, colleges and universities. This paper, therefore, presents a characterisation of the diverse highlife music trends as an attempt to develop a conceptual framework for creating 'neoclassic big-band highlife music' that transcends diverse styles and generational tastes. Drawing on my experience as a highlife practitioner and music educator, I reviewed theories, concepts, and literature relevant to highlife music to conceptualise a framework for creating works that transcend the generational differences and tastes of highlife music. This paper expands the frontiers of highlife music practice and scholarship. Therefore, it is not just a recommendation but a call to action for Music composition professors to adopt this conceptual framework as a blueprint to begin a taught course on 'Highlife Music Composition' in music institutions. The involvement of Music composition professors in this process is crucial to enhancing the structural and theoretical trajectory of highlife music.*

KEYWORDS: Conceptual framework, Highlife, Neoclassic big-band, Popular music, Sankofa.



INTRODUCTION

Highlife music has greatly interested scholars over the years (Adum-Attah, 1997; Bender, 1991; Collins, 1986; Coplan, 1978). While it is generally agreed that much has been accomplished in the joint effort to describe the various parameters of the music (Coffie, 2020), there is currently no consensus on what constitutes a particular style. Each author tries to explain the different highlife styles from their background knowledge as either composers or performers. Also, studies on highlife music tend to lump the different types together despite their distinctiveness and specificities (Adinkrah, 2008; Coester, 2008; Collins, 2005; Emielu, 2011). Highlife presents various styles employing various musical ensembles and playing to different audiences. The differentiation of highlife into distinct styles operating within distinct social spheres, according to Collins (1976), is a result of the division of labour and specialisation of the music as it has evolved and spread. Due to its several offshoots, the term highlife has generally been used as a generic name for popular music forms in Ghana recently. Recent debates on highlife music, as observed by Coffie (2020), suggest that most people are familiar with the music; however, the stylistic integrity of the diverse trends is still a quagmire to many practitioners, patrons and scholars.

Highlife is one of the oldest African popular music forms that originated from the Anglophone West African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia as a result of the acculturation of African, Western and Afro-Cuban music (Collins, 1994, 2005, 2018; Coplan, 1978; Dosunmu, 2010; Manuel, 1988; Matczynski, 2011). However, this description of highlife as just acculturated music has been contested by Emielu (2009, 2010) as amorphous and symptomatic of African popular music. Emielu argued that combining African and Western musical resources is not exclusively for highlife. More so, other Nigerian popular music forms, such as *Juju*, *Afrobeat*, *Fuji*, *Contemporary Hip Hop* and *Gospel*, are a fusion of African and Western musical resources. Surprisingly, Emielu was silent in proposing a definitive framework to describe highlife, which is quite understandable due to highlife's stylistic diversity. In as much as highlife's scholarship is multi-disciplinary, a greater emphasis has been placed on its historical and sociological dimensions, with less emphasis on the creative and sonic manifestation.

In his seminal work on *Redefining Ghanaian Highlife Music in Modern Times*, Coffie (2020) contested not only the acculturation description of highlife but also the *siki* and *gome* timelines (indigenous rhythmic patterns), which practitioners and scholars use as the distinguishing feature of the music. Coffie contended that the cross-cultural description of highlife in modern times is convoluting and deceptive. Moreover, popular music forms, such as Congolese *Soukous* and *Rumba*, Ivorian *Mapouka*, Cameroonian *Makossa*, Malian *Mandingo*, Kenyan *Benga Beat*, Senegalese *Mbalax*, Nigerian *Juju* and *Afrobeat*, South African *Kwela* and *Mbaqanga*, Cuban *Rumba* and *Salsa*, Trinidadian *Calypso* and *Soca*, Brazilian *Samba* and *Bossa Nova*, Barbados *Spouge*, Surinamese *Kaseko* and American *Jazz* music are as a result of cross-cultural fertilisation. Furthermore, he postulated that highlife had recently taken a nose-dive, and its distinctiveness is reduced to only the timelines (ostinato rhythmic pattern) and drum patterns. However, these ostinato rhythmic and drum patterns are common in popular music genres such as *Soukous*, *Salsa*, *Rumba*, *Makossa* and *Kaseko*. Coffie, therefore, concurred with Yamson (2016) in giving prominence to the indigenous guitar styles as the distinguishing feature of highlife.



The ongoing debate on which style of highlife is considered authentic by practitioners, patrons, and scholars has raised issues of concern regarding highlife's description and future directions. The attempt to resolve the subject of authenticity in highlife music scholarship has led to several studies on the historical and sociological dimensions of highlife music in general (Ampomah, 2013; Bender, 1991; Collins, 1994, 2005, 2016, 2018; Coplan, 1978; Emielu, 2009, 2010, 2011). In this regard, they viewed highlife as a social construct in that every generation decides what it is. According to Emielu (2011), the issue of what constitutes the original highlife and its definitive stylistic framework in contemporary times has been uncertain among practitioners and patrons across generational groups and regions. Emielu's assertion was corroborated by Ampomah (2013) that highlife music has developed to an unrecognisable bit from its original inspiration. Furthermore, he concluded that the golden age of highlife is gone, and its future is uncertain. As Austin Emielu puts it: "This generational conflict is basically ideological, as each generation grapples with the question of what is 'original' or 'authentic' and what is 'fake' or 'bastardisation' of the 'original'; what is the 'core' and what represents the 'periphery'" (Emielu, 2011, p. 375). While I agree to a large extent with Austin Emielu, I wish to contend further that the lack of a definitive conceptual framework for highlife music for practitioners may have contributed to its stylistic uncertainties over the years.

According to Coffie (2020), the recent confusion and discourse surrounding the Vodafone Ghana Music Awards (VGMA) highlife categories have exposed the inadequacies of the view of highlife as a social construct, which suggests that any music could be presented as highlife based on a generation's perception. Hacking (1999, p. 19), as quoted in Emielu (2009, p. 35), opined that a social construct is "the contingent upshot of social processes and historical events". Interestingly, recent studies on highlife, such as Aidoo (2014), Coffie (2012, 2020), Coffie et al., (2020), Marfo (2016), Owusu-Poku (2021) and Yamson (2016) have strongly advocated for highlife to be viewed beyond its social construct and look at its material essence, which is the stylistic integrity and sonic manifestation. However, these opposing views of highlife as a social construct or material essence have just been a mere *pep-talk* without any practical direction. This reveals a lacuna in the conceptual framework of highlife music that transcends the diverse stylistic trends.

I want to emphasise that the pioneering works on highlife music by scholars such as John Collins, David Coplan, Peter Manuel, and Austin Emielu, among others, are valuable references. However, various research and publications on highlife music reflect their historical and sociological dimensions, as stated in the preceding paragraphs. The analytical study of highlife's compositional and stylistic structure is still embryonic; hence, studies so far (Acquah et al., 2021; Aidoo, 2014; Coffie, 2012, 2018, 2019, 2020; Coffie et al., 2020; Marfo, 2016) are commendable but inadequate. It is worth noting that the diverse highlife stylistic trends have declined in musical works recently due to generational differences and tastes. As a result, modern-day highlife compositions sound similar and, in some cases, the same. Despite its iconicity in Ghanaian popular music, it is also quite surprising that highlife music still struggles for compositional and theoretical relevance in Ghanaian academic programmes of schools, colleges and universities (Konu et al., 2022). Therefore, a framework for the structural and theoretical trajectory for highlife music transcending the diverse stylistic trends to fill the above lacuna is *sine qua non* for Ghanaian music scholarship and industry. To this end, theories, concepts, and literature relevant to highlife music were reviewed to conceptualise a framework



for practitioners to create works that transcend generational differences and tastes in highlife music.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study proceeds from interculturalism, transculturation, social reconstructionism and *Sankofa* (go back and retrieve), indigenous knowledge, and expression. These cross-cultural phenomena became the theoretical foundation of this study. In addition, I discuss indigenous creative resources and synthesise the diverse highlife stylistic trends to develop the conceptual framework for creating trans-generational highlife music. The framework was conceptualised within the big-band highlife tradition due to its geographical popularity. Also, it subsumes the other highlife traditions due to its relatively sizable instrumental structure. Hence, the term 'Neoclassic Big-Band Highlife Music Conceptual Framework'.

Interculturalism

Interculturalism has increased in focus in the past decades and has been used in diverse disciplines, such as the social and political sciences (Loobuyck, 2016; Bouchard, 2011; Cantle, 2012; Meer & Modood, 2012). However, many scholars define interculturalism based on the goals they hope to achieve. Consequently, there is no generally accepted definition of interculturalism. Previous studies (Barrett, 2013; Meer et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2006; Rattansi, 2011; Taylor, 2012; Goodhart, 2013) have attempted to define interculturalism as a cross-cultural interaction by its inherent assimilation qualities. Nonetheless, this definition usually emphasises other aspects of culture with less or no attention to music. It is worth noting that I am not attempting to contribute to any more ambitious generalised definition of interculturalism. However, I will deduce what other scholars have defined as interculturalism concerning interaction, identity flexibility and unity across cultural differences. Appropriating interculturalism to music, Kimberlin and Euba (1995) outlined three categories of intercultural activity: *thematic, acquired and performance*. In the thematic intercultural activity, the composer belongs to one of the hybrid music cultures. Unlike the thematic, in the acquired intercultural activity, the composer borrows or uses idioms from cultures other than their own. Finally, in the intercultural performance activity, the performer and the music are from two cultures. Several Ghanaian scholar-composers have recently employed interculturalism and other musical composition theories to create novel works. One is tempted to mention (Acquah, 2018; Addaquay, 2020; Adzei, 2008; Agbeve, 2021; Agbodza-Gbekle, 2019; Amoah, 2020; Ansah, 2009; Dodoo, 2016; Ferguson, 2013; Mensah, 2012; Nantwi, 2014; Oduro, 2015; Sackey, 2017; Taylor, 2021; Twumasi, 2013). The scholar-composers mentioned above usually explore the rhythms in traditional drum music, tonal practices of indigenous vocal music, and folksongs, which they superimposed with their Western-acquired compositional techniques. Moreover, these scholarly compositions are either orchestral or choral art music. Unsurprisingly, some scholars attribute interculturalism to art music (Sadoh, 2004; Lwanga, 2013; Boamah, 2007, 2012). However, this view has been contested by (Coffie, 2019; Squinobal, 2018; Strazzullo, 2003) in that popular musical genres, such as Highlife, Jazz, Rumba, Juju, Kwela, Pachanga, and Mbalax, are intercultural music.

Interestingly, Euba (1993) argued that contemporary interculturalism in Africa is part of an overall twentieth-century African experience and is not limited to neo-African art music. It embraces practically all aspects of African musical life, such as traditional, Christian, Islamic, and popular music. Euba outlines four categories of neo-African Art music in support of his



argument:

- Composers whose works are predominantly Western in idiom with little or no reference to African elements.
- Composers whose works are Western in idiom and instrumentation but borrow thematic materials from African sources.
- Composers whose works are equally African and Western in elements and idioms.
- Composers whose works are predominantly African idioms with little or no reference to Western elements.

Appropriating Akin Euba's concept of categorising neo-African art music into African popular music, it is evident that highlife music is also a twentieth-century African experience (Coffie, 2012). Therefore, the second category, which aligns with the thematic intercultural activity, is preferred when conceptualising the framework.

Transculturation

Transculturation, a cross-cultural phenomenon, has been widely explored in the social and political sciences to explain peoples' cross-cultural experiences. It was pioneered by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940 in opposition to the term acculturation by USA anthropologists in 1936 to identify the transformative process where a new phenomenon brings out cultures converging and merging (Ortiz, 1995). Fernando Ortiz viewed acculturation as a radical dominance of a major culture over a minor one. In contrast, transculturation encourages the coexistence of cultures. Over the years, several scholars have attempted to modify Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation. For instance, Hollowell (1972, p. 206) defined transculturation as:

The process whereby individuals under various circumstances are temporarily or permanently detached from one group, enter the web of social relations that constitute another society and come under the influence of its customs, ideas, and values to a greater or lesser degree.

This concept has been reechoed in scholarly works by Taylor (1991) and Allatson (2007). Hollowell's concept of transculturation, however, implies a possibility of permanently losing one's native culture in the process of interaction with other cultures. Quite different from Hollowell's concept of transculturation, Huffman (2008, p. 147) viewed transculturation as the process by which an individual can enter and interact in another culture's milieu without losing the person's native cultural identity and ways.

Adopting this theory for the framework, I draw on Huffman's concept of transculturation. I refer cultures to the various Ghanaian highlife music traditions, such as *classic big-bands* and *guitar bands*, *burger highlife* and *modern-era highlife bands*. Drawing on my experiences as a highlife music practitioner, I was enculturated in the burger and modern-era highlife bands. But, more so, I was exposed to the classic big-band and guitar bands through my encounter with highlife greats, such as Ebo Taylor, Stan Plange, Kwadwo Donkoh, Bob Pinodo, C.K. Mann, Ralph Karikari, A.B. Crentsil, Paapa Yankson, Jewel Ackah, Gyedu-Blay Ambolley



and Pat Thomas as a bass player. Hence, resources should be selectively borrowed from the diverse highlife music traditions in conceptualising the framework.

Social Reconstructionism

Social Reconstructionism theory, founded by Theodore Brameld, an American educator, has received widespread attention in educational scholarship (Brameld, 1956; Cohen, 1999; Curtis, 2010; Haindel, 2018; Hill, 2006; Kneller, 1964). It is a philosophical stance that views education as an agent of social change. It is usually focused on addressing societal issues, such as what is wrong and attempting to see how it can be improved. Also, it may be referred to as a remedy for a society that seeks to build a more objective social order. As an educational philosophy, educators also emphasise a curriculum that encourages social reforms as its aim. Emielu (2011), in his seminal work, *Some Theoretical Perspectives on African Popular Music*, employed the social reconstructionism theory to highlight the stylistic diversity of highlife music and African popular music in general. In this regard, Emielu explained the cyclical and progressive nature of social reconstructionism, which proceeds other processes, such as social construction and deconstruction. Referring to highlife music, Emielu postulated that the reconstruction stage combines the new and old stylistic musical features in proportions that represent new musical and social meanings into the product, as there is an attempt to redefine the social construct in new stylistic and social terms (Emielu, 2011). Similarly, Fiagbedzi (2019) employed the social reconstructionism theory to assess the development and sustainability of *bɔbɔbɔ*, a neotraditional dance music from the Volta Region of Ghana. Considering Emielu (2011) and Fiagbedzi (2019), their interest was in unravelling and explaining musical genre trends but not developing a framework to create a musical product using the social reconstructionism theory. In adopting this theory for the framework, I view highlife music as a society and attempt to reconstruct the declining stylistic trends over the years. To this end, the *old* and *new* trends of highlife were selectively assembled in proportions, as Emielu (2011) postulated, to develop a conceptual framework within which new music products that transcend generational tastes can be created.

Sankofa Concept

Sankofa is an indigenous knowledge and expression in *Akan* parlance in Ghana, meaning go back and retrieve. It also suggests that traditional practices and resources of value, suppressed and abandoned during colonial times, must be revitalised and recontextualised. As Blanton (2015, p. 17) blatantly puts it: “It is a Ghanaian symbol that reflects the motivation to reconnect with the cultural past of Africa as a way to move forward”. The Sankofa concept was exemplified by Ephraim Amu, a Ghanaian art music composer and Koo Nimo, a Ghanaian folkloric guitarist. According to Ephraim Amu’s daughter, Misonu Amu, her father once argued that “there is no harm in embracing good things of other cultures that have universal value, but by all means, we should keep the best on our own” (Amu, 1988, p. x). Therefore, Ephraim Amu exemplified this concept in his composition *tete wɔ bi ka, tete wɔ bi kyere* (heritage has lots to say, heritage has lots to teach), where he used Western-styled harmony over rhythms in African cultures. Expressing a similar view on highlife music, Koo Nimo averred that “we should move but be guided by what we have” (Collins, 1994, p. 127). Hence, he fused the indigenous highlife guitar rhythms with Spanish and Latin American music (Afro-Spanish) style with arpeggios. In conceptualising the framework, indigenous resources of value relegated to the background due to technological advancement were retrieved for revitalisation and recontextualisation.



Indigenous Creative Resources

Notably, the developmental stages of highlife also came with exploring folktales, folk songs, myths and legends as their creative resources (Brempong, 2010). Prominent musicians and bands such as *Tempos*, *Black Beats*, *Ramblers*, *Broadway*, *Uhuru*, *Osibisa*, *E.K. Nyame's*, *Kwabena Onyina's*, *Kwaa Mensah's* and *Kakaiku's* guitar bands projected Ghana on the 'world music' map with the exploration of indigenous resources in their compositions around the 1950s to 1970s (Coffie, 2012). Interestingly, *Ramblers Dance Band*, for instance, was the first highlife big-band to have employed the *atenteben* (indigenous bamboo flute) in their music (Marfo, 2016). This innovation, however, coupled with the efforts of neotraditional bands, such as the *Pan-African Orchestra* and *Hewale Soundz*, have recontextualised the *atenteben* from an Akan 'funeral' musical instrument to a 'trans-ethnic' musical instrument. In a related innovation, the *Bigshots Band*, a modern highlife big-band, as observed by Coffie (2018), broke the colonising force of Western instruments in their composition, *Too Ke Aduŋ* (goat & monkey). In this composition, indigenous instruments, such as *gyil* (indigenous xylophone), *atenteben* (indigenous bamboo flute), *tsoŋshi* (indigenous palm drums), *shakashaka* (rattle) and *ŋoŋo* (single bell) were employed with Western instruments, such as keyboard, guitar, bass, drum set and horns in a proportional manner. In contrast to the indigenous instrumental resources, highlife greats, such as Ebo Taylor, Eddie Quansah, Gyedu-Blay Ambolley, A.B. Crentsil, Pat Thomas, and Bessa Simons have also attempted to explore indigenous children's rhymes and games as creative resources. They do this by setting the rhythmic speeches of the children's rhymes and games directly to an instrumental accompaniment without an underlying melody. Also, portions of the rhymes and games are sometimes employed in the compositions as *hooks* to get a listener's attention.

Recently, Ghanaian highlife musicians have seemed to be over-reliant on Western musical cultures. Surprisingly, despite Ghana's cultural diversity, modern Ghanaian highlife musicians have underutilised indigenous resources as creative elements. Nana Kobina Nketsia V, Chief of Esikado Traditional Area, lamented in his keynote speech on *The Future of Highlife* at a conference in Cape Coast in 2009. He bemoans the influx of foreign music cultures in Ghana. As a result, some highlife musicians copy Western musicians, ultimately neglecting the rich compositional forms that emanate from their tradition. Gyedu-Blay Ambolley, a veteran highlife musician, as quoted in Coffie (2020, p. 23), similarly claimed that "we are losing the cultural elements in our music that identify our sound as African is negatively affecting the country's youth". Ambolley's claim is understandable because modern-day recorded highlife songs rarely employ indigenous resources. Considering the views of Nana Kobina Nketsia V and Gyedu-Blay Ambolley, there seems to be a general perception that the influx of Western cultures has made Ghanaian highlife music quite unpopular in recent times. However, the challenge of modern Ghanaian popular musicians concerning the development of highlife music is not necessarily the influx of Western musical cultures. It is worth noting that the influx of Western musical cultures has been with Africans since the early 19th century (Collins, 2005). Hence, modern Ghanaian popular musicians' underutilisation of indigenous resources can be attributed to the lack of local role model musicians that will help and encourage Ghanaian youth to employ indigenous resources in their music (Collins, 2001).

As an undergraduate students' original composition supervisor at the Department of Music Education, University of Education, Winneba, I have observed how student-composers grapple with highlife composition and arranging. These student-composers often try to recycle existing



highlife compositions or sample notable themes in existing highlife compositions. This, somehow, suggests the lack of knowledge about the availability of creative resources for exploration and conceptual framework by these student-composers. Highlife is trans-ethnic and transnational music. Therefore, as practitioners struggle for identity to attain global recognition, a framework that will assist highlife composers to explore indigenous resources in their works is germane.

Stylistic Trends in Ghanaian Highlife Music (1950s – 2000s)

Collins (2005, 2018) traced the social history of Ghanaian popular music from the 1880s up to the 2000s. He discussed the various stylistic trends of highlife and highlighted notable Ghanaian popular musicians and their contributions to developing the different styles of highlife music. It is worth commenting that this work has contributed to the periodisation of the changing trends of highlife and the sociological factors that accounted for them. However, the author glossed over the definitive stylistic framework of the musical trends, that is, the creation of the music. It is common knowledge that highlife has become a generic name for popular music forms in Ghana. Also, the term ‘highlife’ gravitates more towards the big-band highlife tradition. This phenomenon is probably because the term ‘highlife’ coinage could be traced to the symphonic dance orchestras of the 1900s (Bender, 1991; Coester, 2008; Coffie, 2012; Collins, 1994; 2016; Emielu, 2009). In the following paragraphs, the reader is provided with a comprehensive overview of the developmental stylistic trends of highlife music, emphasising the distinctive features of the various highlife styles of the 1950s–2000s rather than a detailed discussion of individual treatises. For this reason, a comprehensive sociological background of the different highlife styles will not be discussed since scholars such as (Bender, 1991; Collins, 1994, 2005, 2016, 2018; Coffie, 2020; Coplan, 1978; Emielu, 2009; Manuel, 1988; Doe, 2013) have done extensive work on that. It is worth noting that pundits in the field might view the terms dance band and big-band as the same. Therefore, throughout this study, the term ‘big-band’ is used for consistency and the breadth of its terminological umbrella. Also, the term big-band is used deliberately instead of dance band because highlife is generally dance-oriented music; hence, referring to one style as a dance band may suggest that the other styles are not dance-oriented. Finally, modern highlife bands are referred to as highlife bands from the 1990s until now.

Big-Band Highlife Music

While it is plausible that highlife has recently become a generic name for other forms of popular music in Ghana, the name can be attributed to the big-band tradition pioneered by E.T. Mensah and the Tempos Band of Ghana. The big-band tradition is generally regarded as the core of the highlife genre because of its wide geographical spread and popularity (Emielu, 2009). The highlife big-bands evolved from dance orchestras (Coffie, 2012; Collins, 2016). They were primarily a product of war when the Allied British and American troops introduced the swing variety of jazz music to Ghana. Allied army musicians stationed in Accra, the capital city of Ghana during the Second World War, made swing music popular in Ghana. In 1940, Jack Leopard, a Scottish Sergeant in the British Army, formed an interracial band called *Black & White Spots* to entertain the soldiers (Collins, 2018). The Black & White Spots performed swing and ballroom music mainly at British and American Army Camps. It is worth stating that swing music became the first significant influence on the big-bands of the 1950s. The band’s interracial nature helped Ghanaian musicians develop their musicianship in the context of Western music. E.T. Mensah, highlife big-band pioneer, then a member of the Black &

White Spots, narrates: “It was Sergeant Leopard who taught us the correct methods of intonation, vibrato, tonguing and breath control, which contributed to placing us above the average standard in town” (Collins, 2016, p. 47). Around the 1940s, another band emerged similar to the Black & White Spots called Tempos, which E.T. Mensah later became the leader. The Black & White Spots and the Tempos band were smaller than the pre-war dance orchestras, patterned as they were after the ballroom and swing-era *big-bands*. The horns section is predominant in swing music; hence, highlife big-bands adopted this feature, which became the most prominent characteristic trait. Big-bands of the 1950s usually comprised three horns (trumpet, trombone, sax), guitar, upright bass, trap set, and vocals. The figure below shows E.T. Mensah’s Tempos Band around the 1950s.



Figure 1: Tempos Band of the 1950s. Source: John Collins

The 1960s highlife big-bands, in contrast to the 1950s, had a more extensive horns section with sophisticated arrangements. The horns section uses advanced harmonies due to bands prioritising musicians with solid music theory backgrounds (Coffie, 2012). For instance, some of the prominent highlife big-band composers and arrangers of the 1960s, such as Ebo Taylor, Stan Plange and Joe Mensah, were trained abroad. While Ebo Taylor studied music at Eric Gilder School of Music in the UK, Stan Plange and Joe Mensah studied music at Berklee College of Music and Julliard School of Music (USA), respectively, crediting the above assertion. The 1960s is usually considered the classic era of the highlife big-band tradition among practitioners and patrons. More so, it was in the 1960s that the term *big-band* became relevant in that the combo size bands of the 1950s gave way to bigger bands. For instance, while the 1950s bands used three horns, the 1960s used six or more horns, further entrenching the horns section’s prominence. The figures below show Jerry Hansen’s Ramblers and Uhuru Dance Bands.



Figure 2: Ramblers Dance Band of the 1960s. Source: Peter Marfo



Figure 3: Uhuru Dance Band of 1960. Source: Nate Plageman - Information Services Department of Ghana Photograph Library

Guitar Band Highlife Music

The guitar band, one of the highlife stylistic trends, has less Western influence and evolved from Akan musical types, such as *Osoode*, *Asiko*, *Osibi*, *ɔdɔnsɔn*, and *Sikiyi*. The highlife guitar band transitioned from palm wine music, which employed acoustic instruments, such as guitar, claves, castanet, *prempresiwa* (lamellophone or thumb piano), and *tamalin* (wooden-framed drum). The guitar band style emerged when E.K. Nyame, a guitar band highlife great, merged the palm wine and concert party (Ghanaian comic opera) traditions. Before that, E.K. Nyame introduced congas and bongos (Afro-Cuban percussion), jazz drums and upright bass, which were influences from the big-band tradition into his band (Akan Trio) in 1951 (Collins, 2018). This innovation by E.K. Nyame marks the first developmental phase of the highlife guitar band tradition. As a result, E.K. Nyame's band became a prototype for bands such as Appiah

Adjekum's, Kwaa Mensah's, Kakaiku's and Kwabena Onyina's guitar bands. It is worth stating that the guitar bands before the 1970s did not employ horns and keyboards, and one significant difference between the highlife guitar band and the big-band is the prominence of the guitar in the guitar bands and the horns in the big-bands. However, around the 1970s, horns and keyboards were introduced to highlife guitar bands. This addition was credited to Dr. K. Gyasi and his Noble Kings Band (Collins, 1994). As a result, it became a model for highlife guitar bands, such as Akwasi Ampofo Adjei's Kumapim Royals, Nana Ampadu's African Brothers, Kofi Sammy's Okukuseku and K. Frimpong's Cubano Fiester. In contrast to the 1960s' highlife big-band classism, the 1970s can be considered the classic highlife guitar band era. In this era, the guitar bands assumed the instrumental resources of the big-bands; however, they had fewer horns than the big-bands. It is worth noting that introducing the horns into the guitar bands sometimes blurs the distinctive features of the two musical traditions. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, the big-band horn section arrangements were more sophisticated, with advanced harmonies. Also, the complexity of the guitar, bass and drum patterns of the guitar bands in this era cannot be overemphasised. The figure below shows Nana Ampadu's African Brothers International Band.



Figure 4: African Brothers International Band. Source: Hyperlink Africa

Afro-fusion Band Highlife Music (The Era of Experimentation)

Around the late 1960s to 1980s, Ghanaian popular musicians and bands began fusing highlife with other popular music forms, such as *Soul*, *Rock*, *Funk* and *Disco* music. Thus, other forms of highlife music emerged in this era, such as *Afro-rock*, *Afro-jazz*, *Funky Highlife* and *Burger highlife*. Similarly, bands like *Osibisa*, *Sweet Beans*, *Sweet Talks*, *Pelikans*, *Boombaya*, *Brukutu*, *Sawaaba Sounds*, and *Bus Stop Bands* were formed during this era (Collins, 1994; 2005; 2018). The distinctive feature of this era is that the music became funky, which was evident in the drums and bass patterns. Burger highlife, for instance, became more synthesised due to technological advancement; hence, live instruments were usually compromised to sound

synthetic and, sometimes, substituted with synthesisers. Notwithstanding, the sikyi timeline and indigenous guitar patterns were ever-present. Before this era, bass players employed melodic-rhythmic templates for their bass lines, which did not require ‘serious’ creative thinking and ability. However, in this era, bass players personalised their bass lines, which became a distinguishing feature in recognising specific highlife songs. Around this same period, the neotraditional highlife style emerged due to the *Ga* cultural revival, with the Wulomei group pioneering this style. Subsequently, other ensembles, such as the *Blemabii*, *Dzadzɛɔi*, *Abladei*, *Kudɔɔi* and *Hedzɔleh* modelled on this style (Webb, 2011). The neotraditional highlife style leans towards the guitar band tradition; indigenous drums like *gome* (wooden-framed drum) and *tsoɲshi* (palm drum) were used instead of the jazz drum set. It is worth emphasising that the emergence of these new highlife forms in this era does not mean the classic big-bands and guitar bands of previous periods are nonexistent. It is just that these new forms became the dominant trend while the big-band and guitar band traditions declined. The figures below show Sweet Talks and Wulomei Bands.



Figure 5: Sweet Talks Band. Source: AfricOriginal



Figure 6: Wulomei Band. Source: Graphic Online

Modern Band Highlife Music

It is instructive to note that the classic big-band and guitar band highlife traditions declined around the late 1970s due to political instability in Ghana, which emerged the *burger* highlife style in the 1980s. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, this highlife style is highly computerised compared to the classic big-band and guitar band due to technological advancement (Coffie, 2020; Collins, 2018). As a result, live instruments such as drums, guitars, bass and horns were usually substituted with synthesisers. Following the burger highlife era was the modern highlife band music in Ghana around the 1990s. Bands such as *Western Diamonds*, *Gold Nuggets*, *NAKOREX*, *Marriots*, *Megastar* and *Ozimzim* were the architects of the modern band highlife music as an attempt to revive and continue the legacy of the classic big-bands. However, economic reasons and the lack of big-band arrangers were a challenge to these bands in reviving the big-band highlife tradition. Hence, modern band highlife music of the 1990s–2000s blended the big-band and guitar band traditions of the 1950s and 1960s. The instrumental structure of modern Ghanaian highlife bands is no different from the classic big-band and guitar bands. It is just that modern highlife bands rarely employ more than three horns in the instrumental structure. In addition, the modern band highlife music uses fewer or no synthesisers than *burger highlife*. For instance, *Evergreen*, *Oguaaman International*, *West Coast Ebusua*, *Hi Skul*, *Patch Bay*, and *Afro Harmony*, among other bands, sustained this modern band's highlife style. However, interestingly, bands such as *Local Dimension*, *Bigshots*, *Weku Kronkron*, *Native Afrik* and *Santrofi* are recently becoming more Afrocentric in their sound by including indigenous African instruments, such as *gyil* (xylophone), *atumpan* (talking drums), *donno* (hourglass drum), *seperewa* (harp-lute), *atenteben* (bamboo flute) and *mbira* (lamellophone) in their instrumental resources. In contrast, other bands, like *Nkyinkyin*, *Groove*, *Dark Suburb* and *FRA*, are becoming more synthetic sonically by employing synthesisers, such as Sampling Pad Demo (SPD drum pad), sequencers and loops in their

instrumental resources as a modern trend. The figures below show Western Diamonds, Bigshots, Santrofi, Nkyinkyin, and the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) Pop Bands.



Figure 7: Western Diamonds Band Source: The Band's Facebook Page



Figure 8: Ghana Bigshots Band. Source: Video Screenshot



Figure 9: Santrofi Band. Source: Free Press



Figure 10: Nkyinkyin Band. Source: Video Screenshot



Figure 11: UEW Pop Band. Source: Edward Quansah

The Conceptual Framework for Neoclassic Big-Band Highlife Music

The main thrust of this study is to develop a definitive stylistic framework that transcends the diverse highlife traditions based on indigenous and Western musical resources. Therefore, upon reviewing the literature on theories and concepts related to highlife and drawing on my experiences as a highlife practitioner and music educator, the neoclassic big-band conceptual framework was developed, as shown in the figure below. This framework will guide composers who wish to borrow resources selectively from diverse highlife traditions to create trans-generational highlife music.

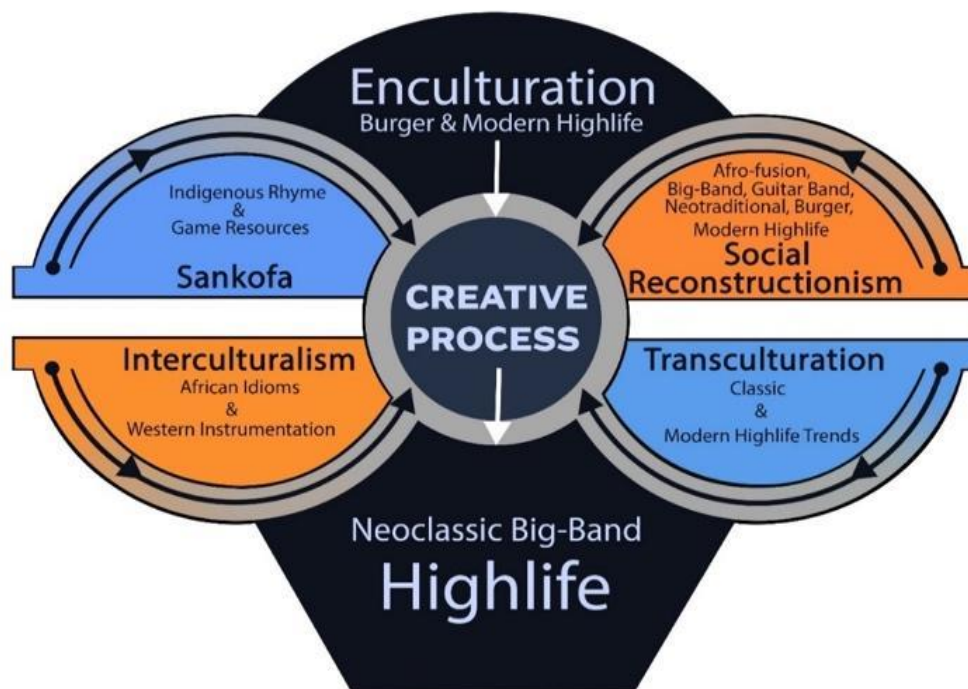


Figure 12: Neoclassic Big-Band Highlife Music Conceptual Framework (Coffie, 2023)

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to shed light on the various perspectives on highlife music as a social construct or material essence. Highlife stylistic trends have declined, depriving highlife lovers of various options. Considering the reviewed related literature, one can infer that Ghana's highlife music appears at a crossroads; the many stylistic trends have become a quagmire to modern composers. As a result, creativity is usually left at the mercy of studio programmers who replicate the same ideas for different artists, thereby making modern-day highlife works sound similar and, in some cases, the same. Hence, the conceptual framework will help revive declining highlife stylistic trends. Practitioners can either compose highlife style-specific or selectively borrow from the diverse highlife stylistic trends to create highlife music transcending generational tastes. Finally, it will be the *game-changer* in making highlife music exportable for global appeal and consumption. Therefore, it is not just a recommendation but a call to action for Music composition professors to adopt this conceptual framework as a blueprint to begin a taught course on 'Highlife Music Composition' in music institutions. The involvement of Music composition professors in this process is crucial to enhancing the structural and theoretical trajectory of highlife music.



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