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Tonality and Atonality of Speech Surrogacy as Resource for African Pianism

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Abstract
While a good portion of African traditional music exists in the song idiom, a sizable part of the music of indigenous Africa is expressed in the speech mode, seen predominantly in drums and other instruments performance. The resultant effect of speech mode in Indigenous African instrumental music is known as speech surrogacy, which is the utilising of musical instruments to communicate like in spoken words. This paper investigates the aspect of pitch organisation, within the context of tonality and atonality, in 'Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá', an ensemble piece by the author, in which the piano plays a prominent role, within the principles of African pianism and makes use of speech mode as it exists in *Dùndún* tradition. Through the analysis of the case study piece, the extensive use of speech surrogacy in the piano part score and the process through which tonality and atonality lend credence to the 'traditionalisation' of the piano as a modern African instrument – a practice now known as 'African Pianism' is discussed. This paper ultimately presents the potential in the tonality and atonality of speech surrogacy as a tonal resource cardinal to evolving a viable model in African pianism.

Introduction

This study aims to explore the aspect of pitch organisation within the context of tonality and atonality, using 'Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá', a 2015 ensemble piece by the author, in which the piano plays a prominent role, to demonstrate the use of speech surrogacy in compositions for piano, and the process through which tonality and atonality lend credence to the 'traditionalisation' of the piano as a modern African instrument. This is executed within the principles of "African pianism", which was coined by Euba (1970), as a symbolic cross-cultural conceptualisation entailing the usage of processes and resources germane to African music in piano compositions (Euba, 1970). African pianism, as it were, has been confined to the academic realms, where it is treated as a kind of 'new music' similar to the one-and-a-half century-year-old avante-garde classical music. There has emerged a need to channel ways for African pianism to be taken outside the four walls of the ivory tower and propagate it to the larger population of 'Street pianists (for want of a better appellation). This study is one of the necessary endeavours toward achieving this necessity.

Composing modern African art music for the piano or, indeed, any other instrument of non-African origin using the resource of speech surrogacy is a daunting task. Firstly, the challenge rears its head in the fact that speech surrogacy, or the function of using musical instruments to speak, as it were in African traditional music, exists at an elaborate dimension (Durojaye et al., 2021; González & Oludare, 2022), especially in comparison to the cultures in which the piano or other such instrument of non-African origin emanate. Much as it can be argued that speech surrogacy does exist in some form, in

European music, for example, it mostly occurs in declamatory speech-song format, which is sung by the human voice; other semblances of 'instruments and words' is that in which the instrument 'sings'.

With a preponderance of drums and other percussion instruments, the dominance of rhythm is observable in the music of sub-Saharan Africa (Chernoff, 1991). Therefore, we must see the importance of rhythm in speech surrogacy and how both elements can be understood in the context of the African traditional society. "*Rhythm* in African music has attained the level of a *language* all its own" (Sexton 2007: 1). Rhythm is significantly externalised on the drums of Africa; however, the drum concept in African culture is multifaceted. Being a critical part of African music, rhythm is not seen solely as music and entertainment; the musical-aesthetic feature represents only a part of African music.

In addition to the inherent complexity of speech surrogacy - due to its tonal and rhythmic demands, the modern African art music composer faces the added challenge of navigating between tonality and atonality. The decision on which direction to pursue becomes crucial in ensuring the effective use of this musical resource. As we know, speech surrogacy, or speech mode, is mostly (in African music) not equivalent to singing in actual song mode. Surrogacy is *mostly* externalised on the drums in African traditional music, and it appears mainly in the form of "Direct speech form (heightened speech in free rhythm without musical attributes); Musical speech form (heightened speech in strict rhythm) . . ." (Euba 1970: 191-192). The forging of an effective balance of the synthesis of ideas and sounds (African and Western) on the piano with the resource at hand constitutes a pickle. It requires ingenuity on the composer's part to resolve.

Superficially observing African traditional music, tonality reigns, mainly as vocal African traditional music is dominated by songs (which are tonal) in the human voice performance (Agawu, 2003). However, looking closely, one perceives speech surrogacy as inherently mostly atonal in concept and execution. The very definition of the element 'speech surrogacy' denotes that spoken word, as with the human voice, is proxied on musical instruments, not in song format but in actual talking mode. Hence, you have the 'talking drums' dispersed all over Africa, especially the sub-Saharan regions, in one form or another. Actual speaking, as we know it, even with the tonal languages of Africa, is not set to particular musical tones of a scale as in a song. So, imitating speech on the instruments also does not follow a song scale structure. It is, instead, a more 'un-tonal' method that seeks to mimic actual speech intonation by observing approximated pitch distances in highs and lows of words (Ekwueme, 2001; Ofosu & Ofosu). The point here is that the drums, taking a critical part in all their ramifications in African music and with the talking of instruments, intercoursing with the rhythms in the music of Africa, atonality, (perhaps) at the same level as tonality, can very much be argued to be part and parcel of African traditional music.

The argument in the preceding paragraph is crucial because the concept of atonality has often been thought to be wholly a European development when, in fact, tonality or atonality is neither characteristically Western nor African. The idioms of tonality and otherwise actually do exist in both culture spaces. Tonality exists in African songs, while atonality, as it were, exists in the tone systems and usages of African drums, as graphically analysed in Euba's ' Yorùbá drumming' (Euba, 1990). Conversely, the West existed in the music before Schoenberg's breakaway and subsequently in his departure, with the twelve-tone and serial system(s). Some clarification here would be that "there is a concept of tone row in the African sense other than in the Western sense, it stands to reason that any African composer who adopts atonality as a means of giving his work an African identity must approach it well equipped with this knowledge." (Uzoigwe 2005: 108).

The harmonic and chord structure logic presents further challenges, especially in chiselling an appropriate sound and identity in an African Art music composition of the speech surrogacy

dimension. On this issue, Halim El Dabh piques says, ". . . Chordal progression has the power to eat up melodic invention and rhythmic fluidity" (Seachrist 2002: 78). Here, he refers to the starting fact, or at least he conjectures that African music, even though having chords (which in simplicity, is a combination of definite tones), does not have chord *progressions*. In describing the chordal capacities of the Dùndún ensemble, Euba similarly referred to shadow chords and static harmony in 'Yorùbá drumming'. 'Shadow' in the sense that "In practice, the full chord is never heard from a single attack . . ." and 'static' because ". . . one cannot speak of a harmonic *progression* as such. The pitch restrictions of individual instruments correspondingly limit harmonic progression" (Euba 1990: 271,272).

For the modern African art musician who desires an answer to this question, Uzoigwe suggests a direction to the problem of tone selection to the composer of African Pianism, using speech surrogacy writing.

> Similarly for composers of modern African music to create an African identity in their works, they should derive their tonal patterns, as well as rhythmic patterns, mainly from two contrasting sources: one which is influenced by the speech tone patterns of words and the other which can follow the logic of musical discourse (Uzoigwe 2005: 104).

In speaking to the issue of tonality in African pianism or of speech surrogacy in particular, neither Euba, Uzoigwe, nor Nketia (not to say these are the only authorities on African pianism, though) expressly endorses going in the direction of tonality as against atonality, or vice versa. To create vibrant compositions under the African pianism umbrella, and especially utilising the resource of speech surrogacy, I would suggest a thorough understanding of music, especially of the pianistic technique dimension, and a close study of the musical techniques and cultural sensibilities and ideations of indigenous African cultures, with a good dose of perceptive creative thinking. That way, compositions would not lack in creation, performance, and consumption (listening) interest, regardless of direction in tonality. Heinrich Neuhaus talks of the triple nature of performance, stating that "Every performance … consists of three fundamental elements: the work performed (the music), the performer, and the instrument. Only a complete mastery of these three elements (and first of all the music) can ensure a good artistic performance" (Neuhaus 1993: 17).

African Pianism is a cross-cultural conceptualisation which entails the conversion and usage of inherent processes and resources germane to African music in compositions for the piano. Euba further defines African Pianism, saying

> . . . I identified some of the ingredients of African pianism as (a) thematic repetition (b) direct borrowings of thematic material (rhythmical and/or tonal) from African traditional sources (c) the use of rhythmical and or tonal motifs which, although not borrowed from specific traditional sources, are based on traditional idioms (d) percussive treatment of the piano (Euba 1989a: 152). I later added a fifth ingredient, namely "making the piano 'behave' like African instruments (Euba 1999: 9).

One of the principal 'behaviours' of African instruments is acting out or dwelling in their speech mode, in other words, their speaking function. Since speech mode is a consistent feature of traditional rhythm and percussion all over sub-Saharan Africa, it is therefore, in line with Euba's prescription for the workings of African pianism, also an inherent feature of African pianism.

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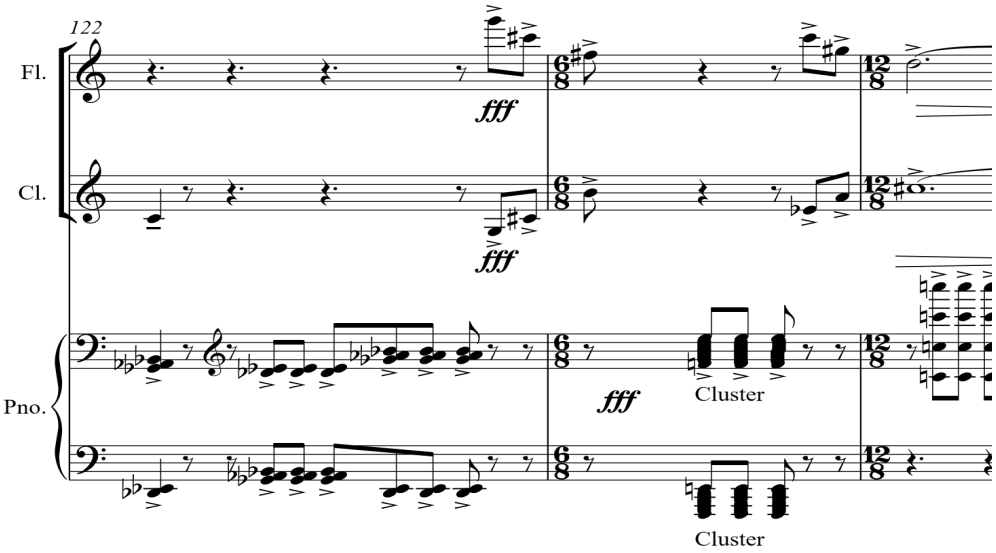
Techniques of African Pianism

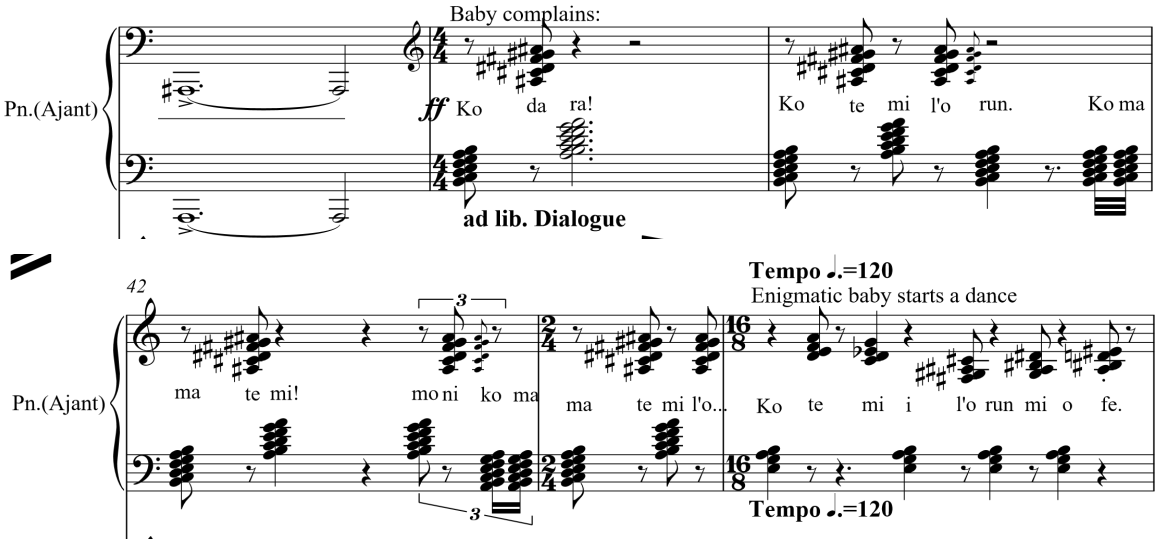
African Pianism would inherently mean using the African traditional music concepts, elements, characteristics, and ideations (speech surrogacy in this context) on the piano without necessarily using African traditional instruments, especially those to which the elements belong. Some of the methods and techniques employed in achieving speech surrogacy in modern African art compositions include:

1. *Cluster Chords*: The mostly indeterminate nature of standard speaking pitches makes cluster chords on the piano - of which possibilities of its realisation also exist in combinations of other instruments - a helpful resource in achieving speech surrogacy in modern African compositions. Examples are found in Oluranti's 'Trifecta Yorùbána' (example 1) and Seun Owoaje's 'Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá' (example 2).

Example 1: Trifecta Yorùbána

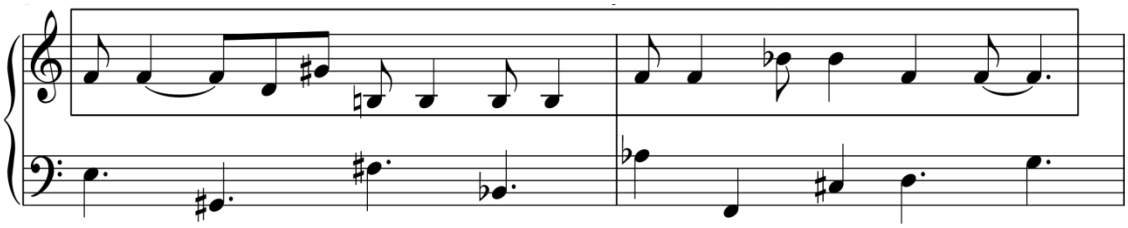


Example 2: Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá



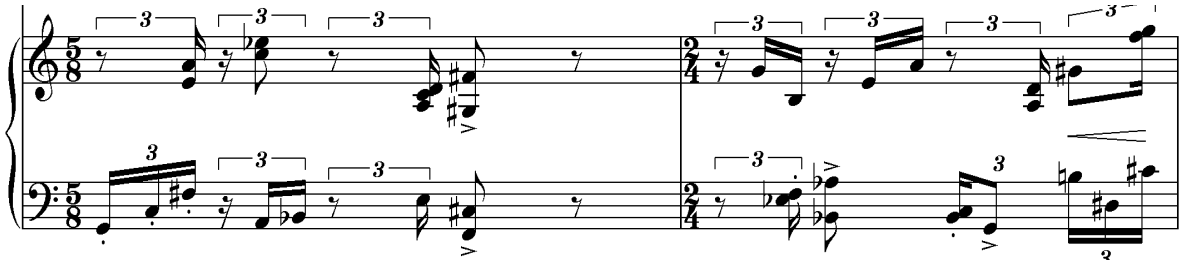
2. *Irregular rhythms, irregular time signatures, and intermittent metre changes*: Speech rhythm is not regulated as in a conventional song or dance. Consequently, close realisation of speech on instruments would entail extensive use of irregular rhythms, time signatures, and often intermittent metre changes. An example can be found in the last movement of Akin Euba's 'Five Pieces for English Horn and Piano'.
3. *Contortion:* Contortion of existing melodies or melodic ideas in the repertory to make them sound more speech-like. Representative of this device is Omojola's 'Agidimo Dance II'.

Example 3: Agidimo dance No II. (Contortion of Yorùbá traditional tune, 'Se l'ayò mi sèsè bèrè, mo d'olórí ire'.)



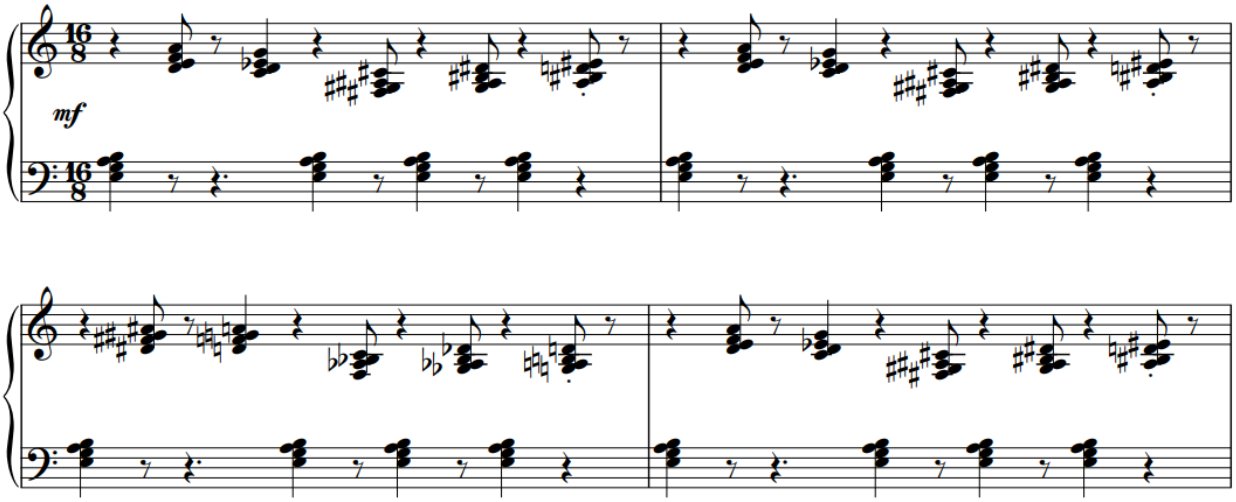
4. *Angular motion*: Angular melodic interval movements, of which a good example would be found in the second piece of Euba's 'Five pieces for English Horn and Piano' (measures 11-24, 27-28).

Example 4: Five pieces for English Horn and Piano



5. *Interlocking*: Interlocking of left hand and right hand on the piano. Àjàntálá's enigma dance (below) sets a good example of this.

Example 5: Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá'

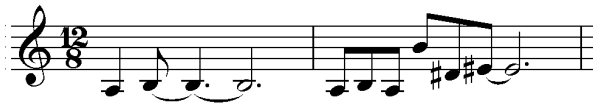


Analysis of 'Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá'

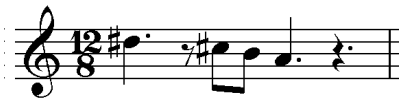
This section engages an analysis of 'Verse Dialogue with Ajantala', a composition by the author. It engages the structural outline, tonality, background to the piece, pre-compositional considerations, instrumentation, and instrumentation plan. It is essential to note the following:

1. Use of instruments to depict characters: Certain instruments are utilised to depict certain characters; for example, the piano plays Àjàntálá's part and individual wind instruments, and the viola plays the parts of specific animals. Also, instrument groups, such as the strings (violins, violas, cellos, and contra basses), depict character groups, such as the townspeople.
2. The use of 'Leitmotifs': Leitmotifs are used to announce the incoming, the presence, or the participation of specific characters in the narrative.

Example 6: Ìrágbèje's motif



Example 7: Secondary characters motif



Main Outline Structural/Melodic/Harmonic Facts

Rhythmic motif is based on the following figure:

[3+3+2 (8)] + [3+3+4 (10)] = 18

Melodic and harmonic structures are based on whole-tone intervallic relationships.

In Act III, motifs, ideas, etc. are essentially recaps and modifications of corresponding narratives, similar to those in Acts I and III.

A Background to 'Verve Dialogues with Àjàntálá'

The Àjàntálá narrative forms a portion of D. O. Fágúnwà's classic Yorùbá novel 'Ògbójú ode ní'nú igbó irúnmolè'. In addition to growing up with and reading Fágúnwà's original writing, I also went through Wole Soyinka's translation, 'Forest of a Thousand Daemons'. Therefore, some of my translations and conceptualising are based on Soyinka's translation of phrases. An example would be found in Soyinka's use of the phrase "each one of them had a rapid dialogue with their feet", which is a direct transliteration of the statement from the original novel "oníkúlùkù yára bá esè rè sòrò". To 'dialogue with your feet ('bá esè rè sòrò' in Yorùbá) means to run away or move away, usually from an unpleasant situation. In addition, I engaged my own Yorùbá to English translation of the entire Àjàntálá portion to have a deeper internalising of the narrative and the concepts and to occasionally give it a personal creative flavour and meaning.

Pre-compositional considerations

Form/Structure: Ternary. Modified Scherzo

There is a 'scherzorisation' of the Àjàntálá narrative i.e. the plot is initially broken down into Scherzo form which is an A B A (modified) form. Each portion of the narrative is progressively permutated to form a certain part of the scherzo.

Character: Playful/humorous, celebrative, aggressive, sombre

Outlook: Modern

Tonality: Modal/Pseudo-tonal/Whole tone

Duration in time: About 22 and a half minutes

Length in bars: 534 bars

Rhythm: Mostly irregular meters, also regular metres - 16/8 (compounded as 3+3+3+3+4), 11/8, 12/8, 13/8, 23/8, 9/8, 6/8, 4/4, 2/4, abundance of ad lib dialogue passages.

Tempo: Mostly Moderato and Allegro Moderato, i.e. 120 dotted crotchets/min. Occasionally Adagio, Andante, Maestoso and Presto.

Instrumentation

1. Speaking Narrator (speaks in words what Ìrágbèje tells in music)
2. Ìrágbèje (The Storyteller) - Kalimba (tells in music what the narrator speaks in words)
3. Àjàntálá – Piano
4. Ìyá Àjàntálá (Solo Viola)
5. Ewúré (Goat) - Algaita/oboe
6. Kìnìún (Lion) – Bassoon
7. Erin (Elephant) - Elephant tusk /Trombone
8. Ìkokò (Hyena) - Goje/Viola
9. Ekùn (Tiger) - Tuba
10. Ìyá'lù (accompanist/surrogate for Ìrágbèje)
11. Sèkèrè (Rhythmic accompaniment)

Audience/Respondents/People in the Narrative

The strings, as listed below played the role of the audience, respondents/people in the narrative:

1. Violin I (People group 1)
2. Violin II (People group 2)
3. Viola (People group 3)
4. Cello (People group 4)
5. Contra Bass (People group 5)

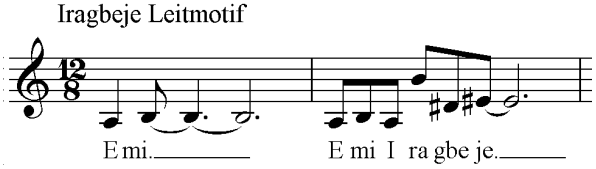
Instrumentation plan

Kalimba, being the narrator, speaks (plays) more than anyone else. Sometimes, he speaks in the background while others play out his narrative. At other times, he introduces and allows others to play out the narrative as he has started. He is often playful, so he employs rhythmically playful themes. He usually alludes to other characters' themes and motifs. Next in the length of speaking or playing is Àjàntálá being the principal actor. Strings represent the audience, both the audience listening to the narrator and general people in the plot as they interact with the main character(s).

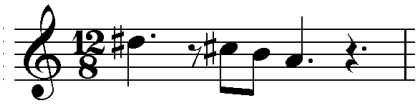
Detailed Analysis with a focus on tonality and piano part

Introduction to Act 1 Scene 1

Bars 1-3: Metre is 12/8. Ìrágbèje (The Storyteller) - Kalimba introduces himself with a motif that will serve as his motif and introduction throughout the work. The motif makes use of a whole-tone scale.

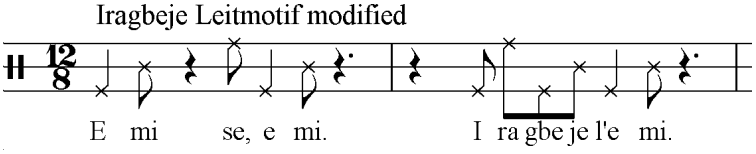


Bars 3-4: 1st Violins (People group 1) enter with a countersubject motif:



Bars 5-6: Violas, cellos, and basses (People groups 3, 4, and 5) join, repeating countersubject in lower octaves.

Bars 17-20: Ìyáàlù comes in with a modified Ìrágbèje (Kalimba) theme.



Ìrágbèje - Kalimba fully introduces himself as the one with a thousand tales while strings play on countersubject.

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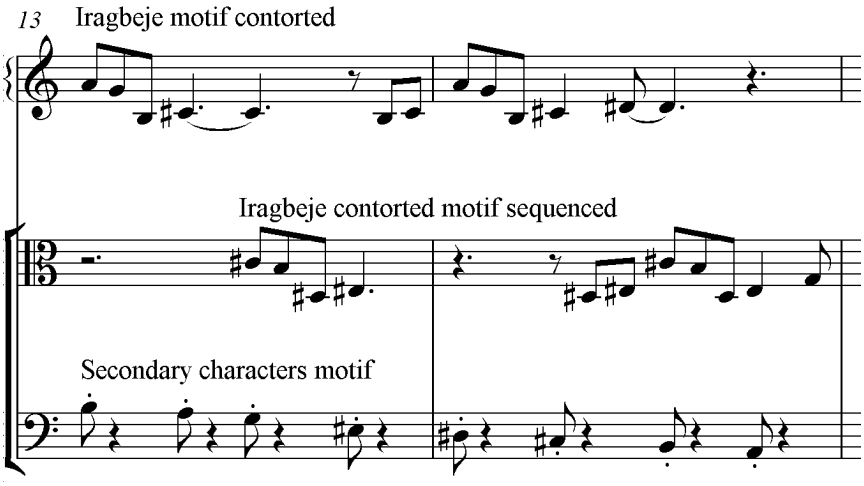
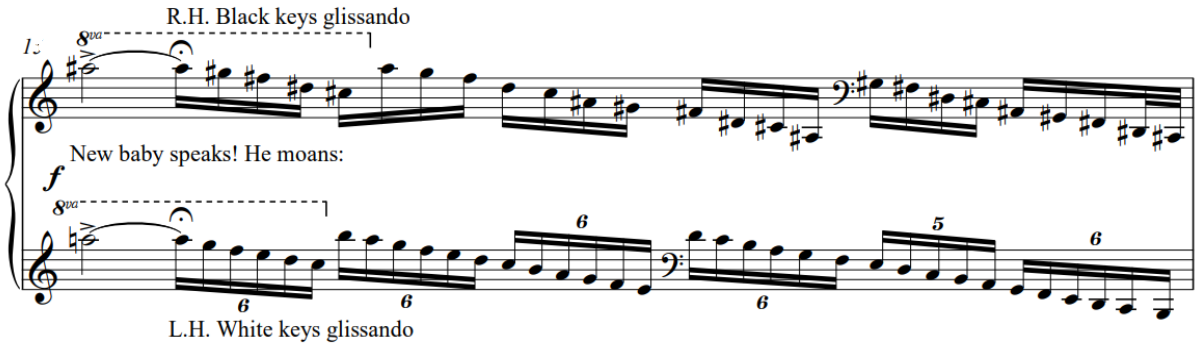
Act 1 Scene 1

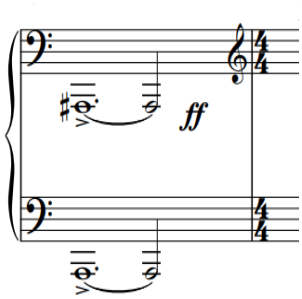
Bars 23- 26: Ìrágbèje starts the narrative with a theme, which is a contortion of his motif/introduction. Speaking Narrator starts the story by telling of a woman giving birth to a very beautiful boy. Violas sequence after Ìrágbèje in the half bar, major 3rd distance, while 'Cellos make use of secondary character motif, which is a downward slide in *whole tones*. Metre is 12/8 up till bar 26.



Bar 27: Metre changes to 16/8 (compounded as 3+3+3+3+4). Ìrágbèje starts with a playful dance-like theme. The narrator tells of the celebration of the arrival of a baby. Ìyá'lù and sèkèrè join in bar 29. Upper strings come in with somewhat augmented and inverted modification of countersubject in bar 31. Cellos come in with pizzicato punching in bar 34. This ongoing combination of Ìrágbèje, ìyá'lù, sèkèrè, and strings represents a celebration of people at the baby's arrival.

Bar 38: Suddenly, the new baby (piano) speaks. He interrupts the celebration with a loud moan. His moan is depicted with a simultaneous cascade of both black and white keys starting with A#6 (Right hand)/A6 (Left hand) down to A#1 (Right hand)/A1 (Left hand) in bar 39.





Bars 40-43: Metre changes to 4/4. Baby uses octave-wide tone clusters to complain, "It is not good! I am not satisfied!". The people (strings) incredulously respond with exclamations, using octave-wide glissandos, with augmented 4th interval spacing between the strings.

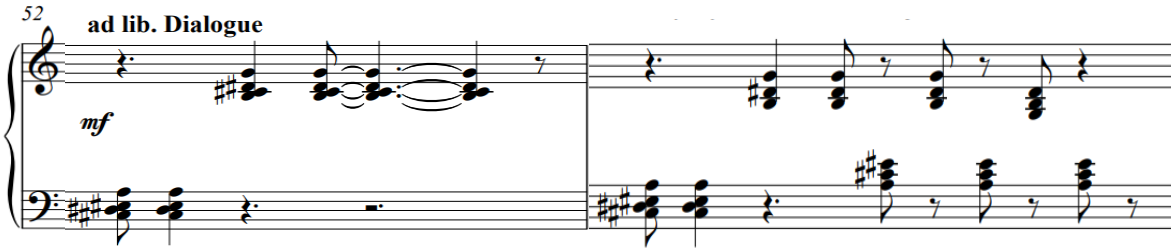
Bars 44-47: Metre changes back to 16/8. Baby breaks into dance, using tone clusters on celebration/playful theme stated by Ìrágbèje in bars 27 to 37.

Bars 48-54: People join the baby in dancing, using the same theme. *Bars 55-65*: Baby interrupts dance again. These bars are an extended modification of bars 40-43, and baby complains more and more vociferous, argumentative responses from people and ìyá'lù. *Bars 66-73*: Metre goes to 12/8. Strings return to the initial countersubject to close scene 1.

Act 1 Scene 2

Speaking Narrator: Seventh day. Revelling at the naming ceremony. Baby is simmering. He says, "I don't know what they're looking for. Haven't they seen a baby before?" (Ẹ̀mi ò mo nkan tí wón n wá. Sé won ò rí omo titun rí ni?)

Bars 74-76: Ìrágbèje continues the story with a playful use of the countersubject. *Bars 78-85*: People continue revelling at the naming ceremony with countersubject use. *Bars 86-87*: Using tone clusters, Àjàntálá names himself. Surrogation of the statement "*Àjàntálá l'orúko mi*". To achieve this on the piano, whole-tone pentachords are used. Revellers' protest/dialogue is likewise characterised by whole-tone movements and progressions.



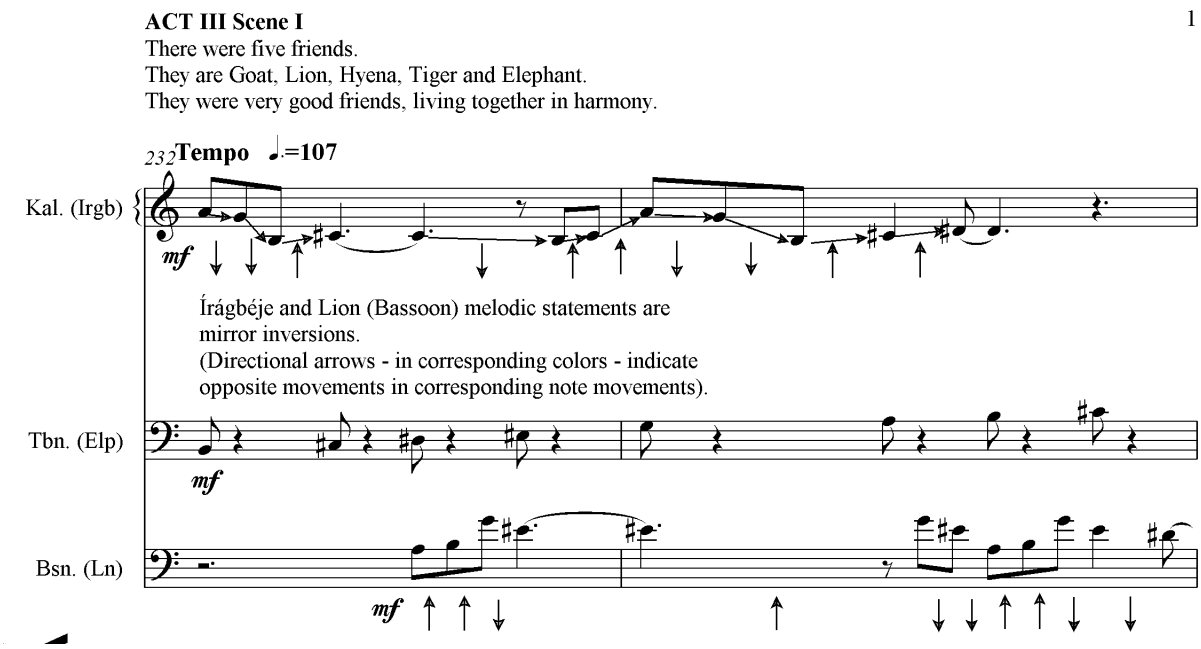
Starting bar 94: Irregular rhythm of 23/8 with tone clusters used in "*Àjàntálá l'orúko mi*" dance.

Act 1I Scene 1

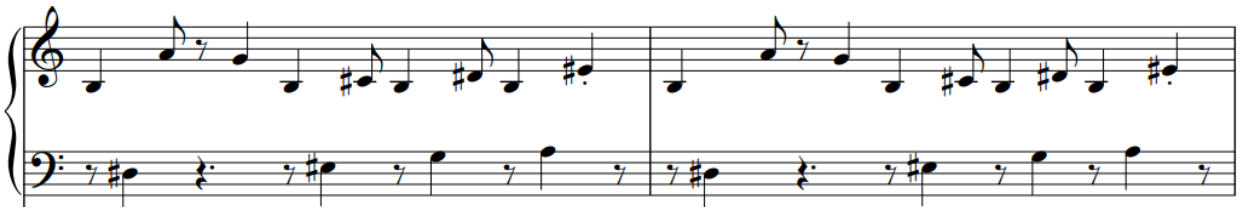
Starting bar 155: Àjàntálá's cry of mother! Mother! Is in whole-tone tonality.

Act 1II Scene 1

This act is largely a recapitulation (in structure and material) of act I. In addition to new material, major materials in act I are being modified and repeated in the new plot.



The main techniques primarily used in achieving speech surrogacy in this piece are extensive use of whole-tone scale, preponderant use of irregular metres, metric modulations (helpful in surrogating speech rhythm), and tone clusters. This piece gravitates at least towards indicating that whole-tone or largely whole-tone pitch progressions (harmonically and melodically) are a viable tonal possibility/alternative in expressing speech surrogacy on melodic instruments. This piece is a testimonial to this hypothesis. In the whole of the piece, intervals of major second, major third, augmented fourth, fifth, and sixth are very prevalent. Ìrágbèje's opening dance theme sets this tonal structure throughout the piece.



With this, there are very few instances in which an interval of a minor second and larger intervals would have to contain a minor second (such as a minor third, perfect fourth, perfect fifth or significant sixth) occur, either harmonically or melodically. These exceptions occur in Àjàntálá's enigma dance in acts I and III, white notes cluster chords in Àjàntálá dialogues and violence on revellers and animals.

Reflective Discourse

One may want to ask the almighty question: "Whither African Pianism: The way forward." The way forward is what I call the "*Traditionalisation of African Pianism*". This is evolving African Pianism into a tradition, which implies moving African pianism to advance into a living, breathing, utilitarian, everyday compositional and performance tool by which it becomes a genre of its own. Is a fully functional African pianism possible? Yes, it is possible. I believe it is possible: an African pianism transcends mainly musicological theorising and discoursing. African pianism is still very essentially the preserve of music scholars. Can the concept of African pianism be accepted as a modus operandi by the larger body of pianists and composers, even the apparently 'unschooled' 'un-

ethnomusicological' ones? Can African Pianism be advanced and thereby forged into a seminal and formidable piano style such as stride piano in jazz, a widely recognised piano school such as the Russian school, or even a genre/subgenre such as the impressionist and expressionist sub-genres under the umbrella of the main classical genre?

The stylisation or genrefication of a functional 'working' African pianism will depend mainly on taking it outside the four walls of the ivory tower and propagating it to the larger population of the 'Street pianists (for want of a better appellation). China, in recent years, has witnessed a surge. One main cause was the paradigm shift in the ivory towers across China. What was the shift? Professors had to see their work and research as being useful if, and only if, it has a veritable impact on the larger society. Conversely, therefore, the shift also dictates that their research is meaningless if its sphere of influence only stops inside the university's walls, at peer reviews, seminars, conferences, inaugural lectures, symposia, etc. Earlier on, it was mentioned in this essay that Uzoigwe suggested being influenced by the speech tone patterns of words and following the logic of musical discourse". The perpetuation, motorisation in time, and ultimately the development of enduring genres of music over the ages have been wrought by embracing a new stylistic addition to the repertoire of styles in that genre by the larger body of practising musicians and, eventually, the larger public.

Conclusion

The bane of 'New Music' (still new after almost a century and a half) - speaking of avant-garde classical music of the Schoenbergs, Sessions, Stockhausens, Bergs, and John Cages, with the mindset of "who cares who listens" (alluding to Milton Babbit) should not be allowed to happen to this window of opportunity presenting itself in African pianism. Notably, the subgenre of 20th-century avante-garde classical music, which embodies itself in the 12-tone/serial tonality, atonal, and indeterminate concepts of the composers mentioned above (and many more), is still considered mainly as new music. The reason is that this style of composition and performance and altogether its aesthetic worldview, position, and outlook are essentially alternatives to audiences and perhaps even a sizable portion of its performers alike. The doctrine of African Pianism can leverage and tap into the availability of scores of young up-and-coming African pianists who will only be too willing to embrace a well-crafted and articulated piano style that is Indigenous 'our own'. Not only to add it to their arsenal of learned piano styles but also to exalt it to a state of broader acknowledgement and recognition.

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