

Nigerian Composers  
Richard Donald Smith

Many Nigerian musicians have been exposed to Western music and Western compositional techniques. Some try to duplicate them, while others try to employ them in African ways. "African" ways can vary because African composers (i.e. Nigerian composers) can represent numerous ethnic backgrounds, even in a single country, which means that the ethnic influences can vary amongst their compositions. The influences can differ in terms of the types of music they represent, with traditional or popular references. So, keeping this in mind, when you see a list of Nigerian composers, although there are many composers listed, the accessible music is not so easy to find. I find some of the best music when I'm actually in the country visiting places where I can find local music that I can buy. I also find music written by musical colleagues in Africa, sometimes having to rearrange it in a way that suits my purposes. With my strong sense of "African-ness", I also compose or arrange music myself. Some Nigerian music has been accessible to the Western world, but not so easy to find in published form. With that in mind, I will give a list of some Nigerian composers who are sometimes performed in the West, and some whom I just happen to know because of my experience in and with Nigeria. Of course there are composers in other countries, but I find Nigeria and South Africa to be standouts because of their widespread educational systems and strong musical practices. Nigerians, for instance, have been touted as being among the best or most educated immigrants who come to our own country (the USA). I actually know many of these composers, including a large number whose music does not reach the Western world in force. I have interviewed and become friends with many of the better-known ones, as well as others, and can say that they are all serious musicians who have developed and employ strong compositional skills. With Nigeria's strong and dynamic music sensibilities, composition is happening all the time, in all kinds of music, at all levels.

In Nigeria, there is an interesting dynamic between instruction in Western music and African music forms at the university level. In most cases, students must study and participate in both – Western instrumental ensemble and African instrumental ensemble, Western dance and African dance, Western theater and African theater, Western opera and African opera, Western chorus and African chorus, etc. The African forms are usually traditional. Much of the activity in these many areas is student-generated, with students practicing very early in the morning, before other classes begin. This double exposure gives students the ability to keep very much in touch with African cultural display, sometimes at an astounding level, because, as music students, they are already very musical. My instrumental students can often be great dancers, drummers, energetic singers, and also capable performers on their primary instrument. This can all be transferred to young students when they later go into the teaching world, which, at the primary level, seems to be very strong.

Here is a partial list of Nigerian composers, past and present. There are many, many more, some of whom you can find by checking this link: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/13XGQjuUzlhOzQK-HrSbjlym8dBllswY72LpIA6R5Ae0/edit#gid=0>

Ayo Bankole

Sam Ojukwu

Adam Fiberesima

Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips

Joshua Uzoigwe

Christian Onyeji

Meki Nzewi

Stephen Olusoji

Lazarus Ekwueme

Akin Euba

Bode Omojola  
David Aina  
Fela Sowande  
Edewede Oriwoh  
Godwin Sadoh  
Jude Nwankwo  
Ngozi Chinwah  
Samuel Ekpe Akpabot  
William Wilberforce Echezona  
Achinivu Kanu Achinivu

Additional information:

If you witnessed my Flute Fair presentation on “Music Education in Sub-Saharan Africa – It’s Not What You Think”, you may recall that an African mentee of mine (whom I did not know was present at the lecture) named Ola made some comments at the end of the lecture. Ola, a virtuoso clarinetist, is currently finishing his second year as a music student (clarinet major) at Trinity College in London. I believe he is the first Nigerian to be given a full scholarship at Trinity, where his clarinet teacher is the principal clarinetist of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He has had to cope with the COVID-19 situation during much of his study. He was fortunate to have been able to spend his 2020 semester break back in Nigeria, where he took clarinet reeds to his Nigerian musical colleagues as gifts, because good reeds are not always available in Nigeria. In January he arrived back in London, only to find out that the city had just gone into another lockdown, making him very unhappy because so much of his instruction was still going to be virtual. I suggested that he get together with some friends and make music together, thinking that would inspire him to become engaged in chamber music. He did get together with student colleagues, virtually, and guided them towards making a video, with him playing the saxophone. When I told him that I never heard him play the saxophone before, and didn’t know that he played it, he responded by saying: “I started learning it a month ago when a friend loaned me one of her saxophones. She is actually a flute major.”

I was pleased with the video on two levels – 1) he was keeping up his African heritage, and 2) I thought that his student colleagues were super cooperative. I believe you will appreciate this video, for which the link is below. It wasn’t what I expected, but it’s all good. I had intended to use this video during my Flute Fair presentation but ran out of time.

<https://youtu.be/s-qmboJ3gO4>

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