

The Music of Poetry and the Poetry of Music: Artistic Interface on the Space-Time Continuum

MATTHEW M. UMUKORO

Preamble

The intriguing relationship between music and poetry on the tenuous space-time continuum is analogous to the inextricable fusion between sense and sensibility; between feeling and emotion; between what is *heard* and what is intuitively *felt*; between orchestrated sound and versified silence. Poetry is a creative recollection of fleeting and intractable emotions, while music is the acoustic articulation of poetic intuitions in space and time. The putative primeval music of the spheres finds eloquent expression in planetary motion which, in turn, exerts creative afflatus on the poetic sensibility. That ageless lunar man, eternal Muse of innumerable romantic rhymes, is one sure evidence of the perpetual planetary pull on artistic creativity. Thus, the poet and the musician are fellow travellers in cerebral flight on the shared wings of creative imagination. If, as Walter Pater contends, all art aspires to the condition of music, poetry is perhaps the singular art with the inherent capacity to attain that sublime transcendentalism in intuitive communication of which music is thought to be the supreme model. The consequence is a rare artistic collaboration between two ancient arts which have regulated the human emotion and its immanent social barometer from time immemorial. The objective of this paper is, therefore, to explore this unique artistic interface on the space-time continuum, from historical and critical perspectives, with broad classical and contemporary points of reference for this universal collaboration in artistic creativity. For instance, here is the very basis of Richard Wagner's operatic art which intricately welds music, poetry, and drama into one inextricable creative pageant. The paper rounds off on the current collaboration between the present author (a Nigerian poet) and African American composer, Wallace Cheatham, which offers us a contemporary paradigm of transcontinental poet-musician partnership with increasing prospects

of mutual artistic fulfilment, and remarkable contributions to the growing global corpora of lyrical poetry and the resultant inspired musical compositions.

I

Let us quickly dispose of the controversial question of temporal precedence between poetry and music: was it the poetic egg that hatched into music, or the musical hen that first laid the golden egg of poetry? This ancient riddle is best resolved on the joint platform of ontology and epistemology. If poetry is the manifestation of human intuition, music is the orchestration of that intuition through the elaboration of the planetary music of the spheres, attributed to Pythagoras. But this Pythagorean theory relates only to imaginary planetary sound devoid of poetic content, which makes it a far cry from music in the true sense of the word. Poetry is the primeval art on which all other arts are founded under the superintendence of the Muses, the nine daughters of Zeus. The word 'music' derives from 'muse' which, in its original Greek or French, implies 'the art of the Muse.' The Muse in reference is ostensibly Euterpe, arguably the most lyrical of them all. By that derivation, music would seem to have appropriated the title common to all the art-sponsoring deities, thus giving it a contestable impression of aesthetic supremacy over all other arts. Is music truly the 'king' of the arts? According to Walter Pater, 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,' and this condition is none other than the putative quintessential purity of music as an art form. Thus, unlike most of the other art forms, music is believed to have the capacity for emotional communication across board, regardless of race, tongue, or intellect. In their rudimentary forms, poetry and music are rooted in human feelings and must have been in existence from the beginning of creation, as subtle manifestations of the emotional and psychological dispositions of the Adamic man. To that extent, music and poetry are inextricably engaged in a process of cross-fertilisation. But we must move away from the red herring of myth and mythology to enable us come to grips with the philosophy of modern music, driven by the culture of globalisation, and in dynamic relationship with the contiguous arts of

poetry, dance, and drama. All of them, in varying combinations, are subsumed under the overarching art of theatre, which represents the ultimate in creative collaboration.

Music has been defined as the art by which a composer, through a performer as intermediary, communicates to a listener certain ideas, feelings or states of mind (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 19:646). It manifests in various forms and shades, ranging from solo renditions to the liturgical chant of the church and the culture-oriented folk music, to the more intellectually engaging art music or serious classical tunes, and full-scale orchestra. Hence, the boundaries between the various forms are often difficult to define because of the very eclectic nature of music and the fact that they all draw from the same tonal pool. Nevertheless popular music differs remarkably from art music by the pedestrian and ephemeral nature of the former and the more esoteric and enduring quality of the latter. 'In contrast to art music, a particular style of popular music is likely to be evanescent, to give way after a few years to a new style. A sense of the transitory nature of popular music is provided by the superficial, sometimes slangy names of various styles: swing, bebop, country, Western rock, soul, hard metal, etc.' (647).

Poetry, on the other hand, has been variously defined as 'the art of patterned language,' 'emotion put into measure,' 'language that implies more than it states,' 'emotions recollected in tranquillity,' (Coleridge) and so on (*The Penguin Encyclopedia*, p.469). The same source elucidates that poetry 'represents imaginative speech in its greatest concentration, from the use of 'overtones' and emotional connotation, multiple meanings, puns, ambiguities, ironies, metaphor, simile, imagery, the evocation of sense-impression by allusion, the stressing of words by metre, rhyme, alliteration or assonance, the emotive, musical, or kinaesthetic effects of sound, etc.' (*The Penguin Encyclopedia*, p.469). Although the adoption of a rigid rhyme scheme is not a mandatory feature of poetry, a tight structure and the recurrence of a rhythmic pattern certainly are. Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of the most musical poets of the English Romantic School, defines poetry, in his *Defence of Poetry*, as 'the expression of the imagination,' and links it with the origins of man. 'Man is an

instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody' (*Selections from Shelley's Poetry and Prose*).

The theatre constitutes the most influential matrix of the artistic union between poetry and music. Indeed, the ancient Greek theatre was launched on the platform of lyrical song, otherwise known as the *dithyramb*, with a corresponding visual interpretation in dance and movement. The chorus, with its graceful calisthenics and powerful rendition, was the very essence of Greek theatre at inception before the later ascendancy of speech and action. Thus, the earliest Greek dramatists were appositely referred to as poets because they skilfully blended in their artistic works, the visual poetry of dance and movement, and the aural poetry of speech and song. This fundamental link between poetry and music has remained an entrenched feature of theatrical creativity. By its very nature, the theatre communicates through a complex combination of poetic idioms and aesthetic codes which appeal directly to the human senses, notably the visual and the aural. Its poetic language finds eloquent expression in the poetry of words and music, which harmonises with the other aesthetic elements to produce a veritable artistic experience.

This leads to one invariable conclusion: that the musician is a poet of the theatre in much the same way as the poet is a musical artist. Furthermore, that both poetry and music share the same artistic ambience, drawing on the same linguistic and aesthetic armoury in their varied appeal to intellect and emotion. Music, at its purest, is essentially poetic, while poetry, at its best, is intrinsically musical; the proverbial two sides of the same lyrical coin. Consequently, theatre itself, at its most intense, is the product of artistic complementarity between poetry and music. My personal observation is that, from this inventive duality, two parallel or corresponding artists seem to have emerged: musician-poets and poet-musicians. They function, at best, as mutual alter egos or mirror-images, in the complex process of poetico-musical creativity. The distinction between both categories of melodious artists can be at once tenuous and substantial, given their overlapping and inextricable personalities. While musician-poets are

essentially composers with poetic intuition, poet-musicians are fundamentally poets with musical sensibility. Modern music owes a lot to the tremendous contributions of an illustrious line of these twin artists who, by their creative vision, have shaped the course and cause of musical communication. These musico-poetic icons include Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826), and Richard Wagner (1813-83), all German; Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) of Austria, Adolphe Charles Adam (1803-56) of France, Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857) of Russia, and Arthur Seymour Sullivan (1842-1900) of England. Each of them has carved a niche for himself, especially in the hall of fame of the opera, where Richard Wagner had a particularly outstanding career. Before unveiling Wagner's conception of music drama or poetic drama, we should endeavour to probe further into the intrinsic nature of the symbiotic relationship between poetry and music, the very basis of the present double-barrelled or bipolar discourse: the music of poetry and the poetry of music.

II

By the music of poetry, we imply the various features of poetry which align it closely to music and give it its inherent musicality. In both poetry and music, sound often echoes sense, as the emotional tends to overshadow the rational, and intellect is subordinated to feeling. From the perspective of mode of communication, there are, at least, six specific features of poetry which underscore its eternal fraternity with music, and justify the basis for their artistic complementarity. These are *euphony*, *rhythm*, *pace*, *cadence*, *tonality* and *emotional appeal*.

Euphony – that aural pleasantness which derives from vocal beauty – is the corresponding side of melody. Music communicates through its melody; poetry, through its euphony. Every good poem has that musical expressiveness that catches the ear of a sensitive music composer, even when this is not evidenced by measured rhythmical features. It follows therefore that, in the hands of a skilful composer, a euphonious lyric is potential material for a melodious tune. Similarly, rhythm, defined as pattern of beats in music, translates into pattern of stress in poetry. In both poetry and music,

rhythm is a suprasegmental attribute which engages attention in an unbroken aural sequence, best captured in the visual analogy of the sea waves. The meaning of a poem or a piece of music is also partly resident in the rhythmical pattern which delights in its overall form and variety. Pace is the basic building block of rhythm, which gives final shape to this aural form and variety. Defined as speed or rate of progression, pace is a musical attribute which also finds expression in poetic communication. It varies from line to line and from one stanza to the next, serving as the basic instrument of emotional control, and determined by the overall metrical pattern of the poem in question. In a musical sequence, cadence refers to a variety of terminal forms in a lyrical progression, suggestive of either a slight pause or total cessation. In poetry, cadence is a feature of vocal intonation, indicative of the pattern of rise and fall in oral communication. Thus, cadence can be defined as a particular type of rhythm, intended to gain specific emotional effect in either poetry or music, although the latter boasts of a wider variety of cadenced progression which allows for greater creativity by imaginative music composers. Tone, otherwise known as timbre, is the distinctive quality of sound on a variety of scales in both speech and song, with or without instrumentation. The falling tone, the rising tone, or a rapid succession of rise and fall, are all indicative of a variety of rhythmic patterns with definite linguistic and emotional significations. Tonal application in poetry differs remarkably from that of music, but the fact of tonality is common to both aural arts. The overall impact of all five interlocking attributes of both poetry and music is the sixth element of emotional appeal to the listener, whose intellect is largely guided by sense impressions. This explains why it is possible for a listener to be moved by a song or poem (such as a dirge or an elegy) being rendered in a language alien to him or her, since the emotional appeal fills in the intellectual or linguistic void.

Poetry, then, is spoken music or musical speech, intended to be intoned or chanted, rather than read; it is a halfway house between prose and song. 'Spoken music' is the term employed by Nancy Saklad (2011:2) to describe the goal of elocutionary speech that is revelatory of "the character's state of being," and indicative of

“pleasing tone, clear articulation, and so forth.” It bears reiteration that poetry is uncompromisingly an elocutionary text that communicates predominantly in oral codes. It is a fundamental misconception to regard the poem as a literary art, simply because it enjoys the fraternity of pen and paper with prose and other literary forms. In an earlier critical exegesis on poetry appreciation presented before an audience of literature teachers, the present writer has emphasised the fact that “poetry is an *oral* art designed for *aural* consumption, although usually preserved in literary form” (Umukoro, 2010:84). Elsewhere, he likens poetry and music to the “two euphonious sides of the same melodic coin” (*Meteorites*, p.11). The written form of a poem is hardly any different from the lyrics of a song or the score of a piece of music, which are essentially oral arts frozen into print for sheer documentation, waiting to leap back into aural life, again and again. Every culture, every community of people, has its fair share of oral poetry which is everywhere the bedrock of literary poetry. The itinerant troubadours of the Medieval world offer a ready reference point for the long tradition of oral poetry in Europe’s lyrical history, before the later ascendancy of literary poetry. The writing of poems, it must be pointed out, remarkably differs from their oral interpretation, demanding two completely different skills: intellectual creativity, on the one hand, and the capacity for vocal and gestural communication, on the other. This explains the paradoxical fact that good poets are not necessarily the best oral interpreters of their poetry, any more than great dramatists can be regarded as effective performers or directors of their own plays. Oral interpretation of poetry is a speech and movement skill that has to be acquired, away from the tranquil moments of literary inspiration and creativity. Poet-dramatists, such as Nigeria’s Wole Soyinka, who deftly combine the literary and performative skills, are generally few and far between, considered from the global perspective. In the final analysis, a piece of poem can communicate effectively only under creative manipulation by a skilful oral interpreter, as much as a piece of song can only strike the right chords under rendition by an accomplished vocalist or songster. The music of poetry is thus rooted in this fact of mutual orality and shared

emotional impact which these two fraternal arts eloquently manifest in their respective modalities of communication.

III

The poetry of music, on the other hand, refers to those salient factors which make music an essentially poetic art. When we talk of music, we talk of an art which appeals directly to the imaginative faculty, to the heart rather than to the head; an art which transcends all communication barriers, both physical and psychological; an art which eloquently feeds the mind and profoundly lustrates the soul; in brief, an art which enjoys infinite space and time on the space-time continuum. These are just some of the fundamental features which music shares with the art of poetry. A close analysis of the art of music reveals a number of specific poetic qualities which include *lyricism*, *rhyming pattern*, *versification*, *linguistic economy* or *laconicism*, *allusive style*, and *emotional appeal*.

For a better appreciation of its relationship with poetry, music must first be considered in its pristine state as song that was only later highlighted through instrumentation. If song is the oldest form of music, then the egg and hen riddle posed at the onset of this paper can logically be resolved in favor of poetry, which creates the lyrics, and which is the very first stage in song or music composition. The music composer has to depend on the lyrics fashioned out by the poet, even where the versatile composer doubles as his own poet. When the music composer is first inspired into lyrical creativity, he functions as a poet who then goes further to compose around his own lyrics in the capacity of the music composer. Although this versatility deserves to be encouraged, the ideal situation is where poet and composer are two different artists who combine to form a perfect blend in harmonious creativity. Our submission here is that lyrical and compositional works are two different but related stages in the creation of a musical piece. Hence, lyricism is a fundamental quality of poetry which music, through the instrumentality of the song, inevitably appropriates, in the course of composition. The song-like quality implied by lyricism is a shared phenomenon which initially belongs to

poetry. The more lyrical a poem is, the closer it is to the song, and the more readily amenable it is to compositional artistry. Many composers there are who exhibit this poetic afflatus which, by no means, is the exclusive preserve of the lyrical poets. This simply underscores the fact that lyricism is one of the vital chords binding music to poetry.

Rhyme, as distinct from rhythm, is a key factor in the manifestation of lyricism in both poetry and song. It is an aural quality which registers distinct metrical patterns in poetic communication. Poets have a wide variety of rhyming patterns to choose from: masculine or feminine, perfect or imperfect, eye rhyme or oblique rhyme, assonance or alliteration, blank verse or free verse, resulting in such metrical arrangements as couplets, triplets, alternate rhyming, sonnet varieties, and the famous iambic pentameter of which Shakespearean art is the supreme example. Blank verse (with metrical regularity but without a rhyme scheme) or free verse (with neither a specific metrical form nor rhyming pattern) are traceable to the Romantic Revolt of the eighteenth century which overturned the highly rigid and regimented literary culture of Neo-Classical poetry, exemplified in the works of Pope and Dryden. The Romantics, best represented by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, substituted the poetry of content for the poetry of form and structure, insisting that the poetic message lies more with *what* is conveyed than *how* it is conveyed. Far more than poetry, song or music is heavily dependent on a rigid physical structure which imposes a definite rhythmical pattern and emotionally guides its listener to the message inherent within it.

Although verse is not necessarily synonymous with poetry, a piece of poem communicates in short bursts of literary forms known as verses, through which the message of the poem gradually unfolds. A poem may comprise one verse or many verses, and each verse may be as short or as long as the message demands. Versification is a fundamental feature of poetry which has become an inalienable part of the song in musical communication. Also known as stanzas, verses calibrate the song into specific metrical beats for ease of oral delivery and aural assimilation. Like rhyme scheme, verse is a physical or

visual feature which contributes to the overall aesthetic form of poetry, and gives music that distinctive poetic attribute exemplified in the lyrical art of the song.

Perhaps the most eloquent factor which closely aligns music with poetry can be found in the deployment of language, which also distinguishes poetry from prose as distinct literary modes. The basic distinction between poetry and prose is not just structural but syntactical. While prose parades words in their best possible order, poetry privileges diction over syntax by presenting the most appropriately chosen words in their best possible order. In doing this, poetry employs laconicism, that capacity for pithy and epigrammatic communication, to register the maximum impact with minimum words. It is this laconic feature of poetry which music adopts and further accentuates through the imagery of vocal and instrumental sound. A careful application of well-chosen sound codes can have a greater impact on the listener than sheer aural verbiage. So, when we speak of the poetry of music, we partly imply this predisposition of the music art to register maximum emotional impact through the creative economy of organised sound, in keeping with the proverbial logocentric prudence of poetry.

This laconic style also finds expression in allusive and periphrastic mode of communication, typical of both music and poetry. The focus on the emotional, at the expense of the purely rational or intellectual, implies that words are figuratively deployed to evoke associated sense impressions and responses which convey much more than is being literally communicated. Here is, finally, that tenuous distinction between sense and sensibility. Much like poetry, music employs sound metaphors, similes, and other forms of aural imagery, drawn from the linguistic arsenal of poetic communication. Tone, pitch, stress, rhythm and other elements of the sound alphabet, are freely deployed in musical compositions to singularly poetic effect. Thus, in lyricism, rhyming pattern, versification, linguistic economy or laconicism, as well as the allusive style of communication, music appropriates the features of poetry in creative communication. The final quality, emotional appeal, is a mutual attribute which has earlier been elaborated upon, registering as the

cumulative impact of the peculiar modes of communication associated with the twin arts of poetry and music.

IV

The pertinent question to ask at this juncture is: where does music stand in relation to the other arts, most especially, the contiguous art of dance, on the space-time continuum? Space is a three-dimensional concept which is made up of length, width, and height, while time is both a temporary and temporal phenomenon that exists everywhere but nowhere in particular, defying all manner of physical and psychological hurdles. Hence, while dance communicates in both space and time, music communicates only in time, without spatial restriction, although both arts are transitory in nature. Therefore, if music is the veritable king of the performing arts, dance is invariably the queen, with an arguable claim of temporal precedence over all others. Like poetry, dance quite possibly predated music, since the former, defined as rhythmic and organised movement, is part of the primordial mimetic instinct of man in primeval society. If dance is truly the oldest of the performing arts, music must have followed hard on its heels, developing in tandem with dance in a logical movement-and-sound sequence. In an earlier study carried out by the present writer, the following salient observation is made with regard to the tenuous relationship between these two oldest arts of natural creativity:

Was it dance that gave birth to music or music that inspired dance into being? Or, quite possibly, did both of them spring up almost simultaneously, with one hard on the heels of the other? Although it is widely presumed that dance is the oldest art of the theatre, it is hardly conceivable that it could have developed entirely independent of some form of rudimentary music, if only by way of the rhythmic patter of feet, the clapping of hands or the periodic clangour of hand-held percussion objects. This must have been the case with the traditional African dance, remarkable for its sheer vigour and vibrancy, and capable of concurrently creating the peculiar music to which it responds. In most parts of

Africa, traditional dancers are wont to wear, among other items, sets of tiny bells on their wrists and ankles, as part of the dance costume. In the course of the dance, these bells jingle to the rhythm of the dancers' movements producing, in effect, a musical tintinnabulation, inseparable from the dance itself (Umukoro, 2010:148-149).

Thus, every dance sequence invariably generates its own perceptible musical accompaniment, merely awaiting aural articulation or orchestration. So, in spite of their mutual claims of artistic and aesthetic autonomy, dance is ultimately inseparable from music.

But when music allies with dance or drama, it loses its spatial superiority and succumbs to the imperatives of audio-visual communication. This is certainly the case with the opera, the eclectic art which unites music, dance, and drama, in a variety of theatrical combinations. Unlike dance-drama which communicates predominantly through dance and movement, music-drama conveys its message essentially through the arts of music and sound. The opera is, however, a peculiar type of music drama, in which song and action compete for aesthetic supremacy. Begun in the late sixteenth century, opera hit its zenith of popularity in the nineteenth century, with the bold and inspiring creativity of the great German composer, conductor, and theorist, Richard Wagner. The oft-considered question is whether, in the opera, it is the music that drives the drama, or the drama that interprets the music. In other words, is it the music that inspires the dramatic poetry, or the dramatic poetry that brings the music into being? It remains a moot question that has engaged considerable critical attention.

In his theoretical postulations on the issue, Richard Wagner would seem to have resolved the argument in favor of dramatic poetry. He identifies the fundamental error in the construction of opera as the fact that "a means of expression (music) has been made the end, while the end of expression (drama) has been made a means" (Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 1851). In the paraphrase by Arthur Symonds, Wagner is quoted as likening music to "a woman who gives birth but does not beget." He elaborates further:

Just as the living folk-melody is inseparable from the living folk-poem, at pain of organic death, so can music's organism never bear the true, the living melody, except it first be fecundated by the poet's thought. Music is the bearing woman, the poet the begetter; and music had therefore reached the pinnacle of madness when she wanted not only to bear, but to beget (Wagner, paraphrased by Symons, in Bentley, ed., 1968: 296).

The sexual imagery employed here puts poetry as the male fertilizing agent and music the female receptacle and ultimate bearer of the resulting opera, much like the crucial role of butterflies in the process of pollination. For Wagner, therefore, the opera is less a dramatised music than a musical drama, with music as the inevitable precursor of the dramatic end. Richard Wagner's contributions to the artistic development of music are both remarkable and outstanding. Among other things, "it is to Wagner that we owe almost a revolution in the art of conducting" (Symons, in Bentley, ed., 1968:319). Conducting, the art of visual synchronization of the composite art of the orchestra by deft movement and gestures, has emerged as one of the finest points of attraction in a choral performance, which gives the music conductor that singular edge over the drama director with regard to the degree of control exercised over the final products of their respect arts. While the drama director hands over proceedings to his stage manager during the live performance, the music conductor follows his creation through up to the hilt, and tends to steal the show at the expense of the ensemble, with skilful histrionics. Wagner raised this action of the gestural interpretation of music to the level of an art, and influenced many subsequent performers. According to Arthur Symons,

...it must be remembered that from Wagner arose the whole modern German school of conductors, from Bülow to Weingartner, and that the greatest of them, Richter, was the most intimately under his influence. Thus Wagner not only reformed the actual conditions of music, not only created a new and wonderful music of his own, but brought about a scarcely less significant reform in the interpretation of

music, which, existing on paper, could be heard nowhere according to the intentions of the composer (Symons, in Bentley, ed., 1968:320).

There is no doubt that Wagner exerted a great influence on the musical art, furthering the tremendous works of antecedent artists such as fellow German composer, Ludwig van Beethoven, generally acknowledged as one of the greatest musicians of all time.

Poetry, music and dance can thus be regarded as tripartite arts on the space-time continuum, which present as a triangle with poetry at the apex. Just as poetry enjoys a bilateral relationship with music on one side of the triangle, it enjoys a similar bilateral relationship with dance on the other side of the triangle, while both music and dance find an artistic link at the base of the audio-visual triangle, perennially fuelled by related poetic thoughts and inspiration. The pervading poetic aura results in the aural poetry of sound and music on the one hand, and the visual poetry of movement and dance, on the other. While sound and music communicate purely in time, movement and dance communicate in a tight structure of space and time. Music and dance thus exist in an inextricable audio-visual relationship of mutual interpretation. In other words, music is the aural interpretation of dance in time alone, while dance is the visual interpretation of music in both space and time. The groundswell of postmodernism compels the search for aesthetic autonomy for these arts that have existed in traditional complementarity. Poetry and music, as non-referential arts, have the best prospects of artistic autonomy, capable of independently communicating directly with the individual listener, while dance and movement are abstract arts with an intrinsic quest for referential relationship. But dance theorists and practitioners insist that dance is equally capable of independent communication without reference to external stimuli such as song or music; capable, that is, of communicating exclusively in an intricate web of mime and movement, two closely interwoven arts independent of both the oral and the aural media. But movement is the more abstract art, leading ultimately to dance, while the more concrete art of mime leads to drama. The language of mime is a specific gestural language with a

defined visual vocabulary, capable of being employed by the dancer in autonomous communication. Thus, dance, the rhythmic and organised movement of the human body, is infinitely capable of generating both temporal and spatial signification independent of song and music which can, of course, play significant interpretive roles without detracting from the visual autonomy of the dance performance. Drama and theatre, as collaborative arts, provide the artistic matrix in which poetry, music, and dance are welded into one vital aesthetic pageant; a huge audio-visual creation which occupies the summit of the legitimate arts of the stage, with latter-day extensions to the media of the radio, television, film and the video. While radio is purely audio, the other products of communication technology are audio-visual in nature. All of these have aesthetic implications for the various arts on the space-time continuum, and corresponding influence on the ever-dynamic audience, made up of connoisseurs and amateurs alike.

V

As this discourse tapers to an end, it is apposite to discuss some personal but pertinent issues which bear upon the central concern of the relationship between poetry and music. It has been pointed out that both the poet and the musician are complementary artists; the former inspiring the latter to compositional creativity. Over the years, collaboration between poets and composers has been witnessed in different parts of the world, with specific poets providing lyrical support to the creative visions and ventures of particular musicians or composers. One such artistic collaboration in contemporary times is that between the present writer (a Nigerian poet), and Dr. Wallace McClain Cheatham, a renowned African-American scholar and musician; a collaboration which dates back to the year 2004, when Dr Cheatham accessed *Dross of Gold* through a distinguished Nigerian ethnomusicologist, Professor Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike (now of blessed memory).

An entry in the 2004 edition of *Reverberations* (p.3) describes Wallace Cheatham as “a multi-talented musician and researcher...composer, pianist, organist, conductor and author,”

credited with several compositions which include his first song cycle, "Three Songs", "Walk About Elders" and a later song cycle, "The Umukoro Songs". The last-named is a selection of poems from the poet's maiden volume, *Dross of Gold*, set to a song cycle by Cheatham in 2004, and premiered on Saturday, November 19 at the Festival entitled "From Folk Song to Art Song – Modern Traditions of Vocal Music in Africa and the Diaspora", held at the University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A. The songs were vocalised by mezzo-soprano Joanne Stephenson, with Cheatham himself on the piano. His other works include a major book of interviews with music icons, *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience* (1997), and a journal article in *Ars Lyrica* (Vol. 16, 2007:19-27), with the title, "The Umukoro Songs: Reflections from the Studio of the Composer", in which he describes his first memorable encounter with the poet's works, many more of which have since been set to music and performed within and outside the United States, and as far afield as China.

A native of Cleveland, Tennessee, Wallace Cheatham graduated from Knoxville College for his first degree, obtaining his Masters and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Colombia Pacific University, respectively. He also has an honorary D.F.A. from his alma mater the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the scholarship and profession of music. Like many great composers, he often creates his own lyrics, but loves the stimulus or inspiration that emanates from the works of other lyricists. He describes his style of composition as being both "very classical" and "very melodic", adding:

I keep exploring contrapuntal approaches...I like to deal with various forms of architecture, no matter how complex tonally, harmonically, or rhythmically (*Reverberations, Vol 2. No 2*. December 10, 2004, p.3).

Thus, he loves to confront challenging sound architecture which he most probably encountered in *Dross of Gold*, from which no less than nine poems have been set to music. This unique collaboration

between an African poet and an African American composer is the focus of the concluding part of this essay.

Most of the poems in *Dross of Gold* have philosophical underpinnings. As described in the 'Author's Note', "*Dross of Gold* is also a metaphor for the numinous creative process, a definition of the poetic sensibility, which inextricably subsumes experience and communication" (*Dross of Gold*, p.4). In the attempt to communicate a profound philosophical idea, words tend to fail the poet, and the ultimate product is hardly any more than mere dross of the original golden thoughts. In drawing freely on this poetic pool, Cheatham demonstrates a rare perception and sensitivity transcendent of the dross, and capable of accessing and harvesting the gold itself. This is much more than the immediate readers and critics of this volume have been able to achieve.

The first three poems composed from *Dross of Gold* are "Doubts", "Gethsemane", and "The Lost Garden". Recalling his experience in turning these poems to music, Cheatham enthuses as follows:

The composition of songs is particularly rewarding because it represents a blending of two art forms: music and poetry. As I read Umukoro's poems, I could hear music being organically poured into them, and a singing voice subsequently bringing to life another artistic and creative genre. I was also propelled by the excitement of an African poet and an African-American composer joining hands to bring this into being, something that transcends the boundaries of nationality and cultural prejudice (*Ars Lyrica*, p.27).

"Doubts", the shortest of the three, is a philosophical dilation on the doubtful mind which is metaphorically likened to a garden clustered with weeds or an abandoned room overtaken by cobwebs, but which can be restored to a perfect salutary state by simply clearing the encumbrances. In the two-part poem, entitled "The Lost Garden", an ambitious attempt is made to capture the entire history of mankind from paradise lost to paradise regained, with the new Adam still

bearing the burden of his primordial iniquity. The message of the poem is that the historic conquest of the moon on 20 July 1969 by a team of American astronauts led by Neil Armstrong in the Apollo 11 spacecraft has proved to be a much easier task than the conquest of the self; of the fundamental negative instincts that led to the loss of Eden, in the first instance. Cheatham musically ferrets out this message to underscore the fact that "history teaches no lessons, human nature does not change, and each generation makes the same mistakes" (Cheatham, 2007:25). The third poem, "Gethsemane", achieves a blend of form and content in its philosophical dilation. As experienced by Jesus Christ himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, the poet notes that "the expectation of a painful experience often proves to be more agonising than the experience itself" (Notes to *Dross of Gold*, p.95). Thus, the earlier the inevitable bitter cup is drunk, the better and less traumatic for the sufferer. As the last stanza of the poem states:

So, let it come!
Anxiety is the fuel of anguish,
The cross remains the royal road to the crown,
LET – IT – COME!

(*Dross of Gold*, p.43)

In scoring this particular poem, Cheatham observes as follows:

The score of "Gethsemane" goes beyond song and takes on the magnitude of a concert aria. The singer becomes Christ. The voice is often trapped within the orchestrally-hued accompaniment, as Christ was deeply enveloped within a drama that, in essence, transcended time, place, and comprehension...Like the poem, the aria moves from the betrayal of Gethsemane to the promise of resurrection (Cheatham, 2007:21-22).

In these various ways, Cheatham attempts, as far as possible, an accurate musical interpretation of the poems to unveil the underlying

philosophy. It is not often that music achieves that level of lyrical accuracy in aural interpretation.

This unique artistic collaboration has proved to be remarkably fruitful, achieving an uncanny empathy across the continental divide. In his Foreword to the poet's second volume, *Meteorites*, Cheatham states, *inter alia*:

Matthew and I have become very productive professional partners. Ours might be the first Nigerian poet and African American composer collaborative artistic partnership. Matthew's poetry has played for me the same role that German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe played for Austrian composer Franz Peter Schubert; the same role that French poet Charles Pierre Baudelaire played for French composer Claude Achille Debussy; and the same role that numerous American poets have played and continue to play for Euro-American and African American composers (Cheatham in 'Foreword' to *Meteorites*, 2013:6).

The poet corroborates this observation in his prefatory note by remarking that

Ours is a unique artistic collaboration, which, hopefully, will continue to flourish and narrow the perceived divergences between the converging arts of poetry and music

(Umukoro, 2013:11).

In "Euterpean Songsmith", a poem dedicated to Wallace's birthday in 2012, the present author describes the collaboration between the poet and the composer as that of the song smith preparing the feathered skeletal thoughts of the wordsmith for musical flight into sensuous space. The third stanza states as much:

Together, we constitute a lyrical pair – you
and I:

I, to feather the skeletal thought and you, to
make it fly.
With the deft dexterity of the virtuoso
songsmith,
Fleshing out the slender art of a modest
wordsmith,
Playing to multi-racial audiences across the
vast land
To the appreciative applause of
connoisseurs in great band.

(Meteorites, 2013:33).

It is to be hoped that this artistic collaboration which has blazed a trail, will bear more melodious fruits in years to come, serving as an enduring paradigm of poet-composer partnership, in the inextricable union between poetry and music.

VI

And so, our task is accomplished. We have been able to demonstrate the close bond between poetry and music, and distinguished between the music of poetry and the poetry of music, and their tenuous interaction on the space-time continuum. Furthermore, we have been able to establish the various points of convergence and divergence between the triangular arts of poetry, music and drama, in relation to the theatre which serves as a melting-pot for all the arts. In the course of our critical peregrination, we stumbled upon the art of Richard Wagner and briefly highlighted his enduring legacies to the theory and practice of music as an art form, particularly the opera. We then rounded off on the personal alliance between the present writer (a Nigerian poet) and Wallace Cheatham, an acclaimed scholar and composer of international repute. Hopefully, it should be possible, at some point in the future, to share a platform in a series of poet-composer seminars and workshops to consolidate this rare artistic collaboration.

References

- Bentley, Eric, ed. (1968) *The Theory of the Modern Stage: An Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama*, Penguin Books.
- Cheatham, Wallace McClain (2007) "The Umukoro Songs: Reflections from the Studio of the Composer", *Ars Lyrica*, Journal of the Lyrica Society for Word-Music Relations, Vol. 16
- Encyclopedia Americana*, (1982), Vol. 19.
- Penguin Encyclopedia*, 2004.
- Reverberations*, the Newsletter of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Vol. 2 Issue 2, December 10, 2004.
- Saklad, Nancy (2011), *Voice and Speech Training in the New Millennium* Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books.
- Umukoro, Matthew M. (2002) *Dross of Gold: A Collection of Poems*, Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Limited.
- Umukoro, Matthew M. (2010), *The Performing Artist in Academia*, Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited.
- Umukoro, Matthew M. (2013), *Meteorites: A Collection of Poems*, Nigeria: Gold Press Limited.
- Welland, D.S.R.(1961) *Selections from Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Hutchinson Educational.