

## Music In Times Of War: The Nigerian Experience

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### Abstract

Music has been an integral part of warfare and the soldier's life since the dawn of history. The function of music in war has always been in two folds; as a means of communication and as a psychological weapon for the proper execution of wars. From the Biblical times through the middle Ages to the Classics, it was observed that Joshua was a most subtle general who compensated for the numerical and technological inferiority of his men through the use of musical instruments. The role of Haydn, Beethoven and Benjamin Britten's symphonies in times of war especially in 1796 when Napoleon was advancing to capture Vienna were discussed. The paper titled "Music in Times of War: The Nigerian Experience" brought out the role of music in wars from the Biblical times, the Middle Ages and to the World War II. It further described in details the Nigerian civil war and the role music played to sustain the war spirit on the Nigerian and Biafran sides. Two excerpts, "We are Biafrans" and "Nzogbu, Nzogbu" were shown in musical scores as well as the poetic lines of Gabriel Okara – a renowned poet. Music is implicated in life, and people go all out to use music to communicate, to move, to express emotions and ideas, and to mobilize people or rally them to solidarity.

**Keywords:** Music, Biafra., Warfare

### INTRODUCTION

Music has been an integral part of warfare and soldier's life since the dawn of history. The musical instruments that are played during wars have themselves acquired great symbolic powers. For example, the marching drums add colour to the tradition of wars in the early times. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that is the Baroque period, the act of enlisting in the army was described as "following the drum". This was because of the importance of the drums in boosting the moral of the soldiers of war. Even today, those ancient symbols such as drums and trumpets have continued to evoke titles such as that of Dave Palmer's "Summons of the Trumpet". (Trotter, 2006, p. 1). The function of music in war has always been two folds. First, it acts as a means of communication and secondly as a psychological weapon. It has always played an integral role in wars, its preparations and celebrations when victories are achieved. According to Gutmann (2003), from organizing

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to war in music, the two mix.... Even so, given their stock in trade, composers naturally have been attracted to the sheer sound of war. After all, the explosive power of munitions must have packed a huge visceral thrill in the prehistoric era before rock concerts, home theatres, megawatt amps and subwoofers (Gutmann 2003: p. 1).

### The Biblical Times

Among the oldest references to the role of music in times of war, was that recorded in Joshua 6:1-21. It has an exceptionally detailed description of the deployment of ram horns against the city of Jericho, the oldest fortified human settlement known to archaeology. Although ram horns do indeed make powerful blast of sound, they can hardly be assumed to have been sufficient in and of themselves to level Jericho's 7-meter high walls of thick undressed stone. This was because the finger of God was underneath as recorded in Deuteronomy 33:27; It reads, "the eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms; and he shall thrust out the enemies from before thee: and shall say, Destroy them". Still the Biblical account of his campaign makes it

clear that Joshua was a most subtle General who compensated for the numerical and technological inferiority of his men through the use of musical instruments. This was because some of the Jericho's Canaanite garrison had iron weapons, whereas the Israelites were entirely God's own soldiers. They utilized the tactics of intelligence gathering, hit and run and psychological tactics of warfare. Barring a highly coincidental earthquake, the priests blew their horns in unison, fired up their shout of victory and the walls fell down flat. (Trotter, 2006, p. 1)

Both the Greek and Roman armies used brass and percussion instruments including the earlier type of the modern cornet and tuba. These were used to convey information in the march past, in the field and in the soldiers' camp. Greek armies on campaign also employed musicians to accompany lines of poems, celebrating a great event and recitations of songs of praise designed to remind soldiers and the citizens of the victory of their past heroes. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, its tradition of martial (war) music was preserved and made clearer by the Eastern Empire in Byzantium.

### **The Middle Ages**

During the first half of the middle Ages, music was found in the courts and churches of Europe but not on the battlefield. The crusaders changed that, as they did to some other practices. Impressed by the Saracens' use of military bands as both a means of transmitting orders to distant formations and as a weapon of fear and affray, the Christian Knights soon emulated them. Among the Saracen instruments were the anafil, tabor and the naker that looked like a Kettle drum. The earliest use of these in combat was written in *Itinerarum Regis Anglorum Richardi I*, a history of the third crusade published in 1648 (Trotter, 2006: 1). In one battle fought in Syria in 1191, it described trumpet calls being used to signal the start and recall of a Christian cavalry charge. When the veteran crusaders returned to Europe, they brought instruments and such ideas with them. As they were absorbed into various feudal or mercenary armies, the use of martial music spread rapidly. Such music also acquired new modifications as different soldiers adapted it

to their local tastes and practical needs. To the trumpets and drums were also added double – reed instruments and bagpipes. In his treatise *Libro della arte della Guerra* (The Art of War), Niccolo Machiavelli wrote that the commanding officer usually charge orders by means of the trumpet because of its piercing tone and great volume. This enabled it to be heard above the pandemonium of war. Drums and flutes were most useful as an adjunct to discipline on the march and during infantry manoeuvres on the battlefield itself. (Trotter, 2006 p.1)

### **Renaissance and the Classics**

One of the earliest musical treatment of war on a symbolic level is found in Monteverdi's 1638 *Madrigali guerrieri ed amorosi* (Madrigals of war and love). Yet Monteverdi's "war pieces" do not depict or even refer to war itself but rather functions as metaphors for the poets feeling of anguish and betrayal of love. (Gutmann, 2003 p. 2). Haydn in his *Missa in tempore belli* (Mass in Times of War), written in 1796 as Napoleon was advancing on Vienna where it was to be performed is another typical example. Although in the normal natural key of C major and largely reflecting Haydn's style of floating harmony, the opening and closing sections are punctuated with militaristic trumpet fanfares and timpani rolls. Haydn had added similar instrumentation to his earlier Symphony No 100 in G but the effect was purely for decorative purposes. This was a clear example of the role of music in times of war in the work of a Classical Master.

Also a composer, Ludwig Van Beethoven produced one of the few literal depictions of war in his 1813 Wellington's Victory of the Battle of Victoria. Beethoven at first had so revered Napoleon as a popular liberator that he had offered the dedication of his remarkable Symphony No 3 (*Eroica*). Later, when Bonaparte proclaimed himself an Emperor, he inscribed it to "the memory of a great man". While Beethoven's audience may have had to infer his intention, Benjamin Britten left no room for doubt in his disquieting 1962 War Requiem. In this first major work, he seriously challenged sacred ritual and Britten intermingled the benign authority of the traditional liturgy of mourning



Source: Okafor R.C. (2009:59)

Other songs that were popular among the Biafran soldiers were “*Eye, Anyi Ga Enwe Nmeli* (Oh Yes, Ours will be Victory), *Enyi*

*Biafra A Laala* (Biafra, the Elephant Nation, has left) and *Nzogbu, Nzogbu* (Trample, Trample them to Death)”.

They helped to raise their spirits and mellowed down their sufferings in the hope that success would eventually be achieved.

LEADER

N - zo-ghun - zo-ghu n - zo-ghu zo-ghu

RESPONSE

e-nyim ba, e - nyi, e-nyim ba, e - nyi

nwo-ke, zo-ghuo nwa-nyi, n - zo-ghu

e-nyim - ba, e - nyi, e-nyim - ba, e - nyi, e-nyim - ba, e - nyi

*Nzogbu, Nzogbu*

(Trample, Trample (them) to Death)

*Nzogbu, Nzogbu*

*Trample, trample (them) to death*

*Enyi mba, enyi*

*Great nation, big as an elephant*

*Zogbue nwoke*

*Trample the men to death –*

*Enyi mba, enyi*

*Great nation, big as an elephant*

*Zogbue nwayi*

*Trample the women to death –*

*Enyi mba, enyi*

*Great nation, big as an elephant*

Source: Okafor, R.C. (2009:62)

The poets, who also foresaw the terrible situation of the citizenry during the war, wrote poems concerning it. Okafor (2009:63) specifically depicted the situation when he said;

When the storms of war were gathering in the forms of arson, pillage and program, Gabriel Okara in December 1967, wrote a poem that touched the heartstrings of every Biafran and vibrated sympathetically in the hearts of all men of truth, peace and goodwill – “Leave Us Alone”.

### **Leave Us Alone**

There are women and children born and unborn.

Done to death by in human hands

Bespattered with blood of praying men

In rooms, in Church, and Chapel

Are crying for human vengeance

There's no vengeance in our hearts

All we ask is leave us alone

Leave us alone in our land and home

Leave us alone to heal our wounds

And tend our orphans and widows

Leave us alone to heal our wounds

Let time erase your blind hatred

Let time reveal to you

The terrible deed of your hands

Leave us alone to heal our wounds

Leave us alone

But this, you say will not be

For, in the silence of the aftermath

You dared not face the thirty-thousand cries

The cries of the children you did to death in your madness

Leave us alone in our fatherland

Leave us alone to build the land

The land of our dreams and of freedom

Justice, Hope, Opportunity –

Where no one will ever be oppressed, suborned

Leave us alone to build our houses

And raise our families in peace and plenty

Leave us alone

That's all we ask of you and the world

(Okara, 1967, pp 71-74).

Nwokolobia Agu later set it to music and the song then became a companion to freedom fighters with which they travelled to war theatres and the refugee camps in Gabon. Definitely, other poets like Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka viewed the situation with more sublime and incisive minds.

### **End of the War**

With increased British support, the Nigerian federal forces launched their final offensive against the Biafrans which led to the end of the war in January 1970. Consequently, it was the spirit of war fuelled by music that sustained the Biafran soldiers till the end in 1970.

### **CONCLUSION**

Tolstoy in his novel “War and Peace” in Trotter (2006:2) observed that; the effectiveness of an army is the product of the mass multiplied by something else, by an unknown. ‘X’... the spirit of the army. Throughout history, music has had the effect of raising that unknown ‘X’ by a considerable power. What was true of the Saracens during the Crusades remained true during later conflicts. Therefore, what worked for a regiment can be made to work on a

national level, to a greater extent. Even the horrors of modern warfare have proved easier to

bear when their struggles are identified with and supported by great music.

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