# Redreaming the Sound

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I.

Among all the genres of music I heard constantly as a child, classical music came to me and stayed.

Growing up as the son of a clergyman in a close-knit family immersed in religious rituals, music was a constant tie that held each passing day and gave meaning to my preoccupations. My family lived in rectories which were mostly built within church premises. This meant that there was hardly any event or rehearsals that went unnoticed. There was the military-styled band of the Boys' & Girls' Brigade, complete with trumpets and bugles which gave the music a certain kind of resonance. The youth fellowship played mostly Igbo gospel songs accompanied by African indigenous instruments such as the drums, gongs, pot-drums, wooden slit-drums, wood blocks, and rattles. The gospel band played Western musical instruments to an average degree of mastery. Theirs was a non-genre specific band that played pop gospel songs by recording artists whose music had received wide acceptance. Then, the church choir. With the aid of tonic solfa notations, they practiced hymns, canticles, and anthems.  Each day of the week was governed by a genre, or multiple genres.

At 5, I joined the Boys' Brigade and grew to perform as one of the signal boys during outings, particularly funerals and weddings. I learnt to play the snare, bass, and tenor drums. That afforded me the privilege of flexibility. One evening, I sneaked into the band store room in search of the trumpets. I had watched our trumpeters keenly, desired to play the instrument, but never mentioned it to anyone. I wanted to teach myself. I didn't think it would be easy, but I believed I could do it. I found one of the instruments stored neatly in its case, inserted the mouthpiece right there, and

attempted my first note. What I heard sounded like a fart, at best. I tried again and again until I could make a clear tone. In what must have been less than fifteen minutes of constant attempts, I felt a slight sting on my lip, and put the trumpet down. When I turned to face the mirror placed behind the door, I saw that the mouthpiece had left an impression on my lip. I touched my lip gently, looked down at the trumpet and wondered: What is this? I am just getting started, and I already have a mark on my lip?

I left and returned the next day. Nothing changed. After two weeks of repeating the same cycle and leaving with a marked lip, I dumped the instrument. No, the trumpet dumped me.

**II.**

My truest musical affinities began with George Handel's *Messiah*.

I consider Dick Clark's famous quote about music as the soundtrack of one's life as an essential perspective by which one could look at memory through the lens of music. What we forget as humans, music has the power to remember, to remind us, to bring even the depths of buried emotions to the present. What does it mean to trace the trajectory of one's life through old records and albums? It is not new. Humanity owes gratitude to the ingenuity of artistes, their sound, or perhaps the science of sound and human cognition—for this otherworldly phenomenon.

III.

I trace my earliest memory of Handel's music to 1995.

We lived in Oko, a college town in the southeast of Nigeria. I was six and naïve, but responded to the soundscape of my immediate world with a range of curiosity. Our residence, the rectory, was located near a busy main road where passing vehicles, particularly those that honked and played loud music on external speakers—shared their sound untamed. Student unions and clubs publicized their parties on slow moving buses blasting loud music; often with a promoter speaking into the mic intermittently while cheering dancers and passersby. Each time I heard their music, I stood on the sofa to watch through the window, nodding to the rhythm of songs whose lyrics I did not care to know. I think of my penchant for singing wrong lyrics to songs I like even to this day, and I wonder if it started at that age. Most of the songs were popular, no doubt. They hit me and bounced off nonetheless. Only a handful of pop songs such as Angelique Kidjo's *Agolo* & *Wombo Lombo*, and two years later, Coolio's *C U When U Get There* whose chorus was an anthem of sorts, stayed for a while.

The new church building of St. John the Divine was progressing in construction and nearing completion by August, 1995. When the date of its dedication was finally scheduled for December 27, the air was filled with exciting anticipation as preparations commenced in full.

IV.

Enter the church choir.

A chorus of no less than 55 singers, mostly adults and a few teenagers, the choir was and still is—adjudged to be one of the best in the region, owing to their exceptional performances and many wins at choral competitions. For the event, a composer whose name I do not recall now was commissioned to compose a special anthem with the history of the church. In fact, his job was to set the entire story to music. And he did. Rehearsal sessions were delightful, particularly because I heard everything from the rectory, and was often enveloped in the resonance of their voices. I imagined myself, a boy of six, singing in the choir. One evening, the music was different, and I heard the organ booming from the church in accompaniment. It was majestic. I allowed myself the

pleasure of absolute surrender, and did not bother to understand how the song was altering my mind and its definition of music. Did I even possess the mental maturity with which to process that thought? That was not music as I knew it. The music was old, but new to me. Soon enough, the words became clear. *Lift up your heads, O ye gates!* It was a chorus from George Handel's *Messiah* to be performed in addition to the commissioned anthem. Each time I heard the choir, I hummed along. Handel's music left me with goose bumps, and the melody, or perhaps its feeling of grandeur—registered in my subconscious and followed me to sleep on many nights. If dreaming were to be considered an elevated form of encounter, it could be safe to assume that what the song achieved in that realm was a perpetuation of resonance up to the point of materialization.

My newfound love for classical music, particularly those who performed it often had me turning on my ear each time I heard about a good choir, a fantastic conductor, or an organist so exceptional. That was how I heard about Mr. M, a keyboardist whose fame and dexterity on the keys won the admiration of many. He was, like me, the son of a preacher in the same denomination. I did not spare much thought about how proximity to church could be a factor in shaping a musician. I wanted to meet him.

A few years later, in another college town, I met Mr. M on the keyboard. It was a funeral. I had walked into the church to a somber atmosphere and the sound of a soft classical tune in the background. Mr. M wore a black suit, his mien seemed to corroborate whatever sad story his music told as his fingers moved gently on the Yamaha PSR. I gestured in greeting and took a seat near his location, away from my siblings, so I could watch him closely. People spoke in low tones and exchanged greetings with gestures as the funeral brochure was shared in rows. The dead man was a medical doctor, known in his town as a progressive and philanthropist. The music felt like a sound pool which held the grief of mourners. Mid service, after the homily, a tall fair lady walked to the mic stand. She performed Handel's *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*, accompanied by Mr. M, to an audience completely taken by her charm and pitch. While others focused on the singer, my gaze was on Mr. M who mostly fixed his gaze on a book and turned pages intermittently while he played. It was in the same service that I heard Handel's *Dead March from Saul* for the first time. It was a solo performance by Mr. M shortly before the service came to an end. I imagined myself as Mr. M.

V.

As a junior in secondary school, along with a few classmates who shared similar interests in music, I joined the chapel choir to sing soprano. The school, a seminary which operated a full boarding house system, had only male students. Ours was an all-male choir that had a remarkable balance in voice parts. It was to our advantage that we sometimes met for choir rehearsals during the hours of manual labor. The chapel owned an old upright piano which was not only permanently out of tune, but badly beaten by time. The instrument exuded an impression that betrayed a possibility of usefulness. Yet, it was sometimes played during the night assembly. While I sang in the choir, it took a short while to realize that I was rather moved by the keyboardist who was a student. He was a senior whose expertise did not in any way measure up to Mr. M's, yet deft. In the company of my peers, I would tell electrifying stories about Mr. M: how his fingers moved on the keys, how his eyes focused on the score or darted around, how he could play any classical music on earth; and often ended with how I would play like him someday. One evening after choir rehearsals, I walked up to our keyboardist and asked if he knew Mr. M. Yes, I've heard about him, he answered; and continued: I hear he plays the staff notation. I guess that makes him better than some of us who only play by ear. He's very good.

I nodded in agreement, wondering if learning to play the staff notation was all it would take to be on the same pedestal as Mr. M. While our keyboardist walked away, I joined my peers who were leaving the chapel in a rush towards the refectory for dinner.

At the end of the term, I got home for vacation, changed my clothes and left for the market. I was going to buy myself a keyboard. It did not matter that I did not have enough money. I was determined to own the instrument. Before then, I had made a decision to save some of my pocket money for the purchase. What I had could barely pay for any instrument, let alone a keyboard. I walked into a store that had more home electronic gadgets than musical instruments. It was the best known music store in the town. The store owner, a member of our church known to my family, was a middle-aged man venerated for his benevolence. The only keyboard he had in his store was a small-sized two octave pink instrument, which was more of a toy than a keyboard. I declared my interest. When the man told me the cost and noticed my hesitation, he asked how much I had. I brought out all my savings and showed him. He fell on his chair in a thunderous laughter. I had never seen him laugh that way before. I do not recall if I joined, or how his laughter made me feel, but I was determined to go with the instrument. He took the money and promised to keep the instrument so I could have it whenever I brought the balance payment. I went home with nothing, but satisfied that I had taken a step. When my mom returned from work, I narrated my experience at the market. She gave me the balance and encouraged me to go for the keyboard. That became my first instrument. With that, and the aid of tonic solfa notation, I began my first fruitful journey as a self-taught musician.

VI.

In a space of six months, I had made measured progress on the keyboard. I could, to an average degree, play a number of hymns and songs. Playing musical notes remained a dream. My father, benign and supportive of my resolve; sent my eldest brother to buy me a better keyboard. That was my reward. Or perhaps, a seed for the future. When my brother returned from Onitsha with the instrument, in the presence of my father and his best friend Mr. EPH, we opened the box, set the keyboard, and I played a hymn to their delight and applause. My family became my first real audience and training ground. During devotions, particularly at night, I would set my keyboard and play the set hymn. Next, I began playing in church at midweek services.

In school, I began to play at the chapel. While this came as a surprise to many students and staff alike, my colleagues in the choir envisaged the transition. During a mid-term break, I branched off on my way home to attend a funeral where I was sure to meet my father. The deceased, Canon CC, was a musical icon and British Columbian trained scholar and clergyman who hailed from my hometown. When I realized that the date for his funeral coincided with the date we would leave school on mid-term break, it felt like a miracle. His funeral was surely going to be a grand concert, I knew. That day, I walked into St. Mary's Church compound and was overwhelmed by the mammoth crowd and the chanting of Psalm 90 booming from high-mounted speakers. There were more people outside the church building than were inside. Many cars were parked in several directions, and there were little canopies set up for merchandise such as clergy vestments, religious literatures, films, and music CDs. First, I had to find my dad's car. It did not take long before I spotted Mr. O, my father's official driver, laughing in conversation with his colleagues. I walked up to them, exchanged greetings, and he took me to where he parked. He put my box in the trunk, and as we walked back, I took another turn and found a good location near a window, from where I watched the proceedings. After the homily by the Archbishop, there were a number of performances by choirs and individual soloists. Among the solo performers was a clergyman who sang from the altar, fully robbed. Then, a young man holding a mic, walked to the chancel, took a bow and faced the congregation. The entire choir numbering over a hundred, stood up and gave a resounding rendition of Stephen Adams' *The Holy City*, their voices ringing as they chorused Jerusalem, Jerusalem, lift up your gates and sing, Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna to your King! I stood there hypnotized, my eyes full of wonder. I imagined that if the dead could not wake up at that point, he was truly dead and nothing else would change that fact. Afterwards, I walked back to one of the canopies to look

through their catalogue of music CDs. With my little savings, I bought CDs of Handel's *Young Messiah*, Handel's *Messiah*, and a collection of hymns by Charles Wesley.

VII.

In school, I began to practice and play some music from Handel's *Messiah* by ear. I had listened to my CDs so often that I knew each song, without truly knowing them. To my audience, I was the chapel keyboardist who in addition to hymns and songs, played classical music. It did not matter that I only played by ear. One morning at the chapel, while we were seated calmly, waiting for the assembly to commence— a bespectacled lady walked in with the principal, Sir. V. The lady, Ms. Amaka, was introduced to the school as the new Music teacher and Kapellmeister. That morning, she played the set hymn, her eyes focusing on a large hymnbook she had brought with her. At a glance, I saw it was staff notation. Finally! A keyboardist who played musical notes. A graduate of Music from the University of Nigeria, she had come with a wealth of knowledge and experience to revamp the school choir and the study of music, the principal had said earlier. I made a mental note to ask for the possibility of taking private lessons from her, on a later date.

The staff quarters, an L-shaped landscaped building that housed mostly younger members of the academic staff who were single, often had an air of calmness about it that forbids the meddlesomeness of playful students. In fact, students were forbidden to show up at any staff member's residence uninvited. I broke the rule. When I knocked on her door, Ms. Amaka appeared, surprised to see me. It was during the hours of night prep when fellow students were studying, but there I was, young rebel—following my mind regardless. I do not know how to play the staff notation, I said. Would you teach me, please? She regarded me kindly. That's alright. I'll get back to you later, she said. Now, go back to class. Her voice was resolute.

I thanked her and left.

VIII.

One evening, choristers were gathered at the chapel, waiting for Ms. Amaka's arrival. It was rehearsal hour. Since she took her position, we had learned and performed compositions by European and notable Nigerian composers alike. Our carols at Christmas took a new turn. I was seated at the keyboard, playing Handel's *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth,* when she walked in. I did not stop. I wanted her to hear me, even though I was playing by heart—and in a key different from the original by a semitone. After the rehearsal, while others were leaving, she approached me to ask if I could play the entire aria. I nodded in the affirmative, but mentioned that I could only play the music in E Flat Major. She asked me to transpose to E Major and play. She wanted to sing. It felt strange. Here I was—a neophyte at the instrument, about to accompany my teacher and Kapellmeister on one of Handel's greatest arias. I played. She sang. When the music ended, I looked up to her for feedback, an assurance of sorts. I thought our rendition was good, but her face held suppressed admiration. Perhaps she did not want me to get carried away by early acclaim. I have a funeral to attend in Enugwu-Ukwu, she said. I will sing this aria, and you will accompany me on the keyboard.

Our performance of Handel's *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth* became my first gig as a classical musician. At that funeral, I met three young classical musicians from Onitsha who had performed as well. The first young man, a fair baritone, sang *But Thou Dids't Not Leave* from Handel's *Messiah*. The second, a tenor, sang Stephen Adams' *The Holy City*. The third, a fine young man in tie and waistcoat, was their accompanist on the keyboard. I wanted to be like them, to be invited and paid to perform classical music. On our way back to school, I asked Ms. Amaka when I could start my piano lessons. I was eager to learn how to read notes, to stop transposing, to experience what it felt like to

be Mr. M—or the keyboardist I just met a while ago. Meet me at the staff quarters tomorrow evening, she said. Come with small wood.

I was baffled. Small wood? What does a piece of wood have to do with learning staff notation? I didn't see the correlation. If that was all it took, how come I never figured out? It didn't make sense. I failed to mention my concern to her. She was, in the meantime, postulating on the significance of studying music as a course in the university if I aspired to be an exceptional performer. I did not care for that. I wanted to study law, but play piano professionally. When we got to school, I spent several hours worrying about finding an appropriate small wood for the lesson. What kind of wood would it be? How small? Perhaps the length of a key on the keyboard? Does it have to be heavy? It must be light, I thought. If it is for piano, then it has to be light. No, perhaps I needed to show up with all kinds of wood and let her decide the best fit for the lesson. When my indecisiveness peaked, I abandoned all the woods and showed up at the staff quarters with nothing. I expected to be chided. Instead, she set her own keyboard at the verandah, brought an extra seat for me, and went back inside. When she reappeared, she had a yellow slim book with a bold title: SMALLWOOD'S PIANO TUTOR. So this was small wood? I thought. I was ashamed. I would never have guessed right. When we sat for the lesson, she flipped through the preliminary pages, pointed out a few rudimental theories, and thereafter—I began a new journey on the instrument.

IX.

I saw it first in a dream. My mother, Rose, was lying still in a casket. There were decorative lights around where she was laid for viewing, and as the congregation sang hymns, people walked up to pay their last respects. I woke up in tears. The message was as clear as daylight, yet damning in many ways. Months earlier, mom had returned from an ordination service, worried. There, some of her colleagues had pointed out that her eyes were turning yellow. That week, she began a journey that took her through initial misdiagnosis, months of pain, surgeries, and gradual withdrawal. On Wednesday November 30, 2005: she passed on. Cause of death: Cancer of the pancreas. When the news broke out, my younger brother and I were in school, writing exams. The news was hidden from us until it was not. When I found out, the dream flashed back. Was that the day she passed on? I came undone. At night, I locked myself in the school library alone, and wept my eyes dry.

On Christmas Eve, I was seated at the keyboard near the choir stall, away from my family, waiting for the pre-funeral commendation service to begin. The procession came into view and I began the first hymn. Soon, I saw her casket. My heart sank. Yet, I played on. When they approached near the chancel, the casket was laid and opened for viewing, while the hymn singing continued, interspersed with bible readings. Around where she lay, were decorative Christmas lights blinking in multicolor. From where I sat, I could see her upper body, dressed in white—still and serene. I played on. There I was, after the homily, singing Stephen Adams' *The Holy City* while I played the keyboard, the choir joining in the chorus section and recharging the atmosphere in sublime harmonies. I came full circle.

X.

Sixteen years later, I am sitting in my room, scrolling through music videos on YouTube. I see *The Holy City – By Stephen Adams*. The title catches my attention. I pause and click on the video. It is a recorded live performance by Harmonious Chorale, a Ghanaian classical ensemble. As the synths open with the prelude, stage lights turn on to reveal the choir, keyboardists, and children; all dressed in white. As the soloist begins the first verse, the children form small circles, their wing costumes glistening under the light as they display a synchronized choreography to the rendition. I am still, still, still. When the music ends, I exhale heavily. Have I been holding my breath? My eyes are full now and tears roll down in memory of my mom, my journey through music, and the passage of time.

I unlock my phone and click on the video again.

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