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REMEMBERING O.G. BLANKSON: A GHANAIAN CHORAL ART MUSIC COMPOSER

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ABSTRACT : This paper contributes to the current Ghanaian choral art music scholarship by tracing the life history and works of Oman Ghan Blankson, one of Ghana's foremost choral art music composers in an attempt to bring to the fore his musical exploits in the context of Ghanaian choral art music. Music is inarguably at the centre of Christian worship and has been an integral part of the formation of the church up till today. The Western missionaries brought their style of music to the Gold Coast now Ghana. As time went on, African composers started composing songs that reflected their identity. The tunes were used for everyday church service and special occasions. These composers contributed to the foundation of choral music and hymnology in the African church, of which one of such composers is O.G. Blankson. Although the compositions of O.G. Blankson are well known among the choral art music fraternity, not much is known of him as a person. Employing document review and interviews for data collection, the paper reveals O.G. Blankson as one of the major contributor to the development of choral art music in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: *Ghanaian choral art music, Christian worship, composer, hymnology, O.G. Blankson*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that the Church has always been identified with choral music since the early stages of the then Gold Coast, presently Ghana. This is due to the coming of the Western missionaries, whose main purpose was to propagate the gospel. The Western influence on the traditional, art and popular music of Ghana has been discussed by many scholars (Mensah, 1960; Nketia, 1974; Collins, 1994; Agawu, 2003; Andoh, 2008). The introduction of Western Christian hymns by missionaries sung by the converts at seminaries and other parochial institutions according to Amuah (2010) aided the assimilations of Western musical styles by Africans. According to Agordoh (2010), many of the composers wrote to satisfy other singing styles in the Church. The Western-style of harmony, singing and musical instruments became a "colonizing force" on Ghana's vocal music (Agawu, 2003; Andoh, 2010; Dor, 2005). This phenomenon, however, marked the beginning of Ghanaian art music. Musical instruments such as the harmonium, accordion and style of church music were also introduced to the Gold Coasters, which began to influence the vocal music of the local people. It is worth noting that the Victoria College of Music, London had Charles Graves as its correspondence representative in the Gold Coast in the 1920s. The availability of potential musicians to access formal music education through correspondence helped to improve the compositional techniques of musicians such as Ephraim Amu, Oman Ghan Blankson, Isaac Daniel Riverson, Otto A. Boateng, Rev. J.E. Allotey-Pappoe, J.H. Nketia, N.Z. Nayo among others. It is worth noting that all the above-mentioned composers have received considerable scholarly attention except for O.G. Blankson. Some Ghanaian scholars, for instance, Amuah and Arthur (2013) and Andoh (2010) subtly referred to O.G. Blankson as one of the earliest Ghanaian choral art music composers in their respective studies.

A preliminary investigation of O.G. Blankson's compositions revealed that some of his compositions are considered anonymous composer, while others have also been incorporated into other Churches hymnal without proper acknowledgment. The compositional style of O.G. Blankson is of importance to composers and scholars with interest in the early African church music compositional styles. Despite being one of the foremost Ghanaian choral art music composers, literature on O.G. Blankson is almost non-existent. It is on this background that this study brings to the fore the life history and musical exploits of O.G. Blankson as a contributor to choral music scholarship in Ghana. Since O.G. Blankson and his wife have passed on, the data for this study was collected through document review and interview with his children, Prof. Sir Robert Annaman Herbert Blankson, Dr. Charles Codman Taylor Blankson and Victor Emmanuel Roberts Blankson.

II. EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION OF O.G. BLANKSON

Oman Ghan Blankson was born on 17th November 1899 to Richard John Blankson and Madam Hannah Roberts (all of Winneba in the Efutu municipality in the present-day Central Region of Ghana). He was the 4th among five children of his parents. He started his elementary education at the Winneba Wesleyan School. His father passed away when he was only 7. At age 13, his special interest in music, coupled with his unique talent caught the attention of the then Principal of the school, The Reverend. S.C. Dodd. To develop his music skills, Reverend S.C. Dodd recommended that he joined the church choir, which his mother obliged. O.G. Blankson consequently, joined the Ebenezer Methodist Church Choir which was then under the leadership of Mr. J. Essuon Inkabi. While in the choir, the young O.G. Blankson took special interest in the church organ. At age 19, O.G. Blankson began to learn the rudiments of music from Mr. Sam Yarney, a civil servant in Winneba. Mr. Yarney prepared young Blankson to write some of the external examination syndicates in the country at that time (Andoh, 2008). While young Blankson started picking up on the fundamentals of music theory, Mr. Yarney was transferred from Winneba to Sekondi in the Western Region. O.G. Blankson was subsequently, appointed the choirmaster and organist of Winneba Methodist Church at age 20. To continue with his music studies, he took correspondence courses with Professor Charles Graves of Cape Coast who was the resident representative of the Victoria College of Music, London. He passed the advanced course in music with Associate Musician of Victoria College of Music, London (A. Mus. VCM) on 16th August 1920.

After finishing middle school, O.G. Blankson taught in the Methodist Elementary School in Winneba. Although he taught for only three years, he became well known and called “Teacher” throughout his life. In 1926, O.G. Blankson married Jane Arthur, a cousin of the late Reverend A. B. Dickson, the father of Most Reverend Professor Emeritus Kwesi Abotsia Dickson, the seventh President of the Ghana Methodist Conference. O.G. Blankson resigned as a teacher to join Messrs Miller brothers, a British company operating in Winneba at the time. This company, later on, merged with East Trading Company to become the United African Company (U.A.C) in 1930. From 1940 to 1946, the company moved to Swedru in the Central Region. With the movement of the company, he was also transferred to Swedru. He however, continued to serve with the Winneba Methodist Church until Isaac Daniel Riverson was transferred to Winneba. He took over from O.G. Blankson as choirmaster and organist of Winneba Ebenezer Methodist Church. In 1946, O.G. Blankson was transferred back to Winneba. Upon his return to Winneba, he continued as the choirmaster and organist of the Methodist church in Winneba. He retired from U.A.C in 1952 as an accountant due to blindness, having served the company for 29 years.

O.G. Blankson, due to his passion for music established a private night music school where he taught people who wanted to learn to play the organ in the 1930s.

Life as a Choirmaster and Organist of the Methodist Church of Ghana, Winneba

As stated earlier, he was appointed as choirmaster and organist of the Ebenezer Methodist Church when he was 20 years. The job of the choir master organist is to organize and rehearse the choir for worship service. Interestingly, he organised and staged concerts with the Winneba Methodist Choir, which was unusual at that time. He staged cantata such as *The Count of Como*, *Esther the beautiful Queen* and *The Queen of Sheba* by W. B. Bradbury and C. M. Cardy. He performed with the choir and the women’s fellowship. Most of these concerts were performed between the 1930 and 1950.

O.G. Blankson’s willingness to share his music skills and knowledge with anyone who needed his services without even thinking about the financial or social reward was one of his unique character traits. He availed himself to other societies of the Methodist Church to help in teaching and adjudication of music competitions. According to Herbert Anaman Blankson, the Methodist Church, usually invited O.G. Blankson and the Ebenezer Methodist Church Choir to go to various towns to inaugurate new Society and dedication of new Choir robes.

Life as a Composer

Although a prolific music instructor and organist, he never considered composition until he lost a chorister. His first composition, *Kofbon* was composed out of grief when one of his choristers known as Kofi Bonney died in 1923. This composition is, however, believed to be the first composition published by an African. The lyrics of the music were written by his friend, Mr. E.O. Tetteh. This composition became very popular among choirs in general and the Methodist church in particular. This work, as shown in figure 1 below aroused public interest and spurred him on to further compositions (Andoh, 2008).


Fig. 1.

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KOFBON

C.M.

Words by E.O. Tetteh Suggested hymn: "God moves in a mysterious way" M.H.B 503 Music by O. G. Blankson



Copyright 1923

1. 'Tis silent now- the voice that once
Our earthly choir in love
Did join ; disowing this, it joins
The blessed choir above.
2. And who is he whose death doth stir
The people of this place?
Yes, rich and poor the wise and fair
All yearn to see his face.
3. 'Tis he of whom 'tis true to say
He was well loved by all.
Now gone before us suddenly
To attend his Master's call.
4. Ah, how my spirit longs to see
His face once sweet and bold.
Lord Jesus, Guide his soul to Thee,
Thy face e'er to behold.
5. Kind Heaven bless thy peaceful sleep,
On earth who art no more.
May'st thou eternal sabbath keep
With those long gone before.

A - men

One major characteristic of the compositional style of O.G. Blankson was the use of passing notes to express emotions as can be found throughout the composition. The lyrics which by E.O. Tetteh, fitted the composition style and expressed the emotions that O.G. Blankson wanted to put across. O.G. Blankson's religious zeal for testimonies, evangelism, discipleship and service to God, led him to compose several delightful and memorable tunes for special occasions, including births, weddings, and death involving family members and friends. For instance, O.G. Blankson at age 24, composed a touching song titled *Frank* to be sung to the hymn, *Now The Labourer's Task Is O'er* (M.H.B 976), in the memory of the late Mr. Frank Sam, a musician and a cousin to O.G. Blankson. This composition has become popular among Ghanaians that it is almost impossible to have a burial service in the Country without it being sung. Similarly, when O.G. Blankson's brother, Rev. Kwodwo Abbam Blankson died, the late Rev. Gaddiel R. Acquah wrote the words *Da Yie dofo fonafo* (*Fare well loving and tired friend*) which was sung to the same tune, *Frank*, as shown in figure 2 below. In all, O.G. Blankson composed over 120 simple delightful tunes, chants, anniversary songs and responses.

Fig. 2.

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DA YIE

Words by Revd Gad. R. Acquah Tune: "FRANK" - 7.7.7.7.8.8 Music by O. G. Blankson
Suggested hymn - "Now the labourer's task is o'er" M.H.B

Copyright, 1923

<p>1. Da yie, Dafo fonafo. W' edwuma abo adze; Ahomgye pa, siar mbordo Na dew mapa nyɛ wodze NGYEDO Da yie, da yie, Nyame mfa W' nsie Adzesaa ahyɛ sum da yiel</p>	<p>3. Twer Jesu N' abaw mu komin, Nyame-do nkata wo do; Sun w' Agyenkwa no bom sɔm Mbrɛ bon biara nneɛhaw wo. NGYEDO Da yie da yie, Nyame mfa wonsie Yebehya m'afeboɔ, da yie</p>
<p>2. Nyinsu bɔnsam' kwantunyi, Hom fi yaw na suro nsa, Hom mbrɛ su na mbusu nnyi, W'akwantu ber no asa</p>	<p>4. Kwantunyi brɛfo dafo, W' ankwantu abo adze; Atsew esian nyina me, Efi awerɛhow' wiaɛze. NGYEDO Da yie, da yie, Nyame mfa w' nsie Dzi fie kan kotweɛn hɛn, da yiel</p>

Most of O.G. Blankson's compositions were circumstantial. He also collaborated with other people such as Rev. A.B. Dickson, Rev. Gaddiel Acquah and Rev. Chas D. Kittoe to write most of the lyrics to his songs. As to why O.G. Blankson did not write lyrics to most of his songs is not established, however, Charles Blankson was of the view that these lyricists were eloquent and knowledgeable in the Christian faith and, maybe his father thought they would do a good job if they write lyrics to his composition. The relationship between O.G. and these lyricists were mutual and most of the time, O.G. would write the song and hand it to them to write appropriate lyrics to it. The acceptance of his compositions by the general public and the Church spurred him on to write other songs. His composing styles were hymn-like, just as his contemporaries such as Rev. J.E. Allotey-Pappoe, Charles E. Graves. Most of the compositional styles in the 1920s and 1930s were hymn-like, the same as what the missionaries brought to Africa (Agordoh, 2010).

In 1946, his mother sadly passed away. He then compiled some of his compositions into a hymn book to eulogise his late mum. This hymnbook, which he titled *The Robertsville* was published in 1949 by John Blackburn Publishing Company in Leeds, United Kingdom. This hymnal became one of the foremost hymnbooks published by a Ghanaian. This Hymnal had 24 songs including anniversary anthems, hymn tunes and chants. The Robertsville Hymnal has been further revised and edited by Kwasi Gyebi-Tweneboah. The hymnbook now has 92—songs with contributions from O.G. Blankson's children. 16 of O.G. Blankson compositions have been added to the "New Methodist Christian Asɔr Ndwom" a vernacular translation of the entire Methodist Hymn Book Published by the Methodist Church, Ghana. One of O.G. Blankson songs *Alpha et Omega: Beloved, let us, love*, has been adopted by Susanna Wesley Missions Auxiliary in the Methodist Church not only as its anthem but also as a salutation. It is worth stating that, the Winneba state has honored O. G. Blankson by naming a Street after him in recognition of his contribution towards music and the development of music in Winneba. Similarly, the Ebenezer Methodist Cathedral in Winneba also mounted a plaque in his honor in the church. O.G. Blankson died in 1974 due to old age.

III. CONCLUSION

Oman Ghan Blankson, one of the foremost musician composers and trailblazers of choral art music has contributed immensely to the development of this genre in Ghana particular and Africa in general. In this study, not only have I traced O.G. Blankson's life and music history but also his iconic contribution to the development of music in the Methodist Church of Ghana. Choral music has always been part of Christian

worship from earliest times till now. I therefore recommend that the life and music of composers similar to O.G. Blankson should be documented for posterity.

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