

ADVANCING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH CHORAL PERFORMANCES: PERSPECTIVE ON THE MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY CHOIR TOUR OF WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES IN 2023

KEYWORDS

Cultural Diplomacy, Choral Performances, Morgan State University, Choir, West African.

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diplomacy has been known for its role in promoting transnational dialogue between cultures and nation of the world, via exchange of cultural ideas, philosophy, works of arts and language. The Morgan State University Choir visit to Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Benin republic expressed great potential of choral works and performance groups in enhancing intercultural relationships, acceptance and exchange of cultural values among nations. The study examined the efficiency of choral group's performances as tool for cultural diplomacy. Emphasis was on combined performances by chorals of different nations. This work also examined cultural interactions among these choral groups and some selected repertoires they performed as a groups. Methods for data collections include library research, interview, internet sources and personal observation. Findings provide that music performances possess strong potentials for instigating cultural collaboration, negotiation and interaction. The tentative conclusion is that music performance is an effective tool for enhancing cultural diplomacy among nations of the world.

I. INTRODUCTION

Music as a creative art is one of the fundamental art forms for human expression. It has been considered as a universal language due to its power to communicate and express human emotions. Music in its nature springs from human emotions, life experience, cultural values and environmental dynamics. The expression of man's emotion, feeling is often influenced by the totality of his or her life experiences. These motions can be shared and transferred to other people of diverse cultures and environments though textual contents, sonic effect, dance performances. Music performances have the potential to attract people from different cultures of the world and unite

them as one functional community. Kofi Annan (2023) in his peace address in the United Nations day states that, music jumps across language barriers and unites people of very diverse cultural origins in a world of diversity where ideals often collide. He asserts that 'music may express a wide spectrum of emotions, get to the heart of the matter, and speak directly to the soul. Through our common feelings, music has the capacity to unite us and strengthen our sense of community. Music performances can therefore be perceived as a viable tool for advancing the purpose of cultural diplomacy. With the aid of musical activities, all peoples of the world can unite to create a more peaceful human race.

Music has been known as a fundamental component of every human society. It's often used for mobilization, building up of hope and aspirations, and for the expression of moods; feeling of sadness or happiness. When people gather for purposes of celebration, mourning, or to participate in socio-cultural, political and religious event, music making and performance take the centre stage to create a sense of unity. Hence, no human society exists without music. Even though, the music of different human society may differ in terms of pitch, rhythm and timber as a result of environmental resources, instrument designs and language but, the common futures do exist irrespective of these cultural and environmental differences. Music is emotive in nature; it penetrates human's emotion and arouses some feelings. That is why Blacking (as cited in Reily, 2007) refers to the emotional characteristic of music as inherent to humans. Music is an one of effective tools that has overtime shown to be beneficial in uniting human societies since its emotive nature knows no boundary across human races.

Music performances have always facilitated cross-cultural contact and have greatly showcased an ideal humanistic approach to intercultural acceptance and relationships. For instance, a popular Nigerian afrobeat singer, David Adeleke, popularly known as Davido has performed in many nations of the world and have also won numerous international awards from different nations. The likes of Ayodeji Ibrahim Balogun known as Wizkid, Divine Ikubor popularly called Rema, Kizz Daniel, Damini Eburnoluwa known as Burnn Boy and many Nigerian pop music artistes have got their music accepted and appreciated across different cultures. These artistes from Nigeria have made impact in the world's popular music scene particularly, in Afrobeat genre. Their music received much acceptance in many nations of the world and created different image of Nigeria, irrespective of media representation of Nigeria as a nation. Tiwa Savage is female Nigerian popular afrobeat who was commissioned to perform at the coronation concert of King Charles III in London. She was the first African to perform at coronation of a British monarch. Not only did Tiwa Savage's performed for British monarchs at the coronation concert in

April 2023 rather, she performed before many powerful monarchs across the globe. Her performance in the arena of coronation of such magnitude demonstrates cultural inclusion and undermine of cultural and racial differences. Such gesture strengthens economic, political, and cultural ties between nations as well as, fostering friendliness among citizens of such nations.

In addition to the Nigerian Afrobeat singers performing around the world, the tour of Morgan University choir gave another kind of touch to the music diplomacy. Not only that their performance style is away from Afrobeat style of music, their concerts and performances happened mostly in institution of learning, involving cooperate bodies, government officials and agencies. The Morgan State University Choir is a choral group belonging to an institution of learning and it is known for her regular visit and collaborations with different choral groups belonging to institution of learning cooperate organizations and churches. Morgan State University Choir has toured many continents around the world. It is apparent to note that musical attractions and performances facilitated virtually all visits of Morgan State University Choir to different continents of the world and in 2023, to four West African nations. This gesture evidenced how music can pull nations to a common ground of understanding and associations. It becomes pertinent to document the activities of the Morgan State University Choir in West African nations particularly, their choral performances, combined rendition of African and African-American repertoires with indigenous African choral groups.

The Morgan State University Choir

The Morgan State University Choir is a collage choir based in the city of Baltimore, the state of Maryland and the United States. It is one of the most prestigious university choral ensembles with about one hundred and forty voices. It is an institutionalized chorale that has been directed by Dr. Eric Conway since 2004 till date. The Morgan State University choir has performed on many grand stages and theatres around the world. They are known for preservation of African American slave music styles particularly, the Negro spiritual genre. Selection of their repertoires for performances often comprises of classical, gospel and

contemporary popular music which in most cases reflect a fair share of African American musical elements. The Morgan State University Choir has performed throughout United States and in many nations around the world including Virgin Islands, Canary Islands, Canada, Europe, Asia and Africa. The choir was pronounced the best collage choir in the United States of America by Reader's Digest in 2004. (The Kennedy Centre, 2012). Morgan State University (2019), affirms that since 2017, the Morgan State University choir has toured, Cuba, Spain, Portugal, Australia, Slovakia, Germany, England, Scotland, Wales, Peru, Ecuador, Galapagos Island and Hawaii (p.3). The tour of four West Africa countries by Morgan State University choir is one of their usual trips which are motivated by collaborative choral performances with different choral groups around the globe.

Their tour to West African nations was notably a historic one due to the great display of ancestral connections of black American music to West Africa musical cultures. The Morgan State University choir incidentally, consists more of African American descendants in their choral group and they performed more of African American musical styles in the visit to west African nations. Hence, despite diversity in languages, cultural background and identity, the Morgan State University choir and West African choral groups interacted freely and effectively.

The Morgan University Choir tour of four West African Nations

The Morgan State University Choir embarked on their annual international spring tour to four West African countries in the month of May, 2023. The tour began from the Cape Coast, Ghana as the choir landed Accra, Ghana on the 21st of May, 2023. They were received with African drumming and dance performances by Akomapa group at the Cape Coast Castle. (Wilson, 2023).

Ghana is an Anglophone West African country. Ghana secured her independence in 1959 from the British colony. Since after independence, Ghana has been making waves in cultivated music particularly in areas like highlife music, Pop music and Art music. However, the visit by Morgan State University Choir motivated more performance of Ghanaian art music than other regular musical

genres in Ghana. In collaboration with the Morgan State University Choir, free choral concert was held in the University of Cape Coast; Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Catholic Church where different choral groups including Madonna Choir, Pax Romanan Chior, Holy Family Choir, St. Joseph the Worker Church Choir and a few others choral groups performed at the concert. On 25th of May, the Morgan State University Choir moved to Accra; the capital city of Ghana where they performed at the National Theatre. The Morgan State University Choir in collaboration with Harmonious Chorale Ghana staged free choral concert in the National Theatre where performances of African - American spirituals, contemporary hymns and some African repertoires were performed.

The Harmonious Chorale Ghana is believed to be one of the best choral groups based in Accra Ghana. It is an interdenominational choir that has performed in some major stages around the world. The two choral groups (the Morgan State University Chior and Harmonious Chorale) co-performed works like 'Oh, Happy Day' by Edwin Hawkins; a popular hymn song done in a contemporary singing style. They crowned the concert with combined performance of 'Oye', one of the works of James Armaah, a popular Ghanaian composer. The collaborative, expressions, bodily languages and the rhythmic movements by the combined choir during the performance of 'Oye', projected the extent of connectivity and friendliness that had already started existing among the choir members of the two choral groups within such a short time. The same emotions were transferred to their audience. The National Theatre concert was embraced by great personalities, such include government officials, different cooperate organization leaders in Ghana, representatives from American embassy Ghana and the president, Morgan State University.

Togo was the second West African country toured by The Morgan State University Choir. On Friday, 26th of May 2023, the Morgan State University Choir was in Lome, the capital city of Togo. Togo is one of the French speaking nations in West Africa. Togo gained independence from the French colony on the April 27, 1960. Hence, French remains the official language in Togo. Music as a universal language can easily breaks the barriers of language differences. The power of

music broke the language barriers between the Morgan State University choir and the host choral groups in Lome. There was noticeable bonding between these nations through music. The US Embassy supported a free musical concert in which the Morgan State University Choir in collaboration with the Avenir Choir of the University of Lome performed. The Battle of Jericho by Moses Hogan was performed by the Morgan State University choir at the concert. And both choral groups jointly performed 'Precious Lord' composed by Thomas A. Dorsey and arranged by Nathan Carter. This was performed accapela (without instrument accompaniment). They also performed 'Oh Happy Day' by Edwin Hawkins together.

The Morgan State University choir travelled from Togo to Benin Republic on 27th of May, 2023. Benin was the third country they visited in their tour to West African nations. Just as seen in Togo, Benin Republic is also a French speaking West African country. The nation was under French colony but got her independence in 1960 as well. The Morgan State University Choir landed Cotonou on the 27 of May. Cotonou is the largest city in Benin Republic. In collaboration with the University of Abomey-Calavi Choir, a free concert was held at the Blue Room, Palais Du Congress. There were performances by Morgan State University Choir and also from Ensemble Vocal les Airs Sacriea in Benin. The free concert in Cotonou was supported and embraced by the United State Embassy and many government officials from Benin Republic. In progression, the choir left Benin Republic to Nigeria after their Performances at the Blue Room, Palais Du Congress. Hence, Nigeria was the last West African nation that the Morgan State University choir visited in their tour of West African countries.

Nigeria is one of the British colonized nations that gained her independence in 1960. Nigeria is a multicultural nation with about two hundred and fifty ethnic regions and languages. However, Nigeria has English as her official language. The Morgan State University Choir arrived Lagos Nigeria on the 29th of May, 2023, and stayed till 31 of May, 2023. Most of the performances by the Morgan State University Choir in Nigeria took place in Lagos; the largest city in West Africa. In collaboration with different

Nigerian choral groups, Morgan University choir performed in different venues and cities within and nearby Lagos. Collaborative concerts were held at places like, the Cathedral Church of Christ, Marina, Lagos, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State and Agip Recital Hall, MUSON centre. The Morgan State University Choir performances were conducted by Dr Eric Conway and they delivered gospel songs and some African- American spirituals. These combined concerts attracted prominent people from embassies in Nigeria, policy makers, cooperate organizations and music scholars to commune in a shared collaborative arts experience

Nigeria and United States have in many ways shown to have familiar and common interests in arts especially, in music and film. There has been a lot of collaboration among Nigerian Pop singers and American pop stars like Ahmed Olamide popularly known as 'Asake' featured Gabriella Sarmiento Wilson in the remix of his song titled 'lonely at the top'. In same manner, many Nigeria singers and actors have featured in Hollywood films through which they created dialogue and exchange of cultural experiences. Joe Kruzich, the US consulate's public Affairs officer in an interview expressed that the office was happy to support Morgan State University choir's tour to Nigeria. He affirms that the burgeoning ties between the U.S. and Nigeria were extended through institutions like Morgan State University and other Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) which have continued to serve as home for international students in the U.S., including many from Nigeria. Joe Kruzich notes that the Morgan State University choir's visits would contribute to strengthening the bonds of friendship and collaboration through music and arts. (Nigeriatribuneonline.com May 2023). This thought expresses the power of music performances and collaborations in the enhancement of cultural diplomacy or intercultural understanding and negotiations.

Music in Diplomacy: Exchange of Musical Background and Collaboration

Diplomacy entails the application of art and science in the practice of negotiating between nations, groups or individuals in the conduct of their affairs, in a way to protect interests. Through dialogue and peaceful relationships,

decisions are taken to promote political, economic or cultural relations between two or more parties or nations. The encouragement of friendly relations and conduct of negotiations between nations without arousing any form of resentment are all task of diplomacy. Music as an expressive art, a unifying force and a universal language can appeal or arouse certain emotions in an individual or groups irrespective of race and culture. Music is a culture carrier and its performances have shown to drive positive relations hence; it is a vital tool in the discourse of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy entails the exchange of cultural concepts, works of art, knowledge, and other cultural products between countries and their citizens in an effort to deepen understanding. It assists the inhabitants of a foreign country in becoming familiar with the nation's values, constitution and prospects. Cultural diplomacy often aims at boosting supports for political and economic objectives. (bestdiplomat.org, 2023.). With the aid of music collaborations and other art forms, a country's accepted cultural values, and taboos are systematically transmitted via performances which in turn may influence both negotiations and decisions.

The Morgan State University choir had collaborative concert with Babcock University choir on Tuesday, 30th May, 2023. There were joints and separate choral renditions of selected repertoires. The concert started with the Nigerian national anthem thereafter, the American anthem was rendered. Although, the Morgan State University choir did not join in the rendition of the Nigerian national anthem probably, due to their visit to multiple nations. The task to learn all nations' anthem may be a bit of a challenge to the touring choir. Given that the Morgan State University choir is remarkable known for touring continents around the world, it is understandable that the choir may not have been able to master the anthems of all countries they have performed in. However, they all stood in solidarity when the Nigerian anthem was rendered. On the other hand, Babcock University choir as the host choir in the concert rehearsed both Nigerian and American anthem, as a way of fostering unity between the two nationalities. The Babcock University choir joined in the rendition of the American anthem. In addition, the joint rendition of American anthem

was accompanied by the Babcock University Choir accompanists. Through this, participants from both countries; Nigeria and America, have been able to exchange each country's identity song which contains texts that were carefully woven around the core values of each country. It can be said that such gesture as rehearsing and rendering other nations anthem is an opportunity for learning about a people and appreciating their national values.

After some choral renditions by the Morgan State University choir, the host and visiting choirs came together to perform two pieces 'O Happy Day' by Edwin Hawkins and Halleluyah Chim Le, original composed work of Onyeka Onwenu, arrangement for choral by, C.N Osinigwe. While 'O Happy Day' was conducted by the Morgan State University choir conductor, Halleluyah Chim Le was conducted by the Babcock University choir conductor. All of these created avenue for cultural exchange in the area of music. While the American troupe had a feel of the Nigerian art musical works, the Nigerian choristers who participated in the rendition of American styled gospel choral music got some new musical experiences. Here there were sure exchanges of musical and cultural traits. Kruzich (2023) upheld that the role of music in diplomacy cannot be overemphasized, especially with its emphasis on free expression, creativity and collaborative teamwork. (Nigeriatribuneonline.com, May 2023).

In order to showcase the multiethnic and multicultural Nigerian state and African nation, the choice of repertoires by the Babcock University choir were selected from some ethnic regions of Nigeria; the Efik song titled Da Ekyong (Arise and shine), Yoruba composition titled Messiah Baba mi (Messiah, my father) and an Igbo piece, 'Halleluya Chim Le' by Onyeka Onwenu arranged by C.N Osinigwe. A South African musical work titled, Dipala (Blowing the trumpet) was also presented to reflect African identity, not just the projection of West African musical works only.

Musical collaborations, involvements and negotiations have proven to forestall misunderstanding and misconceptions about many nations of the world. For instance, West African nations that were mostly represented in the media as the den of terrorism, corruption, banditry and

political instability have through musical interrelations and performances gained the opportunity of rebranding the continent's image by telling different story aside the usual stories. Music performances have helped nations like Nigeria in painting her own image as hard working, happy and contented people in the world's music scene; the side of story that media hardly talked about. In like manner, America has been popularized as a nation of perpetual racism against blacks, exploitative, selfish and power intoxicated nation in most media contents. However, the Morgan State University Choir tour and their collaborative performances with African chorals speak of America as a nation with another side of story. The free collaborative concerts with African chorales portrayed America as a nation with good sense of alliance, association and tolerance. However, the American university choir visited four West Africa nations for the first time to share in cultural exchange through choral musical performances experiences. The choice of mostly spirituals and gospel rhythms by the Morgan State University choir repertoires is believed to be a force to arouse and upheld the ancestral ties between the two nations and to sustain friendly relationship.

Selected Repertoires for Tour of African Nations by the Morgan State University Choir

Some of the repertoires by Morgan State University choir for their tour of four West African countries include, 'In Bright Mansion' by Roland Carter, 'To sit and Dream' by Rosephanye Powell, 'Examine Me' by Cedric Dent, 'I will lift up my eyes' by Adolphus Hailstorck, 'Precious Lord' arr. Nathan Carter, 'My God is a rock' by Damon Dandridge, 'The Battle of Jericho' by Moses Hogan, 'My soul's been Anchored' by Moses Hogan, 'Just come from the fountain' by Raymond Wise, 'Be still and know that I am God' by Barrie Cabena, 'Quiet Place' by Ralph Carmicheal arr. Jerry Rubino, 'Over the Rainbow' arr. Roger Emerson, 'Any Day Now' by Vincent Bohanna, 'For Who You Are' by Eric Scott, 'The Lord Be Praised' by Margaret Douroux, 'Even me' arr. Patrick Lundy, 'Praise the Lord' by T.D Jakes, 'Oye' by James Armaah, 'Anthem of Praise' by Richard Smallwood, 'Heal the World' by Micheal Jackson, 'Oh, Happy day' by Edwin Hawkins and the Battle Hymn of republic : Traditional Classical

movement, 2023. Most of these repertoires mentioned can be categorized as the developmental trend from the Negro spiritual genres. Most repertoires performed by the Morgan Choir demonstrated to a large extent, some elements of African musical performance styles which form the root for both Negro spiritual and Gospel musical genres. Hence, collaboration was much easier between the foreign choir and host choirs in West African region. The host choirs and even their audience aligned very easily with the familiar musical styles and techniques applied since, the Morgan University choir performances resonated well with West African musical sense and performance style.

II. CONCLUSIONS

Musical collaboration has always provided fine ways to unite individuals, groups and nations for better and more tolerable global community. Choral collaborative performances often imbibe some cultural, political and fiscal undertone for choral groups, institutions and nations involved. Obviously, the visit of the Morgan State University Choir to four West African Nations created an opportunity for direct interaction with both the West African public and institutions. There were momentous exchange of experiences between the Morgan State University Choir and the host countries' choral groups. American students and faculty officials who embarked on this tour must have advanced their musical and academic experiences through their relationships and collaborative performances with West African students and chorales. In the same manner, African student, members of some choral groups and other musician who participated in the free concert held during the tour gained some new musical experience and knowledge through joint performances, participation and observations. This form of intercultural interaction is often employed to enhance cultural acceptance, international relationships and beneficial negotiations.

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