

AFRICAN AND WESTERN ASPECTS OF BALLANTA'S OPERA "AFIWA"

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## Abstract

Nicholas George Julius Ballanta (1893-1962) was a Sierra Leonean composer, ethnomusicologist and scholar. Trained in Western art and church music both in his home country and in the United States, he also conducted many years' research into tribal music in Africa, and indeed was a pioneer in the study of West African music. His most complete opera is "Afiwa," which sets the story of a girl who stands up to her father, the king of the Anlo Ewe tribe in Ghana, for atrocities he had committed at her birth.

This study identifies what is uniquely African yet also Western about Ballanta's "Afiwa". In chapter 1, an introduction to the work is presented, including Ballanta's biography. In Chapter 2, I determine what Ballanta believed to be characteristic of the African music he studied by examining his writings about rhythm, melody, form, texture and harmony. In Chapter 3, I cite numerous passages from "Afiwa" where these characteristics are found. My conclusion is that Ballanta combined both African and Western musical aspects in this opera. Chapter 4 goes beyond the music to explain, referencing the 2010 Cottey College production, aspects of the libretto, plot and staging that will help any future producers to understand the opera better so as to provide as authentic a production as possible.

## Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Joseryl Olayinka Lucy Beckley.

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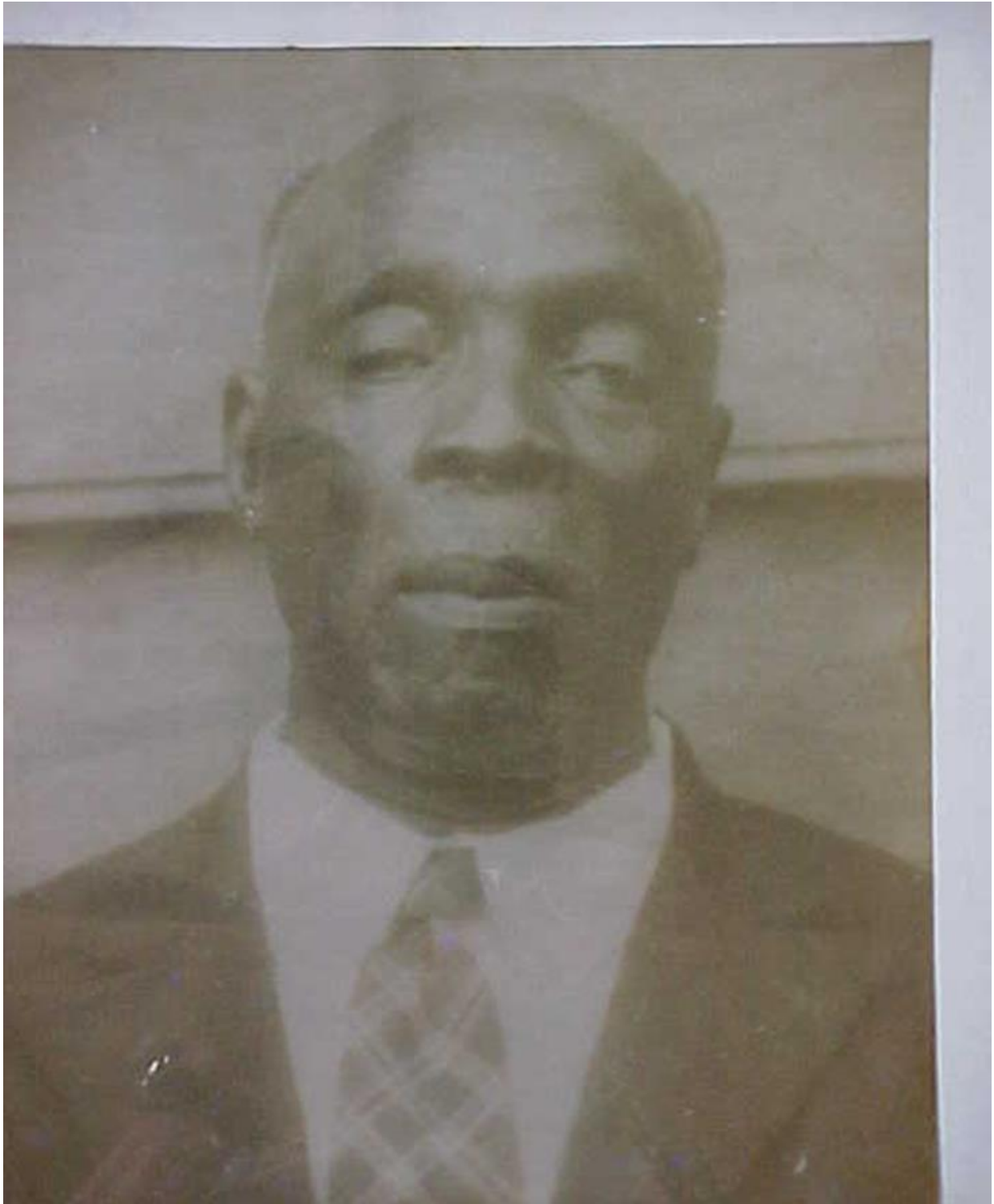
My family and friends have been there to support me through the course of the four years I have been in Vancouver. I trust that my fondest memories will live on.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Mrs. Pheabie Johnson-Cole, Ballanta's daughter, my dear mother Mrs. Rosamond Robbin-Coker, my father Dr. Josie Beckley, and my brother Josephus Beckley, for their unbending love and support through the years. Earning this doctorate has only been possible with them being there. Last but not least, I also dedicate this work to Professor Nancy Hermiston, for without her formidable efforts and goodwill towards Ballanta and myself, all of this would have been wishful thinking.



*Figure 1 1 Nicholas George Julius Ballanta<sup>1</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> Permission to reproduce photo granted by the Ballanta and Wright Families.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation for this study

As an African musician, I became interested in a composer, scholar and performer who hailed from my own country of Sierra Leone, Nicholas George Julius Ballanta. Classically trained, he gained repute and renown<sup>2</sup> both at home and abroad. The Ballanta Academy of Music was opened in Freetown in 1995 to honor his work as the first Sierra Leonean ethnomusicologist and composer who did extensive research in West Africa. His original music reflected his cultural heritage and educational upbringing and, as this thesis will show, he was successful in merging African and Western musical elements in his compositions.

I first came across Ballanta's works in 1997, when I was a student at the Ballanta Academy of Music. In May of that year I performed the title role of his opera "Afiwa" at the British Council Cultural Centre in a production organized by the Academy. My voice teacher at that time, Logie Wright, trained me for the role. A few days after the performance, the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front captured Freetown. Fearing for our lives and the atrocities of war, I and my family fled by boat to The Gambia. A year later, I moved to the United States of America to study voice performance at Cottey College in Nevada, Missouri. I had brought along arias from "Afiwa," given to me by Wright, which I wanted to include in my sophomore recital. One evening, while I was

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<sup>2</sup> Eldred D. Jones, a recognized literary scholar, gives an appreciation from the point of view of a noted Sierra Leonean in "Ballanta and Musical Traditions" in *Shine Like De Mornin' Star: N.G.J. Ballanta of Sierra Leone, Composer and Ethnomusicologist*, ed. Logie Wright. Freetown, Sierra Leone: USIA, n.d. pp 1-4. Kwabena Nketia recognizes Ballanta as a significant early scholar of African music in his article "The Scholarly Study of African Music: A historical Review" in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: Africa*, ed. Ruth Stone. New York: Garland, 1998. pp. 19-22.

practicing the aria “Come ye behold me,” my former music theory professor, Dr. Dyke Kiel, who was passing by, asked what I was singing. Dr. Kiel’s specialty was the music of Claudio Monteverdi; he had never had the opportunity to research the works of an African composer, and he became intrigued by Ballanta’s music. I linked him to Logie Wright, and in 2001 he, his wife, and I travelled to Freetown to request permission to study and rediscover the works of Ballanta. Ballanta had willed his manuscripts to Wright, his trusted friend and colleague, specifically for the purposes of "editing and publication.”<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, the board of directors of the Ballanta Academy granted permission to transfer all the manuscripts to the Cottey College Library, for the civil war was still raging in Sierra Leone, houses were being burnt to the ground, and the manuscripts might have otherwise been lost forever. Over the next ten years Dr. Kiel researched Ballanta extensively, then edited and produced orchestral and piano-vocal scores of “Afiwa” from the handwritten manuscripts, making possible the first public performance of the entire opera in the U.S. (in 2010). He has generously allowed me full access to these materials.

Through my studies and family connections I have become well acquainted with Ballanta’s life and work, and with “Afiwa” in particular. My mother is married to his nephew. When we fled Sierra Leone, we travelled with Ballanta's daughter, who is presently living in England and is over ninety years old. In 2000 I gathered a few stories from her about her father during my cultural education trip on spring break to London. I have performed the opera twice, and excerpts from it constitute part of my thesis recital for my current doctoral program in voice performance.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas G.J. Ballanta. “The Last Will and Testament of N.G.J. Ballanta,” 10 April 1962.

My study of “Afiwa” has spanned over twenty years. At first it involved learning excerpts from the opera for various concerts and events. In the early 2000s I did research at the Library of Congress on Ballanta and went to Cottey College in 2014 to collect copies of his manuscripts and almost all of the materials Dr. Kiel had found during the ten years when he became the leading scholar on Ballanta.

The principal problem I faced was that much of Ballanta’s works was lost or destroyed in a fire, and, if manuscripts still exist around the world, I know not where they are now. Consequently, I have limited my research to focus on “Afiwa,” the opera that is his most complete work. To familiarize myself with the entire work, I re-edited the entire piano-vocal score, comparing the handwritten manuscripts with Dr. Kiel’s Sibelius version. I did a harmonic analysis of the entire opera and studied its texture, form, rhythm, and melody. I studied all the written essays he left behind, and got to understand in depth his treatise, *Aesthetics of African Music*, which remains unpublished.

*Figure 1.2 N.G.J Ballanta, center right, in a photo dated 1957 with his colleagues from the Grammar School.<sup>4</sup>*



## 1.2 Research question

My thesis is that Ballanta took aspects of African music, as he understood them from years of research, and blended them with compositional procedures he learned from the European-American art-music culture in which he was trained. The result is that “Afiwa” sounds both African and Western, something different and unique that deserves investigation and appreciation. I have a special interest in researching how Western and African musical traditions and cultural influences are present and combined in the music, libretto, and dramaturgy of

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<sup>4</sup> Reproduced by permission of the Ballanta and Wright Families. This photo is dated 1957.

“Afiwa.” Some features, such as the strong African-English dialect or the Western-traditional Grand Finale at the end, are obvious, but many others can only be appreciated through more detailed study.

### 1.3 The compositional background of “Afiwa”

Nicholas George Julius Ballanta-Taylor was born on March 14, 1893 and died in July 26, 1962 in Kissy, Freetown.<sup>5</sup> He was baptized into the Anglican faith and raised by his father Gustavus Taylor and his mother, a Christian Mende woman. He had a brother and sister. His father was a ship engineer and a musician who played the organ and the violin. He used to travel between Sierra Leone and the Gambia to work, until he was killed in a ship accident when Ballanta was ten years old. Ballanta used British books to study music during his early years and he became a chorister at St. Patrick’s Church, his home Church, and later he began to play the organ. When he progressed to the Christian Missionary Society Grammar School, he became a member of the school band, played the clarinet and was elected as Sergeant of the band. Ballanta had a brilliant mind and by the time he got to fifth form was elected Head Boy of the Grammar School.<sup>6</sup>

He eventually took the first music exams at the Bachelor’s degree level at Fourah Bay College, which is affiliated with Durham University, England. He became the Musical Director for the Freetown Choral Society and worked closely with Mrs. Adelaide Caseley Hayford who invited Ballanta to go to the United States to pursue his musical career. Ballanta wrote a piece titled *Belshazzar’s Feast*, which Hayford took to the United States to promote him.<sup>7</sup> For years he had

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<sup>5</sup> “Ballanta Dead at 69.” *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, July 28, 1962.

<sup>6</sup> Blanche C. Jacobs. “A Tale of West Africa” *The Baton* (Institute of Musical Art, New York), 11 - 13

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

been collecting African songs and studying them, so he then decided to go to the United States in 1921 to study the relationship between Negro Spirituals and African songs.<sup>8</sup>

While in the U.S., at the request of Clarence Cameron White, a professor at the Boston Conservatory,<sup>9</sup> Ballanta wrote two articles on African music which were published in the *Musical Courier*, an influential trade journal: “Jazz Music and Its Relation to African Music” (1 June 1922) and “An African Scale” (29 June 1922). The editor introduced Ballanta to musicians in New York who would become his benefactors, including the conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra, Walter Damrosch, his brother Frank Damrosch, who was the Director of the Institute of Musical Art in New York City, and the philanthropist George Foster Peabody. These men were very impressed with Ballanta’s compositions, amongst them the full orchestral score of an overture “Among the Palm Trees”<sup>10</sup> and his published articles for *Musical Courier*. Frank Damrosch, in consultation with the Percy Goetschius, awarded Ballanta a scholarship to study composition at the Institute of Musical Art (which later merged with the Juilliard School of Music) where he eventually received a Diploma.<sup>11</sup> After graduating, with the persuasion of Peabody, he went to South Carolina, Alabama and Georgia to study the music of African Americans. He transcribed 103 spirituals, which were later published by G. Schirmer in 1925 as *Saint Helena Island Spirituals*.<sup>12</sup> He later wrote at least eleven scores, some of which are now missing or

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas G. J. Ballanta, *The Aesthetics of African Music* (Unpublished, 1934), iii

<sup>9</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, iv.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, v.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas G.J. Ballanta, *St. Helena Island Spirituals* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1925).

unaccounted for, for some of them were said to have been burned in a fire that erupted in his home at Kissy.

Ballanta explored "...African indigenous music at a time when very few people anywhere in the world had any interest in the subject."<sup>13</sup> From 1924 to 1926 he was sponsored by Peabody to conduct field research in Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria. He studied scales, melodies, rhythms, harmony and form of the songs he heard and the musical instruments used. In 1925, he was able to continue his research by a Guggenheim Fellowship to compare African indigenous music with Western Classical music.<sup>14</sup> He returned to the U.S. to give his report.<sup>15</sup> Then from the latter part of 1926 into 1927 he went to Germany, where he studied with the well-known comparative musicologist Erich von Hornbostel before returning to West Africa where from 1927 to 1929, with the assistance of another Guggenheim Fellowship, he was able to continue his study of African music.<sup>16</sup> On this trip he visited French and Portuguese Guinea, and the native tribes of Liberia and Ivory Coast. In 1930, he was still in search of differences between African and Western music. In 1932, he returned to Nigeria to study the tribal music of the Efiks, Ibibios and various tribes along the Cross River and the Niger Delta. He also went to places he had not visited before in Dahomey and Togoland.<sup>17</sup> Letters archived in the Berliner Phonogrammarchiv indicate that Ballanta was planning on "recording music in the Congo for von Hornbostel but was denied access to that area."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jones, "Ballanta and Musical Traditions," 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, 6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>18</sup> Tobias Klein and Dyke Kiel, personal communication.



All told, during all of his 20 years of travels, Ballanta collected and recorded over 2000 songs from various parts of West Africa, most of them now lost. When he compared them with music of East Africa, he found very few differences in terms of rhythm, tone, and form. He did find that recordings of a solo voice provided very little information compared to recording a group of singers, who also would clap and sing other parts within the song. He also found that the younger generation's performances were less authentic than those of the older generation, as they were mixed with Western music.<sup>19</sup> He summarized his research in two scholarly works: *The Aesthetics of African Music*, which describes "what is African Music,"<sup>20</sup> and *The Philosophy of African Music*, which unfortunately is missing or lost. Eldred Jones asserts that had Ballanta's scholarly works been properly published, they would have shown him as a pioneer in African studies.<sup>21</sup>

During his travels, he composed several works that he called musical plays. Following his research interests, their plots were based on Ghanaian stories about three women, Afiwa, Boima and Efua. I call them operas because their texts are sung by a cast accompanied by orchestra.<sup>22</sup> One of them, "Afiwa," was produced for the first time in November 1936 in Keta, in Ghana, and again a month later in Lome in Togo. Thereafter, Ballanta returned to Freetown, where he was admitted to hospital on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1937 with typhoid fever.<sup>23</sup> He slowed down his activities and did only a few performances of the three musical plays.

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<sup>19</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, vi - vii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, "Ballanta and Musical Traditions," 2.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas G.J. Ballanta, Letter to the Guggenheim Foundation (5, July, 1938). The letter is given in the Appendix. Ballanta usually used whatever instruments were available to him. For example, when he was to perform *Belshazzar's Feast* on a ship the orchestra left prematurely and so he used other instruments. Jacobs, "A Tale," 12 – 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Figure 1.3 N.G.J. Ballanta, second from left, sitting on the right of Colleagues<sup>24</sup>.



In his later years Ballanta became a Freemason, and was elected to be a Justice of the Peace for the region of Kissy.<sup>25</sup> He loved to garden after teaching daily at the Grammar School and this was

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<sup>24</sup> Permission to reproduce photograph from the Ballanta and Wright Families. Photo from the Sierra Leone CMS Grammar School Staff, dated 1953.

<sup>25</sup> "Ballanta Dead at 69," *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, July 28, 1962.

how he spent his later years, quietly. At this funeral, he was escorted to the grave by the Grammar School Marching Band, as shown in Figure 1.4

*Figure 1 4 Ballanta's Funeral Procession at the Grave Side.<sup>26</sup>*



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<sup>26</sup> Reproduced by permission of the Ballanta Family.

## 2 What do Ballanta's writings identify as "African" in music?

"Afiwa" was composed during the height of Ballanta's research into African music, when he was comparing and contrasting it not only with African diasporic music in the New World but also with the Western classical music that he performed and composed. It therefore seems appropriate to investigate what elements of this work are "African," and how they comport with what are basically Western harmonic and melodic procedures within a Western operatic form. But the century that has passed since Ballanta composed the work may make it difficult for today's listeners, whatever their culture, to hear the African elements. It seems most appropriate, therefore, to turn to Ballanta's own writings to begin to understand his work. I have chosen the 1934 *Aesthetics of African Music* with its musical examples, his two articles from the *Musical Courier* cited above, his foreword to his transcriptions of the *St. Helena Island Spirituals*, and his 1930 article "Music of the African Races" from *West Africa, a Weekly Newspaper and Review*.

In the latter article, Ballanta wrote, "It is interesting to observe that on account of these different perceptions the African is able to appreciate and understand other systems of music. Although the perception of the African [today] presents the same features [as] that of Western music in days gone by, the European has, by confining himself to the development of one form to the exclusion of others, lost the perception of the latter"<sup>27</sup> By this I believe that Ballanta means the African became aware of other forms or genres of music from the West but that the West was

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<sup>27</sup> Nicolas G.J. Ballanta. "Music of The African Races," *West Africa*. (June 14, 1930). 752.

slow in becoming aware of African musical genres or elements. It seems likely that "the African" in this statement refers to Ballanta himself and, if so, gives us encouragement to search in his music and writings for a "perceptivity" to both European and African musical "systems" and "forms." The following quotations and examples show what he claimed to be African about various elements of music.

In the same article, Ballanta said about rhythm:

The fundamental of rhythmic perception is duple time throughout. Each beat of this duple time may be divided into two, three or four parts. When more than one rhythmic instrument takes part, or when the chorus is accompanied by hand clapping or other rhythmic dances, these different divisions of the beat are brought into effect. One part may divide the beat into twos, another into threes, another into four parts and a further division into six parts, giving intricate rhythmic effects in which syncopation plays an important feature.<sup>28</sup>

The situation that Ballanta describes could be called either polymeter, that is, parts in different time signatures going on at the same time, or cross rhythm, that is, interweaving rhythms syncopated against the underlying metric pulse.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Figure 2.1 Example 14 from Ballanta's *Aesthetics of African Music*<sup>29</sup>.

The musical score for Example 14 is presented in five staves, each with a different time signature and key signature (one sharp, F#). The staves are labeled on the left: Basic Drum, Solo Drum, Rhythmic Instruments, Hand Claps, and Voice. The Basic Drum staff is in 6/8 time and features a complex rhythmic pattern with accents (^) on the first and third beats of each measure. The Solo Drum staff is in 3/4 time and features a steady eighth-note pattern. The Rhythmic Instruments staff is in 3/4 time and features a steady eighth-note pattern. The Hand Claps staff is in 6/8 time and features a simple rhythmic pattern. The Voice staff is in 6/8 time and features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes.

In Example 14 from his *Aesthetics of African Music*, reproduced in Figure 2.1, Ballanta transcribes a passage of Yoruba drumming with different time signatures in the different parts, so that we see polymeter with 6/8 against 3/4 within these two measures.

Another observation he makes about African rhythm is that “the African, except in rare instances, never ends his musical expressions on the first accent [beat] of a measure, as in Western music, but immediately before that accent. It is also rare to find melodies beginning with an upbeat.”<sup>30</sup> Also, “all melodies begin on the first pulse [down beat] of a measure, or immediately after it and end after the second pulse [second beat] of a measure.”<sup>31</sup> An example of such a melody is shown in Figure 2.2, which reproduces his transcription of a song performed by the Timni Bundu Society.

<sup>29</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics (Musical Examples)*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ballanta, “Music of The African Races,” 752.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

The solo begins on a downbeat, but the chorus ends on a weak beat in the second half of the last measure.

Figure 2.2 Example 50 from Ballanta's *Aesthetics*<sup>32</sup>



In the *Aesthetics*, Ballanta also provides musical examples of a characteristically African rhythm. His Example 32 is reproduced in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3 Example 32 from Ballanta's *Aesthetics*.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning this transcription, Ballanta tells the reader, "Note: The Rhythm given by [one of the instruments – Gangan I] is characteristic. It is found in nearly all tribes..."<sup>34</sup> Then he rewrites the rhythm as shown in Figure 2.4.

<sup>32</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Figure 2.4 A "Characteristic" rhythm (the bell pattern).



Modern scholars call this the standard bell pattern, after the instrument on which it is played in some cultures.<sup>35</sup>

Concerning melodic form, Ballanta wrote in his *West Africa* article that “in ending a melody, or in what is known as the cadence, the progression is mostly downwards; even when it is upwards it is not by a semitone, as in Western music, but a whole tone.”<sup>36</sup> This theory I call ‘Whole Tone Progression’. By this he means that phrases that end with an ascending whole tone are characteristically African. Figure 2.5 shows his transcription of a song performed by the Limba Female Society. The singers sing in unison for three measures, then split into two parts. The top part cadences by ascending whole tone from F to G.

Figure 2.5 Example 52 from Ballanta's *Aesthetics*<sup>37</sup>



With regards to harmony, Ballanta says in the same article that the “perfect fourth is the basis of harmonic combination: that is, where two parts sing together note against note. Towards the cadence, however, other intervals may be used as the major third and the major second; but the

<sup>35</sup> A.M. Jones, *Studies in African Music* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 210-213.

<sup>36</sup> Ballanta, “Music of the African Races,” 752.

<sup>37</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics (Musical Examples)*, 32.



Ballanta had more to say about African pitch patterns in his *Aesthetics of African Music*. In the preface he wrote about what we would call the pentatonic scale:

The five notes Ballanta identifies, do-re-mi-soh-lah, make an anhemitonic pentatonic scale.

Figure 2.6 Example 56 from Ballanta's *Aesthetics*<sup>40</sup>



<sup>40</sup> Ballanta, *Aesthetics (Musical Examples)*, 18.

Taken together, Ballanta's observations provide a specific description of what he, as a Western-trained African musician, thinks is distinctive about African music. I would summarize these observations as follows:

- Rhythm: polymeter; starting on the downbeat, not the upbeat, and ending on the second beat of a measure; the bell pattern.
- Pitch: Whole tone progression down or up at cadences, pentatonic scales
- Harmony: Perfect fourths as very important consonant intervals; major thirds as discordant; fifths not so important.

With these principles of African music in mind we are prepared to investigate how he used them in his opera “Afiwa.” In many respects the opera reflects his Western musical training, but he fused those Western musical principles with African principles of pitch, form, harmony, rhythm and texture. I discussed those numbers that best show African principles. Each of them has African elements, be it polymeter, pentatonic scales, whole tone progressions, bell patterns, and so forth.

*Figure 2 7 Afiwa as an Ewe Queen.<sup>41</sup>*



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<sup>41</sup> Reproduced by permission of the photographer Nick Schale. "Afiwa" Production, Cottey College 2010

### 3 An analysis of what is “African” in “Afiwa” in Ballanta’s terms

#### 3.1 No. 1: “I heard thee crying”

African elements are immediately evident in the first piece “I heard thee crying”. This soaring aria is sung by Ayele (Afiwa’s foster mother) as she finds and fetches Afiwa from the river. Harmonically, in many respects it sounds like a late-romantic operatic aria. Ayele's melody is accompanied by tonal triads and seventh chords in a flexible tonality. There is an alternation between the keys of B minor and D major. After a chromatic introduction, D is clear at the beginning of the aria. In the middle section, as she sings "I'll nurse thee always," the key of B minor is suggested by its dominant. At the conclusion, there is a strong cadential return to D major, but the D major triad is decorated with an added 6th, the note B, combining the two main tonalities of the piece.

The melody itself, though, has elements that are like those Ballanta points out in African music.

Figure 3.1 "I heard thee crying" (No.1 From "Afiwa"), mm. 29 - 34.

Ayele

29

I heard thee cry - ing

Ayele

33

Down in the deep

Figure 3.1 shows Ayele's opening line. It uses an anhemitonic pentatonic scale, which Ballanta identifies as African. In the first phrase the perfect fourths appear directly between B and F#, and also from the first note A to the last note E of the phrase. The second phrase essentially repeats the first phrase, but embellishes the A with its own fourth above the note D.

### 3.2 No. 3: "O baby mine"

This number is a through-composed aria that Koshiwo (Afiwa's biological mother) sings in despair for her little one tossed into the river. It is unified by a motive that sets the first words, which recurs on the words "for thee I pine" and "our father's grace" to remind the listener of the bonds of motherhood between Koshiwo and Afiwa. Like "I heard thee crying" the piece is in D major at the beginning and ending, and harmonic contrast is created in the middle section by modal mixtures and suggestions of other keys.

Also like the first number, melodic aspects of this aria could be interpreted as African. The notes used in the opening melody (Figure 3.2) D-E-G-A-C, are a pentatonic scale, and the opening motive spans a perfect fourth. Unlike the first aria, though, Ballanta introduces some distinctively African rhythmic procedures. Repeating throughout the entire number is an ostinato that we can see in the lower voices of mm. 5-6. Not only is this rhythm syncopated, it is actually a version of the bell pattern that Ballanta found to be widespread across Africa.

Figure 3.2 "O baby mine" (No.3 From "Afiwa"), mm. 5 - 12.

The musical score is for the piece "O baby mine" (No.3 From "Afiwa"), measures 5 to 12. It is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The score consists of two systems, each with a vocal line for Koshiwo and a piano accompaniment.

**System 1 (Measures 5-7):**

- Koshiwo:** Measures 5-7. The melody starts on a whole note G4, followed by a half note A4, and a quarter note B4. The lyrics "O ba - by mine" are written below the notes.
- Piano:** Measures 5-7. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern: G4-A4-B4-A4-G4. The left hand plays a bass line with chords: G2-B2 (m. 5), G2-B2 (m. 6), and G2-B2 (m. 7).

**System 2 (Measures 8-10):**

- Koshiwo:** Measures 8-10. The melody continues with a half note C5, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4. The lyrics "thou'rt all a -" are written below the notes.
- Piano:** Measures 8-10. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern. The left hand plays a bass line with chords: G2-B2 (m. 8), G2-B2 (m. 9), and G2-B2 (m. 10).

**System 3 (Measures 11-12):**

- Koshiwo:** Measures 11-12. The melody continues with a half note G4, a quarter note F#4, and a quarter note E4. The lyrics "lone" are written below the notes.
- Piano:** Measures 11-12. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern. The left hand plays a bass line with chords: G2-B2 (m. 11), G2-B2 (m. 12).

Figure 3.3 "O baby mine" (No.3 From "Afiwa"), mm. 28 - 36.

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a vocal line (Koshiwo) and a piano accompaniment (Piano). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 7/8.

**System 1 (Measures 28-31):**

- Koshiwo:** Measure 28 starts with a whole rest. The vocal line begins in measure 29 with the lyrics "I have" and continues with a long note in measure 30, followed by "no" in measure 31.
- Piano:** The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand, including some triplets.

**System 2 (Measures 32-34):**

- Koshiwo:** The vocal line continues with the lyrics "blame" in measure 32 and "This" in measure 34, with a long note spanning measures 33 and 34.
- Piano:** The piano accompaniment continues with similar rhythmic patterns, featuring eighth notes and some chords.

**System 3 (Measures 35-36):**

- Koshiwo:** The vocal line concludes with the lyrics "is my sigh" in measure 35, followed by a final note in measure 36.
- Piano:** The piano accompaniment concludes with a final chord in measure 36.

Toward the end of the middle section, just before the return to the opening motive and tonality, Ballanta intensifies the music by using what might be understood as polymeter. The passage is shown in Figure 3.3. In mm. 29-30, over the bell pattern, now in the upper voice, Ballanta asks the singer to subdivide two measures into three equal durations. In m. 34 she has to sing a duplet against the triple division of the beat.

The source of the melodies of these two arias is not known, whether they were Ballanta's original compositions or adaptations of African folk songs. But we can understand them as combining elements he found in African traditional songs with Western tonal harmonies and orchestrations.

### 3.3 No. 4: "Why tempt ye me"

This number features soloist and chorus in a verse and refrain form. It is in E minor with some chromaticism for the depiction of juju, a form of witchcraft that brings bad luck to people. Figure 3.4 shows the first few measures.

There are many features here that Ballanta's writings identify as African. All the pitches used by the soloist and chorus belong to a single pentatonic scale. When the chorus sings about juju, the two parts are mostly a perfect fourth apart. The accompaniment to the chorus is a bell pattern, the same rhythm we heard in "O baby mine". Therefore, in several measures we hear 2 against 3 polymeter, such as m. 6.



Figure 3.4 "Why tempt ye me" (No.4 From "Afiwa"), mm. 2 - 6.

2

Koshiwo

Why tempt ye me\_ with jeal - ous rage  
For this my lord\_ doth pun - ish me

Chorus

Piano

6

Koshiwo

Chorus

Sow - ing ju - ju and reap - ing ju - ju.  
Sow - ing ju - ju and reap - ing ju - ju.

Piano

Figure 3.5 "Why tempt ye me," mm. 13 - 14.

13

Koshiwo

mal - ice jeal - ous - y and scorn

Chorus

mal - ice jeal - ous - y and scorn

Chorus

mal - ice jeal - ous - y and scorn

Piano

During the refrain (Figure 3.5) the cross rhythms intensify, with every half measure divided equally into twos and threes, and also with a diminuted version of the bell pattern in the upper voices of the orchestra.

### 3.4 No. 8: "Big goat was bought"

This strophic song for Afiwa describes an African tradition, called "sara," or animal sacrifice, and explains the reasons for it: the king is warning his wives of the consequence of having female babies. Afiwa reminds the king of his words and imitates how he said them. The vocal line is straightforward, but requires lots of chest resonance to pull through the low notes.

The tonality of this song is not as clear as in the previous numbers. It starts by emphasizing C minor, and provides a V-I cadence in the middle of the strophe, but it ends on a G minor chord, and there are few standard Western harmonic progressions. Probably because of the stresses in

the English text, some of the lines begin on an upbeat, which Ballanta says is more Western than African.

On the other hand, some African elements are clear. The first two phrases of the melody use a single pentatonic scale. The last phrase, mm. 11-14, does not, but it ends in the middle of a measure with a rising whole tone from F to G, which Ballanta says is typical of African melodies. The last phrase also features a polymetric texture, with 6/8 implied by stresses in the voice and by slurred triads in the upper accompaniment, against the notated 3/4 and the syncopated rhythm in the lower parts.

Figure 3.6 "Big goat was bought" (No. 8 From "Afiwa"), mm. 3 - 14.

Afiwa

Soprano

Piano

Big goat was bought Then it was killed  
Who - ev - er now Will not o - bey  
Then she was born Left for to die

Afiwa

Piano

All wives were sought Eat and be filled  
Shall bring a row From day to day  
By bush - es torn Saved by a tie

7 10

I  
A

11

Soprano

con - jur you nev - er a fe - male to bear I  
daugh - ter I'll throw her right in - to the sea To  
How\_ can a child who is dead be a - live That

Piano

Afiwa

warn you for ev - er so now save a tear  
drown and to per - ish with - out an - y plea.  
goats and small birds from the corn she should drive?

Piano

### 3.5 No. 9: "My fate with grief is strewn"

Figure 3.7 "My fate with grief is strewn" (No. 9 From "Afiwa"), mm. 2 - 6.

Ayele

1. My fate\_ with grief is strewn\_

This aria starts, as shown in Figure 3.7, with a pentatonic melody focusing on C, where it also cadences by descending whole tone. The C major often has an A added to it, making the kind of added-6th pentatonic sonority that was heard in the first number. True to Ballanta's claim about harmonic intervals, the melody is harmonized with perfect fourths, while the thirds – which he

says are dissonant harmonically—appear mostly as melodic intervals, perhaps showing the grief and pain of Ayele.

### 3.6 No. 10: “Come ye behold me”

This is an aria in A minor in 2 strophes with dotted rhythm, each strophe followed by a more steady-rhythm choral refrain. The phrases are often purely pentatonic. Following Western styles, though, Ballanta uses counterpoint and harmonies to express the words. For example, the line “‘Justice shall greet me, I never shall fall’ is sung to a rising melodic line and at the same time there is a chromatic falling bass line in the piano. This appears to indicate that “Afiwa is a woman who will not give up no matter what the circumstances.”<sup>42</sup>

Figure 3.8 “Come ye behold me” (No. 10 From “Afiwa”), mm. 21 - 22.

The musical score for "Come ye behold me" (No. 10 From "Afiwa"), measures 21-22, is presented in three staves. The top staff is for the Afiwa (soprano) voice, the middle two staves are for the Chorus, and the bottom staff is for the Piano. The Afiwa staff shows a rising melodic line with lyrics "nev - er shall fall" and "life to pre - serve". The Chorus staves are empty. The Piano staff shows a chromatic falling bass line in the left hand and a rising melodic line in the right hand.

<sup>42</sup> Dyke, Kiel, “Ballanta’s ‘Afiwa’ and *Efua*, A History and Comparison of African Influences” (Unpublished paper, Ballanta Music Festival, Freetown, Sierra Leone, March 13, 2008) 17.

The cadences to A minor in mm. 21-22 (Figure 3.8) and 37-38 (Figure 3.9) are from minor subdominant-added-sixth chords, which harmonize the whole-tone descent to the tonic in the melody.

Figure 3.9 "Come ye behold me" mm. 37 - 38.

The musical score for Figure 3.9 shows measures 37 and 38. The Afiwa part (soprano) has a whole rest in measure 37 and a half note in measure 38. The Chorus parts (two staves) sing "do and will dare" with a whole note in measure 37 and a half note in measure 38. The Piano part (two staves) provides harmonic support with chords and a melodic line in the right hand.

### 3.7 No. 11: "O daughter, my tears are for thee"

This is amongst the most conventionally Western pieces in the opera but with some chromaticism. The chords are straightforward. It ends in the home key of D major. What is African about it is that the opening melodic phrase is pentatonic and the duets have perfect fourths as harmonic intervals.

### 3.8 No. 12: "Behold us weeping"

Figure 3.10 "Behold us weeping" (No. 12 From "Afiwa"), mm. 4 - 9.

Afiwa

Be - hold us  
Re - ceive us

Ayele

Be hold us  
ceive us  
weep ing and  
kneel ing and

Afiwa

weep-ing and dy-ing for shame  
kneel-ing and bath-ing in tears

Ayele

dy-ing for shame  
bath-ing in tears  
Re-lease us  
Per-form ye

This piece, with chorus and refrain, features a duet between Afiwa and her mother Ayele. Beginning in C major it gradually roams through indistinct keys, ending in E minor. Once again African elements are beautifully interwoven into the texture. As shown in Figure 3.10, the duet unfolds as a call and response between Ayele (supported by the chorus) and Afiwa, respectively. All the parts of the first phrase, "Behold us weeping and dying for shame," are constructed from a pentatonic scale, E-G-A-C-D. In m. 7 (Figure 3.11) we hear a hint of polymeter, as a 3/4 pattern in the accompaniment supports Afiwa's 6/8 singing.

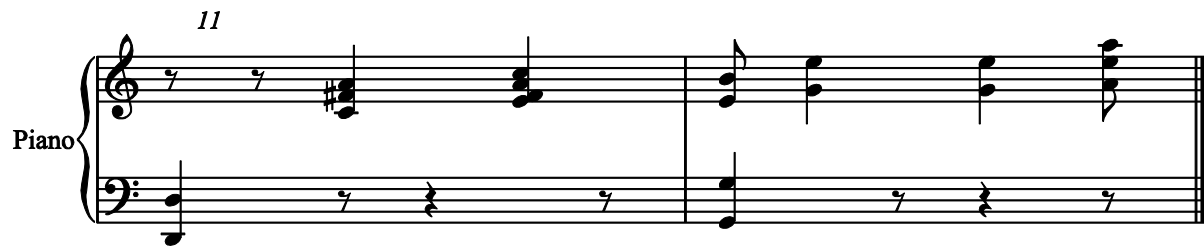


Figure 3. 11 "Behold us weeping", m.7.

The musical score for "Behold us weeping", m.7, consists of five staves. The first staff, labeled "Afiwa", has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a measure rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The lyrics "weep - ing and dy - ing for" are written below the notes. The second staff, labeled "Ayele", has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a measure rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The lyrics "kneel - ing and bath - ing in" are written below the notes. The third staff, labeled "Chorus I", has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a measure rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The lyrics "dy - ing for" are written below the notes. The fourth staff, labeled "Chorus II", has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a measure rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The lyrics "See us See us" are written below the notes. The fifth staff, labeled "Piano", has a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a measure rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The lyrics "dy - ing for" are written below the notes.

Then, as the accompaniment continues, we hear that it is playing the bell pattern, as in previous numbers. Figure 3.12 shows the rhythm.

Figure 3.12 "Behold us weeping," mm. 11 - 12.



### 3.9 No. 13: "Great King of this state"

The tonal structure of this piece reflects the Western musical tradition for it starts and ends in the same key, E minor., and that key is affirmed by perfect authentic cadences at the ends of phrases in measures 5, 14, 17, 23 – 24, 36. Figure 3.13 show the first of these cadences, in which the dominant harmony has a #5, G natural, substituting for the perfect fifth F#.

Figure 3.13 "Great King of this state" (No. 13 From "Afiwa"), m. 5.

Figure 3.13 shows the musical score for measure 5 of "Great King of this state" (No. 13 From "Afiwa"). The score is written for four vocal parts (Chorus) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "hom - age we pay thee". The piano part consists of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

As with the other numbers, there is some chromaticism as well; for example, Figure 3.14 shows a bVII dominant 9<sup>th</sup> at the beginning and a vii/V as the last chord.

Figure 3.14 "Great King of this state" m. 12.

Figure 3.14 shows the musical score for measure 12 of "Great King of this state" (No. 13 From "Afiwa"). The score is written for four vocal parts (Chorus) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "The". The piano part features a chromatic ascending line in the right hand and a descending line in the left hand.

The main African influence in this number is a drumming interlude that is not notated, but (as I will explain in the next chapter) has been part of every production. In African cultural traditions, at the entrance of a King or Chief a Master Drummer will play an elaborate drumming music to announce his presence.

### 3.10 No. 17: “Afiwa” we greet thee

This piece, a four-part chorus is the finale of the opera. As he did throughout the opera, Ballanta once again incorporates Western harmonic structure into the music. The chordal progression is simple harmonically, dwelling mostly in C major. The music cuts off so abruptly in the orchestral score that Dr. Kiel changed the voicing of the last two measures to give a more convincing ending to the opera.

Also, as in the other numbers, the Western harmonies are combined with a strong African influence. Figure 3.15 reproduces the score to mm. 1-17, the main choral section. The soprano part is entirely pentatonic, using a C-centered collection C-D-E-G-A.

Figure 3.15 "Afiwa We Greet Thee" (No. 17 From "Afiwa"), mm. 1 – 17.

## XVII - Afiwa We Greet Thee

(♩ = 118)

Chorus

*f* A - fi - wa we  
The years of to

Chorus

*f* A - fi - wa we  
The years of to

Chorus

*f* A - fi - wa we  
The years of to

Chorus

*f* A - fi - wa we  
The years of to

Piano

♩ = 118

Chorus

greet thee The spir - its  
mor row Will not be

Chorus

greet thee The spir - its  
mor row Will not be

Chorus

greet thee The spir - its  
mor row Will not be

Chorus

greet thee The spir - its  
mor row Will not be

Piano

The musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are for a four-part chorus, each with a vocal line and lyrics. The lyrics are: 'greet thee The spir - its', 'mor row Will not be'. The bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment, featuring a treble and bass clef. The piano part includes a melodic line in the treble and a harmonic line in the bass. The score is marked with measure numbers 4, 5, and 6, and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

Chorus 7 8 9

Pro - tect thee Through  
of sor - row As

Pro - tect thee Through  
of sor - row As

Pro - tect thee Through  
of sor - row As

Pro - tect thee Through  
of sor - row As

Piano

Detailed description: This musical score block contains five staves. The first four staves are for a Chorus, each with a vocal line and lyrics. The lyrics are 'Pro - tect thee Through' on the first line and 'of sor - row As' on the second line. The fifth staff is for the Piano accompaniment. The music is in 3/4 time, with measures 7, 8, and 9 indicated by numbers above the staves. The piano part features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Chorus

10 11 12

life may you live  
such as have been through

Chorus

life may you live  
such as have been through

Chorus

life may you live  
such as have been through

Chorus

life may you live  
such as have been through

Piano

The musical score is for a chorus and piano accompaniment. It consists of five staves. The first four staves are for vocal parts, each labeled 'Chorus'. The fifth staff is for the piano accompaniment, labeled 'Piano'. The lyrics are: 'life such as have been through may you live'. The piano part features chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.



13 14 ^

Chorus

as the your sires  
wish - es

Chorus

as the your sires  
wish - es

Chorus

as the your sires  
wish - es

Chorus

as the your sires  
wish - es

Piano



In mm. 18-25, the parts shift for contrast to a G-centered pentatonic collection G-Bb-C-D-F; then the music returns back to the original collection in mm. 26-32. For the final refrain, the tonic stays on C but the melodic line switches back to the G-Bb-C-D-F pentatonic collection.

Ballanta also uses characteristically African rhythms. After each phrase, the accompaniment suggests a 6/4 meter against the otherwise constant 3/2; see mm. 4-5 in Figure 3.15. In the refrain, there is a brief call-and-response texture, and the orchestral accompaniment plays the version of the bell pattern we have heard throughout the opera.

### 3.11 Summary

The examples discussed above are typical. They show how Ballanta's opera "Afiwa" is both Western and African, in the composer's own terms. It is Western in its use of an orchestra, libretto, conventional tonal harmony, minor and major scales, chromaticism, compound and duple meter, melodies that begin anywhere in the measure, strophic forms, through-composed arias, arpeggiated chordal accompaniment. The African elements include pentatonic scales, call and response, syncopations, cross rhythms, polymeter, bell patterns, whole tone progression and use of African drums. Ballanta's observations in his scholarly writing live on in his composition "Afiwa," and he has fused both musical heritages to create a musical masterpiece.

## 4 Bringing out the "African" in a production of "Afiwa"

### 4.1 Introduction

Since, as Chapter 3 has shown, there are many musical elements in "Afiwa" that are "African" in Ballanta's terms, it seems reasonable to assume that the composer would have wanted, or at least permitted, his work to be staged in such a way that the African elements of its plot are brought out in production. Indeed, a review of the first performance described its subject as "... African life as observed amongst the people of Keta in the Gold Coast of Lome in Togoland."<sup>43</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to explain the cultural heritage of this work and to assist stage directors and conductors in deciding how explicitly African they would like to stage it.

A stage director who is given the task of producing an opera must have a vision for the piece that will clearly communicate the story and theme of the opera. The opera director must respect two languages, the written word and the musical language of the piece. One must also deal with large amounts of music with no text which, however, also communicate the intent of the composer, enhancing the audience's understanding of the work. In order to do this, the opera director works together with the singing actors to express the meaning and content of the piece through their vocal expression, their diction, their acting and physical portrayal and stage movements. The singing actors must be "in their characters" and express those characters' internal thoughts and emotions. In a discussion between the composer Jan Meyerowitz and the stage director Boris

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<sup>43</sup> "African Comedies and the Everton Club," *Sierra Leone Daily Mail* (October 29, 1937), 5.

I Togoland and Lome belonged to Ghana before being divided by the French and British colonists. Keta is a town in the Volta region of Ghana. The people living in these areas were Anlo Ewe.

Goldovsky who was directing his one act opera *Port Town*, Goldovsky asked the composer what he had in mind when he composed a certain boisterous part in the opera for the sailors. Meyerowitz answered “I had nothing special in mind... why should I? I am not a stage director.”<sup>44</sup> Meyerowitz went on to explain the inner feelings that he put into the music and that the stage director has to exteriorize. Generally, he said, “... the composers create the ideas of the work and ... the performers, guided by the stage director, give these ideas their external shape, their actual life and power.”<sup>45</sup> Goldovsky supports the idea that the stage director has to take into consideration the spoken word and the music, declaring that “... the best way to begin is to study the libretto. This acquaints the stage director with the story line, the characters and their interaction, and helps him in general to visualize the work in terms of what happens. A careful analysis of the music will stimulate his ideas in regard to how things happen.”<sup>46</sup>

An opera production can be set in different eras or time periods, with costumes and sets depicting the era chosen, with stage set depicting ancient, modern, or futuristic values, in order to shock, amaze, cause a stir, impress, or depict the pathos of the story. *La Traviata*, for example, was set in the 19th century, but now stage directors can set it in the 20th century. For example, the University of British Columbia’s 2015 production, directed by Professor Nancy Hermiston, was set in the 1920s. At the Salzburg Festival in 2012, the director Willy Decker used sparse modern sets and costumes and a cast that mixed gender, sexuality and race. The stage presented an all-white background with a huge clock. In the first act, both men and women—even the

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<sup>44</sup> Boris Goldovsky, *Bringing Opera to Life* (Appleton, Wisc.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 277.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 278.

character of Flora—were dressed in tuxedos, with their hair slicked back; and only Violetta and Annina were dressed as women.

It might be tempting to modernize “Afiwa” in some of these ways, but it would be difficult, because it may be inappropriate to impose today’s Western values upon complex traditional African culture. Alternatively, “Afiwa” could be staged in such a way that African culture is celebrated, appreciated, and used as an educational tool, both musically and culturally. Because Ballanta used Western elements in his opera through dialogue and compositional style, the African cultural heritage in “Afiwa” may be mixed and balanced with Western cultural influences. Some examples of doing this would be to have a multiracial cast, or to bring Christianity or other aspects of post-colonial African culture into the opera.

But Africans are very reluctant to permit artistic works to be performed in the West where they may be misconstrued, misunderstood, or misinterpreted. To guard against that, Africans usually travel to perform abroad with their own groups be they choirs, dance troupes or musical ensembles. It is very difficult for African works to leave their homeland otherwise.<sup>47</sup> One example was the 2002 performance at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago of the South African Zulu opera “Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu.” Its plot concerns an African princess whose family was destroyed by British Colonialists but lives to tell the story<sup>48</sup>. The performers were a “60-member African Renaissance Opera troupe.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dyke Kiel, personal communication.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Tommasini, “Opera Review – Varied Cultures Entwine Around a Zulu Princess,” *New York Times* (June 4, 2004). However, this reviewer “found the blending of Western and African styles problematic.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The production history of “Afiwa” can help provide some context for future productions. Ballanta’s own stagings in the 1930s were done at Wilberforce Hall, in the heart of Freetown. They involved various casts: students at the Annie Walsh Memorial School at one time, and different groups as well in the surrounding area, like the Grammar School Old Boys Improvement and Endowment Committee.<sup>50</sup> In 1936 in Ghana and Togo, as well as in Freetown and the surrounding area, it was well received and quite successful.<sup>51</sup> There were announcements in the *Sierra Leone Daily Mail* publicizing the upcoming performances.<sup>52</sup> Ballanta usually put together an orchestra for “Afiwa” productions using whatever instrumentalists he could find, and he conducted from the piano.

In the 1997 production at the Ballanta Academy, in which I participated, a small orchestra accompanied the singers. The staging was modest, not as elaborate as the later Cottey College production. Many props were used to provide atmosphere for market scene, such as baskets of food and cloth for sale. My only costume was a cotton dress tied around my neck, and I was barefoot. I was dressed in a simple way to represent how Afiwa had been ostracized from her family and raised in a humble home. In contrast, the High Priest Boko was clad in a very elaborate ceremonial costume like that of a witch doctor, very frightening and very funny at the same time. During Act 2, when he is summoned to consult the spirits he was accompanied by long and elaborate drumming not specified in the score. Many children were included in the cast, dancing around Afiwa as a baby during the songs “In the middle” and “This one we bring”. The director

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<sup>50</sup> J. B.J. Johnston, “Plan Never to Miss AFIWA,” *The Sierra Leone Daily Mail* (November 13, 1941) 1.

<sup>51</sup> The success of the Freetown performance is discussed in “Everton Club,” *The Sierra Leone Daily Mail* (August 24, 1938), 2. For the reception in Ghana and Togo, see Nicholas G.J. Ballanta, Letter to the Guggenheim Foundation (5, July, 1938). The letter is given in the Appendix.

<sup>52</sup> “The Everton Club” *The Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, (October 16, 1937) 3.

for this production put children in the play because, although Ballanta did not include them in the cast list, he specifically asked for them in the libretto: “(The children set the baby in the centre and sing and dance the following song)”<sup>53</sup>

The stage director of the 2010 Cottey College production, Michael Denison, wanted to do a production that played up the African elements of the plot. It was necessary to cast the parts mostly without regard to race, because there were very few black singers available, but the cast was nevertheless unified through costuming and makeup, as I will describe below.

#### 4.2 Plot

The story of “Afiwa” is about a young daughter of a Ghanaian king. As an infant she was cast into the river because her father did not want a female child, but she was rescued and raised by another village woman. (The story line resembles the biblical story of Moses, who was hidden in the bulrushes and found by the Pharaoh’s daughter, who nursed him till adulthood.) She confronts the king, and is jailed. She goes through a trial, and, upon the Soothsayer's consultation with the spirits, she is favored over the king. He is dethroned and banished, and “Afiwa” is enthroned as queen of the village.

Particularly African elements of this story are its portrayal of village life with polygamy, ancestral worship, and juju (a form of divination). It may also seem strange that the king would hold his wives accountable for the selection of the sex of a child, through the sacrifice of a goat “sara.” Modern audiences might see other universal themes in the plot, such as the emancipation of

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<sup>53</sup> N. G.J. Ballanta, Libretto of “Afiwa” (Unpublished, 1937) 7.



women. The climax of this story, in which an African lady becomes Queen, may have appealed to Ballanta because when he travelled to the United States in 1921, American women had just received their voting rights. The story also contained an anti-polygamy message that would have resonated with audiences at the time: Ayele, Afiwa's mother says to the wives of the King who taunt the King's favorite wife Koshiwo, "... the reason for the partiality is because one man can love only one woman at a time. When women realise that then they will not only refuse to have mates but will not marry to any man who already has a wife."<sup>54</sup>

### 4.3 Aspects to consider in production

#### 4.3.1 Words

"Afiwa" has spoken dialogue as well as sung text, all written by Ballanta himself. It incorporates British and North American dialects of English, some early English like that found in the King James Bible and Shakespeare's works ("thy," "thee," "doth," "methinks"), plus a native local dialect of English called Patua (broken English) spoken in the British colonies ("juju again"). The dialogue is interwoven with arias, duets, chorus and various forms of vocal ensembles throughout the opera. This combination of speech and song are like Mozart's *Singspiels*, such as the *Abduction from the Seraglio* and *The Magic Flute*, or even English ballad operas such as John Blow's *The Beggar's Opera*. Usually this genre contains folk elements from the culture it is based on, and that is also present in its depiction of African village life and culture. (Nowhere in Ballanta's writing does he make mention of these operas.)

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<sup>54</sup> N. G.J. Ballanta, Libretto of "Afiwa" (Unpublished, 1937) 4.

Using spoken dialogue in an opera can intensify moments of drama and or comedy. Speech inflection and intonation can express thoughts and feelings in a complimentary way to the singing. Ballanta uses different spoken dialects for different dramatic situations. For example, when Afiwa defies the King, he delivers a monologue in Shakespearean language: "What now am I become that I should be thus disobeyed? The sceptre, right, and power of a king so proudly flouted by a little maid? Ye goodly spirits of my father's race, methinks I see in this a dreadful 'venge ...'"<sup>55</sup> The most intimate part, Afiwa's monologue, of the opera is spoken. Her monologue "Fathers, Mothers and to you my friends ...". English Patua occurs only for effect and in small comedic doses when the wives are teasing or being teased; for example, they say to Koshiwo, "when you leave that juju practice, things will get on better with you."

#### 4.3.2 Costumes, casting, and vocal considerations

The libretto does not specify any particular costumes, or suggest that the characters be dressed like Ewe. However, the reviews in the *Sierra Leone Daily Mail* tell of the productions set in the style of Togoland and the Ewes.<sup>56</sup> So there is a great deal of latitude here for interpretation. Some considerations that should be taken into account when costuming a musical play or opera are well described by Leo van Witsen:

costume designers are the servants of two masters. Their first allegiance must be to the work that is being produced, via the stage director's interpretation. Second, it is their duty

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<sup>55</sup> N. G.J. Ballanta, Libretto of "Afiwa" (Unpublished, 1937) 9.

<sup>56</sup> "The Everton Club," *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, October 16, 1937, 3;

"African Comedies and The Everton Club," *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, October 29, 1937, 5;

"Everton Club," *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, August 24, 1938, 2;

"Plan Never to Miss 'AFIWA,'" *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, November 10, 1941, 2;

"Plan Never to Miss 'AFIWA,'" *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, November 13, 1941, 1.

to costume the performers as suitably as the part demands, make them look as beautiful as the role permits, and make them as happy and comfortable as possible.<sup>57</sup>

If the director wishes to portray the characters authentically in the opera “Afiwa,” then a straightforward approach would be to clothe the characters in the traditional dress of the Anlo Ewe tribe of Ghana. Costumes may incorporate the Kente cloth, printed fabric to wrap like Roman togas, with cowhide slippers, beads as jewelry, and Ghanaian stools for sitting. Other styles of clothing can be the Agbada, a flowing wide-sleeved robe, and Ronko war shirts made of country cloth. But it is also important to differentiate among the main characters by costume, to help the audience follow the plot. Sometimes the personality or type of character can be signified by particular “dress codes.”

The 2010 production provides one example of how the various imperatives of costuming can be coordinated. Generally, the costumes signified African culture through their design and colour; Africans love colors and so they dress like an ‘African Salad’ with beautiful colours and fabrics imported from Asia or made in Africa. The Cottey costumes incorporated styles of today that are sold online. They were quite general in style, African but not specifically Ewe. The costume designer, Dr. Rusalyn Andrews, also distinguished the characters. For example, the use of elaborate gold thread embroidery was used for the King’s wives' daily wear, in contrast to the more modest costumes and earth tone-colors with tie-and-dye and batik patterns on the costumes used for the characters of Afiwa, the market women, the guards and the town counselors.

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<sup>57</sup> Leo van Witsen, *Costuming for OPERA: Who Wears What and Why* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) xxii.

The act of casting is a huge task for the stage director to undertake, and a huge responsibility in any opera house. The choice of actors always brings different interpretations to a work. One scholar, writing in particular about the casting of black actors, explains

[I]n opera, a world of fantasy, illusion, and unbounded imagination, artists are hired, supposedly, for their abilities as singers and their appropriateness for a particular role. The final point is one which is left to the subjective discretion of operatic casting authorities. To approach a characterization [or interpretation] which is convincing and “authentic,” some casting agents suggest that blacks should not appear in certain roles. A popular mantra which has frustrated black singers, fat singers, and singers who are too tall or too short for a particular role in the eyes of a casting agent is: He or she simply doesn’t look the part.<sup>58</sup>

The problem of casting is especially fraught in a work that blends African and non-African styles and themes. Casting the king with a white actor, as in the Cottey production, might suggest colonialism in an African’s mind or even apartheid. How would an African child watching “Afiwa” for the first time feel if the lead character were white? Depending upon the audience, the director may want to consider casting carefully to avoid misrepresenting the cultural heritage of the opera. The Gershwin estate stipulated that opera *Porgy and Bess* must be performed by an all-black cast.<sup>59</sup>

For the Cottey production, the first one in America, I had thought the cast should be dominated by African or African-American singers. If “Afiwa” were set during the colonial days (as a director might choose to do) then a racial mix might seem appropriate, except that Ballanta does not overtly include Christianity or colonialism in the story, which makes one wonder what it would

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<sup>58</sup> Jason Oby, *Equity In Operatic Casting As Perceived By African American Male Singers* (The Edwin Mellon Press, U.S.A. 1998) 25 – 26.

<sup>59</sup> Anthony Tommasini, “All-Black Casts for ‘Porgy’? That Ain’t Necessarily So,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2002.

be like with an all African cast. But those decisions were beyond me. Perhaps that was for the best. It was cast multiracially, and that blinded my eyes to the racial divide I thought I preferred in other “black” operas like *Porgy and Bess*, and Joplin’s *Treemonisha*. It was still as authentic as possible with the resources they had available to them. I feel that the good balance of races presented a united front that encapsulates a modern-day vision of equality with no discrimination. The musical *Hamilton*, which casts actors of many races in roles of the white founders of America, makes a similar point.

An effective production decision in the 2010 production was to have everyone’s face painted. The kernel of this idea was undoubtedly influenced by African facial-paint masks. In their original context, such painting is associated with certain functions or customs. For example, painting is a way for a husband to keep a check on his wife’s daily activities, so that if she is to cheat, the marks would be rubbed off. In this production, though, the painting had an entirely different significance. Painting all faces unified both black and white cast members. Having the entire cast barefoot on stage also acted as a unifying symbol. Through this simple design decision, this production suggested the West unified with Africa.

Ballanta left no instructions about how his work should be produced in terms of multiracial casting. But the mix of races in the production was effective in highlighting the different cultures that Ballanta combines. White American actors understood the Shakespearean language. African Americans, were very dramatic, expressive and got connected with their African roots. The pathos of the mourning trait of a negro spiritual was exemplified through their actions and vocal intonations. I, as the only native African in the cast, was given the lead role.

Based on this experience, if I were to stage “Afiwa,” I would also use a multi-racial cast. Having a mixture of different races at least has the virtue of making it more accessible to other musicians, and the audience may realize that there is something there for everyone. I would incorporate African religious rites with Christianity and Islam; for example, during the summoning of the spirits No. 14 “O Nigbla Look on me,” I would direct the actors to jointly pray but based on their individual faiths.

Any casting decisions, of course, need to take into account the demands of the vocal score, which is written to be performed by Western classically trained singers. The role of Afiwa is for soprano but can be sung by a mezzo as well. The lead characters need to have strong voices, well supported with a good vocal technique. A rich chest-voice color can be used to portray Afiwa’s budding sense of confidence which enables her to stand up to the King. Acting skills are also important. For example, King Kofi’s character has to be dramatized with much emphasis on his ability and authoritative power to influence his people, usually in a negative manner.

#### 4.3.3 Class, authority, and religion

Implicit in the plot of “Afiwa” are the class system and line of authority in Ghanaian villages. The class system is of importance for the Ewe, who are a major tribe in Ghana, Togo and Nigeria. The hierarchy of authority has the Chiefs as heads, then the counselors of the village who report to the chief. The women usually have large families, and their children are tended to based upon the wealth of the husband and their ancestors. In “Afiwa,” the King is the supreme authority before he is ousted by the counselors.

Also, in the era in which it is set, Africans believed in the worship of ancestral spirits.<sup>60</sup> This practice is strongly emphasized in the opera. There is mention of “guardian spirits” in Afiwa’s monologue, and the Soothsayer consults the spirits when the King desires higher answers. It is striking that, although Ballanta wrote the opera after Christianity had been established in Ghana, he makes no mention of it.

To bring out the class distinctions, a director can use cheaper fabrics for the market women and children, more expensive and sturdy fabrics in earthy tones for counselors and elders, more elaborate costumes with African shells as jewels for the wives, and, for the King, the most beautiful masculine gowns in the royal colours of white, blue, green and gray. Class can also be conveyed through acting, with the commoners behaving like lower class persons, and the elite in the King’s home more proud and aloof. The market scene can be a place where the actors use various mannerisms to depict African culture and traditions. The swaying of the feminine hips, counting money rapidly, carrying babies on backs, placing water clay pots on the heads of young children or adults, hand and facial mannerisms, and the manner of walking all can come into play to make a village on stage come to life.

In the 2010 production, respect for authority was depicted by having the villagers kneel to approach the King, and to have a drummer improvise a short introduction whenever the King makes an entrance, which is very common in the Ghanaian and African traditions. The drummer was an African woman from East Africa. This goes against the practice of male drummers introducing their chiefs in a Ghanaian village. The plot itself contains an event that actually goes

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<sup>60</sup> James Burns, *Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-Drumming Community in Ghana: Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit*. (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 5 – 6.

against the grain of Ghanaian culture: the character of Afiwa takes this leadership role. Normally, girls or women may not become chiefs, only ceremonial heads.

#### 4.3.4 Polygamy and juju

Beside the religious practices, two other traditions in Ghanaian culture, polygamy and juju, play an important role in the action. The King has seven wives, the oldest six of whom believe that he favors the youngest. The negative consequences of polygamy are strongly portrayed, like those that Burns discusses in his study of Ewe women.<sup>61</sup>

The practice of juju (divination and witchcraft) is very common in African villages and in Ghanaian culture. It is often caused by jealousy among wives wanting to be favored over the others by the husband.

#### 4.3.5 Orchestration

Despite its African story line, the orchestration is made for Western classical instruments. There was a strong influence of wind band music during the colonial days<sup>62</sup> (1930s), so wind instruments predominate. According to the printed program for the first Freetown performance, the musicians accompanying the performance were the Danvers Orchestra with Professor Ballanta on piano. The Danvers Band played many of the Victoria Park concerts at this time,<sup>63</sup> and in the 1937 "Afiwa" performance consisted of a violin, alto saxophone, trumpet, clarinet, euphonium,

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<sup>61</sup> Burns, *Female Voices*, 34 - 48.

<sup>62</sup> Sierra Leone gained Independence in 1961.

<sup>63</sup> Music Lover, "Music at Victoria Park," *The Sierra Leone Daily Mail*. (December 24, 1997) 5



bass, and drums and effects.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, the Cottey production used flute, clarinets, alto saxophones, trumpets, a euphonium, percussion (drum and triangle), violins, violoncello, and piano. It also added an African instrument, the djembe drum, as I will discuss below. The sparse orchestration helps the listener and the performer to stay focused on the drama on stage.

Naturally, Ballanta made a piano-vocal arrangement of “Afiwa” due to the fact that he did not always have an orchestra at his disposal. The overture is found only in the orchestral version of “Afiwa”. Briefly, it has very simple rhythmic figures, with lots of suspensions and chordal harmonic progressions in the music. Just as in Wagner’s operas, it features motifs from the opera, such as the “Big Goat” theme.

#### 4.3.6 Duration and interludes

“Afiwa” is about an hour long. This presents a problem for contemporary production, in which an evening’s entertainment is expected to run at least 90 minutes. (This is a problem as well with some one-act European operas, for example, *Il Pagliacci*.) Two solutions might be to add interludes between the scenes, or even to add a staging of the incomplete opera “Efua” to show the differences and beauty of the two stories that Ballanta set to music. The first Freetown performance of “Afiwa” had no interludes. The 2010 production added interludes by the Kufara Marimba Ensemble accompanying a modern dance group miming the story as it moved along. The musical materials adapted music of African xylophone ensembles; they were not by Ballanta. These interludes between the scenes of the opera acted as a kind of *divertissement*, which French

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<sup>64</sup> Ballanta, *Programme of “Afiwa”* (December 1, 1937), 9.

composers of the 17th century placed as interludes between the acts of their operas, as comic relief and entertainment between serious dramatic episodes.

#### 4.4 A critical evaluation of the 2010 production

It can be gathered from my descriptions above that the Cottey College production was a blend of Western and African music and dance traditions. To get an authoritative view on various aspects of the 2010 production, I interviewed Lulu Wright, the custodian of the Ballanta manuscripts on April 17, 2013. She performed as a chorus member in the 1997 production and remembered quite a lot about Ballanta's life and history.

She voiced only two minor critiques. She did not object to the dance interludes with the marimba ensemble, but she felt they were too static, and that they should have had energized African dancing and drumming—essentially a classical African ensemble with African drums and African-inspired dancing—instead of Western modern dance movements. She also mentioned that the 2010 production did not incorporate children into it, which the 1996 and 1997 productions in Sierra Leone did, in the market scene when Afiwa has been found in the river, and when she is to face trial. Afiwa is supposed to be ten years old when she stands up to her Father and her childhood friends come round to support her when she is to face trial. So her friends could be around her age group, a bit younger or older, say five years old and above.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

With this chapter's survey of the African aspects of “Afiwa” that are not specifically musical, we can better appreciate Ballanta's accomplishment. We have seen how Ballanta set the bell

pattern, pentatonic melodies, perfect fourths, and African melodic cadential patterns with rich Western harmonies sung by operatic voices with Western orchestration. Similarly, the libretto lends itself to a staging that combines a representation of traditional tribal customs with more universal ideals, such as the emancipation of women from polygamy and upholding the rights of children. By bringing Western and African musical elements together Ballanta has also allowed his music to appeal to a wider audience both in the West and in Africa. The planned publication of the score will begin to make it available for performance, and I hope that my research will provide motivation, assistance and inspiration for future performances.

Future extensions of my work may include similar in-depth study of “Efua.” Even in “Afiwa” itself, there are more African elements to be found and more powerful political lessons to be applied. Perhaps a production that powerfully depicts true African life in all its glory, in spite of poverty, strife, famine, lack of education, can inspire people to give more value to the people and land of Africa.

*Figure 4 1 Photo of the persona of an Anlo Ewe queen, with the painted face and elaborate embroidery.*



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## Appendix

Bo, Sierra Leone  
5th July, 1938.

Mr. Henry Allen Moe,  
Secretary,  
John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation  
New York City

Dear Mr. Moe,

I have two days ago received your circular letter to Fellows calling for information to be included in the 1937 – 1938 bulletin of the Foundation; which puts me in mind that I have not informed you of my return to Sierra Leone.

I left Sierra Leone in February 1932, to complete my research among tribes not then visited, after the failure of arrangements to connect with the Achimota Institution in the Gold Coast which began in 1930. On that trip I first landed at Grand Bassam in the Ivory Coast and travelled by road to Sekondia in the Gold Coast, thence to Kumasi and on to Accra. At Accra in that year, I met the members of the Achimota Inspectorate who had been sent out by the British Colonial Office, of whom the Director of Education in Nigeria was one. He informed me of certain arrangements whereby I would be connected with the Yaba Higher College in Lagos and invited me thither. I arrived in Lagos in May, 1932, and lectured on the Harmonic Phase of African Music. The arrangements which Mr. Hussey, The Director of Education in Nigeria, was interested in never materialized, although it had the support of the then governor, Sir Donald Cameron. I left Lagos for the Eastern provinces via Kano, Zaria and Jos, a town nearly 3000 miles from Lagos in the interior. I next visited Onitsha, Enugu, Aba, Port Harcourt, and Calabar, and returned to Lagos in November 1932. I produced an African musical play entitled "FERI GHINE" at Lagos, in December, 1932, and left for Fernando Po in February, 1933. From Fernando Po, I went to Duala, Tiko, and Beula in the Cameroons and returned to Lagos in May, 1933. I produced another Musical Play "EFUA," in May 31, 1933, and I left Lagos again in June, 1933, for Benin, Asaba, and other tribes on the right bank of the Niger up to Zungar, and on my return produced another musical play "BANGURA" at Onitsha, in September, 1933. From Onitsha at the visit, I travelled to Sapele in the south, leaving Sapele in October, 1933 and returned to Lagos. From October, 1933, to April, 1934, I was engaged in organ repairing work and finished the repairs to an organ at Calabar in April 1934, and returned to Lagos via Ibad and Ijebu Ode, two large Yoruba towns.

At Ijebu Ode, as I had a respite from other activities and had some money at my disposal to keep me going, I completed the final revision of my book "Aesthetics of African Music" which had been in course of preparation since 1930. I returned to Lagos in August, 1934, and met a request for me to visit Togoland to which place I went, via the French Colony of Dahomey, contracted for the rebuilding of a large organ at the Cathedral of Sacred Heart in Lome and began my work in November, 1934 and completed it in April, 1936. During my long stay in Togoland, I studied the music of the Eves and Popos and assisted the Procurer, an Officer of the French

Colonial Government, in the preparation of a book entitled "L'Aime de Togolaise" the Procurer providing the folk tales and the folk music. This book has been published in France and sells at 80 francs. In September, 1934, at Togoland, I addressed to you a letter forwarding you a typescript copy of my book "Aesthetics of African Music," to which you replied in November, 1934, but which reply did not get into my hands until March, 1937. After the satisfactory completion of my work in Togoland, I received another request to repair the organ at the Catholic cathedral at Ouidah but thought it best to return to Accra to find out news from friends which had been wanting since I entered French soil in November 1934.

I went to Accra in June 1936, and gave an organ recital in July 1936, and left that same month for Lome, via Keta, where in November, 1936, I produced another musical play "AFIWA". This play was repeated at Lome by request of the French authorities with the same cast from Keta in December, 1936. I left Lome in January 1937, for Ouidah, and completed the work of repairing the organ at the Catholic Cathedral, and returned to Lagos in Easter week, 1937, I left Lagos a week after and arrived in Freetown on April 22nd, 1937, having been away for five years and two months.

This is the longest tour I had ever undertaken and it was no surprise when I returned to Freetown to be admitted to Hospital on account of a terrible fever diagnosed a "Typhoid", which kept me in bed from the very day I landed until the 19th June, last year. After the fever subsided, I lost control of my nerves and my eyesight was impaired. I continue under doctor's orders until August, last year. After my convalescence, I was able to arrange three performances of the musical play "Afiwa" to which reference had been made above, and one performance of Bangura, King of Sandalla, which was first produced at Onitsha in 1933. This took me to the end of 1937. Since the beginning of this year, I have been having my holiday and turned my attention to the publication of the book "Aesthetics of African Music," which has been accepted by the Oxford University Press.

I enclose for your information copies of letters which has passed between the press and myself and would invite your attention to the last paragraph of your letter to me of 13th November 1934. I shall be much obliged therefore if you would kindly let me know what further steps to take to procure the subvention which you were so good as to promise to recommend for the consideration of the Trustees.

Under the circumstances, until this book has been published there is no item of publications by myself. I have with me the rough draft of the second volume but the delayed publication of the first volume has actually prevented me from further prosecuting that work.

I shall be in Sierra Leone for a long time to come; that is, until the book has gone through the Press. My address therefore will be until otherwise altered:

123, Blackhall Road,  
Kissy, Sierra Leone, West Africa

I am,

Dear Mr. Moe,

Yours very respectfully,

N.G.J. Ballanta. etc.