

The National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana plays Ghanaian Classics: negotiating multiple identities through highlife music

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Abstract

Fifty-six years after its establishment, the Ghana National Symphony Orchestra in 2015 recorded its debut album Ghanaian Classics at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. Despite the overwhelming challenge of low patronage of art music in Africa generally, the choice of repertoire and composers for this historic album was largely drawn from the Ghanaian popular music domain. This paper investigates the extent to which the album recording and launch represented a deliberate attempt by the orchestra to negotiate its multiple identities through Ghanaian highlife music and musicians. We argue that the album recording, the choice of the highlife genre and artists featured on the CD, the instrumentation and the venues for the recording and launch were all a deliberate attempt to de-escalate the elitist label the Ghana National Symphony Orchestra has carried right from its inception and to court a larger following from the Ghanaian populace as a national cultural asset.

Introduction

Of the several national music and dance ensembles in Ghana, no other ensemble, throughout its existence, has had to struggle to define and redefine its identity like the Ghana National Symphony Orchestra – henceforth referred to as GNSO.¹ This

¹ Other national ensembles include the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Ghana's military and police bands, *Abibigroma*, the *Osagyefo* players etc.

identity crisis was occasioned by the GNSO's Euro-Western origin and its setup in 1960 during the charged immediate post-independence era, including its initial instrumentation, repertoire and performance ethos. These factors placed the GNSO at odds with the then nationalist cultural agenda to promote the post-independence musical heritage of Ghana and thus pitted the ensemble against the majority of the Ghanaian public (Botwe-Asamoah 2005). On one occasion, some old violins, violas and cellos of the GNSO were secretly carried to a dumpsite to be burned. It took an anonymous person to quickly inform members of the GNSO who were on the ensemble's premises at the time to go and rescue the instruments.² Such extreme challenges resulted in years of relentless efforts to Africanise the GNSO by indigenising its instrumentation, repertoire, costume and aspects of its performance ethics (Nii-Dortey 2013).

In recent times, however, the efforts to Africanise the ensemble out of its identity quagmire have taken an entirely new turn: an audacious appeal to the more stable domain of popular music and musicians resulted, for the first time in the ensemble's six-decade history, in the recording and launch of an album, *The National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana plays Ghanaian Classics*, in 2015. Given the relatively low art status accorded popular music and musicians because of their historical association with the subaltern (Negus 1996), and the historical unidirectional influence that Western classical music wields over popular music (Young 2016), we ask the following questions: why would a Western-styled orchestra (the GNSO) resort to popular music for purposes of revamping its image; would that amount to a demotion of the GNSO's status; what Ghanaian popular genre was engaged for the GNSO's identity-building project; and how may the project's success or otherwise affect the historical binary opposition between classical and popular music? We argue in this article that the debut album recording represents a reconfiguring of the GNSO's identity to (re)position itself as a national asset within Ghana's contemporary musical space. The project evokes the phenomenon of cultural hybridity as a postcolonial theoretical paradigm that challenges notions of fixed identities, pure origins and binary oppositions, and underscores hybridity as a highly nuanced and rational creative endeavour practised among not just the African subaltern but also the elite (Oduro-Frimpong 2009). For its resultant repertoire mimics exclusively neither the so-called serious musical arts the GNSO has been used to, nor the drumkit-dominated popular idiom of the original works but is a fusion of both – what Kofi Agawu (2003, p. 119) describes as a 'Western-influenced non-Western music'. The GNSO's 2015 album thus not only represents an innovation into the African music heritage but also signals a major drift in the ensemble's quest for an African identity. In this paper, we examine this entirely new turn by the GNSO, specifically highlighting the extent to which the debut album recording, maiden and post-album launch performances, and the album jacket were a deliberate attempt by the ensemble to navigate its way out of the Euro-Western and elitist tagging, and to appeal to the broader Ghanaian masses through popular music and musicians.

² During the tenure of Dinah Reindorf, the second director of the GNSO, 'at a particular state function, some state officials decided to assign the responsibility of the Ghana national anthem to a drum ensemble, to avoid using the orchestra. This was a programme which the orchestra was also in attendance' (Nii-Dortey and Arhin 2010, p. 48)

Background

In 2015, 56 years after its establishment, the GNSO recorded its debut album at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. In view of the overwhelming challenge of low patronage of art music in Africa (Agawu 2011, Irele 1993) the GNSO chose to draw its repertoire and composers for this historic album from the Ghanaian popular music domain. Out of the 11 tracks on the album, only two fall within the Afro-European art music category in the truest sense. The album featured Ghanaian highlife music and legends including Agya Koo Nimo, Bob Pinodo and Gyedu Blay Ambolley.³ The GNSO also launched this album at +233 Jazz Bar and Grill, a space noted for its weekly jazz and popular live band music performances in Accra.

In a recent study of the debut album recording and launch, De-Souza (2020, p. 64) posits that '[i]n marketing the CDs, the orchestra selected seasoned artists in Ghana to collaborate with them ... Putting together such music icons on this recording project was a marketing strategy ... a good way to market the CDs'. She further writes, 'we can ... conclude that the GNSO's maiden album (*Ghanaian Classics*) was partially successful in the commercialisation because the orchestra has not made much out of the sales of the recording project' (De-Souza 2020, p. 72). In a related discussion the authors had with Allotey Bruce-Konuah, the coordinator of the album project, he stated that this debut album was 'for posterity's sake' and that the issue of commercialisation was never a serious part of the motivation for the project; they therefore produced only 1,000 copies of the album (personal conversation).⁴ The current director of the GNSO, Isaac Annoh, also confirmed, in an interview with De-Souza in the same document, Bruce-Konuah's explanation that the *Ghanaian Classics* album was for posterity's sake (De-Souza 2020). Although De-Souza's assertion may have some veracity, it overhypes the commercial reasoning and interest, especially equating the debut album and the popular artists featured on it with sales figures and market indicators risks falling into what Simon Frith (1996) describes as the populist position. It not only undervalues the socio-political potency of popular music but also reinforces long held prejudices that associate popular music with a 'commercial phenomenon of little substance' (Collins and Richards 1989, p. 13).

We suggest that the debut album's success hinges, among other things, on the altruistic concept of the public good rather than on the usual commercial success index often associated with popular musical products. We proceed from the album producers' own reasons for the low production figure and to give attention to the impact of the album itself as well as the motivation behind the GNSO's choice of popular music and musicians. We suggest that the choice of music genre recorded, performance venues for the project and the album jacket were all a deliberate attempt to de-escalate the elitist label that the GNSO has carried right from its

³ Images of the album cover, songs recorded on the album, and musicians featured on the debut can be found at *The National Symphony Orchestra Of Ghana – The National Symphony Orchestra Plays Ghanaian Classics* (2015, Digipak, CD) – Discogs

⁴ Personal communication with Allotey Bruce-Konuah on 20 October and 28 November 2021. Bruce-Konuah, apart from being the project coordinator, is the one who started the conversation about the debut album recording. He played such a significant role in 'selling' the idea to the producer and the executive producer of the debut album.

inception so as to court a larger following from the Ghanaian populace as a national cultural asset. We begin with the ensemble's history and current composition.

The Ghana National Symphony Orchestra

In 1954, under British colonial rule, a Ghanaian music teacher by the name of Robert Kwami at the Achimota School founded and directed a symphony orchestra.⁵ Kwami's aim was to create an orchestra with a national tag. However, he died while the ensemble was still in its early stages, leaving the group in the care of his teacher colleague Philip Gbeho (1904–1976). After encountering the Gbeho-led ensemble and falling in love with their performances, Ghana's first president, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), decided to nationalise the group in 1959 with Gbeho as its first director and conductor (Nii-Dortey and Arhin 2010).⁶ Nkrumah was of the belief that Africa must selectively embrace and adapt its Arabic and European legacies: he particularly perceived the arts as a delicate instrument of ideology (Nkrumah 1964). To utilise this ideological potency of the arts, Nkrumah established several statutory cultural bodies and converted others to transform the disturbing impacts of European cultural hegemony on Africans at the time. One of these major changes occurred in 1962, when Nkrumah proposed that the then Arts Council of Ghana be converted into the Institute of Arts and Culture to, among other things, preserve, promote, disseminate, foster and develop Ghanaian art forms and culture (Botwe-Asamoah 2005).⁷ Botwe-Asamoah (2005, p. 172) bemoaned this apparent incongruity of using a Euro-Western ensemble to correct a Western cultural hegemony thus: '[t]he most distressing thing that occurred was the Institute's [constitutional] establishment of the New Ghana Orchestra for the cultivation of European classical music'.

In 1963, the New Ghana Orchestra – which would later be known as the National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana – literally confirmed the fears of the sceptics when it gave a concert of European works by composers such as Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart under the directorship of Gbeho. 'If, in fact, the people's culture was dying as a result of colonialism, how was the Orchestra's classical music going to preserve, foster, and develop [the people's] arts and culture?', Botwe-Asamoah questioned (2005, p. 172). Thus, the GNSO's transition from a small group of Achimotans performing European classical music to a national orchestra that pursues the same mandate in the wake of heightened nationalism and Pan-African consciousness enforced its colonial depiction and attracted condemnations from a variety of Ghanaians.

Fully aware of the agitations against the orchestra as a relic of the colonial cultural hegemony, Gbeho creatively included in the ensemble's repertoire a handful of popular highlife tunes such as Dokye Apenteng's *Wofa Nono* and E.T. Mensah's '*Ebe Ebe Tatalé*'.⁸ However, the hope that this elitist rendition of highlife music could

⁵ Achimota School, formerly Prince of Wales College and School, was founded in 1924 by Sir Frederick Gordon Guggisberg, then Governor of the British Gold Coast colony.

⁶ Philip Gbeho was the director of the Institute of culture and arts, and the first director of the GNSO. He led the ensemble from 1959 to 1971.

⁷ The Arts Council of Ghana was first established as the Arts Council of the Gold Coast in 1955.

⁸ *Wofa Nono* was composed in the 1960s for the Broadway Dance Band by the legend Ebo Taylor; E.T. Mensah was the King of highlife music during the same period.

mitigate the orchestra's contested identity was short-lived, partly owing to Gbeho's untimely demise in 1976. The rendition leaned too heavily towards the orchestral idiom. The known highlife tunes were, for the first time, dominated by the orchestral strings without the usual singing, and performed by a less active set of musicians from music scores. Successive directors of the ensemble restricted themselves to the domain of art music and, depending on their strengths, wrote and/or performed both Western and African art musical works until the mid-1990s. Except for Dinah Reindorf, who promoted choral music owing to her expertise in that field, most of the GNSO's directors turned to the traditional music of Ghana as a major resource base for their compositions, drawing from its indigenous idioms and musical instruments.⁹ None of these conscious efforts to indigenise the GNSO's repertoire, however, resulted in an album recording, although an attempt was made during the tenure of Reindorf to record some of the Ghanaian choral works she had successfully popularised. Unfortunately, Reindorf had to resign from her post in 1984 owing to external pressures from some ardent Africanists at the political front of the nation. Their expectation was a pan-African instrumental ensemble to dominate or replace the imported ones. The Africanists were unimpressed with Reindorf's artistic decisions, particularly her fondness for the more popular choral music she performed, sometimes solely, with the National Choir; the National Choir was a recognised group that accompanied the GNSO on joint performances but, like the GNSO, also gave concerts on its own. Reindorf's resignation thwarted what would have been the GNSO's first album recording at the time. The closest the GNSO came again to an album recording was in 1995 when, under the directorship of Kwasi Aduonum, it featured in a German documentary titled *Art-music in Ghana*.

Given what the Africanists wanted, it was not surprising that they found Nana Danso Abiam as Reindorf's replacement. He experimented with new ways of composing for the orchestra by adapting African musical forms, timbral, rhythmic, melodic, harmonic peculiarities and instruments (Nii-Dortey and Arhin 2010). Unfortunately, after working with the GNSO for three months, Abiam abandoned his position, left the ensemble and went on to form the famous Pan African Orchestra in 1988. The formation of the Pan African Orchestra soon after he exited the GNSO solidified the lingering suspicion that Abiam's resignation may have been occasioned by his inability to freely pursue his pan-African ensemble dream, or that he wanted to pursue that dream privately. Following Abiam's short stint, Nicholas Zinzendorf Nayo assumed the position of director of the GNSO and led the ensemble from 1985 to 1991. Nayo's tenure was characterised by elaborate orchestral works based on the Western symphonic form, chromatic harmony and developmental traditions created around some Ghanaian popular folk tunes. Although futuristic as far as Ghanaian art music is concerned, Nayo's symphonies, and even the handful of popular folk tunes he expounded on, were too sophisticated and unexciting for many of the Ghanaian audience. Nayo's successors, including Kwasi Aduonum, Kenn Kafui and George Worlasi Dor, therefore, did not continue entirely in his tradition of elaborate and sophisticated symphonies because of the criticisms and resulting decline in the audience's patronage.¹⁰ Instead, they (re)introduced

⁹ In 1972, Dinah Reindorf succeeded Philip Gbeho as Director of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana. She was the first female director of the orchestra.

¹⁰ Other people who directed the ensemble include Oscar Sulley and Kwame Dzokoto. Sulley, for example, was a jazz musician and under whose tenure the ensemble played more jazz works.

lighter popular highlife and danceable orchestral works such as those pioneered by Gbeho in the mid-1960s, as well as new highlife songs such as George Worlasi Dor's 'Echoes of Nketia' and E.T. Mensah's 'Ebe Ebe Tatala', both of which are featured on the debut album.

Presently, the GNSO is directed by Isaac Annoh under the administrative oversight of the National Commission of Culture, Ghana. Annoh, together with his assistant Ato Quayson, have been directing the ensemble since 2008. Like Gbeho, Quayson has also assumed the responsibility of composing and arranging in a light orchestral style for the GNSO. As the only national orchestra in the West African sub-region, the GNSO currently is under severe constraint with only 36 musicians including two flutes, one clarinet, one bassoon, one trombone, two horns, three double basses, three violin I, four violin II, two violas, three cellos and two percussionists, plus a set of traditional Ghanaian drums.¹¹ Also, instead of the usual jacket and tie, the GNSO now performs in a variety of Ghanaian-styled clothes and sleeveless smocks ('fugu') as part of their indigenisation efforts.¹²

It is clear from this rather brief history that, within a period of 24 years beginning from Dinah Reindorf's resignation in 1984 to Isaac Annoh's appointment in 2008, more than 10 directors have led the GNSO. Although the exposure to these several directors offered a rich source of diverse musical and logistical experiences for the GNSO, their rather short stints, in quick succession, delayed '[efforts] to evolve an original musical language with which a developed modern musical sensibility can identify' (Irele 1993, p. 59). In other words, because there was no clearly defined homegrown template for the GNSO directors to follow, each of them assumed his/her own unique model of Africanisation and, similarly, left with it. We attribute the delay in resolving the ensemble's multiple identity crises to this leadership conundrum.

From the beginning of this paper to this point, we can conclude that the developmental trajectory of the GNSO has spawned multiple identities including, first, an identity represented by the orchestra's own colonial origin and genre features. A second identity involves a new outlook fostered by the GNSO's association with the African elite patrons and actors whose taste for Western classical music defined the orchestra's initial repertoire. A third identity can be described in terms of a nationalist outlook inspired by GNSO's new African cultural mandate and all the Africanising transformations that mandate engendered. A fourth and an evolving new identity can be defined as a relatively more popular image being fostered in collaboration with popular music icons and their sonic signatures constructed through years of musical fusion, experimentation and international tours. Tia DeNora's (2017) analysis of identities as not only resources and statuses but also malleable phenomena that involve hybridisation best typifies the GNSO's operations in the last six decades. The GNSO's development trajectory through the four marked identities within the period is not linear, i.e. starting off as a colonial relic through to its present status as one national ensemble that is able to appeal to the masses through its popular music repertoire. On the contrary, the absence of an Africanisation blueprint meant that each new director that took over the leadership of GNSO adopted his/her own models of Africanisation. The result of the disjointed

¹¹ Interview with Isaac Annoh on 10 May 2023.

¹² A quick Google search will show pictures and videos of the GNSO performing in their diverse Ghanaian-styled clothes.

Africanisation experimentations was particularly evident in the GNSO's repertoire. Several styles, including outright Western orchestral music, African symphonies and anthems, choral art music pursued in collaboration with the National Choir and other choral ensembles, light orchestral works involving African folk tunes and instruments, have all emerged in the process. While the development has enriched the diversity of the GNSO's repertory, it has inadvertently robbed the ensemble of a stable image in terms of musical style and sonic signature.

As can be inferred from some of the literature referenced in this paper, aspects of GNSO's developmental history, which covers the first three marked identities, have received some scholarly attention, particularly by Nii-Dortey and Arhine (2010, 2012). This paper's focus is the new and more popular outlook being nurtured through the album's production and launch. Since orchestral music is essentially music on paper, the GNSO's negotiation of the currently nuanced popular outlook can be said to have begun when Ato Quayson scored the highlife songs. The ensuing joint rehearsals with Koo Nimo, Gyedu Blay Ambolley and Bob Pinodo, the recording of the album, and the maiden and post-album launch activities should all be seen as continuations of the identity negotiation processes. Thus, the processes involved in fashioning the new popular image are both sonic and visual.¹³

The *Ghanaian Classics* album: why popular music and not Afro-European art music?

Of major concern to this paper is highlife, a genre of West African popular music that evolved owing to the hybridisation of '[Ghanaian] dance rhythms and melodies with Western instruments and harmonies' (Collins 1976, p. 62). Since its emergence in the 1900s on the West African coastline, highlife has proven to be 'more amenable to innovation and alteration' than traditional African music and Afro-European art music (Coplan 1978, p. 101). It has significantly contributed to the evolution of 'various sonic signatures ... that are associated with particular record producers, recording studios, record labels, musical styles, geographic locations [and] historical periods' (Zagorski-Thomas 2014, p. 38). See for example, the work of Ernest Owusu-Poku (2021) on the legendary Ghanaian sound engineer Francis Kwaakye through whose efforts a unique highlife sound recording emerged in the 1970s. Another example is the Ghanaian Lebanese producer the late Faisal Helwani who made a strong mark on the highlife sound of E.T. Mensah, the King of highlife. We can further mention producers such as Zapp Mallet and Panji Anoff who together with Reggie Rockstone fused highlife sounds with American hip hop to create a new sound, hiplife, in the 1990s.

Unlike African/Afro-European art music,

[h]ighlife appears to be a thin line that musically connects the diverse Ghanaian tribes. Its trans-ethnic identity draws musical idioms such as dance rhythms, vocal styles, dialects and instrumental resources, among others, from the various cultural groups in the country. (Owusu-Poku 2021, p. 248)

¹³ An online link to the album jacket can be found here: <https://www.discogs.com/release/14858843-The-National-Symphony-Orchestra-Of-Ghana-The-National-Symphony-Orchestra-Plays-Ghanaian-Classics>

It is for these reasons that, in present-day Ghana and even on the world music market, highlife music tends to be the only genre that is so far considered as Ghanaian classic. Its status among both the elite and masses guarantees a high chance of being considered a Ghanaian asset. Meanwhile, the challenge of art music in Africa is indisputable: of the three categories of African music – traditional, popular and art music – it is art music that is the least prominent (Agawu 2011). Also, despite both art music and popular music having evolved from urban settings, ‘popular music travels in and out of the city, while art music is locked in the cosmopolitan sphere’ (Agawu 2016, p. 51). Take for example, names such as Ali Farka Toure (Mali), Dobet Gnahore (Ivory Coast), Papa Wemba (Congo), Salawa Abeni (Nigeria), Angelique Kidjo (Benin), Miriam Makeba (South Africa), Naa Amanua (Ghana) and, in more recent times, Burna Boy & Wizkid (Nigeria) and Shatta Wale & Black Sherif (Ghana); and genres such as fuji, soukous, highlife, makossa, mbalax, chimurenga, Afrobeat, Afrorock, hiplife and Afrobeats. These sample lists of African popular musicians and genres contrast sharply with the relative paucity of African art music’s presence, both locally and internationally. They are veritable evidences of the mobile potency of African popular music and continue to prove through mass participation and reception how well popular music has developed in the soils of Africa.

We argue therefore that the GNSO’s move to record highlife music, the Ghanaian classic, is not necessarily a demotion of the orchestra’s status to the so-called low art. Rather, it is a strategic blurring of the so-called high art represented by the ensemble’s elitist and European origin, and Ghana’s highlife music tradition, which the new repertoire represents. Arguably therefore, highlife’s status as a Ghanaian classic qualifies the GNSO’s adoption of that genre for its maiden album as a status elevation project intended to meet the high aesthetic standards of the adopted African cultural milieu it has been operating in for six decades. Agawu (2003, p. 149) confirms this notion of highlife’s elevated status when he asserted that ‘[p]opular music, finally, is a contemplative art’.

Why popular artists and not Afro-European art composers?

Art music composers are ‘always named individuals to whom specific works are credited’, while popular music groups feature composer-performers whose identities the audiences partly and continually construct, and can readily be verified (Agawu 2016, p. 51). Although the presence of art music composers preceded popular music artists in Africa, the stardom enjoyed by popular music artists enabled them, during and immediately after colonialism, to be more successful at defying colonial ideologies and to radically lead in the decolonisation efforts of many African nations.¹⁴ By the 1950s, for example, popular musicians in Ghana had become major players ‘central to negotiations of collective identity as it emerged in the years surrounding [the country’s] ... independence from British colonial rule’ (Plageman and Shipley 2017, p. 10). They were ahead of the politicians in cultivating mass audiences and tailoring messages in a variety of local languages across lines of class, ethnicity and location. Laying the foundation for a common national identity,

¹⁴ The origin of art music in Africa dates to 19th century missionary encounters on the continent, whereas popular music is a more recent trend.

these popular musicians, most of whom were into highlife music, blended into the political agenda of the times and, in a self-conscious ideological way, indigenised their performances and recordings in line with Nkrumah's ideals (Collins 2007).

The GNSO's choice of highlife artists for its debut album is therefore beyond the marketing of CDs and sales figures as De-Souza said. These are Ghanaian popular music legends that have 'transcended barriers of ethnicity, age and gender' and even partisan politics: they are in and of themselves national assets (Akyeampong 1996, p. 223). Agya Koo Nimo (b. 1934), for example, is a professional medical laboratory practitioner who has dedicated his life to playing palm wine music, an earlier form of highlife music associated with semi-literate immigrants and played on the acoustic guitar (Waterman 1988). Over the years, both adepts and those with little or no competency in palm wine music have admired Koo Nimo's guitar playing skills and style of music presentation, particularly his ability to creatively blend 'traditional proverbs . . . highlife, and a variety of embellishments borrowed from classical music and jazz' (Kaye 1999, p. 159).

These stylistic features of Koo Nimo's music position him in-between Eric Charry's (2018) second and third generations of African popular musicians who create their own individual solutions to bridge the gap between the African elite and the popular musician as well as reconcile deeply rooted traditions of their societies with the most contemporary global sonic flows. To date, Koo Nimo remains 'an important link between [Ghana's] musical heritage of the distant past, and the evolving musical stylistics of the [nation's] more recent history' (Kaye 1992, p. 2). Recognised as a 'Living Legend' by the National Theatre of Ghana in 2004 and as a UNESCO National Living Human Treasure of Ghana in 2007, Agya Koo Nimo is credited with the preservation of Ghanaian palm wine music. In 2013, the National Theatre of Ghana featured him in a concert organised as part of the theatre's 20th Anniversary celebrations. Dubbed 'Koo Nimo in Concert with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana, Ghana Police Band, and Tema Youth Choir', several of his palm wine songs were scored for the GNSO, the police band and the choir by the late Dr Pascal Zabana Kongo.¹⁵ Despite the lack of advertising for that concert, the audience members that attended, including the authors of this article, testified to the musical feat of Agya Koo Nimo and his invaluable contribution to the African popular music heritage.

Koo Nimo's interest in music innovation and an Afro-sound is however not unique to him. Bob Pinodo (b. 1945) and Gyedu Blay Ambolley (b. 1947), both of whom recorded under the same Ghanaian record label Essiebons Ltd. at the beginning of their careers, are 1960s Afro-funk and funky highlife pioneers (Collins 2015).¹⁶ Bob Pinodo, for example, invented in the 1970s a pop-influenced beat *sonobete* based on traditional rhythms from his ethnic background the Efutu of Winneba, Ghana, and went ahead to operate a music studio, Szaabu Sounds (Collins 2015). His showmanship of dance, music and comedy won him the title 'Show Master of Africa', and made his music very popular in Germany, the UK and Yugoslavia. In June 2021, Pinodo received a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Vodafone

¹⁵ The late Dr Pascal Zabana Kongo, a Congolese from the Democratic Republic of Congo, until his demise was one of few Ghana-based scholars whose academic training has been in music composition and orchestration.

¹⁶ Bob Pinodo was born Robert Kwaku Idan; the name Pinodo was a nickname given him by his classmates.

Ghana Music Awards.¹⁷ His contemporary Gyedu Blay Ambolley is still recording albums, giving performances in Ghana and embarking on musical tours around the world. With his unique *simwigwado* funky highlife style, it is no doubt that Ambolley's Fante rhyming slang foreshadowed the contemporary movement of Ghanaian rappers (Collins 2015).¹⁸ Indeed, the acceptance of West African highlife and, in general, popular music as 'a form of cultural production', is partly credited to the sonic signatures of these three artists (Irele 1993, p. 57). Their 'musical, technical and aesthetic qualities ... offer us a means to penetrate, understand and compartmentalise' the post-colonial West African popular music industry (Maloney and Schofield 2021, p. 3). Such are the personal and collective lifetime achievements of the highlife musicians the producers of GNSO's maiden album decided to partner with.

The performance places and the Ghanaian classics album

Equally significant to this image construction thesis of the GNSO are the places associated with the album recording and launch. Placeness, writes Elliot Bates (2016, p. 23), 'indeed, is one of the most important attributes for evaluating the "traditionalness" of any song' – not just of any song but also of any performer or ensemble. The potency of placeness to authenticate an artist or ensemble, and vice versa, contributes significantly to the success stories or otherwise of musicians and music groups. And if indeed placeness is crucial for evaluating the traditionalness of an ensemble, then where else would have been more appropriate for the GNSO to record and launch its debut album after its struggles to redefine its identity since 1959, than the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, and +233 Jazz Bar and Grill? The choice of these venues for the GNSO's debut album project advances the agenda to de-escalate the colonial tag and blur the 'binary oppositions between ... elite arts and mass entertainment' (Flew 2016, p. 9).

The Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, was set up in 1961 and officially inaugurated in 1963 by Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah as part of the attempts to rehabilitate and develop African culture (Charry 2018). Its mission is to 'engage in the regeneration of Africa and her peoples through knowledge production, dissemination, application and preservation'.¹⁹ In collaboration with the Institute of Arts and Culture, the Institute of African Studies in 1962 also founded the Ghana Dance Ensemble (GDE) to 'be Ghana's flagship for the professional, world-wide promotion of the music and dance heritage of Ghana'.²⁰ Apart from the position of its directorship, the membership of the GDE since its inception, has deliberately been

¹⁷ Established in 1999, the Vodafone (now Telecel) Ghana Music Awards is the biggest entertainment award scheme in Ghana.

¹⁸ Gyedu Blay Ambolley describes his jazzy, funky and soulful highlife music accompanied by self-invented dance movements as *simwigwado* ('I am reigning'). The movements, especially, have been described by Ghanaian dance scholar Oh! Nii Sowah (a retired Professor of the Department of Dance Studies, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon) as an interesting resource for the study of popular dance in Ghana (personal communication with the authors on 16 May 2012).

¹⁹ Information obtained from [Vision and Mission, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana \(ug.edu.gh\)](http://www.visionandmission.ug.edu.gh), accessed 10 December 2021.

²⁰ Information obtained from [Ghana Dance Ensemble, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana \(ug.edu.gh\)](http://www.ghanaensemble.ug.edu.gh), accessed 10 December 2021.

reserved for non-literate but dexterous Ghanaians.²¹ Like the GDE, the prestigious position The Kwame Nkrumah Chair in African Studies, established to, among other things, provide 'a platform ... for some of the unfinished business of a renaissance for African peoples to occur', is also housed by the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon.²² Additionally, J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1921–2019) who was one of the most notable and globally respected scholars of African musics and aesthetics, was a faculty member and the first African Director of the Institute of African Studies. The GNSO album recording specifically took place in the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Conference Hall, a facility named after the late professor long before his demise. It is worth emphasising that *Ghanaian Classics* is the first music album recorded not only at the Institute but also at the Kwabena Nketia Conference Hall.

+233 Jazz Bar and Grill, on the other hand, is a venue designed to offer weekly live band music performances. Owned by Dr Adrian Oddoye, an acclaimed medical practitioner and the executive producer of the *Ghanaian Classics* album, the +233 Jazz Bar and Grill is also noted for dominantly attracting the cultural elite.²³ Launching the *Ghanaian Classics* album at this venue was an effort to retain the orchestra's elitist audience even as the ensemble paradoxically attempted to de-escalate its elitist tag. After the official launch at +233 Jazz Bar and Grill, the GNSO further extended its performance of the tracks on the debut album to locales such as Jamestown and the Osu Night Market in Accra as a way of bringing the Ghanaian classics to the ordinary Ghanaian music enthusiast.²⁴

On both the recording and the back of the CD jacket, the GNSO lists the Ghana national anthem, 'God bless our homeland Ghana', as the first track, followed by the highlife tracks 'All for you', 'Ebe Ebe Tatale', 'Echoes of Nketia', 'Naa Densua', 'Apatampa', 'Highlife Time', 'Osabarima', 'Oman ye wo man', and 'Abrokyire Abrabo'. The final track is 'Yen ara asase ni' ('this is our own land'), a patriotic song 'whose popularity has led to it being dubbed the unofficial national anthem [of Ghana] ... in some [Ghanaian] schools, ... [and] sung either alongside or in place of' Ghana's official anthem (Agawu 1996, p. 273).²⁵

In addition to these local titles the CD jacket further displays visual imagery of two old lovers facing each other (see Figure 1). This, we believe, is part of the attempt to appeal to the masses. Known as *laimomo* ('old firewood') in the Ga language of the people of Accra, this visual imagery features quite prominently in the everyday life of Accra's residents. The response to *laimomo* – *etso fe lai hee* ('it flames more than fresh firewood'), is often used as a metaphor for the importance of rekindling old relationships rather than courting new ones. For the GNSO, the resort to highlife music

²¹ These non-literates are performers whose knowledge of indigenous Ghanaian musics has not been corrupted by Western education. For most of them, their level of Western education is just at the basic level. For a detailed study on the GDE, see Paul Schauert (2015).

²² This information can be found on the Institute's website, ug.edu.gh, accessed 10 December 2021.

²³ Personal communication with Colter Harper on 20 October 2021. Colter Harper is a regular jazz music performer at +233 Jazz Bar and Grill, and currently a visiting assistant professor at University at Buffalo. The +233 Jazz Bar and Grill facility is owned by Dr Adrian Oddoye, a medical practitioner and the executive producer of the album.

²⁴ The concert at Jamestown Accra was dubbed 'Music in the Old City' at a venue called Franklin Lodge. Personal communication with Allotey Bruce-Konuah on 11 December 2021. Osu is a Ga coastal community located in central Accra, Ghana.

²⁵ Ephraim Amu composed *Yen ara asase ni* in 1929, several years before Ghana's independence from British colonial rule in 1957.

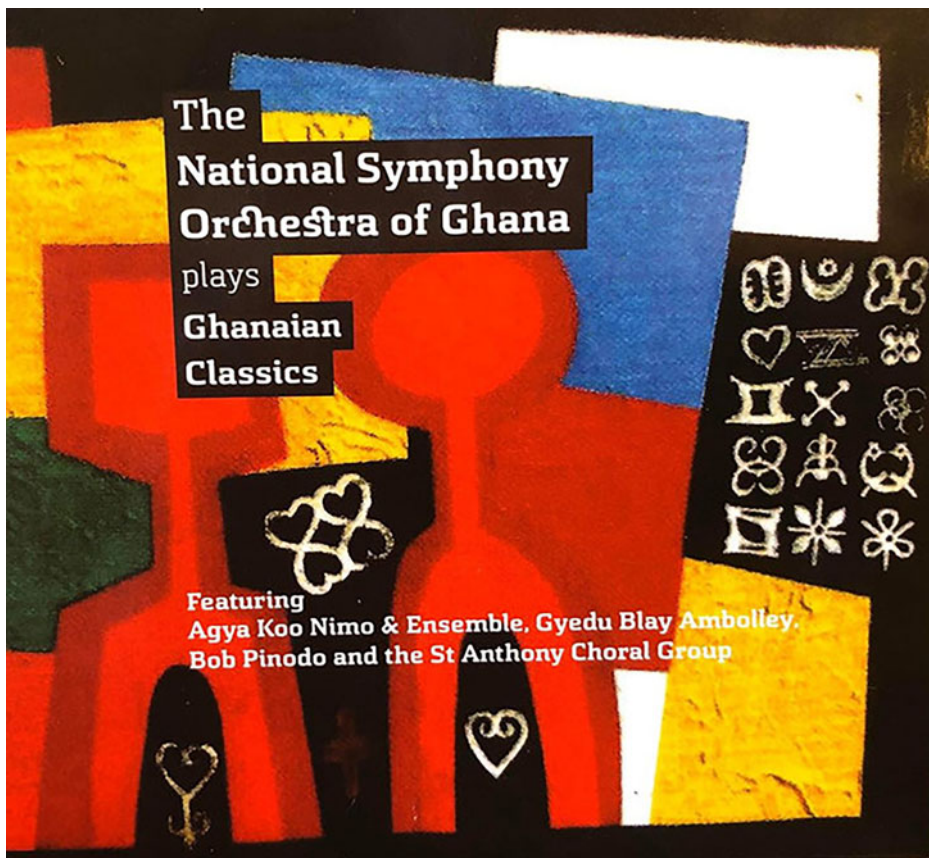


Figure 1: The front cover of the GNSO album, *Laimomo Dilemma* (2015). Artwork by Sela Adjei.

represents the return to this proverbial *laimomo* imagery. The front cover of the CD jacket is also laden with popular Akan adinkra symbols such as *Akoma* ('the heart' – a symbol of patience and tolerance), *Osram ne nsroma* ('the moon and the star' – a symbol of love and harmony), *akoma ntoaso* ('the joining of hearts' – a symbol of agreement) and *ese ne tekrema* ('the teeth and the tongue' – a symbol of friendship and interdependence). For Ghanaian popular musicians, these symbolic designs serve as ready-to-use thematic areas and resource base for their songs and albums. Thus, the GNSO's utilisation of the front and back covers of the CD jacket in the way discussed above provides sufficient semiotic grounds for hedging the ensemble's identity with African aesthetic sensibilities rather than those of its Euro-Western origins.

The impact of the *Ghanaian Classics* album

We ground our discussion of the impact of the *Ghanaian Classics* album – how it was actually received – on our observation of the entire recording process at Legon, and on both the maiden and post-album launch performances. We also ground the album's impact on feedback from our interviews with the GNSO's director and

the album project coordinator. We dare to make the claim that the debut album is a success. Unlike the past, when the GNSO would perform to empty seats, both the maiden and post-album launch performances of the new repertoire at the various venues mentioned earlier saw a higher audience turnout made up of both elite and ordinary people. Presently, at the time of writing this article, there is a massive demand for copies of the *Ghanaian Classics* album from within Accra and beyond.

One of the positive outcomes of the debut album project was the establishment of the National Youth Orchestra (NYO) in 2019, under the auspices of the National Theatre of Ghana.²⁶ The NYO initiative, which was part of the GNSO's mandate from its inception, had remained on the drawing board for a rather long time, but received a fresh lease of life from the National Theatre after the GNSO's album appeared to have struck a major chord with the populace. Presently the NYO numbers some 46 high school students. While it took a long time to materialise, there is no doubt it represents the biggest hope for the orchestra as some of the youths have already begun participating in major concerts along with their seniors.

From a more philosophical perspective, we wish to emphasise that the not-for-profit approach to the *Ghanaian Classics* album adopted by the sponsors should be judged, even more highly, as a mark of success. This perspective of success is what the sponsors described as being 'for posterity's sake', and it is based on the idea of 'a public good' performed in a spirit of nationalism. It is instructive to know that recordings purposely made for posterity's sake are not entirely new in the Ghanaian music industry. In 1995, for example, the Pan African Orchestra led by its founder Nana Danso Abiam released their first and only album *Opus 1*, which was never commercialised despite the financial challenges Abiam and his orchestra faced at the time.²⁷ Thus, we evaluate the success of the *Ghanaian Classics* album based on this altruistic context rather than the conventional album sales index as anything done in the public interest and for public good is obviously a higher form of sacrifice and therefore highly commendable (Coughlin 2005).

To further confirm the altruistic motivation for this debut album project, Dr Adrian Oddoye, the executive producer of the album, has expressed his readiness to sponsor another album by the GNSO even though he did not benefit financially from the first.²⁸ Given its rather malleable and chequered developmental trajectory, it is not certain what new image the GNSO will chart in the near future when another musician takes over the leadership of the ensemble after the current director, Isaac Annoh, retires later in 2024. However, what seems to be certain presently is that the GNSO is enjoying a fresh lease of life through the Dr Oddoye-sponsored album project as well as the youth orchestra dream that the album project has activated.

Conclusion

The GNSO's current status confirms unashamedly the liberal approach towards popular music as expressed by others such as Storey (2018), Agawu (2003) and Negus (1996). It is important to acknowledge that the GNSO is neither the first,

²⁶ Interview with Isaac Annoh on 10 March 2023.

²⁷ Personal communication with Kofi Agawu on 28 October 2021.

²⁸ Personal communication with Allotey Bruce-Konuah on 5 May 2023.

nor perhaps the last, national ensemble to seek to rebrand away from its Euro-Western cultural antecedents. Ghana's military and police bands and various church and school ensembles have all had to adopt popular repertory, instrumentations and performance practices in response to the African cultural relevance question.²⁹ What seems unique about the GNSO is that its very designation and apparent rootedness in Euro-Western elitist culture positioned it at the very peak of imperial cultural hegemony in the country. This factor, aided by the palpable absence of an Africanisation blueprint for successive directors to work with, prolonged the resolution of the identity quagmire of the GNSO.

We argue that the GNSO's latest quest to resolve its identity crisis appears to be a step taken in the right direction for this reason: that the successful maiden and post-album launch of the *Ghanaian Classics* seem to have indelibly inscribed the much-elusive national cultural asset tag that all the previous directors of the orchestra had worked hard to attain without much success. By implication, the historical events have helped to tone down significantly the colonial cultural scourge the ensemble had lived with for the past decades. In this sense, the album highlights cultural hybridity as a space of negotiation and resistance to cultural domination (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1999) and confirms Tia DeNora's (2017) assertion that identities are exchangeable resources and statuses. The album project therefore adds to the plethora of rational cultural hybridisation choices and approaches which have characterised the development trajectories of most African contemporary music forms. The current status of the GNSO, as one national ensemble that fluidly negotiates in and out of the art-popular music binary, questions the entrenched biases held by some nationalists against the ensemble's establishment. Finally, if the GNSO's debut album revamps, rather than demotes, its image within the Ghanaian cultural context, then that affirms popular music's positionality as being relative to a people's socio-cultural context. Therefore, the value judgement placed on popular music should belong to every culture and exercised according to a people's lived experiences and aesthetic values.

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²⁹ See, for instance, Hukporti (2014) and Plageman (2017) for details about Ghana's military and police bands.

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