

Twenty Five Years of Choral Music Performance: Contribution of Winneba Youth Choir (WYC) in the Socio-Economic Development of Ghana.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the beginnings, performance setting, challenges and the benefits derived from the activities of Winneba Youth Choir in the socioeconomic development of Ghana. This descriptive qualitative study highlights how the activities of Winneba Youth Choir have yielded positive results in terms of employment, education and social recognition (identity) among the youth in Winneba and its environs. The paper addresses the need in preserving the authenticity of the choral musical Art as one of the avenues in developing the cultural values of an individual. It is therefore recommended that every youth experiences any of the musical arts in his/her lifetime.

Keywords: choral music, performance, contribution, socio-economic, development.

1. Introduction

The year 2013 marked 25 years of existence of Winneba Youth Choir (WYC) whose choral music performances have been the precursor of the proliferation of youth choirs in Ghana. Most of the aficionados of choral music in the country prefer, among others, to listen to the WYC either with their live performances or Compact Disk (CD) recordings. The choir offers many opportunities to its members through skill development in music that provides employment to them. Since its establishment, it has given wide range of opportunities for singers, including local and regional concerts, large-scale performances with the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO)², international touring, performing commissioned masterworks, and singing regularly at regional and national choral conventions. In fact, it is one of the institutions that identify and portray the rich cultural heritage of Winneba, and for that matter Ghana. The choir is noted for its service to the community and the nation by performing at major local and national programs. For many years, some members of the choir have been found establishing new youth choirs across the country.

This paper is an attempt to preserve this history while we have human subjects available. Questionnaire and interview were used to collect data for this study. They were administered to ten current members and ten pioneers who are now out of the group. Additionally, ten others (former and present patrons) were also interviewed towards the research of this history. The paper then discusses WYC focusing on its origin, performance setting, leadership and teaching styles, achievements and then its contribution to the socio-economic development in Ghana.

1.1 The Beginnings

In the late 80s, precisely in 1988, the Ebenezer Methodist Church in Winneba, now the Ebenezer Cathedral, started a Juvenile choir dubbed "Methodist Junior Choir". The responsibility of nurturing the choir was put under the tutelage of George Mensah-Essilfie with the assistance of Francis Arthur Yamoah (Paa John), the current director and conductor of the Winneba Youth Choir. The main aim for the establishment of the choir by George Mensah-Essilfie upon the direction of the church leaders' meeting (the highest decision making body) in the Methodist church, was to prepare the youth to take over the mantle of singing from the adults in their old age. In the wisdom of the leaders, it was expedient to congregate the children from the Sunday school of the church to constitute a juvenile choir who would duplicate the activities of the existing church choir (adult choir) with the intention of not only replacing them in their old age, but also complementing their performances when the need arises.

² An Orchestra established by Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of the Republic of Ghana, to spearhead an African cultural renaissance agenda in Ghana.



**George Mensah Essilfie
(Founder)**



**John Francis Arthur Yamoah
(Paa John – Music Director)**

(Amuah 2012) posits that:

The church elders also deemed it doctrinally sound to ensure the retention of the youth in the church by engaging them in such an activity. Apart from singing in the church during the Sunday service, the junior choir also assisted the church in her open air evangelism works by attending and singing during the crusades, camp meetings, dawn and radio broadcasts among other events organized by the church. The choir also made visits to one of the following establishments in the course of each year: Winneba Government Hospital, Winneba Prisons and the Orphanage centre (S.O.S) at Bawjiase (Amuah 2012:65).

The effort of the Ebenezer Methodist Church, Winneba, encouraged other sister churches in the town to form junior choirs. Within a short time, the Anglican, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Zion, the Roman Catholic and the Mozama Disco Christo Church had all formed junior choirs which performed similar functions in their churches.

It was also found necessary to keep the younger generation actively involved in the church through singing. So, the then Methodist Junior Choir was born to perform independently or complementarily in the church without any reward.

1.2 The Emergence of Winneba Youth Choir

In 1997, unexpectedly however, about ninety percent of the membership of the Methodist Junior Choir, Winneba, broke away to start a youth choir. The then director of the junior choir, Francis Arthur Yamoah, (Paa John) assisted by Edwin Atta Ghunney (organist), and His Excellency Kow Nkansah Ackaah³, pioneered the registration of the group as non-profit making association, independent of the church (Arkurst 2012: 1). Thornhill (2008: 1) is of the same view that a choir is usually incorporated, not for profit making or a registered charity.



³ the late former Vice President of the 4th Republic of Ghana.

Early years of The Winneba Youth Choir

The new junior choir which took on the name “Winneba Youth Choir” has since developed their choral music performance. It has in effect become the “National choir” (Ghana) and has featured prominently at almost every state function. Indeed their wonderful performances have caught the attention of all such that a number of choral music enthusiasts including pioneers of the WYC have established youth choirs in most communities in Ghana in the last ten years. An instance is James Varrick Armaah who has established the Harmonious Chorale, Ghana. With its new non-church affiliation, more youth from Winneba community and its environs, between the ages of ten (10) and twenty-five (25), were auditioned and recruited into the group. That is, interested prospective members who expressed a very good sense of pitching and hearing were tested in voice quality join the group. This was in line with Nina (1995:2) and Vera’s (2009:5) assertion that music directors have to be listening for good voices before recruiting them into the choir.

The WYC has the sole objective of providing a platform that would educate and develop the youth in Winneba through rendition of edifying songs. As a pioneer of independent youth choral groups in Ghana, the WYC also aims at remaining an internationally recognized youth choir that projects a positive image of the African Youth and the African Choral music. According to Arkurst (ibid), the WYC has pursued this vision through hard work, adopting the posture of a learning organization, and the formation of productive associations with other internationally acclaimed choirs.

1.3 Performance Setting

Nketia (1974) asserts:

Since the traditional approach to music making makes it a part of the institutional life of the community, the physical setting for performances can be any spot suitable for collective activity. It may be a public place or private area to which only those intimately concerned with the event are admitted, regular place of worship, such as a shrine, a sacred spot, a groove, a mausoleum, the courtyard of the house where ceremony is taking place or the area behind it, the scene of the communal labour, the corner of a street habitually used by social groups for music and dancing, a market place or a dance plaza (Nketia 1974: 31).

The performing settings of WYC are however Christian related, because they had their orientation from the singing tradition of the Methodist Church. Most of their initial repertoire was popular hymns and anthems of the Methodist Church. They later incorporated varied choral music genres of the periods - Anthem, Cantata, Carol, Chorale, Hymn, Madrigal, Magnificent, Motet, Oratorio (which include part-song and passion), Requiem, Stabat Mater and Te Deum (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2004:146). All these songs have sacred themes.

The WYC in addition to these choral genres performs slow and fast danceable tunes, Negro spirituals, patriotic songs and re-arranged contemporary gospel tunes. It has in its repertoire these sacred based songs. The reason is not only as a result of the retrospective orientation from the Christian perspective but also because most Ghanaian composers write sacred anthems and hymns, re-arranged gospel tunes and patriotic songs. It is also to complement the activities of pastors; to win souls to Christ, since most of their edifying songs are gospel related.



The Winneba Youth Choir singing praises to God

2. Contribution to Socio-Economic Development

The WYC has immensely contributed to the socio-economic development of Ghana in terms of *employment, education and social recognition*.

2.1 Employment

Boamahjeh and Ohene-Okantah (2000) state:

Music in general education serves a dual purpose. First is to develop the natural responsiveness to music inherent in all individuals; to provide them with the tools for understanding and participating in the music of their own culture and those of others. Secondly, it serves as a foundation for the development of the talents of those who are gifted musically for their own benefit. Such individuals benefit the society, which will be served by them as well as the art of music, which depends on the supply of composers, performers, conductors, scholars and teachers (Boamahjeh & Ohene-Okantah 2000: 3).

This is an undeniable fact because many are those who realized their potentials after joining the choir. Some of them are employed in the music industry as church organists, choir directors, professional singers, conductors and scholars in the field of the musical arts. Many of them have got the opportunity to pursue academic music at the various tertiary institutions due to their orientation from the WYC. The employment opportunities in music are quite enormous to provide a fundamental contribution to the quality of human life. For example James Armaah, the Executive Director of Harmonious Chorale, Ghana realized his leadership capabilities and polished his musical talent while he was an organist of WYC. Ebenezer Amparbin who currently lectures at Center for African Music and Culture of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, realized his potential when he also joined the group. Eddie Gaisie, and Samuel Dankwa, lead tenor soloists in Ghana developed their talent as soloists when they joined the WYC. Today they earn their living as solo performers who train voices of choirs and individuals.

2.2 Education

As part of the activities of the WYC, younger ones who are needy but brilliant are supported on their education with part of the accrued resources. The group has been able to support the said membership to acquire Senior High School Certificates and University degrees.

Quansah (2006) in affirmation of activities of junior choirs in Winneba indicates:

Winneba Youth Choir alone has within the last 14 years influenced the life of about six hundred (600) people including her members in the catchment area. Admissions to schools have been sought for some of its members, school fees of some members have also been paid, others have been sent to learn a trade, in addition, donations have been made to bereaved members and others who were hospitalized or bedridden (Quansah 2006: 100).

In addition to that, professional teachers are engaged to offer tuition in the various academic disciplines studied in their schools to deepen their academic potentialities, usually an hour or two to precede the usual rehearsal periods. These teachers are paid by the management of the choir. This has made many young ones pursue academic work without much financial stress. The role of the WYC in shaping its members to develop their capabilities through acquisition of knowledge is real.

Since Education seeks to provide knowledge to the benefit of the society (Aboagye 199:1), it became necessary and prudent for the management to support its members in that regard to enable the beneficiaries become useful citizens in the community apart from the musical training.

In addition, Ohene-Okantah (2003) suggests that Music represents a unique mode of knowing which requires and fosters particular mental activity. He continues to state that it also represents a unique way for experiencing and understanding life, just like language, Mathematics or Science (Ohene-Okantah 2003:38).

The WYC, through its music, trains the minds of its members using technical exercises, reading and performance of wide range of repertoire. Textual interpretations of the music used and its associated emotional drives were even enough to educate the youth morally, socially and psychologically

2.3 Social Recognition

The choir has exposed most of the members to the outside world. In July 2000 and November 2001, they had the chance of performing with the Bavarian Police Band in Munich and Bamberg in commemoration of the centenary anniversary of the life and works of Giuseppe Verdi in Germany. In November 2002, there was a joint performance with Ron Kenoly, Rodnie Bryant and Rebecca Malopa in Benin, and September 2003, they were in Lagos, Nigeria, to celebrate Dr. Femi Akinkugbe at the invitation of Music Society of Nigeria (MUSON). Furthermore, they have had the opportunity of hosting Osnabruck Youth Choir of Germany in Ghana (August 2004), National Children's choir of Bahamas (August 2005) and Gordonstoun School Choir from the United Kingdom (March, 2006). The Choir also hosted the first Camp of the "African Children Sing!" initiative of the IFCM, and follow through tour of Seoul and Busan – South Korea. This has led to healthy interactions of the choir members not only within Ghana but outside the frontiers of West Africa.



**Performance with Gordonstoun School Choir & Orchestra
The Children's Choir in Korea**



Performance during Us tour in 2009





Busan 2010, South Korea

The WYC is a member of the international Association of Theater and Arts (ATTA) and occasionally performs the final original compositions of students of the Music department of the University of Education, Winneba. The group has also featured in a number of radio and television programmes and has had a number of audio recordings.

The choral musical art has given the youth an identity; thus, the mention of Winneba and music brings to mind both the erstwhile National Academy of Music⁴ and the Winneba Youth Choir.

The choir performs in the various languages such as English, German and Swahili songs as well as other local dialects such as Twi, Ewe, Fante, Ga⁵. They are therefore exposed to languages outside Africa thereby making them more internationally recognized. The current writers agree with Boamajeh & Ohene-Okantah, (ibid: 3) that “music contributes to the personal and social growth of an individual in several ways. The latter explain that ability to perform creditably in front of an audience has inestimable value in building the self-esteem of the individual because it improves collective discipline and responsibility.

2.1 Achievements

The Winneba Youth Choir has produced several albums in various choral musical genres which are played all over Ghana, Africa and the world at various occasions. Some of them are *Celebrate Christmas with Winneba Youth Choir*, *Peace on Earth* and *Favourite Hymns and Anthems*.

As a pioneer youth choir in Ghana, the WYC has served as a model to many existing and up and coming youth choirs whose musical performances are enjoyed by the masses. Lartey (2012) confirms this and opines that the Winneba Youth Choir, among others are helping choral music lovers in Ghana get their share of good local (African) choral repertoire to add to their western collections. These choirs, since their inceptions have put up wonderful performances throughout Ghana and beyond to showcase the potentials of Ghanaian choral music being recognized on the international domain (Lartey, 2012:2).

Instances of some of these performances have already been indicated earlier. The WYC has had the opportunity to partner the National Symphony Orchestra in choral music performances. This has been confirmed by Amuah (2013) as:

This collaboration of the NSO with choral groups has been in existence until present day. They have had several performances, collaborating with the Winneba Youth Choir, Harmonious Chorale, Ghana Musama Disco Christo Church choirs, University of Education, Winneba Choral ensemble to perform numerous choral works both locally and internationally (Amuah, 2013:10).

Dortey and Arhine substantiated this as:

In the 1990s the orchestra officially backed the Winneba Methodist Youth Choir to perform the national anthems of Ghana, England, Brunei and South Africa during the state visit by Her Majesty the Queen of England, His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei and President Thabo Mbeki to Ghana, respectively (Dortey and Arhine, 2010:54).

Based on their main objective, the WYC has served as the Ghana national choir and has performed on all public

⁴ Currently the Department of Music Education of the University of Education, Winneba

⁵ Twi, Ewe, Fante and Ga are dialects in Ghana

functions including public holidays such as the Independence and, Republic days, funerals of prominent individuals in the nation, as well as weddings of Diplomatic corps, ministers and other political figures. The group has also acquired a building and established a center equipped with computers, photocopiers and telephones for business. Besides these, it has also established a library stocked with books of contemporary usage. It also has two sets of instruments at their disposal.

3. Challenges

Administratively, the WYC has not been able to contract a full time organist. It has most at times relied upon hired composers and song teachers to instruct the choir. Arkurst (ibid:25) points out that the Choir does not have permanent organists contrary to Koerts (2008:3) and Bob's (1998:1) assertion that great choirs have great accompanists because the success of the choir is largely dependent upon its accompanists. It is a big challenge for the choir to motivate and sustain the interest of well qualified musicians. Most musicians associated with the choir have not been stable; perhaps they have not been properly catered for. The only leader who has and still been with the group is Francis Arthur Yamoah (Paa John). Mr Edusei Derkye has also served as the Executive Director with Joyce Aryee. But Joyce Aryee currently serves as a patron. Her attention has totally been captured by Harmonious chorale, an Accra based youth choir which serves as a resident choir for Salt and Light Ministries (SALM).⁶The Choir is only resourced through sporadic donations from patrons and when they are also engaged to perform at someone's request.

Lack of commitment on the part of some members hinders the progress of the group, especially when the group has no engagement to prepare for. Rehearsals are therefore not well attended. Some parents or guardians have also ill-advised their wards to withdraw from the group, because of indiscipline behaviours ascribed to the WYC. Schooling and transfers of some of the members have also contributed to a downward trend of the group. Finally, members who have not benefitted from the scholarship scheme by way of payment of fees, or learning a trade, feel cheated and tend to put up negative attitude toward the group.

4. Conclusion

In concluding this paper, the writers are very much convinced that the arts, including music are not valuable for their practical benefits alone but also the insights, satisfaction and the enjoyment it provides. In the 25 years of its existence, the Winneba Youth Choir has contributed positively to the development of over a thousand youths in its catchments area. The Choir has become a model upon which has developed a thriving industry of Youth Choirs in Ghana, providing employment and opportunity for self-development to many budding music professionals in Ghana. This is to say that the Choir has shaped the career opportunities of many young people and has provided a unique identity for Winneba, Ghana and the West African sub-region as they have tried portraying the capabilities of the youth of Africa through choral music. The youth who travelled outside Ghana have highly been motivated by the various invitations to either contest or serve as guests in choral music performances.

Today, we are experiencing an emergence of Youth Choirs in almost every region in Ghana, some of whose leaders were once members of the WYC. To remain as the best youth choir in the midst of the emerging youth choirs in Ghana, it is important that permanent musicians and qualified instrumentalists (accompanists) are engaged to constantly train them. Having permanent choral directors will help them reach greater heights in their bid to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. If this is not done, they may stand the risk of being overshadowed by these emerging groups who are equally good in providing choral music at state functions.

The research on the WYC has unearthed the need for every youth to experience some aspect of the musical arts. Learning to sing or playing an instrument makes the mind active and develops the logical thinking of individuals. Like Reimer (1989:12) said, music is characterized with cognition and intelligence that children are not to be deprived of its values.

The musical arts have a lot to achieve as it develops individuals with positive attitudes, greater sense of responsibility and self-discipline. As stated by Boamajeh & Ohene-Okantah (ibid), "together with Fine Art, Drama and Dance, Music helps to develop a greater interest in the cultural side of life. It provides unity among individuals for the betterment of their future career development.

⁶Salt and Light Ministries, (SALM) a non-denominational and not-for-profit making ministry, is an organization which has made it a twin responsibility among others, to evangelize through promotion of choral music performances in Ghana. This Ministry was founded by Dr. Joyce Aryee.

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