

REPOSITIONING CHORAL CONDUCTING IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: A PERFORMANCE-BASED AND INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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Abstract

Choral conducting and directing remain critically underrepresented and insufficiently theorised within the Nigerian university education due to curriculum marginalisation, lack of formal mentorship, and the dominance of Western paradigms that undervalue indigenous musical expressions. Thus, this paper sought the repositioning of choral conducting as a central, autonomous, and interdisciplinary component of music education in Nigeria. The study examined factors contributing to the academic neglect of choral conducting, established its pedagogical and cultural significance within Nigeria's higher education system, and examined challenges encountered in choral conducting in Nigeria. This study was guided by ethnomusicology and performance studies as interpretive lenses, which provide a lens for understanding conducting as both a learned skill and a culturally embedded performance practice. Methodologically, the study employed case studies and archival research to construct a historical and analytical account of choral conducting practices in Nigeria. Findings revealed systemic gaps in curriculum design, training resources, institutional support, and tensions between Western and indigenous traditions. However, the study also identified models of excellence among Nigerian conductors who creatively integrate local idioms with global standards. The conclusion emphasised the need to recognise choral conducting as an academic and cultural enterprise. The study recommended curriculum reform, establishing dedicated training programmes, faculty development initiatives, and institutional partnerships with professional choirs and global networks as a professionally viable discipline within Nigerian university education.

Keywords: Choral Conducting, Nigerian Music Education, Performance Studies, Interdisciplinary Pedagogy.

Introduction

Choral direction and conducting have historically been crucial within various global musical traditions, influencing artistic expression and community identity

through collaborative performances. Within Western classical music and African communal choral practices, the conductor is critical in steering interpretation and promoting unity among performers. In Nigeria, notable contributions by figures like Lazarus Ekwueme, Emeka Nwokedi, and Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko have elevated choral music by fusing indigenous traditions with international standards. Choirs like the MUSON Choir and Lagos City Chorale have gained global acclaim, further illustrating the field's academic and professional potential. However, choral conducting remains ambiguously positioned within university curricula, raising questions about its rightful disciplinary classification, whether under ethnomusicology, performance studies, or music theory.

This debate carries significant implications for higher education, particularly in structuring music programs and training future conductors. Ethnomusicology explores the cultural contexts of choral traditions and highlights how Nigerian music integrates Western harmonic frameworks with African rhythmic patterns, tonal languages, and call-and-response techniques.¹ Composers like Fela Sowande and Ekwueme exemplify this synthesis through Western-styled arrangements of indigenous melodies. However, ethnomusicology often neglects the technical skills essential for conducting. On the other hand, performance studies emphasise real-time interpretive leadership, while music theory equips students with score analysis skills but overlooks live ensemble dynamics.² Meanwhile, music theory and composition provide essential tools for score analysis and harmonic understanding, but may not address live ensemble dynamics.³ These differing emphases underscore the need for a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to choral conducting education.

Based on these perspectives, this paper argues that choral conducting is optimally placed within performance studies, supported by ethnomusicology and music theory. "Optimally" reflects how performance studies best capture the expressive, embodied, and interactive nature of conducting. The paper proposes repositioning choral conducting through a performance-based and interdisciplinary framework that reflects practical skill development and cultural relevance.

Conceptual Clarification

This study is grounded in the performance theories of Richard Schechner and John Blacking, whose works provide a critical framework for understanding the conductor's role as both a musical and cultural performer. Schechner's theory views performance as a ritualised behaviour rooted in theatrical structures, where the boundaries between performer and audience are fluid, and meaning is co-created through action, context, and repetition. In choral settings, the conductor occupies a central performative role, shaping the ensemble's sonic and expressive output while participating in a broader cultural ritual.

Emphasising that music is not merely a sonic phenomenon but a humanly organised sound imbued with social and cultural meaning, John Blacking complements this view. For Blacking, music-making, including conducting, expresses shared human experiences shaped by cultural systems. His anthropological approach to music suggests that conductors are more than timekeepers or technical leaders; they are cultural interpreters who mediate between tradition and innovation, emotion and form, performer and audience.

By integrating these two theoretical perspectives, this study situates the choral conductor as a cultural agent whose gestures, vocal cues, and listening sensibilities are steeped in both performative ritual and socio-cultural context. Conducting is a technical or communicative task and a deeply symbolic act that expresses communal values, reinforces identity, and facilitates artistic dialogue. The roles of the choral director or conductor are thus examined through this dual lens, as artistic leaders and as performers engaged in a culturally significant practice that bridges sound, meaning, and shared experience.

Drawing from several leading contributors, the professional scholarly perspectives on choral conducting are synthesised in the work of Odusanya..⁸ The first important figure from these sources is Sadie, who defines choral conducting as “an art of directing musical performance through visible gestures designed to obtain unanimous consent by ensembles, both in execution and interpretation”.⁹ Kennedy and Joyce express conducting philosophy as the art of directing a musical performance through visible gestures.¹⁰ From these arguments, Odusanya emphasises the need for gesture-based leadership and that conducting also includes training, administration, and overall leadership of the musical ensemble.

In addition, Adedeji states that choral conducting is a music communication and visual expression, the external manifestation of the conductor’s musical interpretation, conveyed by hand gestures and facial expressions.¹¹ These gestures communicate the basic musical elements, dynamics, tempo, expression and articulation, which determine the interpretative output of the ensemble.

In line with these scholars, the present author argues that conductorship for singing a chorus requires vocal cueing to sync with other parts of the ensemble and the duties of preparing and coordinating an ensemble to sing a musical piece. Conducting a choir in their professional capacity involves providing sound leadership to the music, communicating important musical characteristics, such as dynamics, tempo, articulation, and expressive complexity.

Music of Nigeria prior to colonialism was rooted in oral tradition, social interaction, and performance rituals reflecting the social and religious life of the

indigenous peoples. The transmission process was a process of aural learning and improvisation using call and response patterns rather than written notation, in which musical forms could be preserved and developed over generations.¹²

Different ethno-linguistics have developed different structures for traditional choral music. However, they share many characteristics and structures: polyphony and complex rhythms among the Yoruba people, the talking drum (Dùndun) represented language tones. They were used as the basis of more interactive choral performance styles.¹³ In Igbo-based choral culture, antiphonal singing and polyrhythms were promoted using instruments such as the *Udu* and *Ekwe*, and the resultant array of sounds was rich in texture.¹⁴ In Hausa/Fulani-based musical tradition, Islam was present, including Qur'anic recitation, the vocalisation of praise, and instruments such as the *Goje*.¹⁵ These cultural practices used music in many forms, including entertainment, religious celebrations, social commentary and preservation of history. Three significant aspects of vocal performances are rites of passage, festivals, and collective ceremonies such as naming and funerals.

Colonial influence brought Western musical practices into indigenous societies, hybridising indigenous and European music. Although parts of Western musical harmony were introduced, traditional compositions retained their original rhythmic, textual, and performing characteristics. Indigenous choral traditions remained resilient and adaptive despite foreign influences. Each region contributed distinctly to Nigeria's choral heritage. Although traditional Yoruba music consisted mainly of drum and rhythm music,¹⁶ it was considered deeply religious. In Gwarzo, however, traditional Igbo choral music was kept within the context of society by its antiphonal and rhythmic complexity. Hawaa / Fulani tradition focused on devotional themes and oral histories.¹⁷ These forms hybridised traditional and Western choral expressions in modern Nigeria.

Choral Conducting and Interdisciplinary Research

Choral conducting is an interdisciplinary field that combines music theory, history, vocal technique, leadership, and scholarly areas like ethnomusicology and performance studies to inform interpretation, expression, and communication. By engaging with non-Western styles such as African choral and Eastern European folk music, conductors broaden their repertoire and deepen their appreciation for diverse cultural traditions and performance practices.

Nigerian choral music exemplifies an intricate blend of Western and local influences. Fela Sowande and Laz Ekwueme have been at the forefront of incorporating local harmonies, rhythms, and languages into classical choral frameworks. "The incorporation of indigenous music within western choral structures enhances the music and deepens its connection to cultural identity",

Ekwueme states.¹⁸ This makes it more complex for Nigerian choral conductors who must understand Western and African musical systems. Ethnomusicology facilitates understanding and navigating these cultural intersections, however, not through the lens of performance.

Performance studies, by contrast, focus on the live enactment of music, aligning closely with the conductor's role as an interpreter and facilitator. Through gestures, phrasing, tempo, and dynamics, conductors shape the ensemble's musical output despite producing no sound themselves. Performance studies offer insights into embodiment, movement, and audience interaction, core elements of the conductor's practice. Framing choral conducting within this discipline highlights its fundamentally artistic, interpretive, and expressive nature.

Meanwhile, a solid foundation in music theory and composition remains essential. Conductors must interpret scores, analyse harmonic structures, and understand contrapuntal relationships. Many also compose or arrange, reinforcing the link between theoretical knowledge and practical application. However, music theory centres on written music, not its performative realisation. Conducting, by contrast, involves spontaneous artistic decision-making and expressive leadership. As Patrick Russell observes, professional choral conducting entails more than technique; it is based on score analysis and the capacity to build a coherent and expressive performance.¹⁹ His view reinforces the argument for recognising choral conducting as a subfield of performance studies, supported by interdisciplinary insights from ethnomusicology and music theory. Ultimately, choral conducting exists at the intersection of cultural knowledge, theoretical analysis, and embodied practice. Academic programs should situate choral conducting primarily within performance studies while drawing on ethnomusicology and theory to ensure a comprehensive, interdisciplinary educational experience.

Insights from Renowned Nigerian Choral Conductors and Their Choirs

Renowned Nigerian choral conductors have significantly shaped the evolution, pedagogy, and professional practice of choral music in Nigeria, offering critical insights that underscore the urgent need to reposition choral conducting within university education. Their work reflects a synthesis of cultural identity, artistic discipline, and academic rigour, making them instrumental in defining standards for performance and instruction in the country. Foremost among them is Professor Lazarus Ekwueme, a distinguished musicologist, composer, and actor, who founded the Department of Music at the University of Lagos and established the Laz Ekwueme National Chorale (LENC). Ekwueme's ensemble is acclaimed for its fusion of African rhythmic idioms and Western harmonic traditions, with a repertoire that includes works by African composers such as Sam Akpabot, Ayo Bankole, and Ekwueme himself, firmly rooting his contributions in the

preservation and promotion of African art music.²⁰ Similarly, Sir Emeka Nwokedi has pivotally elevated Nigerian choral music to international acclaim through his Lagos City Chorale (LCC) leadership. Under his direction, the choir has received awards from global organisations such as the International Society for Music Education and the World Choir Council, while fostering musical excellence and youth empowerment through workshops and cultural exchanges.²¹ A key role in promoting classical choral traditions has been played by Christopher Oyesiku.

He has contributed significantly to music education through his academic position at the University of Ibadan. In addition, his leadership in various choral events has helped broaden the appeal of classical music within Nigeria's multiethnic soundscape.²² Nnamdi John Amadi, founder of Trinity Chorale and a protégé of Ekwueme, has cemented his place among Nigeria's top choral conductors with over 25 years of experience. His choir is celebrated for musical precision and expressive delivery, garnering national accolades and reinforcing high-performance standards.²³ Equally transformative is the contribution of Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko, a pioneer in ethnomusicology and operatic performance. Her efforts at the University of Lagos have popularised Bel Canto singing and Italian vocal styles, enriching Nigeria's operatic landscape.²⁴

The value of community-based musical excellence is demonstrated through the leadership of the Port Harcourt Male Ensemble since 1998 by Bob Amunye. His ensemble has won national awards and actively contributes to vocal training and cultural preservation through performances integrating Nigerian folk, highlife, and African classical repertoires.²⁵ Ebele Ezeamama has been especially influential in promoting gender inclusion in choral music, mentoring emerging conductors and advancing the presence of women in Nigeria's choral leadership.²⁶ Also noteworthy is Princess Anne Inyang, a leading figure in gospel music, whose creative synthesis of gospel with traditional choral techniques offers a compelling model for sacred music innovation.²⁷ Lastly, the MUSON Choir, affiliated with the Musical Society of Nigeria, is a paragon of professional choral performance. Led by eminent conductors such as Emeka Nwokedi and Thomas Kanitz, and composed of graduates from the MUSON School of Music, the choir performs both Western classical masterpieces and works by Nigerian composers like Fela Sowande and Joshua Uzoigwe, epitomising the fusion of technical mastery and cultural authenticity.²⁸ These conductors and their ensembles have collectively elevated Nigeria's choral performance and pedagogy standards, offering rich models for academic incorporation, performance excellence, and cultural continuity. Their legacies affirm the necessity of grounding choral education in Nigeria within global best practices and indigenous musical values.

Challenges Encountered in Choral Conducting in Nigeria

Choral conducting in Nigeria has experienced tremendous growth, particularly in religious groups, schools, and community choirs. However, this expansion faces significant challenges that hinder its professional development and artistic quality. Chief among these are financial constraints, lack of adequate facilities, limited access to formal training and mentorship, and tensions between Western and indigenous musical traditions. One major obstacle is the chronic lack of institutional funding and infrastructural support.

It is noted by Omojola that music education in Nigeria often suffers from underfunding, resulting in poorly equipped programs with limited sustainability for musical activities.²⁹ It is pertinent to note from Omojola's comment that most public and community school choral programs lack proper rehearsal facilities, quality instruments, and technical equipment. As this financial inadequacy extends to universities and professional settings, conductors often rely on personal resources or sporadic sponsorship to organise performances and competitions. The absence of consistent financial support restricts the potential for growth, collaboration, and visibility among choirs and their conductors.

A critical challenge lies in the lack of structured training and mentorship for future choral leaders. Although some Nigerian universities offer music degrees that include conducting modules, these are few and often do not provide sufficient practical experience.³⁰ Many conductors come from informal backgrounds, such as church choirs, where training depends on trial and error or oral transmission rather than a systematic pedagogical framework. This limitation hampers the development of refined conducting skills, effective rehearsal techniques, and interpretive depth.

Mentorship, a crucial aspect of developing excellence in conducting, is often inaccessible. Emerging conductors seldom have opportunities to work closely with seasoned professionals who could guide their artistic and professional growth. According to Adedeji, the absence of organised mentorship systems impedes professional advancement in conducting and results in inconsistent standards across Nigerian choirs.³¹ Choral music in Nigeria also intersects with Western and indigenous traditions. The colonial legacy of Western classical and liturgical music established dominant choral practices, which still prevail in formal education and church repertoires.³² However, this dominance has often marginalised indigenous choral practices characterised by complex rhythmic structures, oral textures, and communal engagement.

Today's Nigerian conductors must negotiate the divide between Western notational complexity and indigenous music's expressive, often improvisational nature. This cultural dissonance affects repertoire choices, performance styles,

and audience reception. Agu argues for a growing call for choral practices incorporating local languages, traditional instruments, and indigenous aesthetics.³³ However, conductors seeking this integration often face a scarcity of resources, inadequate scholarly documentation of indigenous music, and resistance from audiences habituated to Western norms. This struggle has resulted in an identity crisis for Nigerian choral conducting, requiring intentional cultural synthesis and innovation. The structure of music education in Nigerian universities significantly affects the professional development of choral conducting. Though these institutions are responsible for training future conductors, their curricula often fall short of international standards. Conducting is typically treated as one element of a broader music education degree, such as a B.A. or B.M.Mus., without focused attention on specialist areas like vocal pedagogy, choral literature, ensemble leadership, or rehearsal techniques.³⁴

In contrast, elite institutions such as the Juilliard School (USA), the Royal Academy of Music (UK), and the Hochschule für Musik und Theatre München (Germany) offer focused training in choral conducting. Their programs include rigorous instruction in score analysis, vocal technique, ensemble management, and practical conducting experience across various musical styles and ensemble sizes.³⁵ These schools often adopt a master-apprentice model and emphasise experiential learning.

Nigerian universities, by contrast, often lack faculty with specialised expertise in choral conducting.³⁶ As a result, they depend on generalist music educators and outdated teaching methods, providing students with theoretical knowledge but little hands-on practice. This imbalance stems from broader institutional shortcomings. In-service training opportunities are scarce for current conductors, and few certified workshops, postgraduate diplomas, or national organisations dedicated to choral conducting exist. Nketia maintains that African music can thrive through institutional support in initial training, mentorship, exchange programs, and ongoing professional development.³⁷ Foreign institutions offer postgraduate programs, masterclasses by acclaimed conductors, and access to global networks, all fostering continuous growth.³⁸ The absence of these elements in Nigeria curtails Nigerian conductors' global competitiveness and technical evolution. Closing this gap calls for a comprehensive overhaul of Nigeria's music education infrastructure, including curriculum reform, faculty development, and the establishment of dedicated training centres. Nigeria can elevate its choral conducting practice to match its rich musical heritage by fostering partnerships with international institutions and creating national platforms for conductor development.³⁹

Strategies for Repositioning Choral Conducting in Nigerian Universities

The future of choral conducting in Nigeria hinges on restructuring educational policies, curriculum development, and global engagement. Despite its artistic and pedagogical significance, choral conducting remains underrepresented in secondary and tertiary music curricula, with limited access to structured professional pathways.⁴⁰ A comprehensive framework must address structural, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions to reposition choral conducting effectively within Nigerian universities. The following strategic approaches are proposed to elevate the status and relevance of choral conducting education in Nigeria's higher institutions.

Curriculum Reform: Universities must introduce specialised choral conducting tracks within music degree programs. These should include modules on rehearsal strategies, non-verbal gesture communication, vocal pedagogy, and interpretive score analysis, with a balanced focus on Western and indigenous choral literature. Practical experience must be prioritised through ensemble leadership, conducting labs, and public performances, ensuring technical skill development and expressive depth. Ogunlade notes that a choral conductor must possess musical intelligence and pedagogical awareness,⁴¹ enabling them to navigate both the interpretive and social dimensions of music.

Faculty Development and Recruitment: There is a pressing need for continuous faculty development through short courses, international fellowships, and certifications, such as those from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM). Music faculties should also explore hiring or partnering with skilled choral conductors, especially those with experience in both indigenous and global choral traditions, to mentor and co-teach with academic staff.

Mentorship and Apprenticeship Models: Drawing inspiration from cognitive apprenticeship theory, formal mentorship programs should be implemented, pairing students with experienced conductors. This hands-on modelling, coaching, and feedback model can bridge the gap between theoretical instruction and real-world practice. Regional music academies and summer workshops can also be hubs for experiential learning and professional networking.

Integration of Indigenous Musical Practices: A core strategy must involve embedding Nigerian musical idioms, such as traditional rhythms, tonal language inflexions, call-and-response techniques, and indigenous instrumentation, into choral training. These practices offer conductors culturally grounded frameworks for ensemble leadership and interpretation, preserving Nigeria's musical identity while enhancing creative versatility.⁴² As John Blacking argues, music is a humanly organised sound shaped by its cultural context, and conducting must reflect this communal and symbolic essence.

Institutional and Global Partnerships: Collaborations with professional choirs like the MUSON Choir and Lagos City Chorale can provide students with performance exposure and mentorship. International partnerships with organisations such as the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM) and the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) can raise academic standards, offer exchange opportunities, and support the commissioning of hybrid works that merge African and Western traditions.⁴³ Participation in global events like the World Choir Games showcases Nigerian choral artistry while aligning it with international benchmarks.

Technological Integration: Using digital tools, such as virtual choir platforms, rehearsal playback software, and conducting simulators, can significantly enhance learning. Hybrid instruction models that combine face-to-face teaching with online resources improve access and expose students to a broader range of choral styles and repertoires. This technological approach supports skill acquisition and helps bridge geographical limitations, preparing Nigerian conductors for global engagement.

Conclusion

This study has established that choral conducting remains underrepresented and undertheorised in Nigerian university education, despite its cultural and pedagogical significance. Addressing this issue demands more than critique; it calls for a multi-pronged repositioning strategy. First, curricula must be restructured to recognise choral conducting as an independent field with practical and theoretical components. Second, faculty development and mentorship schemes must be institutionalised to cultivate expertise and artistic leadership. Third, integrating indigenous musical forms will provide cultural depth and relevance, while partnerships with professional and international organisations will broaden the scope and standard. Finally, embracing digital tools will expand pedagogical flexibility and access. By implementing these interventions, Nigerian universities can reposition choral conducting as a viable academic discipline and a vital cultural enterprise.

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