

# The Effect of the Kenya Music Festival on Choral Quality and Standards

*Sylvester Otieno Ogama, Composer and Choral Director, Kenya*

## Introduction

The Kenya Music Festival provides opportunities for artistic and cultural performances that encourage and promote the study, practice and development of music, dance and elocution. Choirs use such opportunities to stage items that both advance the objectives of the institutions that sponsor them and address emerging issues while entertaining the public. In return, composers look forward to the credible artistic evaluation of such items and any necessary instructive recommendations for growth, regardless of the scores given to the choral performances. Therefore, by using definable, consistent and verifiable terminology, adjudicators' remarks go a long way towards shaping the quality and standards of the compositions that proceed to the next levels of that year's festival and the compositions written for subsequent festivals. These remarks also improve the quality of choral performances, provided they are well interpreted. Adjudication is streamlined through the annual adjudicators' and trainers' workshops, where over ten thousand participants receive guidance with regard to systematic compositional analysis, providing instructive comments and rating performances.

## The festival criteria

The Kenya Music Festival, supported by the Ministry of Education, has two main categories of composition, namely original compositions based on themes of the composers' choosing and special compositions based on themes provided by various sponsors. The criteria state that songs must be

written in the vernacular, Kiswahili or idiomatic English; songs can contain either sacred or secular text; songs should be gender-specific in terms of voicing (SSA, TTBB or SATB); standard compositions for choirs with 36 to 42 members should not exceed 4 minutes while advanced compositions for choirs with 48 to 60 members should last between 6 and 9 minutes on stage; performers must be bona fide members of the primary schools, secondary schools, training colleges, universities or teachers' clubs they represent; a neat and accurate music score must be provided to the adjudicators beforehand, and so on. Since the KMF is a mammoth event that accredits and promotes musicians, many composers and conductors take the time to participate and, as a result, the standards here tend to be transferred to other festivals through workshops and performances.

### **Consideration of the four combinational operations of music**

Consistent evaluation of the appropriateness of music in terms of medium, genre, form and texture means that composers are conscious of the importance of such considerations as they prepare their music for the KMF. As a result, there is a good variety of music for all kinds of choirs.

### **Effective use of the elements of music**

The art of composing music largely depends on how certain tools are appropriately utilised to put together ideas into a song. Since not every composer in Kenya is a music composition major, the KMF provides opportunities for sharing ideas and knowledge. Today, more songs presented at the festival reflect the proper manipulation of rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, dynamic, formal and textual elements than ever before. The same music is used for other events as well.

## **Adherence to the principles of composition**

Principles of composition are tools or devices that help organise sounds and the elements of music into cohesive works. Composers for the KMF are consistently encouraged to adhere to principles such as variety of ideas, meaningful repetition, harmonic and formal balance, sensitivity to acoustics in terms of performance directions, aspects of tension and resolution, well-thought-out transitions and unity of purpose. Above all, it is the interaction, not the isolation, of individual elements and principles of composition that makes music enjoyable. Composers such as Henry Wanjala, Sylvester Otieno, Fredrick Ngala, Timothy Njoora, Humphrey Kisia, Franklin Etyang, Esther Buyekha, Jackline Bulinda, Joyce Mochere, Mellitus Wanyama, Wilson Shitandi, Gabriel Musungu Boniface Mghanga , Sammy Otieno, Arthur Kemoli, Okuku Zalo and many others have written resourceful music for festivals and pedagogy.

## **Preparation of choirs**

Through the various KMF workshops, choir trainers are guided on how to conduct effective auditions for determining the musical aptitude of individuals. Emphasis is put on vocal range, sense of pitch and rhythm, vocal energy, proper phrasing and expression, alertness and control, tonal blend, choral balance and proper diction, and so on. Other factors such as age, gender, the number of singers per voice section, the preferred song language and text, the structure and the musicality of the piece also matter a lot.

## **Choral performances as a means of edutainment**

As the Kenya Music Festival is an educational event, performances are expected to be decent and reflective of proper choral techniques and standards. The choirs appearing in the KMF work hard on their:

1. **Intonation:** Conductors strive to ensure that aspects of tone quality, pitch, blend and balance are approached with care. Intonation is considered one of the most obvious marks of a good or bad ensemble.
2. **Vocal technique:** Singers consistently improve their articulation, rhythmic accuracy, fluency, flexibility and breath control, which further contribute to a better choral score.
3. **Tone:** Defined as sound or timbre that is pleasing to the ear, the words associated with this term might be "evenness" and "direction". Adjudicators encourage the coordination of individual sounds in order to produce an effective blend when singing as an
4. **Rhythmic integrity and interpretation:** This relates to style, tempo, phrasing, dynamic contrast and sensitivity to the main pulse of the music. Too much rushing or slowing down is discouraged, as it impedes good communication of the music. Proper attention should be given to the intricacies of the rhythm in order to maintain cohesiveness and the idiom.
5. **Musical effect and diction:** Adjudicators emphasise phrasing and melodic sensitivity, artistry, expressiveness and musical feeling, among other things. Performers are persuaded to convey precise verbal sounds within the context of the musical line; diction is important for communication but should be part of the overall effect of the performance.
6. **Musicianship:** This involves sensitivity to all aspects of execution: phrasing, dynamics (loud and soft singing), vocal attack – anything that will convey a sense of security in the performance and will not distract the listener. The performers' mental preparation of the music should be portrayed; performers are usually guided to think carefully about how the music should be performed.
7. **Aesthetic value:** Adjudicators evaluate the work as a whole, rating aesthetic effect and appeal beyond mere

technical proficiency. Above all, since Kenya is a dancing nation, choirs are consistently encouraged to perform in a manner that strikes a healthy balance between emotional and physical involvement. Too much dancing that is not an emotional expression of musical appreciation is ineffective, no matter how vigorous and decorative it may be.

## **The KMF and the rise of choral ensembles**

Most of the outstanding choral groups in Kenya are products of the Kenya Music Festival. These include Sylvester Otieno's Blend Ensemble-K and Talanta Afrika Singers, Ken Wakia's Nairobi Chamber Chorus, Wilson Shitandi's STAR Chorale, Elijah Adongo's Almasi Chorale, David Isindu's Nairobi Girls Chorale, Joseph Muyale's African Cultural Choir, William Akunda's Sifa Melodies, Abbey Chokera's Bel Canto Chorus, Filah's Redfourth Chorus and Philip Mbinji's Coast Chorus. All these groups and many more also contribute to the membership and quality of various church choirs in Kenya as well. It is pleasing to note that Kenyan choral music and performing groups are increasingly in demand internationally.



**Sylvester Otieno Ogama** is a renowned composer and choral director based at Kenyatta University. He is in demand as a music festival adjudicator and is currently the chair of the Parastatals, Ministries, Companies and Counties Choral Organisation in Kenya (PAMICCCO). He can be contacted at [silvo2009@hotmail.com](mailto:silvo2009@hotmail.com).

*Edited by Kelly Harrison, USA*