

WOMEN MUSICIANS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF ŞOLÁ ALLYSON'S STYLE



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Abstract

The Nigerian music industry (NMI) is revolutionary and thriving with the tide of the times. Evidence from works of literature suggests that the industry is seemingly patriarchal because of the lopsided ratio between the genders of in the NMI. In recent times, the trend has been the active involvement of women in the industry. Several of these women come with the sole aim of contributing their quota in the advocacy of female inclusion in the industry. Some of them (Bólá Àre, Tópé Àlàbí, *Lará George*, TY Bèllò, *Sinach*, Mercy Chinwo, Victoria Orenze, *Judikay*, etc.) have successfully carved a niche for themselves and emerged with strides of notable accomplishments. Thus, this study examines the contributions of Şolá Allyson Oḃáníyì in the world of popular music with the intent to highlight her contributions to globalize Nigerian popular music. The study adopts an ethnographic approach and data was obtained from primary sources (Interviews, personal narratives, music videos) and secondary sources (observations and scholarly journal articles). Findings show that Şolá Allyson, although faced with many diatribes, remains a model of excellence in her personality as a wife, mother, and musician. The study portrays Şolá Allyson as a model of dedication and persistence which is a sine-qua-non to thrive in the Nigerian music industry. Her music is theologically sound, musically creative, and practically therapeutic. This study recommends it for anyone who is in a sad state and requires God's intervention *because it resonates with upliftment and renewed hope*. This is why her works are a source of inspiration for Christians, church musicians; and gospel ministers especially women musicians

in Nigeria who desire to establish a biblical perspective of music and worship.

Keywords: women musician, popular music, cultural heritage gospel music, legacy.

Introduction

Nigerian music has evolved from what it used to be in the early 70s and this is a result of the contributions of several musicians most of whom are male. The past three decades have been very significant because they represented a time with more participation of female musicians in the NMI. This development has sparked up a lot of conversations regarding their contributions to the development of African musical arts both locally and globally. Out of all the musical arts, popular music occupies the most dominant position in the cultures of contemporary African society.

Popular music also known as Pop music is a type of music that: derives its theme from daily occurrences (Mokwunyei, 2009; Okafor, 2019; Onyeji, 2016); relies heavily on technological infrastructure for its dissemination (Onyeji, 2016); appeals to the youth-at-heart (Okafor, 2004; Onyeji, 2016); enjoys patronage from mostly urban dwellers (Okafor, 2019); is based on idioms that the audience can easily relate with, (Okafor, 2004); is participatory in nature, is accessible (Mokwunyei, 2009); is dance-oriented, is transient and has mass appeal (Okafor, 2019); consists of short songs with a strong beat and simple tunes that are easy to remember (Okafor, 2019).

When it comes to determining social identities, the terms music minister, gospel artiste and popular music(ian) are often used interchangeably because there are some sort of similarities in their meanings. This discrepancy is often controversial. While it might be easier to connote the relatedness of a music minister and gospel artiste in that they are related to the Christian faith, popular music is often associated with secular music because it has typologies within which a wide spectrum of (secular) sub-genres consist. Incidentally, Gospel music is also a sub-genre of pop music. Differentiation of these concepts is discussed extensively in Emielu (2014). However, in the context of this paper, the terms gospel minister, gospel artiste, and music minister are used interchangeably in describing the musical prowess of the

iconic Şolá Allyson because, apart from the fact that most of her songs are Christian faith-based, she also does secular songs for movies, occasions and events. Although many women musicians have contributed to globalizing Nigerian folk, art and pop music, this paper explores the contributions of female musicians with particular reference to Şolá Allyson.

A Brief Biography of Şolá Allyson

Conversations on Yoruba female songstresses are incomplete without mention of Şolá Allyson. Ms. Allyson has been able to carve a niche for herself through her consistent dedication. Over the years, she has become a brand to reckon with in the Yoruba music community. Şolá Allyson was born in Ikorodu, Lagos in 1971, she is an alumna of The Polytechnic, Ibadan, where she bagged a Higher National Diploma (HND). While in the Polytechnic, she majored in voice under Mr. Adetiran, Oluwole Oladejo. Although she attended several churches, one of which influenced her musicianship the most are the Celestial Church of Christ. Her tertiary education was not all that brought her to the limelight of her musical career, musical background from the mosques (because she has a Muslim heritage, her church (particularly, the CCC) as well as an applied apprenticeship with some legends of the Nigerian Music Industry such as Gbenga Adeboye, Yinka Ayefele, Abass Akande (Obesere), Wasiu Alabi (Pasuma), Kayode Olajide, to mention a few of them during her formative years also played a great role in shaping her musical ingenuity. Şolá came into the spotlight of her musical career in 2003 with her release of the soundtrack album titled *Eji Owuro* (Sola Allyson, 2022).

When it comes to training gospel ministers, Adedeji (Adedeji 2015 as cited in Adedeji & Loko, 2019) advocated a bi-disciplinary approach that relies on both formal (based on Western structure) and informal approach (based on African indigenous models) of music education. The formal approach adopts a bi-disciplinary approach (musical and theological education). Although this model makes it imperative that Gospel music ministers receive theological education because “gospel music is a musical genre that is essentially theological” (Adedeji & Loko, 2019, p. 54), Şolá’s education as a gospel minister is in quasi-alignment with this approach except for the fact that there is no formal theological education in her academic portfolio. Her

theological perspective on gospel music stems from her implied apprenticeship with theologians.

Olusola and Onyesiku (2019) identified seven main attributes that characterise Yoruba cultural identity and creativity in a musician as follows: Use of Yoruba language, use of Yoruba belief system, use of *oriki* (Yoruba praise chant/song), exhibition of Yoruba traditional costumes, creativity in vocal nuances, creativity in musical instruments and accompaniments and creativity in dance steps. Just as the afro hip-pop music artiste, 9ice, exhibited these attributes which made his music distinguished in the global music sphere, Şolá Allyson is a leading female musician in Nigeria who is renowned for her use of all these attributes to project her cultural identity into the global space at any given time.

Şolá's Philosophy of Gospel Music

Şolá does not see herself as an entertainer, but rather as a minister. "I am in the entertainment industry but I am not an entertainer" (Adewoyin, 2021), "The kind of music I do is mind transforming, soul awakening..." (City People, 2021, para. 5). She also has this mindset against clout chasing on social media because she sees clout chasing on social media as catching a cruise with one's destiny. This is why she is intentional with whatever content she uploads on her social media handles. Thus, she is not pressured to do what others are doing (Omorogbe, 2019). She is not vainglorious because she sees no difference between when she performs for a large audience and when she performs for a few number of people. Due to the rough lifestyle she lived in the past, the thought of the salvation of God towards her leaves her in a perpetual state of praise and worship of God. This explains why most of her songs are characterised by eulogy of God's loving and redemptive nature. This is not always expressed in the main song text but in the variations and *ad libitum* she does that characterise her songs.

Legacies of Şolá Allyson

Discourse on Yoruba cultural heritage through music in Nigeria and the international scenes will not be complete without the contributions of Şolá Allyson. She has not only composed for religious settings but has written some secular songs, including theme songs for several Yoruba movies. Wherever she is invited to perform at an event, she always goes with her

identity as a Yoruba musician. This has been exemplified in the language, attire, props, musical instruments, and so on. As a voice coach, she has mentored several people on the art of singing. She has contributed immensely to music criticism, especially with her role as consultant and adjudicator in several music festivals and singing competitions, notably the MTN Project Fame West Africa for five seasons. She owns a record label named The Allyson Limited.

She is a model of hard work and does not do her work for the desire to enrich herself. “I’m always very careful. When I’m on the bandstand, I don’t allow people to spray money on me, I don’t like it” (City People, 2021). Her music is not with the intent to make people dance or to impress anyone, “I don’t look out for people to dance or to make people like me. As a learned creative person, I bring out the spirituality I possess...” for the spiritual growth of her audience (Omorogbe, 2019). As a gospel minister, she does not seek to win the heart of the audience, rather, she is after soul-winning for God. She is instant in season and out of season. She had always had physical ministrations for the evangelistic purposes of soul winning but the Covid-19 pandemic made her adopt virtual ministration in songs which oftentimes is more cost-intensive due to the cost of booking studio sessions for her online audience.

Albums

As a Gospel singer, her albums are mostly themed around the adoration of the majesty and sovereignty of God. Şolá has an amazing way of infusing some folk or secular songs into her albums, thereby giving them a surprise appeal. In other words, her albums, though focused on Gospel music, are not always absolutely of the Gospel genre, there is occasionally an infusion of other genres. Aside from Gospel, she has also done some songs of the secular genre like her ode to femininity or womanhood, ‘*Obinrin ni mi*’; a traditional folk tune about the marketplace, ‘*Ero oja*’ or the dawn (a love song), ‘*Eji owurọ*’. Şolá attributed this occasional drift to be a result of some of her personal experiences and observations around her environs occasioned by her upbringing which exposed her to the multiplicity of cultures and religious practices.

While I was growing up, I have been exposed a bit to most of the religion [sic], by virtue of living with one person or the other...So

when the time comes and I need to write about something similar to what happened here, the picture will come to my mind. There's nothing we hear or see that is a waste; it all requires paying attention. So there are lots of things stored in our heads and when the need arises, we use it (City People, 2021, para. 8).

Below is the list of her albums and the year they were produced.

	Album	Year
1	EjiOwuro	2003
2	Gbe Je F'ori	2005
3	Ire	2007
4	Im'oore	2009
5	Adun	2012
6	Ope	2015
7	Imuse	2018
8	Iri	2019
9	Isodotun	2021
10	Imisi	2022

Melody and Harmony

Most of the songs in Şolá's albums are self-composed. She derives motifs for her compositions from Yoruba folk tunes which is why they are characterized by simplicity, short and memorable melodies such as this one:



The use of folk material in Şolá's compositions is in line with Şolá's melodies are mostly built on pentatonic scales. Harmonies are built on primary and secondary dominant chords. She is a minimalist when it comes to chord progression. She used a few chords.

Instrumentation

As is common in most gospel music, they often use musical instruments depicting one culture or the other. Şolá's case, her songs are characterized

as having mixed ensembles. Aside from some global musical instruments such as keyboards, bass guitar, and drumset; Yoruba indigenous musical instruments especially the talking drum are given prominence. The attention she gives indigenous instruments is outstanding when compared with foreign instruments, up to the point that hardly is any foreign instrument featured in the solo sections of her ministrations or albums. Sola's style of instrumentation (whereby she creatively incorporates bi-cultural musical instruments to create a beautiful sonic texture) is not peculiar to her alone; a similar pattern is seen also in the music of some of her professional colleagues in the popular music sector such as Gbenga Adeboye, Yinka Ayefele, Abass Akande (Obesere), Wasiu Alabi (Pasuma), Tope Alabi, Kayode Olajide, *John Odafe Asiemu* (Daddy Showkey), Alexander Abolore Adegbola Akande (9ice), to mention a few. In the religious sector, her musical background with the Celestial Church of Christ also had a huge influence on her choice of instrumentation.

Gender role

Gender plays a very significant role when it comes to the vocal, instrumental and technical sections of Sola Allyson's music. A cursory look at Sola's backup singers who share the spotlight with her over the years showcases more tendency of a female-dominant chorus than a male or mixed chorus. Occasionally, she uses a blend of mixed voices as backup singers in which case, the males are assigned to sing in *sotto voce*; that way, they blend with the overarching female voices. While the backup section often comprised a female chorus, there is no example of when it is otherwise.

Males come into the picture mostly in the instrument section and the technical crew. This male-dominated section hardly employs females. This may seem like a feminist approach, but the intention is not so. Empirical evidence shows that Ms. Allyson is intentional about the sound quality and vocal texture she wants in her productions; that is what informs her distribution of roles to the sexes. This is part of what makes her unique. Some female musicians with similar practice include the following: Osinachi Kalu Okoro Egbu, (*Sinach*), Ada Ogochukwu Ehi (*Ada*), Mercy Chinwo, *Lara George*, *Tope Alabi*, *Pat Uwaje-King* (Patricia King), Toyin Sokefun-Bello (TY Bello), Victoria Orenze, Judith Kanayo (*Judikay*), Osinachi Nwachukwu, and so on.

Controversy

Several controversies surround the personality of Şolá Allyson. For instance, there are speculations that she is not a Gospel artiste just because she occasionally does works of secular genres. In her response to an exclusive interview, she says,

am [sic] less concerned about whether I'm called a gospel musician. For me, I'm Shola Allyson, a singer...God is the creator of everything but we understand him in different ways. So, am a Christian and Jesus who is my perfect example did not do gospel, he came for mankind and he just lived his life and that is exactly what am doing. But before we came, it has been humanly systemize [sic] that it is called gospel music, so if you sound a particular way, people will say you are a gospel musician, and if you sound another way, some will say oh, she is not a gospel musician, but truly it doesn't matter to me. What matters to me, is when people listen to my music, what happens to their mind and soul (City People, 2021, para 6).

She is concerned with praising God with her music and making positive impacts. At some points, her faith was questioned especially because of the assumption that she was mingling with non-Christians. Her featuring of the Muslim Nollywood actor, Lateef Adedimeji, in a worship medley, subjected her to criticisms from the public, especially as Lateef was seen doing qur'anic verse in the same video. While some critics saw that combo as sacrilegious asking the songstress to "pick one side" (Independent Newspaper, 2022). In response, to the critics, Motolani Alake said, "You people are attacking Shola Allyson because she worshipped with Lateef Adedimeji, who worshipped in Arabic. The problem here is that you...exalt religion/spirituality, and that brings separatism and elitism into the conversation" (PM News, 2022). On Şolá's part, she responded thus, "What I owe a Muslim and other people who practice other religions is love" (Eneate, 2022).

The minister of songs is not perturbed by the way she is constantly been ridiculed by some sceptics because she is seen associating with those who are not of the Christian faith. This has put her Christian faith into question,

Şolá opined that she would rather go on to perform with “simple-hearted people like me, regardless of the religion they practice, in spreading godly values” (Ekenaite, 2022). She added that she is only following the footsteps of Jesus, who, during his earthly ministry associated with ‘sinners’ Furthermore, in 2021, the songstress was criticized for featuring Adekunle Gold who moved from being a Muslim to becoming a Christian because of the assumption that his Christianity is not genuine. In response, Şolá stated that she is not discriminatory,

I collaborated with Adekunle Gold and I was almost killed for it. I enjoyed the experience and I am going to do it with anybody whose music is compatible with mine. I collaborated with Adekunle God because he sings in Yoruba, his mode of delivery, and the things that he sings about not breast and bum bum. We need to question a lot of things; we believe that somebody cannot do clean good music until they wear the emblem of “I’m a born again Christian (Chukwuemeka, 2021).

Amidst these controversies which were mainly fuelled by collaboration with non-professing Christians, Şolá claimed that she is not moved by them because God directs her path on whom to collaborate with (Adewoyin, 2021). Because of this, it is also controversial to ascertain whether she is a secular or a Gospel artiste. Another consideration for controversy is her use of Yoruba language, “The controversy about me is that some people say I am not gospel because I sing mostly in Yoruba and my music doesn’t have any religious undertone” (Omorogbe, 2019). In response, Şolá attributed her linguistic bias to what makes her brand unique (Sola Allyson, 2022).

Aside from the aforementioned imbroglios, is the issue of Şolá’s faith being interrogated on account of her not calling explicitly the name of Jesus or quoting scripture verses. In response to her critics, she said,

If you know your father very well and you hear your father being mentioned even when his name is not mentioned, if your spirit is open, you should know that this person is actually talking about your father... But because you expect me to say it the same way you say yours, then we [will] have issues (Adewoyin, 2021).

Language

The Yoruba language plays a vital role in almost all of Şolá's songs. Although she code-switches (the practice of shifting between two or more languages or dialects; in this case Yoruba and English Language) occasionally, most of her lyrics are sung in the Yoruba language. She is a culturalist to the core when it comes to her language. This explains why all her albums have Yoruba titles without any subtitles. "I am not pressured to do what everyone else is doing. I sing in Yoruba and I do that unapologetically so, even though I add some English so that people would know that I went to school" (Omorogbe, 2019). Her Yorubanness is up to the point that even when she sings English gospel songs at public events, she Yorubalizes it in terms of her vocal techniques as seen in *ad-libitum*, short leading phrases in Yoruba language, riffs and runs, and even her vocal textures will still depict Yoruba style indigenous styles.

Costume

Şolá is always seen in a long flowing gown that is usually down to her toes. Most of the time one can hardly see her foot due to the length of her gown. She is not known for any particular colour, but she is known for the similar patterns in her gowns. The common characteristic of her wear is the consistency of African fabric designs. On public appearances, she complements her long gowns with pointed headgear almost like a turban. Her makeup is a reflection of natural adornment, elegance in simplicity whereby is sometimes so little, almost unnoticed. We can see a reflection of her dress code in the appearance of her backup singers and instrumentalists. None of the backup singers or instrumentalists put on revealing or skimpy clothes during ministration. Şolá's costume during ministration and secular events is intentional to correct the erroneous notion prevalent in the Nigerian society which labels musicians as being wayward. She explains:

When I wanted to study music in school, my dad didn't support the idea, he said it's a career for prostitutes because an average person believes and thinks that way... Because all parts of my body is [sic] sacred to me and I attach lots of importance to it... So, am [sic] one of those people changing that impression that being a musician doesn't mean am a prostitute (City People, 2021, para 10, 11).

When it comes to dressing, Şolá believes in simplicity and modesty.



Source: (Instagram) *theŞolá Allyson*, September 24, 2022

Cultural Heritage

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2023), cultural heritage refers to the practices, language, values, distinctive technical or creative achievements, and skills that are passed down from generation to generation within a cultural group and contribute to the group's sense of identity. Şolá is the very embodiment of cultural heritage and this is reflected in her attires, language, instruments, and so on. Her culture is not only displayed in her musicality; it is also reflected in her familyhood. Yoruba culture, just like most African cultures, holds family ties in high esteem as does Şolá. She has exemplified that it is possible to be a mother, a wife, and a music minister. According to her, it is not a difficult task because she has learned to give her family preference in her activities, “Being a mother, wife, and musician is not a difficult task for me, I get my priorities right. If I realize events are [not] okay for me or it will affect my family or duties, I turn it down” (City

People, 2021, para 12). She takes her family along in her shows except when they mustn't go with her, like during the pandemic in 2020 (Adewoyin, 2021). When it comes to partnerships, her choice of those she has worked with so far has an undertone of tribalism in a positive light. To promote the Yoruba cultural heritage, almost all those that Şolá has partnered with are Yoruba people, and this can be linked with her upbringing, including her religious background. Notable people she has collaborated with are Tope Alabi, Adekunle Gold, some celebrities in the Yoruba movie industry, Odunlade Adekola, Lateef Adedimeji, and so on.

Educational Implications

Şolá's musicianship has pedagogic significance to music education in several ways. Sola is a teacher by default because her songs are oftentimes didactic. She uses her platform for ministration as well as for admonition. She is interested in people of all ages, especially youths. Her keenness towards youths is informed by the fact that youthful age comes with pressures, which lead to decisions that can make or mar one. Because she is a victim of circumstances in her youthful days; she channels most of her ministrations to admonishing (young) people on how not to stray. Just as she uses her songs to advocate for social control; likewise, music educators can also teach how to use music as a tool to propel desired change for national development. In addition, Şolá's personality highlights the need for music educators to take the role of guidance counselling seriously, whether it pertains to students' career guidance or other issues of life that pertain to students' physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Because Şolá's songs lean on folk idioms that are rich in cultural heritage, they can be useful in teaching topics in music theory and composition, ethnomusicology, performance, songwriting and music business. Şolá attributed her musical accomplishments to be a result of her being under the tutelage of dedicated music teachers. Hence,

Şolá is an accomplished musician, by implication, dedication is a sine-qua-non attribute for effective music education that teachers should endeavour to imbibe on themselves and the students for the good of society. If music teachers imbibe dedication to their duties, the possibilities of what they can achieve are endless because they will power the dreams of students by

inspiring students. Finally, Şolá being a stakeholder in the Nigerian music industry is proof that women's active participation in the NMI is viable. If music educators encourage women to be actively involved in various endeavours in various capacities, we will have more women musicians who will change the narrative of the music industry.

Conclusion

A lot of Şolá's songs are inspirational because she derives inspiration from her past experiences of how God saved her. Şolá has been through a lot of ordeals of which she acknowledged that God came through for her; therefore, she dedicated her life to God to minister to Him in songs. Her lifestyle is a practical demonstration of unfeigned love for God and it is an important entry into the current discussion of music ministry. Her music is constructively provocative and commonsensical with theological underpinnings that make its appreciation lean on having faith in God. Her musical ingenuity is spurred by divine inspiration. Her educational background as a music graduate also has a significant influence on her musical prowess. Her voice, unique and sensational could be said to have a soothing relief as it tends to link up the broken connection between man and the divine God.

Her philosophy is that if God could save someone as helpless and hopeless as she was before her encounter with Christ; then there is hope for everyone else who is lost and seeking redemption. Accordingly, her motive for music making is to win souls for Christ in recompense for her salvation. She does this by adopting acculturation as an approach whereby she blends African and Western musical idioms as is seen in her costume, language, harmony, and musical instruments.

Ms. Allyson has contributed immensely to the development of Yoruba gospel music through research, performances, workshops, and mentorships. The ministration pattern of Sola typifies Adeleke's (2020) 'New Testament Model' of music in worship. This is an expression of an experiential relationship with God through His son, Jesus Christ. This model is founded on New Testament scriptures whose method of music focuses on educating and admonishing one another.

The composition of Şolá is theologically astute, musically dexterous, and practically therapeutic. If there is anyone who is in an unfortunate situation that requires God's intervention, then Şolá's music is recommended for such persons because it resonates with renewed hope (in Christ). This is why her compositions are a treasure mine for Christians, church musicians, gospel ministers as well as women musicians in Nigeria, who desire to establish a biblical perspective of music and worship while also addressing the most important concerns that are positively reshaping today's music ministry.

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