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Church-Based Choirs Singing to Auto-Sounding Keyboard Tunes in Warri, Nigeria: Technology Assuming Man's Role in Christian Liturgy

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ABSTRACT
In Warri, Delta State, Nigeria, some church-based choirs perform Western and African art music to pre-programmed electronic keyboard tracks. The accompaniments are mixed and set before the service, so the choirs sing to the automated playback. The practice is common among local music directors, yet its reasons and theological meaning have received little scholarly attention. This study looks at why the church-based choirs use auto-sounding keyboards and asks whether technology is taking over roles once filled by human musicians in Christian worship. Through the theories of humanly organized sound, and the way technology mediates religious practice, non-participant observation, and interviews of select Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, and Pentecostal music directors in Warri, Nigeria, the research finds three main drivers: shortage of skilled accompanists, limited church budgets for musicians, and the rich multi-instrument sound that modern keyboards can produce. The technology brings practical benefits, but it also raises questions about participation, creativity, and the human side of church music. The paper concludes that technology can support worship, yet it should assist rather than replace live musicianship if the communal and theological character of church music is to be kept.
Keywords: Choral singing; Auto-sounding keyboard; Music technology; Christian liturgy; Nigerian church music; Worship practice

1. INTRODUCTION

From the first Christian gatherings to the present, church music has been a basic part of worship across many cultures and periods. It is one of the main ways Christians express devotion, teach theology, and build community, especially when they worship together. Scholars have long insisted that music is not just decoration; it is essential to the worship experience (White, 2010). In practice, church music serves worship, evangelism, teaching, and discipleship. Choirs and instruments help congregations praise, give thanks, and reflect. In Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, church music is rooted in the legacy of Western Christian missionary, activities of indigenous Christian converts and emerging technologies.

In the Nineteenth-century, Western Christian missionaries brought European hymns, choral singing, and musical instruments into Nigeria through mission churches and schools. They often treated traditional African instruments and styles as idolatrous and banned them from Christian worship. Over time, African

converts began to bring local musical idioms into the church, first through the outreaches and non-Sunday services. Local rhythms, tone languages that shape melody, indigenous instruments, and call-and-response singing gradually mixed with Western hymns and choir traditions. The result is the hybrid church music common in Nigeria today. The story shows how liturgical music in African Christianity has evolved.

In recent decades, technology has changed church music in Nigeria still further. Amplifiers, electronic keyboards, synthesizers, and automated accompaniment systems are now common sights in churches. They let musicians produce the sound of many instruments at once, even where real instrumentalists are scarce. In Warri, a clear practice has taken root: church choirs sing to pre-programmed electronic keyboard tracks played through the sound system. The practice raises hard questions about the place of technology and human participation in worship. When automated tracks replace human accompanists, the old idea of music as a humanly made offering in liturgy is challenged. This study therefore looks at the rise of auto-sounding keyboard accompaniment among Warri church choirs and at what the practice means for church music and Christian liturgy.

2. Review of Related Literature

The place of music in Christian worship has been studied from theological, historical, and ethnomusicological angles. Early Christians relied mainly on the voiced psalms and hymns because singing together fostered participation and theological reflection (Westermeyer, 1998). In the Middle Ages, Gregorian chant and later polyphony shaped the sound of the church; organs eventually joined the singers. The Reformation pushed congregational singing still further. Luther treated music as a means of teaching doctrine and building the faith of the people (Leaver, 2007). Hymns written for the congregation became a hallmark of Protestant worship. Later holiness and revival movements also collected and organized congregational song to strengthen corporate worship (Jones, 1974).

In Africa the story of Christian music is one of encounter between European missionary traditions and local culture. Missionaries brought Western hymns; African converts reshaped them with local languages, rhythms, and performance styles (Agordoh, 2005; Nketia, 1974). The result was distinctly African forms of church music that still carry both African and Western elements. Globally, congregational hymnody is valued for bringing diverse musical expressions into one act of worship (Hawn, 2003). In today's Africa, independent and Pentecostal churches continue to reshape praise and liturgy under the pressure of social and economic change (Chitando, 2013; Miller, 2007; Oosthuizen, 1997).

Recent studies have looked at the growing place of digital technology in worship. Electronic instruments and sound systems are now common in churches. The tools help, yet they also change how people take part in Christian worship. Digital sound can improve the music, but it can also move the focus from shared participation to a produced soundscape (Ingalls, 2018). The shift creates tensions over style and priorities (Long, 2001) and has led some churches to look for fresh ways to keep congregations involved (Taylor, 2023).

In Nigerian churches electronic keyboards are especially common. They can produce orchestral textures and suit many styles; these make them highly versatile. Pre-programmed accompaniment features have led some music directors to use automated tracks to accompany choral performances. Although the practice is widespread, little scholarly work has examined what it means for liturgy in Nigerian churches. This study adds to the literature by looking at how automated keyboard accompaniment affects the place of human musicians in worship.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study rests on two related ideas: Music as humanly organized sound, and the way technology mediates religious practice. John Blacking (1973) described music as 'humanly organized sound,' stressing that music-making and meaning come from human cultural activity, not from sound alone. Music is therefore a social practice shaped by creativity, interaction, and interpretation. This fits frameworks that treat music as social life in which shared performance builds community (Turino, 2008).

In Christian liturgy, music is a communal act of devotion: choirs, players, and congregations offer praise together. The presence of human performers matters theologically because it embodies the communal character of worship and links human action with encounter with God (Best, 1993; Saliers, 1994; Begbie, 2000; McGann, 2002).

The second strand is technological mediation in religion. Technology often changes how religious communities communicate, take part, and present themselves (Campbell, 2013). In worship, electronic instruments, amplification, and digital media can improve performance and widen access. At the same time they can replace, limit, or alter roles that human beings once filled. This study brings the two perspectives together to ask how automated keyboard accompaniment reflects and changes the human side of liturgical music.

4. Methodology

The study used a qualitative design to explore the experiences of church music practitioners in Warri. Data came from non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Observations were made at choir rehearsals and services in churches that used auto-sounding keyboard accompaniment, showing how the technology worked in live worship. Twenty-two music directors, conductors, and choir members were interviewed; they were chosen because they were directly involved in church music. Questions covered their experience with automated accompaniment, reasons for using it, and views on its effect on worship. Transcripts and field notes were analyzed thematically, coding for patterns around technology, aesthetics, employment, and theology. The data form the basis for discussing the practice and its wider implications for church music and liturgy.

5. Findings

Analysis of the collected data revealed several key themes explaining the adoption of auto-sounding keyboard accompaniment in church choir performances:

a) Scarcity of Trained Keyboardists: Many participants reported a severe shortage of trained keyboardists capable of accompanying complex choral works. Churches frequently rely on volunteer musicians who lack advanced training in harmonic accompaniment or sight-reading skills.

b) Financial Constraints: Financial constraints were frequently cited as a primary factor. Many churches lack sufficient financial resources to employ professional accompanists. Automated accompaniment provides a cost-effective alternative that allows choirs to perform elaborate musical arrangements without additional personnel expenses.

c) Aesthetic Preferences: Participants noted a strong aesthetic preference among congregations for the rich, synthesized multi-instrumental textures produced by modern electronic keyboards. These instruments can combine multiple timbres, creating orchestral effects that enhance the perceived sonic quality of musical performances.

d) Performance Consistency: Some music directors indicated that automated accompaniment provides tempo stability and structural consistency during performances, as pre-programmed tracks maintain a uniform tempo and harmonic accuracy.

The shortage of skilled keyboard accompanists is especially sharp among Baptist churches. A few employ trained ministers of music, yet those ministers often play the keyboard themselves or hand the part to volunteers who cannot handle anthem accompaniment, so they turn to auto-sounding tracks. Anglican churches manage a little better with professional organists or music directors, but those musicians usually have to direct and accompany at the same time.

Money is the main reason churches expect one musician to do two jobs. The same shortage of funds shows up in neglected keyboards: Many instruments have silent or broken keys, and only a few churches repair or replace them promptly. Music directors who want an orchestral sound for local choral music, yet have no real orchestra, therefore programme orchestral voices into synthesizers and use those tracks for accompaniment.

Some directors value the steady tempo of programmed tracks. Yet live music is not meant to be strictly mechanical; small fluctuations and expressive changes are part of what makes performance human. When the choir must follow a fixed track, the singers effectively accompany the machine. That reversal of roles raises basic questions about the theological and musical purpose of accompaniment in choral singing.

6. Discussion

The growing use of auto-sounding keyboard accompaniment mirrors wider changes in church music. Technology brings practical gains, yet it also raises questions about human creativity and the place of machines in worship. Live accompaniment is a real-time exchange between player and choir: the accompanist adjusts to tempo, phrasing, and the conductor's gestures. A programmed track cannot do that, so interpretive nuance and spontaneous expression can be lost.

Theologically, Christian worship values shared participation and human agency. Music is a collective offering of praise, not merely an aesthetic product. When machines take the place of musicians, the symbolic and spiritual weight of human presence can shrink. Technology need not be treated only as a threat. Used carefully, it can support participation, improve sound, and open repertoires that would otherwise be out of reach. The task for church music leaders is to keep a careful balance: Practical convenience on one side, and human creativity, collaboration, and agency on the other.

7. Implications for Church Music Practice

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for church music ministry in Nigeria and similar contexts:

• Invest in training. Churches need to train and employ competent keyboardists. Occasional workshops are not enough for the skills required in anthem accompaniment. Trained players often leave for better-paid posts in larger towns, which discourages investment. Still, deliberate training and retention plans are needed if technology is not to replace human musicianship permanently.

• Work together. Music departments and theological seminaries in Delta State can design joint programmes that train church musicians specifically in choral accompaniment and hymnody.

• Improve conditions of service. Better pay, accommodation, and basic benefits for music directors and keyboardists would help attract and keep skilled musicians in Warri.

• Pay fairly and recognize the work. Compensation that matches denominational guidelines and local realities would free keyboardists to practise and rehearse instead of taking outside jobs.

• Keep technology in its place. Automated accompaniment can help for a time, but it should not permanently take the place of the interactive, expressive work of live musicians.

8. Conclusion

Choirs in Warri singing to auto-sounding keyboard tracks show a wider shift in contemporary Christian worship. Shortage of skilled players, tight budgets, and changing taste drive the practice. Technology is reshaping church music, yet music in worship remains a humanly made offering. Tools should therefore be used carefully. Churches need to keep the communal and participatory character of worship while using technology that genuinely improves musical expression. Future work could look at the same practice in other regions and denominations, or compare ways of balancing technological help with live performance.

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