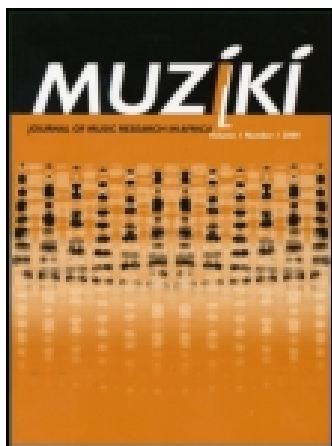


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmuz20>

### Music and meaning: Some reflections through personal compositions

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Published online: 31 Aug 2010.

To cite this article: Timothy Njoora (2010) Music and meaning: Some reflections through personal compositions, Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa, 7:1, 41-59, DOI:

[10.1080/18125980.2010.486146](https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2010.486146)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2010.486146>

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# Music and meaning: Some reflections through personal compositions

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## Abstract

On 31 May 2007, with the cooperation of musicians from Kenyatta University<sup>1</sup> and Goethe-Institute; (German cultural centre) in Nairobi, I had the privileged opportunity to share several premiere compositions with the audience in Nairobi as part of community reach out with '**art music**'. Regarding music composition, Barret (2003) argues that composition assists in expressive meaning-making for both the composer and the audience. But then (he argues) meaning is 'culturally mediated...and is most effectively described as a dialogue between...the musician and the composer, the emerging musical work, the culture that produced the composer, and the emerging work'. For me personally, the compositions shared during the concert served several purposes – (a) sharing my creative world with the audience; (b) responding to music enthusiasts interests and academic requirements; (c) adding cultural capital to Kenyan art music; and (d) exploring some fundamental issues in meaning-making through music compositions. As Barret (2003) observes;

Specific practices and connections, traditions from which they emerge become the *cultural benchmarks* against which other constructions and ways of communicating meaning are judged – and are often found deficient.

In this paper I share some reflections of my creative exhibitions, my thoughts on meaning-making and its unavoidable cultural underpinnings. At the same time, I interrogate some thoughts on the area of '**creativity**', which is often considered abstract. Among the ideas discussed are the five discreet stages of 'creativity' as advanced by Wallas (1926) model of the process namely; (a) Preparation; (b) Incubation; (c) Intimation; (d) Illumination and (e) Verification. Ultimately, I hope that sharing this information will invigorate academic dialogue to contribute towards defining of current generation of 'Art Music' compositions in Kenya and ultimately for the benefit of the region (East Africa).

**Key words:** African art music, composers, composition process, creativity, culture, meaning in music, music composition

## Introduction and context

Traditionally, music history views composers and their compositions (or creations) through the lens of historians, musicologists, critics and other music enthusiasts; often with composers' voices, which usually narrate biographical information such as family trips, love relationships (usually stormy or tragic), personal frustrations, unusual life styles and so forth. While there is great merit in this type of family information, yet of greater value would be narrations from the composer about musical styles, structures, philosophical and personal perceptions. Nevertheless, some composers have shared information about their compositions and thoughts thereby yielding rare windows into their works and mode of creativity. There is, however, great controversy on how creative ideas develop, mature and are ultimately shared by composers through their products. Some composers such as Beethoven and Brahms documented some of their thoughts on their music which has greatly informed performance practice, music interpretation and analysis. For instance, Mozart wrote about the mystery of creativity in his personal diary;

When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good sheer—say travelling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep; it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. When and how they come, I know not nor can I force them. Those ideas that please me I retain in memory, and am accustomed, as I have been told, to hum them to myself (Mozart, in E. Holmes, *The Life of Mozart*, 1979, 317, quoted in Abeles et al. 1994, 72).

Mozart's confession raises several important issues. Firstly, creative mood is supported by appropriate mental/psychological disposition and the environment has to be conducive for creativity to flow, and thus provide for opportunities such as evening walks and solitude. Secondly, Mozart could not explain how the ideas developed in his mind, except that their manifestations are sensed and often heard by those around him (humming the ideas to himself), and thirdly, ultimately good ideas persisted in his mind and could therefore be entertained for further development. Discussing the same issue of creativity, Guilford (quoted in Abeles et al., 1994) argues that there are three types of attributes of creativity, namely; (a) fluency (b) flexibility, and (c) originality. *Fluency* is described as the process whereby people associate words and ideas with specific meanings, while *flexibility* involves the ability to make alternative choices in order to solve a particular problem, and *originality* includes thinking in unusual ways and making connections of ideas in ways that others may not perceive and to creatively think of new ideas. In a similar vein, John Gardner identifies four traits found in creative persons. These are:

(a) openness – a receptivity to all the sights, sounds and ideas that one encounters and to one's own inner feelings; (b) independence – the ability to be free oneself from social

pressures and to question assumptions; (c) flexibility – the willingness to try ideas and the ability to tolerate internal conflict and to suspend final judgement; and (d) capacity to find order in experience – In a unique way, every great creative performance since the initial (the creation of the universe) has been in some measure a bringing of order out of chaos. (Abeles et al. 1994, 174).

When it comes to the composition process there are probably as many approaches as there are composers, but equally intriguing is the fact that if they (composers) had to document their ‘routes’ to composition, it would make for interesting reading on the nature of composition, the process and art product. My compositional journey<sup>1</sup> has been – to say the least; long, complex and informed by two worlds – that is my; own world in Kenya, East Africa, with the rich cultural traditions, folk songs and other musical constructs, and my academic excursions in the United States of America, with the irrefutable academic music underpinnings that come with such an environment. Essentially, each of the two worlds has made significant imprints on my musical landscape and their presence influenced and permeated my ongoing musical thoughts. In thinking about my own contribution to ‘art music’ in Kenya,<sup>2</sup> I draw inspiration from great world music researchers and musicologists. I am especially drawn to perspectives and the thought paradigm by the renowned African music researcher and musicologist Kwabena-Nketia (2004, 1) who observes the following:

Analysing some of the materials I encountered in my research enabled me to develop my composition theory to determine where I could move from tradition to modernity without masking my African voice or losing my African identity...for although my research interest is traditional African music...documentation, preservation and promotion as our cultural legacy, my creative interest lies in the application of my field experience and research findings to the development of *African art music* as a contemporary genre.

This statement powerfully captures my own compositional philosophy and stylistic sentiments. In this paper I share some personal reflections on construction of meaning through my compositions, some of which I shared with Nairobi audience in a concert at the Goethe Institute<sup>3</sup> (German Cultural Centre in Nairobi) Auditorium on Thursday, 31 May 2007. While this concert was not my first of its kind in Kenya, it nevertheless premiered new art music and ideas.

It seems that ‘art music’<sup>4</sup> concerts by Kenyan composers are not as frequent as one would expect them to be, and yet there is a relatively vibrant music community that cherishes these types of music concerts. Invariably, developing an idea which is significantly different from the mainstay involves a certain amount of risk and composers have had their share of facing such risks. For example, Hector Berlioz’s first performance of *Symphonie Fantastique* elicited a rude audience reaction which included cat calls and rowdy audience behaviour. Then there is the case of Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky, whose teacher insinuated that his piano concerto in B flat minor (Op. 23) was unplayable, and not usable in a concert environment. Later, however,

a young Russian pianist presented it in a public concert with resounding success. This piece now forms part of the popular concert repertoire that is most frequently performed by many world orchestras.

## The context of my compositions

One of my main inspirations for the concert was founded in my reflections on meaning in my own life and, by extension, providing a forum for the audience for ‘constructing their own meaning’ using ‘art music’ drawn from Kenyan folk songs.<sup>5</sup> History will show that all over the world composers have freely borrowed from the folk traditions of their respective countries thereby exploring the rich creative fountains of their people. There are many reasons for this phenomenon of ‘art music’ composers exploring the inspirational promise of their country’s music, perhaps primary among them is their wish to promote a national identity and their response to national ideals. I find myself greatly attracted to this idea whose timeliness never seems to diminish. In many ways music is about life and while each of the compositions draws from specific feelings, there are common bonds which I believe each of us can respond to such as praise, celebration of life, and the place and role of lullabies, construction of past history – personal or group features that permeate our lives.

The notion that the process of composing is essentially a ‘*meaning-making*’ enterprise has been addressed by several scholars (Hickey 2003 and Vygotsky 1986). Hickey argues that meaning is culturally mediated and that it is most effectively described as a dialogue between the composer, emerging work, the audience, and the culture that has produced the composer. Furthermore, Hickey asserts:

Understandings of how knowledge and action are culturally grounded and sociologically situated. We know who and what we are because of the culture we come from and live in, because of the socio-cultural contexts.

Music has the capacity to retain the essence of the community even if this involves constantly reconstructing mores and ideals. Some traditional songs carry hidden historical facts. Music is a great tool for constructing past history based on the collective memory of the community. In addition, music in the community is a powerful tool for narrating sad events and sharing information. As Hickey rightly argues:

...the language of music is more abstract than spoken or written language, music often communicates at a deeper level than words. The question of meaning is therefore important to consider...not so much in terms of representation, but rather in relation to intention and response (Jonathan Stephens, quoted in Maud Hickey p.127).

It is characteristic of music history documentation that most of the analytical work is viewed through the writings of historians, critics and scholars. Without a doubt this

is great source of information, but there is also great merit in viewing composers' works through their own lenses for indeed beyond providing great personal insights, this is history too.

## Compositional ideas explored

Music is a powerful artistic tool which constitutes symbol systems of equal importance with letters and numbers. It creates opportunities for reflection, provides important social links between our past history and our present, is a connection between all people, and assists in developing higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and collective problem-solving (Njoora 2005). There are many views concerning 'African art music'. Some people have argued that African art music is music composed solely by Africans, but this argument fails to account for citizens and visitors, whose music activities thrive in Africa. Others argue that it is through music that themes and instrumentation borrow from African roots, but even this argument fails to persuade for obvious reasons. Nketia (2004) provides a more persuasive argument in the following statement:

The term art music... is used for convenience of reference for music designed for intent listening or presentation as 'concert music', in which expression of feeling is combined with a high level of *craftsmanship* and a sense of beauty. Hence, African art music refers to the works that manifest these attributes but which are rooted in the traditions of Africa. Its concepts, aesthetic goals, and techniques may show variations consistent with the values of its own contexts of creativity (Nketia 2004, 5).

In the concert I shared pieces for *three* performance media, that is pieces for the following:

- A. Piano solo – *Kiere*<sup>5</sup> (describing millet and/or harvest time), *Wakariru Cua Cua* (Hurry up least you are late), Personal Journey, *Bendera Itu Kenya*, (Our Kenya Flag) Military March (not performed during the concert).
- B. Voice solo/choral works – *Kira Mwana* (Sleep Child), *Ruru Mwana* (Ruru Child Sleep), Lord I Praise Thee, *Sherehekea Maisha* (Celebrate Life), My Joyful Prayer (for soprano voice and piano accompaniment).
- C. Mixed ensemble – Reunion (for violin and piano), A Job Well Done (flute and piano), *Mwathani Riu Ndigite* (Lord, I Have Left Earthly Pleasures) for voice, flute, clarinet and piano).

In special ways every time we listen to particular pieces, we construct our own meaning within the framework of the music at hand. Sometimes the meanings respond to a collective understanding, at times the meaning is fairly personal. Beyond the sound canvas, programme notes help in perfecting our meaning-making process. Therefore, consistent with standard music concerts, the following made up the

programme notes (albeit in a condensed form) that describe the pieces shared during the evening concert:

### **Wakariru Cua Cua**<sup>6</sup> (for solo piano)

The melody for this piece was borrowed from *Gikuyu* (my community in Kenya). It is a game song, a warning or call to attention for the sojourner(s) to hurry up lest they are caught in the darkness. It was usually sung in the evenings as young people returned from their daily chores. *Wakariru* was an anonymous stranger on the way home. The caller urges the stranger to ‘*cua cua*’ (make haste, hurry up) and get home before it gets dark. To reflect on this human spirit of urgency, the piano setting starts slower and gradually becomes faster towards the end, symbolizing the urgency. The piece is fairly short and repeats its message (in this case a friendly warning) to a friend several times and is thus consistent with the traditional mode. My childhood memories recall this and other regularly performed songs, many having deeply embedded meanings. In a sentimental way, I wonder, as many do at the noble idea of ‘collective responsibility’ and ‘shared identity’ that characterized the lives and times of rural Kenyan communities. These are ideas that can persist in modern times if we continue to share and impart the beauty of our traditions to our children. Below are some examples of these pieces:

**Wakariru**  
A Gikuyu Childrens Game Song  
Timothy K. Njoora

*Allegretto*  $\text{♩} = 100$   
(Piece gets gradually faster, but with a happy mood)

Piano

**Bendera Itu Kenya**<sup>7</sup>(Our Kenyan flag) for solo piano**BENDERA ITU KENYA**Our Kenyan Flag  
(A Gikuyu Folk Song in 1960's)

Timothy K. Njoora

*Moderato* ♩ = 90

Piano

*f*

*In a festive manner*

*ff*

5

As in the case of *Wakariru*, the melody for this piece borrows from the *Gikuyu* community.

The original folk song speaks about the importance and significance of the three colours (red, black and green) on the Kenyan flag. While the piano setting does not reflect on the three colours (but instead dwell on the rhythmic and melodic character of the folk song), the melody references a specific historical time frame in Kenya's struggle for independence. It was popular around 1962 and 1963, during the hoisting of Kenyan flag for the first time, after British colonial rule at the time of independence for Kenya.

**Kiere** (millet song) for solo piano

This song represents a great contrast from the previous two pieces, *Kiere's* melody was taken from the *Embu* community (like the *Gikuyu* people, the *Embu* lived around Mount Kenya).

It speaks of the millet harvesting activities, one of the main activities of the people. The piano part goes through the main melody several times before breaking into a syncopated lyrical section which serves as a contrast. The piece capitalizes on the idea of repetition, but often without complete statement of the melody.



# Kiere

Based on a meru harvest song

Timothy K. Njoora

Piano

## My joyful prayer (for soprano voice with piano accompaniment)

This is a song for weddings, which often, are the happiest moments of our lives. Not only does the occasion bring together close friends and relatives, it is also a life-changing moment for the bride and bridegroom.

## My joyful prayer

T.K. Njoora

A wedding song

Soprano

Moderato

Piano

*f* *mf*

*f* 1. Oh my Lord I pray  
2. Yes my GOD I wish

8 for PEACE and JOY with my LOVE whom Lord you have lead to  
8 for home of JOY with my LOVE whom Lord you have lead to

pno

A wedding is also a time for gifts, vows, sharing and social communion. Yet for those who believe in a higher power it is also a time to thank God for enabling these two parties to make the friendship connections and life's choices. And so this song is both a praise song and a prayer for the lovers brought together through God's guidance.

**Ruru Mwana Koma<sup>8</sup>** (for SATB choir, with piano accompaniment)

This beautiful lullaby is taken from the *Gikuyu* people and its traditional role is obvious. This setting borrows the melody from the age-old oral tradition, but utilizes the harmonic structure of Western music to create a mixed chorus with a warm feel-ing appropriate for lulling a baby to sleep. It starts on a high note but the dynamics gradually become softer to create a peaceful mood for the baby to sleep. The piece received its premier performance on Wednesday 5 May 1999, during the *Composer' Forum* of the University of Oregon, Eugene, USA.

**Ruru Mwana Koma**

A Gikuyu lullaby

Timothy K. Njoora

The musical score is for a SATB choir and piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Moderato' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 108. The dynamics for the choir start at *f* (forte) and gradually become softer. The piano accompaniment starts at *f* and becomes *mf* (mezzo-forte) in the final measure. The lyrics are 'Ru-ru-ru mwa-na ko-ma mwa-na ko-ma'.

**Choir Parts:**

- Soprano:** Ru-ru-ru mwa-na ko-ma mwa-na ko-ma
- Alto:** Ru-ru-ru mwa-na ko-ma mwa-na ko-ma
- Tenor:** (Silent)
- Bass:** (Silent)

**Piano Part:**

- Starts with a *f* dynamic.
- Accompanies the choir with chords and moving lines.
- Ends with a *mf* dynamic.

Sop

me me *f* And I pro-o - mise to love for Lord you-have  
And I pro-o - mise to care for lord you have

pno

*mf*

71

**Sherehekea Maisha<sup>9</sup>** (Celebrate life) for SATB choir with piano accompaniment

In our lives we often are privileged to share a life with people or ‘life forces’ that are so special, powerful and personal that words sometimes fail to capture the essence of such persons. Life’s journey touches us on many deep levels in ways beyond expression. And, while the lives of such persons may physically be extinguished from us, the spiritual breadth and depth of that relationship never really leaves us. And so rather than mourn their departure, we can choose to celebrate their lives the best way we know and music is one powerful way to do this. Music has the capacity to capture our emotions in a manner that cannot be expressed in any other way because life itself is a gift and each day is special and thus a gift from God.

**Sherehekea Maisha**

(Celebration of life)

Timothy K. Njooora

*f Andante Meditatively but firmly*

Soprano Solo

*f* Ka-ti - ka Ma-i - sha ya ha - pa u-li-mwe-ngu

Soprano

*f* Ka-ti - ka Ma-i - sha ya ha - pa u-li-mwe-ngu

Alto

*f* Ka-ti - ka Ma-i - sha ya ha - pa u-li-mwe-ngu

Tenor

*f* Ka-ti - ka Ma-i - sha ya ha - pa u-li-mwe-ngu

Bass

*f* Ka-ti - ka Ma-i - sha ya ha - pa u-li-mwe-ngu

*Andante Meditatively but firmly*

Piano

*ff Meditatively but firmly* *mf*

### **A job well done** (for flute, with piano accompaniment)

The piece was my response to my sense that we need to celebrate life's achievements, and which I believe should be recognized, in other words, important personal plateaus which are reached in our daily lives should be celebrated. Usually, these achievements are attained at the end of set cycles such as at the end of our academic studies, long-term professional achievements, business cycles and so forth. While the climax of such achievements may be recognized through awards, graduation, certification and other related activities, I believe that framing them in music speaks volumes in ways that words may not express. The piece was scored for flute with piano accompaniment.

#### **A job well done**

(Celebration of personal achievement)

**Timothy K. Njoora**

The musical score for 'A job well done' is written for flute and piano. The flute part begins with a rest, followed by a melodic line starting on a whole note G4, moving through A4, B4, and C5, then descending through B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, and C4. The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time, marked 'Moderato'. It features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *ff* (fortissimo).

### **Reunion** (for violin, with piano accompaniment)

This piece was conceptualized over a relatively short period, which does not in any way reduce its emotional, structural and artistic perception. It was composed to celebrate a long-cherished family reunion.

#### **Reunion**

Solo violin and piano  
For my family

**Timothy K. Njoora**

The musical score for 'Reunion' is written for violin and piano. The violin part begins with a rest, followed by a melodic line starting on a whole note G4, moving through A4, B4, and C5, then descending through B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, and C4. The piano accompaniment is in 3/4 time, marked 'Moderato' with a tempo of  $J = 80$ . It features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The score also includes the instruction 'With emotion'.

The image shows a musical score for Violin (Vln.) and Piano. The score is written in B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system starts at measure 5 and the second at measure 9. The Violin part features a melodic line with a long note in measure 5 and 9, and a more active line in measures 6-8 and 10-11. The Piano part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with sixteenth-note patterns in the right hand and block chords in the left hand. A forte (ff) dynamic marking appears in measure 11.

The performance of this piece represented the climax of a rather lonely period. It was first performed on Tuesday 16 February at Beale Hall, a University of Oregon Performance centre, on the occasion of the Composers' Forum.

The above explanations of some of my pieces give the reader some insight into the compositions – however, we still need to answer the question of what is creativity and how does one develop it? In many respects, this question is the million-dollar question. Creativity has been described as a mental process whose objective is to generate new ideas, the act of making something new (original, innovative). Then of course the age-old question arises as to who determines what is novel or original or, for that matter, innovative? Amabile (1996) argued that:

...creativity by individuals and teams *is a starting point for innovation*; the first is a necessary *but not sufficient* condition for the second.

Apparently, creativity is a fundamental process, because without it the building blocks of innovation and other related schema may never arise. Yet creativity, as has been pointed out, is abstract, often illusive and does not necessary conforms to an automated *modus operandi*. Copland argued that composition was a personal matter, and that composers took whatever method was necessary to arrive at the 'new' idea. This does not in any way, suggest that the process is arbitrary or unplanned. It merely means that there are no set rules or conditions (as in scientific experiment) that must be put in place to create great pieces of music, for indeed, if this were true,

its very nature (creativity) would defy the concept of talent and innate ability, often associated with latent native talent, whose potential unfolds through self-discovery, instruction, apprenticeship and so on. As Copland put it:

The composer starts with his theme; and the theme is a gift from heaven. He doesn't know where it comes from – has no control over it. It comes almost like automatic writing. (Aaron Copland, 'What to Listen in Music').

Music history studies reveal that for some composers and creators original ideas were just inborn, and inspiration seemed to flow from a seemingly endless source. Such composers would bring forth one musical idea after another, seemingly effortlessly. However, more detailed studies of personal diaries sometimes reveal that some composers struggled with writing themes, developing initial musical ideas, and performance. One of the more recent authors, Patterson (2009) asserts that:

creativity is an elusive topic. Researchers can't agree that creativity even exists. No two people define it in the same way. And since people are at odds as to what creativity is, there is no shared dependent measure that a group of scholars has routinely studied and then written about in refereed journals. Ergo: creativity doesn't even qualify as an academic topic. 'The Secrets of Creativity' from Kerry Patterson Wednesday, March 18, 2009 at 8:02 am (*Kerry Patterson is co-author of the New York Times bestseller **Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High***).

Some of the earliest researchers on creativity were Graham Wallas and Richard Smith (1926). In their exploration of the subject they believed that the process (creativity) can be divided into the following **five** distinct stages:

- (i) *preparation* – the mind's initial exploration of the task at hand, before taking on any tasks associated with the activity
- (ii) *incubation* – during this stage the problem is understood and internalized, even though to an outsider; there are no obvious signs that the process is taking place
- (iii) *intimation* – at this stage there is a feeling that a possible solution is presenting itself, coupled with an amount of confidence in a solution
- (iv) *illumination* – during this stage (otherwise referred to as insight), like a fountain, the solution to the problem issues from within, and active consciousness is revealed
- (v) *verification* – during the last stage the idea is realized through specific solutions, the idea is tested and in fact applied; thereby providing a solution

Needless to say, these so-called stages are not universal because creative minds differ with personalities, physical and mental mood and the problem to be solved – in short, there are many variables that come into play. With regard to music

composition, the idea of creating ‘novel’ musical ideas may sound easy at the outset, but in practice it is fairly difficult, as many historical composers confessed – for example Beethoven (1170–1823); Handel (1600–1750), Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) and Brahms (1833–1897). But it is also possible to derive pleasure from creating great works, as Rich the TweakMeister would argue:

It is the pleasure in putting a piece together that brings it from spark to final form. If there is no pleasure, we run out of gas, the idea never reaches fruition. Yet, if we are observant, bring in elements to the composition that increase the pleasure (fun), the piece moves forward, onward to completion.

But more importantly he advocates the idea of constantly studying existing works in search of good ideas, which the composer must understand, internalize, and ultimately develop unique ways of creating ‘novel’ musical works and development of personal style and musical signature. As Rich the TweakMeister so eloquently puts it:

You want to fill your head with styles so you can come up with your own. While these artists actually do exist in the real world, the way you relate them together to come up with style only happens in one place: your mind.

In discussing the reasons why people listen to ‘art music’, Abeles (1994) reminds us that several theories have been put forward as well as what he terms ‘educated speculations’. Abeles argues that individuals respond to music at different levels and while there may be collective perceptions and rallying points, many factors, including training, culture, mood at the time of listening to music, knowledge of the music or creator, performing medium and so on, all play a role. The reasons for listening to music are therefore, grouped according to three theories, namely (a) referentialism – a theory which argues that the value of music is anchored in ‘references’ to things and events beyond the music itself, (b) expressionism – which argues that what the music signifies is really not specific, rather, it is a skilful symbol of inner feelings and emotions, and (c) formalism – which is only concerned with formal attributes and characteristics of the music without making reference to other aspects.

It must be said here that these theories are not absolutes, neither are they comprehensive because human emotions (at least as they refer to music perceptions) are complex and difficult to put into definitive categories. In this paper I argue that there are three important actors or participants who take part in the experience of music. These are (a) the creator (composer), (b) performer(s), and (c) audience. The three are involved in what Abeles (1994) refers to as the ‘aesthetic experience’. There are several characteristics of aesthetic experience as shown below:

Aesthetic experience: Has no practical or utilitarian purpose...it is valued for the insight, satisfaction, and enjoyment that it provides. It involves feelings...most of the time these feelings are not obvious or simple. It involves intellect...the mind is active as it consciously notices the aesthetic object and relates that object...to previous experiences. It involves focus of attention...to focus attention, contemplation, and consideration. It must be experienced...not possible to receive the details of an experience from second-hand person, it is should be a personal encounter. The result of aesthetic experiences is a richer and more meaningful life (Abeles 1994, 74–75).

Abeles (ibid) concludes that ‘there are no aesthetic answers, only experiences’. In a similar vein Moore quoted in Hickey (2004) describes the ‘perfect’ music experience as one whereby the interactions between the performer, listener, and composer result in a central converging point with sharing and experiences from the three actors. When this happens, and it is not automatic for every performance, it describes the ultimate musical experience, the hair-raising type of feeling that some people have described as bliss and enjoyment of music.

## Concluding thoughts

In this paper, the examination of personal compositions along with programme notes helped to frame cultural and contextual issues, which the music addresses from a personal (composer’s) perspective. In addition, this paper also hoped to initiate dialogue within listeners and other music enthusiasts. Beyond this objective, the paper sets out to interrogate the idea of meaning-making via music compositions, because, as Behekhizwe Peterson (quoted in Chikwero ) argues, ‘the meanings of songs do not reside solely in their lyrical content’, and that while aware that modern, day recordings and playback offer the listener incredible listening opportunities, the impact of the music can best be felt in a concert environment, where special nuances of the music can be felt. I believe that as the Kenyan community changes over time and we find new ways to use music functionally as active participants or listeners and consumers, new horizons will be defined, for which the use of ‘art music’ will feature prominently at personal and collective levels (Njoora 2004, 65). In the paper I also explored different personal meanings through my compositions, which I shared with Nairobi audiences and now share similar thoughts with a wider audience.

But on a personal level, the meanings I offer through programme notes and score extracts can be seen as allegories of personal struggles, success and meaning-making experiences. If this happens through the music I share with my audiences, then I feel I have succeeded with my music and the music has served the intended purpose. During the concerts and now I welcome the idea that each person, as they listen to the pieces, constructs their own meaning based on their



specific life events, sociological constructs, and so forth. I would hope that the process of ‘meaning making’ guides your thoughts even without the benefit of a live performance. Music has exceptional power to conjure up deep meanings and ideas beyond letters and words. As Andrew Young, former Mayor of Atlanta, aptly observed:

Music represents the soul of a culture...For example spirituals, Gospel and folk music have articulated the sufferings, the hopes and the triumphs of the movement for human rights...jazz...communicates the depth and the range of human emotions, and is also a supreme expression of artistic creativity...music enriches the human intellect and spirit. It provides a solace or joy, it can entertain or educate. And music is universal language which helps to bind together the human activity (Mueller 1984).

In a similar vein former President Bill Clinton reported the following sentiments:

When I was in high school I had a music teacher...named Virgil Spelling, who taught me a lot more than scales and keys and how to hold a steady note on the saxophone. He taught me about patience, hard work and dedication and teamwork...I came to understand how important a musical instrument can be as an outlet for creativity, for ideas and emotions that only music can express (Mueller 1984).

The art of composition is an avenue for exploring the depth and breadth of creativity with its abstract ideas, and provides a forum for developing identity and a voice for composers. Composition is also a means of creating original, novel ideas, which are generally shaped by the environment in which the creator grows in, influenced by the culture in which the creator lives, and it is also a means of using knowledge and innate capacity found in the artist. Ultimately, musical composition helps in defining who we are and goes to some length in narrating musical history of our times. It is indeed a fitting tribute to humanity and our deeply-rooted sociological connections.

## Notes

1. Although I was born in Kenya, most of my music training (post teacher training) took place in the United States of America.
2. There is a small but committed following of ‘art music’ enthusiasts, though the local mass media is fairly oblivious to this art form, and thus does not give much direct support to such music.
3. The German Goethe Institute initiated promotion programmes for local artists and musicians, and helped to mount thematic concerts for the benefit of Kenyans and expatriate enthusiasts. My concert was a by-product of such support.
4. A considerable number of my compositions are arrangements of Kenyan folk songs (especially lullabies), which hold a special place in terms of shared identity and validation of our culture and deep tradition of singing.
5. *Kiere* is a word in Meru (one of the Kenyan communities) which celebrates the activities of millet growing and harvesting. The voice text with the same heading speaks of a woman

who fails to grow her own *mwere* (millet) or other crops; and instead chooses to depend on daily hand outs from other farmers.

6. *Wakariru* (a code and non-meaning word) used a warning 'shout' (in song) to alert the day's traveller about hard work, focus.
7. This folk song was very famous between 1963 and 1965 during the celebration of Kenya's independence from the British. It was also a patriotic song to encourage public support and admiration for our national flag.
8. This Gikuyu lullaby is one among several arrangements I have composed with the theme celebrating the 'Kenyan child'. In the past, especially in rural areas, the responsibility of looking after children and their social upbringing was seen as a communal responsibility, hence the notion that *it takes a village to raise a child*.
9. This music was written to celebrate the life of my late, loving sister. She was one of a kind.

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