

Research article

The Concept of Chromaticism in Ghanaian Highlife Music: A Study of Kwadwo Donkoh's *Wobe Ku Me* (You Will Kill Me)

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Abstract

The concept of chromaticism has been a common feature in the discourse of western music especially in Art music. It has been used to explain inflections of expressiveness and structures in music. However, discussion of this concept concerning the study of structures in popular music is rare in musicological circles. Highlife music is generally described as Ghana's popular dance music with three main styles: brass band, dance-band and guitar band as sampled in a popular dance-band tune, *wobe ku me*, (you will kill me) composed by Kwadwo Donkoh and popularized by the Uhuru dance-band in the 1960s. This paper examines the use of chromatics in Ghanaian highlife music using *wobe ku me* (you will kill me) as our point of reference. The article analyses and discusses how chromatics is applied through melody, instrumentation and harmony. An analytical approach to the concept of chromaticism is used to discuss the symbolic meaning of chromatics in Ghanaian highlife music with a view to validate its effects and significance. **Copyright © AJSSAL, all rights reserved.**

Keywords: Chromaticism, popular music, highlife music, dance-band, symbolic meaning, inflections of expressiveness

Introduction

The discussion of Ghanaian highlife music¹ in musicological circles rarely centers on the stylistic usage of the concept of chromaticism. As a result, studies into explaining the symbolic meanings of chromatics through an analysis of its theory and practice are long overdue. Kehinde (2011) citing Simon Blackburn notes that meanings and true propositions are displayed by a process of revealing hidden logical structures beneath the surface form of a statement. In that, for a better understanding and explanation of a musical piece, certain hidden structures beneath their surface form needs to be revealed. The symbolic meanings, as mentioned above, seek to support the underlying motives of the development of highlife music, in its hybrid form, as well as its multiple functions and significance. This paper therefore analyses and discusses how chromatics is applied in highlife music through melody, instrumentation and harmony using Kwadwo Donkoh's *wobe ku me* (you will kill me) as its point of departure. The paper posits that the usage of chromatics in Ghanaian highlife music paves way for the expression of emotions at will in a performance.

Data for this research was collected through a combined effort of musical transcription of a studio recording produced on a compact disc made possible with Microsoft Finale software, and reviewing available literature on the topic, as well as an interview conducted in January 2012 with the composer at his residence. To better analyze the structures of the song, it was crucial to have obtained a hard copy of the musical transcription on paper. The song was re-recorded through a musical instrument digital interface (MIDI) with the assistance of a studio engineer.

¹ Ghanaian highlife music is best described as Ghana's most popular dance music of the 20th century. See Collins (1996, 1989, 1976), Coplan (1976) for detailed discussions on the topic.

Kwadwo Donkoh's song *wobe ku me* (you will kill me) was recorded and popularized by the *Uhuru* dance-band in the 1960s in Ghana. It belongs to the highlife music category 'Swing dance-band'. Swing dance-bands were popular in Ghana between the late 1940s and early 1970s and served the urban Ghanaian elites. The first of these bands set up was the Tempos Dance-Band, which was led by E.T. Mensah. According to Collins (1976), this band became the proto-type for the numerous highlife dance-bands that spurred in the 1950s and 60s. Songs composed for these bands were often by non-members of the bands and usually not performers, but the leader of the band usually arranged the songs. One such example is Kwadwo Donkoh, who is known in highlife circles more as a composer, arranger and producer than a performer. The paper is in three sections; a brief biography of the composer, a discussion of the concept of chromaticism and an analysis of how the concept is applied in the song.

Biographical Sketch of Kwadwo Donkoh

Whittle Opoku Agyeman Kwadwo Donkoh was born on 12 November 1934 to Charles and Agnes Donkoh in Wenchi in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. He started his education at Wenchi and then proceeded to Mfantshipim School in Cape Coast where he attained his High School Certificate in 1955. He gained admission into the University of Ghana in 1956 and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in History in 1959. Kwadwo Donkoh's interest in music started around the 1940s when he would occasionally play on his father's harmonium but as a result of lack in tutorship he could not learn the instrument effectively. Whilst in the university, he became more interested in highlife music as he would attend musical performances by guitar band musicians such as Kobina Onyina, E.K. Nyame, and Yamoah etc. which were organized by the African Music Society and involved scholars. His musical training was mainly through himself and imitating other musicians and his musical abilities are rooted in his compositions and music arrangements.

Kwadwo Donkoh joined the Diplomatic Service after his university education nonetheless his love for music made him write and arrange songs for dance-bands in addition to his diplomatic duties. In 1961, he composed his first popular song *Time for Highlife* for E.C. Arinze's band in Lagos whilst still on official duty as the first secretary to the Ghana High Commissioner in Nigeria. He constantly had problems with superiors because of his constant attachment with musicians. According to him, his subordinates would report him to his superiors as they concluded he concentrated his efforts on music more than his diplomatic duties. Consequently, he was frequently transferred from one country to the other. This however did not discourage him from writing and arranging songs.

In 1969, he resigned from the diplomatic service after nine years and concentrated on his music. He formed his first band, the *Houghas* in that same year. He later formed the *Ogyatanaa* band with the aim of experimenting and performing his own compositions. Kwadwo Donkoh has also been credited with the production and formation of other bands some of which includes the *Abokyi Parts* bands in honor of Kojo Abokyi, one of highlife's greatest singers, and *Wulomei* with which he produced their first two albums in 1975. He has also produced the *Uhuru* dance-band which recorded the song in perspective, Kobina Okai, Ray Ellis, *Ogyatanaa* etc. some of his

compositions include; *nmbobrowa*², *Agya Nyame*³, *obe ye yie*⁴, *yerefrefre*⁵, skin pain etc. Kwadwo Donkoh still writes and arranges songs at seventy-nine and has been working with *Essibons* records on re-producing some of his old compositions. In 2006, he was awarded the Grand Medal, one of the national highest awards for distinguishing himself in music.

The concept of Chromaticism

Kostka & Payne (2009) describe the term chromaticism as a reference to the use of pitches foreign to a key of passage. Perttu (2007: 48) also notes that chromaticism may be defined in different ways but the definition by Dyson and Drabkin (2006) in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* provides a standard characterization. Dyson and Drabkin posit that in melodic and harmonic analysis the term ‘chromatic’ is generally applied to notes marked with accidentals foreign to the scale of the key in which a passage is written. Three forms of chromaticism can be identified as the following: modulation, borrowed chords from secondary keys and chromatic chords such as the augmented sixth chords (Cope 1997: 15). The concept of chromaticism can be explained, thus, as the addition of new notes to an already existing note. This could further be stretched to mean that an additive, which may not synchronize with the existing structure, is chromatic.

Chromaticism holds multiple meanings and defined based on the function or purpose it serves in a particular piece of music. For instance Westerby (1901: 198) notes that chromaticism is when a foreign element is temporary included within a prevailing tonality. Western music refers to a chromatic scale as one that progress in semitones. In other cultural contexts it appears as specific alterations of some tones in certain musical scales. These different concepts of chromaticism are however, based on similar ideas whereby alteration of basic tones produces decorative effects. In such a situation, chromaticism whether it affects semitone scales, the chromatic elements or alteration, is approached in musicological works as a unified phenomenon. Barsky (1996), reiterate this point when he observes chromaticism as an emergent phenomenon which comprises many different historical types and which starts from Antiquity, Byzantium, middle Ages, and the Renaissance up to the 20th century. This article however concerns itself with chromaticism as different forms of chromatic elements as well as alterations.

Analysis of the song

The analytical consideration through which the discussion on the application of chromatics in Ghanaian highlife music is examined includes textual sources, melody, harmony and instrumentation as these best help explain its careful usage. As discussed earlier, the song *wobe ku me* was composed and popularized by the *Uhuru* dance-band in the 1960s. Although Kwadwo Donkoh composed the song, Stan Plange then the leader of the band arranged it for performance. *Wobe ku me* is a song that appreciates the beauty of a woman. A young man speaks of the good

² Literally means ‘sorrowful’

³ Literally means ‘father God’

⁴ Literally means ‘it shall be well’

⁵ Literally means ‘we’re calling’

looks of a lady remarking that her beauty will lead him to death. He laments on how difficult his journey to finding someone like her was and how glad he is to finally find her. He describes how her movement and beauty arouses him. The lyrics are built on repetitions as we find *wobe ku me* recurrent several times throughout the record. It is written in simple Fante language⁶ and without proverbs, which makes the understanding quite easy. The lyrics makes use of vocal extensions such as 'ee', 'oo' and 'a' at the ending of its phrases which aids in the expression of the emotions of the song.

The song is three minutes, eight seconds in duration and its instrumentation can be divided into three sections: the horns, which includes an alto saxophone; two trumpets, in B flat; two trombones; the guitars, which includes a lead guitar and a bass guitar; the percussion, which includes the claves, cowbell, conga drums, and a drum kit. There is also the keyboard and vocals which completes the instrumentation section of the song. The track is composed in the key of D major, has no modulations and can be treated as a strophic form. It begins with a brass introduction before other instruments with exception of the vocals joins in. This is then followed by a vocal solo, and then returns the brass interlude, followed by guitar improvisation, and then the brass repeats again. However this time the brass only incorporates the trombones. The vocal solo then proceeds, followed by the brass then a coda. The vocal solo is performed by a male baritone voice.

Melody

The melodic line of this song can be examined from diverse angles, however since the song is built around the vocals, we consider the vocal solo as the main melodic line. The vocal solo can be considered as being in a binary form (**AB**) where in **A**, the vocal sings in a question and answer form as illustrated below:

Twi	English
1. <i>wobe ku me odo ee wobe ku me</i>	You'd kill me, my love you'd kill me
2. <i>afe dee menya kase</i>	Now I want to say that
3. <i>wobe ku me oo wobe ku me-</i>	You'd kill me, you'd kill me
4. <i>wobe ku me onua ee wobe ku me,</i>	You'd kill me, my brother you'd kill me
5. <i>afe dee menya kase</i>	Now I want to say that
6. <i>wobe ku me oo wobe ku me.</i>	You'd kill me, you'd kill me

Section B then sings:

7. <i>ahuofe befua nie a,</i>	What beauty
8. <i>walkings befua nie a;</i>	What walkings
9. <i>mena me kyere se me kyin kyin</i>	I say I've been wandering

⁶ Fante is the language spoken by the people of Fanti in the Central region of Ghana.

10. <i>me kyin kyin ma nante ma bre,</i>	I am tired of wandering
11. <i>nanso dabi dabi dabi dabi,</i>	But one day, one day, one day, one day
12. <i>woe dee menya kase wobe ku me.</i>	Now I want to say that you will kill me

This melodic line is derived from the common diatonic scale. However, the use of the flattened seventh note is inevitable in this rendition as shown in figure 1 below.



Figure 1

This can be explained from separate perspectives; the traditional vocal practice of the Akan people as Nketia (n.d.) notes, or the blue note that is common in the 12 bar blues of jazz music which had influenced highlife music. These two points are valid to the extent that the composer does not deny the fact that listening to much of jazz music influenced his compositional skill, but at the same time it should be noted that he comes from an Akan musical heritage which are known to rely on the heptatonic scale for their melodies. Be that as it may, we believe the inclusion of the flattened seventh serves a purpose. As noted earlier, the use of the flattened seventh note in jazz creates moods, which may be erotic. Sometimes lead vocalist stress on the note in an improvisatory way to give a certain expression, depending on his mood. However in this song, we believe it is deliberately used to decorate the wording, hence creating a nostalgic feeling of the lady. For instance, the flattened seventh note occurs on the words *odo-ee* and *onua-ee* lines 1 and 4 respectively. Also on the words *me na me* and *kyin kyin me* in line 9, the notes are affected. The words *me na* is sung on the third degree of the note, however this note is lowered by a semitone which starts a descending process that links up with the flattened seventh note on the words *kyin kyin* creating a melancholic movement or expression of need.

Harmony & Instrumentation

The instrumentation of this song as pointed out earlier is made up of a combination of western and Afro-Cuban instruments as well as Ghanaian instruments. These western instruments comprised both melodic and harmonic instruments such as the guitars, brass, keyboard and the drum-kit. The Afro-Cuban instrument in this song is the conga drum whereas the Ghanaian instruments include the claves and the cowbell. Of these instruments, the guitars, keyboard and brass are chromatic in that they can be used to produce chromatic effects. The aggregate of harmony formed by the brass are sometimes chromatically altered chords and dominant seventh chords.

The keyboard serves as the main accompaniment for the vocal solo and employs block chords. In this song, it can be observed that the keyboard uses dissonance, primary and secondary chords. It is realized that the composer employs

D major chord added ninth to support the vocal solo affected by the flattened seventh note in the first line as discussed earlier. This is then resolved to chord IV (G). Below is a bar by bar examination of chords employed by the keyboard and its resolution.

BAR NUMBER	CHORD STRUCTURE
5, 9	D Major added 9 th
6, 10	D ^{9th} – G Major
7, 11, 17	B ⁷ second inversion – E minor
8, 12	A ⁷ second inversion – D Major
13, 14, 15	D Major added 9 th second inversion
16	D half diminished second inversion- G Major
18	A ⁷ third inversion – D Major

The figure shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff is for the vocal line (d. Vcl) and the bottom staff is for the keyboard (Kb). The key signature is D major (two sharps). The vocal line has lyrics: "Wo be ku mi o do'ee wo be ku mi a fe de me nya ka se wo be ku". The keyboard part shows chord progressions corresponding to the table above. The score is divided into measures, with bar numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 18 indicated.

Figure 2

These chord progressions and its resolutions provide some form of support the vocal solo of the song. The dominant seventh chord is sometimes built on the tonic and sometimes on the dominant. Analyzing the chord progression you observe that the dominant built on the tonic are used as passing chord to the subdominant major chord and the major seventh chord built on the dominant are usually resolved to the tonic major of the chord. This provides some form of finality to the song.

The guitar in this song plays broken chords, but occasionally blocked chords. While playing the broken chords, the guitarist employs the two finger picking technique of West African guitar plucking style, which creates a syncopated repetitive rhythm (Collins 2006). He makes use of a lot of flattened seventh chords, which fill in the gaps that are created by the keyboard playing block chords. It also serves as an adhesive, which binds the melodic section together. The bass guitar, on the other hand plays a 'walking' bass pattern, which is typical of highlife tunes composed for swing dance-bands within the era the song was produced. It should be acknowledged that occasionally the bass guitar uses a flattened seventh note and a flattened fifth note. This adds colour to the bass line and the entire song as a whole.

Conclusion

By analyzing *wobe ku me*, it is apparent that the composer employed the concept of chromaticism in his composition. This is evident in the melody, harmony as well as the type of instrumental resources he employed. The findings here reflect an understanding of symbolic meanings within this piece. We can conclude that there is some form of psychological effect achieved when the flattened seventh note was used which depicted emotions. This is made evident with the expression of affection through the vocal inflections. The composer's use of chromatic notes and chords could be as a result of the fusion that highlife music connotes, as jazz music employs a lot of chromaticism especially in improvisations. Expression of emotions is enhanced by the usage of the concept of chromaticism in this song.

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