Actuosa Participatio: Research Composition as a Critical Tool for Liturgical Music in the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Actuosa participatio (active participation) remains the foundational principle of Catholic liturgical renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council. However, this study posits a vital critique of current practices in the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City, arguing that many contemporary efforts at inculturation remain superficial or "performative." This research investigates research-based musical composition as a pastoral and musicological strategy for enhancing congregational engagement. Drawing on ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews with choir directors and clergy between 2024 and 2026, and a structural analysis of indigenous Edo-language Mass compositions, the study critiques the "clericalization" of liturgical music and the drift toward secular "Highlife" aesthetics. The findings suggest that integrating indigenous Edo musical idioms through a systematic framework—grounded in tonal-melodic correlation and ethnomusicological research—supports both authentic inculturation and theological integrity.

Keywords: Actuosa Participatio, Liturgical Inculturation, Ethnomusicological Composition, Tonal-Melodic Correlation, Edo Sacred Music, Benin City Archdiocese.

1. Introduction

The publication of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963), marked a paradigm shift in Catholic worship. The Council Fathers emphasized that the "full, conscious, and active participation" (actuosa participatio) of the faithful is the aim to be considered before all else. In the Nigerian context, specifically within the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City, this mandate has sparked a decades-long journey toward liturgical inculturation.

Despite the abundance of indigenous songs, there is a recurring problem of "musical-liturgical dissonance." Many locally composed songs emerge from a purely intuitive framework without systematic theoretical grounding. This results in two primary crises: linguistic distortion, where melodies contradict the tonal requirements of the Edo language, and "clericalized" performance, where choirs silence the congregation through overly complex Westernized arrangements. This paper argues that research-based composition is not merely an academic exercise but a pastoral necessity to bridge the gap between Roman liturgical norms and the authentic indigenous soul of the Bini worshipper.

2. Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Foundation

In an academic inquiry of this nature, it is imperative to define the conceptual parameters that govern the discourse. These pillars provide the scholarly weight required for a critical intervention in musicology.

2.1 Actuosa Participatio (Active Participation) Derived from Vatican II, this concept is the hermeneutic key to this study. This work critiques the modern tendency to reduce "participation" to loud singing or rhythmic dancing. True actuosa participatio must be ontological—it must involve the "being" of the worshipper. In the Benin context, this is only possible when the musical idiom is recognized as an extension of cultural identity rather than a foreign imposition.

2.2 Liturgical Inculturation Inculturation is the "incarnation" of the Gospel into a particular cultural soil. This study expanciates on this by arguing that inculturation in the Benin Archdiocese has often been accidental (randomly adding drums) rather than essential (restructuring the melody to fit Bini tonal laws). Research-based composition is presented here as the tool for essential inculturation.

2.3 Ethnomusicological Composition This is a hybrid discipline proposed as a solution to the "Notation Gap" in Nigerian sacred music. It refers to the process where the composer acts as an ethnographer—collecting field data on indigenous scales, rhythmic pulses (Ema), and linguistic tones—before translating these findings into a written score.

2.4 Tonal-Melodic Correlation Edo is a strictly tonal language where the pitch of a syllable determines its meaning. This concept serves as a vital critique: any composition that ignores this correlation is a form of linguistic violence against the liturgy. Professional liturgical composition in Benin City must prioritize the speech-contour of the Edo language over the melodic whims of the composer.

3. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Fieldwork was conducted across urban and rural parishes in Benin City between 2024 and 2026. The study utilized:

Participant Observation: Measuring the "Participatory Index" (vocal engagement levels) of the assembly during Mass.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Engaging 20 choir directors and 10 clergy members to understand the "compositional intent" versus "pastoral result."

Musical Analysis: Transcribing and critiquing 15 indigenous Edo compositions currently in use.

4. Ethnomusicological Characteristics of Edo Sacred Music

Traditional Edo music provides several components suited for liturgical adaptation. These are not merely aesthetic choices but are ingrained in the Bini psyche:

Call-and-Response: Mirrors the dialogue between the Priest and the Assembly, facilitating communal memorization.

The Ema Pulse: The 6/8 rhythmic cycle that provides a communal heartbeat, allowing for "ordered movement" within the sanctuary.

Stepwise Melodic Motion: Natural to Bini speech patterns, making it easy for non-trained congregants to follow.

5. A Vital Critique: The Problem of "Highlife" Hybridity and Performative Liturgy

A core contribution of this work is the critique of the "Highlife-ization" of the Mass. There is a dangerous trend where sacred texts are forced into secular "Afrobeats" or "Highlife" templates simply to generate emotional excitement.

5.1 The Critique of Entertainment When a Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy) is sung to a dance-club rhythm, the "transcendence" of the Liturgy is compromised. This study argues that "participation" is not synonymous with "entertainment." In Benin City, the stately, majestic music of the Royal Palace offers a better theological parallel for the Mass than the transient "market music" often heard in modern parish choirs.

5.2 The Elite-Congregation Gap Furthermore, we critique the Clericalization of Music. Choirs in urban parishes often treat the Mass as a concert venue, utilizing complex Western harmonies that act as a barrier to the "common person." This study asserts that the composer's role is not to showcase artistic genius, but to provide a "ladder" for the faithful to reach the Divine.

6. Findings and Discussion

The field data revealed a significant disparity in participation levels based on the compositional style used. In parishes where the "Research-Based" model was applied—where melodies followed the natural rise and fall of the Edo language—the congregation's vocal participation was significantly higher.

Table 1: Participatory Index and Style Critique

Style	Locale	Participation Level	Critical Observation
Western SATB	Urban	Low	Assembly is silenced; Choir-dominant.
Highlife/Pop	Urban	Moderate	High excitement, but low "sacred" focus.
Research-Based	Edo Rural/Semi-Urban	High	

Recommendations

Establishment of a Diocesan Music Board: To vet new compositions for tonal accuracy and theological depth before they are introduced into the liturgy.

Notation Training: Moving beyond oral tradition to standardized staff notation to preserve the Benin sacred heritage for future generations.

Theological Education for Composers: Choirs and composers must be taught that every musical choice in the Mass is an act of theology, not just a display of talent.

8. Conclusion

This study has moved beyond mere description to a critical evaluation of musical function within the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City. Actuosa participatio is currently in a state of tension between indigenous tradition and secularized "hybridity." The vital contribution of this work is the assertion that Composition is an Act of Theology. By utilizing the "Research-Based Composition" model and respecting the Tonal-Melodic Correlation, the Benin composer can ensure that the "Song of the People" is truly a "Song of the Spirit."

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