



# THE SACRED IN OPERA

A PROJECT OF THE NATIONAL OPERA ASSOCIATION

THE SACRED IN OPERA

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## From the Editor

A new Editorial Team begins with this Newsletter. After a successful run of leadership by Ruth Dobson as chair of the Sacred in Opera committee, and editor of the SIO Newsletter, we (John Pfautz and Kurt-Alexander Zeller) find ourselves trying to fill her shoes. Ruth has become the Vice President in charge of Conventions. Fortunately, Daniel Hammond, a former student of John's is willing to continue with the Newsletter formatting and design, as well as lending his critical eye.

By way of introduction:

I first met Ishaya Yarison on my first trip to Africa, Spring term sabbatical of 2005. Yarison was a young faculty member at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, in Ogbomoso, many hours away from his home in Northern Nigeria. His education had been heavily guided by an American missionary, music professor at that seminary - Dr. Paul Davidson. Under Dr. Davidson's leadership spanning fifteen years, Yarison and scores of others received a solid and rigorous music education with the goal of preparing them for church music ministry or further ventures into higher education. Davidson's legacy continues on both sides of the Atlantic with outstanding graduates. In preparation for my sabbatical experience at the Nigerian Seminary, Davidson told me about a young man who seemed to have a real flare for composition. Upon my arrival there, Yarison showed me some of his compositions. We began a long relationship of communication about musical inspirations, favorite compositions, his poetry, and the general struggle of facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles for a talented, yet poor, young composer from Nigeria.



Through a series of events, seemingly orchestrated by a higher power, Ishaya Yarison has completed a Ph.D. in Music Composition from the University of Minnesota. His dissertation took the form of an opera to which we dedicate this edition of the SIO Newsletter. We think you will be engaged by the topic and amazed at the organizational process that Yarison shares with us, and whet your appetite to hear the music. As of yet, there have been no performances of the opera. Perhaps, by devoting this newsletter edition to it, *I AM Meditation* will inspire one of you to produce this work, in full or in part. I would like to do that; produce it locally, then in a shared production in West Africa. We'll see what comes of it. Want to join me?

Enjoy,  
John Pfautz  
Co-Editor

# Account of *I AM Meditation*, Opera in Seven Tableaus

by I.J. Yarison

## Impulse

Is faith relevant in an increasingly secular society where the idea of God appears to have become obsolete? Can a believer affirm his beliefs in an environment that is more and more hostile to them? Are the fundamentals of Christian beliefs a fit subject for artistic engagement? These questions informed my choice of subject, as I sought to create an art object that reflects my aesthetic conviction that art is a carrier of ideas and beliefs and finds relevant only within the aegis of a community, the fabric of which it should support, challenge, help refine, or undergird.

Every artist has an existential core, that which informs not only his or her outlook on life but also his or her personal lifestyle. The artist's cultural background, education, ideology and conviction are all part and parcel of this existential core, and his or her art cannot but be derivative of this. If art, no matter how abstract, is not without meaning, then it is only so within a given community, whether cultural, subcultural, cultic, or institutional. Having decided on the form of my intended art object, I chose a subject that enables me to apply the above in praxis. *I AM Meditation* is a reflection on the questions of provenance, evil, and salvation, by means of Jesus' "I am" declarations from the Gospel of John.

## "I am" Sayings

The "I am" declarations are at essence humanistic since they respond to the human problem—the latent hunger and search for the good life. Philosophers have thought that the good life is the happy life. But what constitutes happiness? It cannot be epicurean indulgence in pleasure, since even here satisfaction does not come from the obvious pleasures—which lead only to renewal of further desire and pain—but from moderation and the overcoming of the fear of death. Does it lie in stoic disdain for wealth in preference for an austere existence? This would imply that the poor are happier than the rich, a very debatable notion if not downright fallacious. Does it consist in right reason (*ratio recta*)? Disastrous outcomes have resulted from ideas supposedly spawned by right reasoning. Is it what is fitting? Then either humans do not know what it is, or they do, but are either prevented from getting it or lack the power to pursue and attend it.

Jesus' "I am" declarations offer solution to different forms of the human quest: the quest for food and satisfaction (I am the bread of life: *John 6:35*), for knowledge and enlightenment (I am the light of the world: *John 8:12*), for meaning (I am the door: *John 10:9*), for protection and security (I am the good shepherd: *John 10:11, 14-15*), for immortality (I am the resurrection: *John 11:25-26*), for true spiritual awakening and abundant life (I am the way, the true and the life: *John 14:6*), and for a perfect world devoid of evil (I am the true vine: *John 15:1,4,6*). Quite apart from the fact that Jesus' ascription of the title "I am" to himself meant he was equating himself with God, since it was God who revealed himself to Moses and the Hebrews as the "I am," a fact well-known to those to whom Jesus addressed these sayings, the fact that there are seven of them is also significant because seven is a biblical number of completion and perfection. It is also the number of God. In essence, Jesus is the solution to all human needs and problems.

The "I am" sayings are not in themselves dramatic per se, even if each has its own setting, a specific situation to which Jesus responded, and a specific reaction from those who heard the saying. But since my aim was to examine the reason why the problem of evil—which gives rise to the various dimensions of the human problem—exists in the first place, and since I intended to do so through a dramatic form, I had to turn them first into a coherent narrative and then into dramatic action, regardless but not unmindful of their original contextual genesis. If the "I am" declarations are a response to a given condition, it is only natural to begin by examining this condition. Accordingly, my narrative and dramatic sketch began there, under three heads: Evidence of Evil, Origin of Evil, and Solution to Evil. The focus on evil results both from the understanding that it underpins human suffering, to which the "I am" sayings respond, and the fact that it is the force that vitiates universal order, resulting in the so-called, and mistaken notion of, acts of God. The incipient sketch took the following form.

## **I. EVIDENCE OF EVIL**

***Proposition: There is evil in the word as evidenced by human suffering.***

### **TABLEAU I: LOSS OF PERFECTION**

DRAMA: (Paradise)

- Adam and Eve driven out of Eden
- Eventual redemption foreshadowed, Satan is confounded and enraged
- Chorus of Mothers and Children celebrate the foreshadowed “I AM.”

### **TABLEAU II: THE FIRST MURDER**

DRAMA: (Beyond Paradise)

- The first murder instigated by Satan
- Choral threnody on evil

### **TABLEAU III: THE SUFFERING MULTITUDE**

DRAMA: (Beyond the Sea of Galilee)

- Hungry multitude (Kyrie Eleison)
- Messiah Revealed (Processional)
- Feeding of the multitude
- Revelation (I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE)
- Response: Break Thou the Bread of Life (Mary Magdalene)

## **II. ORIGIN OF EVIL**

### **TABLEAU IV: ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND EVIL**

STROPHE I

***Proposition: The presence of evil must mean there cannot be God.***

DRAMA: (Art Gallery)

- Couple reflects on an art work that states that there is no God.
- Militant declaration of the fact, putting under the rule of the same belief. (March of Ideology)

***Conclusion: If there is no God, how did the singularity begin?***

- Messenger: “If You Would Listen...”
- REVELATION: I AM THE LIGHT

STROPHE II: *Discourse on the Origin of Evil*

DRAMA: (Art Gallery)

- Satan's disobedience and fall
- Satan in league with (or rather employs the use of) the Ideologues
- DANSE MACABRE (Deluded worshippers dance around Satan: trances and contortions)
- REVELATION: I AM THE DOOR
- RESPONSE: Many worshippers abandon Satan to follow Jesus

**III. SOLUTION TO EVIL**STROPHE III: *Discourse of God's Provision (pro-vision) for the Problem of Evil*

DRAMA: (Art Gallery)

- Evil is defined and God's solution stated
- Praise for God's solution
  - Chorus of Mothers
  - Chorus of Children
  - Chorus of Disciples
  - On-stage musicians
- REVELATION: I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD
- RESPONSE: The Lord is my Shepherd
- Instigated by Satan, Ideologues attack Jesus and arrest him. Singers and the disciples scatter, chased by the soldiers.
- Orchestral Interlude: *Discipuli Agonistes* (Peter's agony)
- The Evangelist enters, bearing news that the Lord has ascended on high. The scattered crowd returns, prompted by the jubilant Peter.

**TABLEAU V: EVIDENCE THAT JESUS IS THE "I AM": HIS RESURRECTION**

DRAMA: Post-Resurrection Worship Service

- Homily of John: Discourse on things to come
- REVELATION (Jesus appears in the midst of the worshippers). I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE
- RESPONSE: Commission

**TABLEAU VI: GOOD NEWS OF JESUS' RESURRECTION AND SALVATION PROCLAIMED**

DRAMA: Recessional and the gathering of the peoples of the nations

- REVELATION: Jesus appears to two believers, breaks bread with them: I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

## TABLEAU VII: ASCENSION, BEATIFICATION, WARNING ABOUT GREAT DECEPTION

DRAMA: Jesus disappears in a bright light, the apostles too are translated; John is arrested.

- Appearance of three deceivers. Some believers abandon their faith to follow them. Admonition to stand firm.
- REVELATION: I AM THE TRUE VINE
- Glorification of the saints. (scene in heaven)
- Worship of Saints Triumphant
- Supplication of Saints Militant

The sketch provided a panoramic view of both the narrative and dramatic progression of the work. But while the “idea” received logical form, its dramatic potential remained latent, primarily because what I was attempting to capture in one art object was an entire field of thought in perhaps a form that did not seem readily suitable for it. The next thing I did, then, was to transpose the idea into dramatic action, as follows:

### I. SUFFERING

#### 1. BEYOND PARADISE (TRIO)

- First couple driven out of paradise by a mighty angel (Orchestral).
- The two “work” out their situation.
- Satan mocks them and sabotages their work
- Hope given by “The Messenger” (Accompagnato) and the foreshadowed Theotokos (Chorus of Mothers and Children)

#### 2. SAME AS PREVIOUS

- Couple’s sons (Cain & Abel) engaged in “work.”
- Satan instigates envy and the first murder
- Choral threnody

#### 3. BEYOND GALILEE

- Destitute multitude cry out for help (chorus: Kyrie Eleison)
- Helper (Savior) announced by The Messenger
- Helper revealed (Processional: Jesus and His disciples, banners announce His titles): “Lift Up Your Heads”
- Narrative (Mary Magdalene) as Jesus healed the multitude
- Feeding of the multitude (Chorus of Disciples)
- I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE

### II. DISCOURSE ON GOD’S EXISTENCE AND EVIL

#### 1. ART GALLERY

- Dialogue (Duet) between a sceptic and “Modern Woman,” a believer.
- March of Ideologues (soldiers), the singing of their ironic chorus
- Satan appears, chased out of heaven, connives with Ideologues
- Messenger: If they Would Listen (solo)

- Jesus enters: I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD
- Dance of Delusion: Worshippers around Satan (trances and contortions).
- Jesus and the disciples appear: I AM THE DOOR
- Many of the erstwhile worshippers of Satan abandon him to follow Jesus, but Judas Iscariot forsakes Jesus and joins Satan and the Ideologues
- Jesus and His followers exit, Satan and his follower, too.

## 2. AS PREVIOUS

- Monologue on evil and God's solution (Solo and Chorus of Mothers and Children)
- Enter Jesus: I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD
- Chorus of Mothers, Children, and Disciples (The Lord is My Shepherd)
- Enter soldiers (Ideologues) and arrest Jesus. They chase off His followers
- Disciples' Sorrow (Orchestral)
- The Messenger Announces Jesus' triumph (The Lord Has Ascended on High)

## III. SALVATION AND THINGS TO COME

### 1. POST-RESURRECTION WORSHIP SERVICE

- Homily of John the Evangelist
- Resurrected Jesus appears in the midst of the worshippers: I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE
- Evangelist commissions the worshippers

### 2. RECESSIONAL (WITH BANNERS)

- Proclamation of the Good News of resurrection and salvation (Chorus)
- Gathering of the peoples of the nations (Mary and Chorus)
- Jesus appears with two men (Road to Emmaus), reveals himself through the breaking of bread: I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

### 3. GLORIFICATION OF BELIEVERS

#### A. EARTH

- In the full view of the people Jesus is caught up in a bright light and disappears (Orch.)
- While still astounded, the same happens to the apostles, one after the other
- John the Evangelist is arrested, but returns to warn the believers of the coming Great Deception
- Three deceivers appear (Trio)
- A number of believers abandon their faith.
- John calls on all to stand firm, some of the errant believers return.

#### B. HEAVEN

- The glorified Jesus appears: I AM THE TRUE VINE
- The glorified apostles are crowned as Jesus sings

- Chorus of Heavenly Worshipper (“Worthy...” “How Long...”)
- Jesus: BLESSED ARE THOSE...
- Orchestral interlude, triumphant saints exalted

### C. EARTH

- Saints Militant pray to be kept in God’s love (Chorus)

The foregoing, while representing the logical progress of my work on the opera, was in reality more fluid. The seed for what is described under “impulse” above had been sown a long time before this work was attempted. It also took me quite a while to settle on the story I wanted to tell. My initial desire was to adapt the story of Revelation or do the story of Job. When a singer friend of mine thought the “I am” sayings could make for a good solo setting, I realized they could help me tackle the genealogy of evil and its solution, a subject I had been occupied with for a long time. The first thing I did was to write in one sweep, late one night, what became the libretto of the work. Out of this came the above narrative and dramatic outlines.

### Execution

What remained, then, was to execute the drama. I employed a number of devices. The first was the use of recurrent symbolic characters. On the one hand there is the “Voice of Hope” in the guise of John the Baptist, who later metamorphoses into John the Evangelist and delivers a homily about things to come and also warns the Saints Militant about deceivers and the coming Great Deception. John appears either where there is misery in the opera, enjoining the people to listen for the voice of the I AM with “the inner ear of the heart and the discerning ear of the Spirit,” or at points of decision. For example, he appears during the dialogue between the sceptic and “Modern Woman.” His admonition to “listen” is followed by the appearance of Jesus, revealing himself at the “Light of the World.”

On the other hand there is the idea of the Mother of God (Theotokos), metamorphosing from Eve to lead the Chorus of Mothers and Children, signifying the hope to come, then appearing at the scene of the feeding of the multitude as Mary Magdalene, leading the child with the loaves of bread and fish to Jesus, which results in the miracle of the multitude. Later she appears in Tableau IV as “Modern Woman” to lay out the genealogy of evil and God’s solution for it. Finally, she appears as Mary the Mother of Jesus in the last three Tableaus. John’s music is cyclic, accompanied by solo trombone set over long pedal-points in the cello and double bass. Mary’s music is more varied, dictated by the direction of each specific scene.

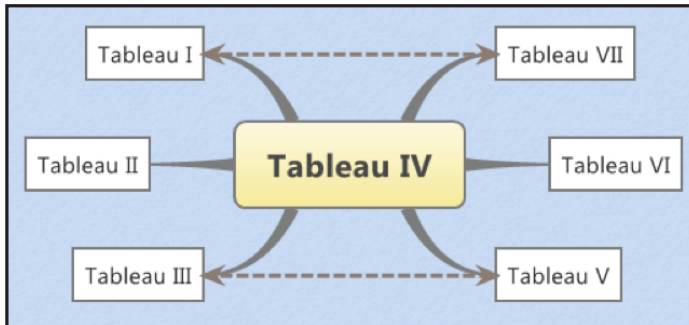
Central to the opera, of course, are the “I am” declarations themselves. Dramatic actions lead up to each of them. For example, the suffering of the multitude in Tableau III, even the evidence of evil that precedes this, all build up to the revelation of Jesus as the bread of life. We have seen above how the scene with the sceptic and the ideologues in Tableau IV leads to the revelation of Jesus as the light of the world. As the only door to life, he appears at the scene of delusional worship, and so on. Long upper or low sustained notes characterize Jesus’s music while solo instruments (especially cello) accompany his singing.

I put into the work tokens, in the form of the organ, hymn texts, and tunes, to signify the Christian community, the central story of which it dramatizes. The song of Adam, Eve, and Satan in the opening scene of the opera is a hymn text by Adelaide Anne Procter (My God, I Thank Thee). Mary Magdalene responds to the feeding of the multitude by singing the text, “Bread Thou the Bread of Life.” The Ideologues in Tableau IV, while executing an offensive salute, sing Joseph Addison’s “The Spacious Firmaments on High.” John’s Homily is declaimed over quotations of “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden,” “O Come and Mourn with Me Awhile,” and “Sweet By and By.” Likewise, the orchestra quotes from “Christ lag in Todes Banden” during the sorrow of the disciples.

There are, as can be expected, other compositional devices in the work. For example, at the very beginning of the opera is a five-measure deformed tune that later undergirds the major portion of John’s Homily. This, naturally, is of symbolic significance. There are other hidden tunes, like “The Comforter Has Come” in the double bass well-concealed somewhere in the work. Another quotes Handel’s “Every Valley Shall be Exalted,” when the chorus

sings “Their Voice Has Gone Out” in Tableau VI. Strains of Brahms and Mozart are heard elsewhere in the work. I endeavored (and I hope I succeeded) to do this meaningfully and tastefully.

But perhaps the most significant unifying device in the work is structural. It is organized as a palindrome, with Tableau IV central and the others spanning progressively and retrogressively from it in terms of its central subject. The following diagram, from the introduction to the work, illustrates this:



Loss in Tableau I is answered by reattainment in Tableau VII, where “vine” signifies regained paradise. Death and lamentation in Tableau II are answered by the good news of salvation in Tableau VI. Misery of the multitude in Tableau III is answered by the worshipping congregation in Tableau V. These relationships occur at the musical level as well. For example, the music of “The Messenger” in Tableau I is recalled in Tableau VII, with only the “spinning-out” sections different to reflect the affect of each scene. The song of the three deceivers in Tableau VII echoes the song of Adam, Eve and Satan in Tableau I. Musical events in Tableau VI correspond to events in Tableau II. Both Tableaus III and IV make strong use of the organ, and I have already mentioned the cyclical music of John the messenger. These are only a few of the unifying devices of the work.

## Scoring

I made copious use of the chorus, which symbolizes the work of the people in the liturgical sense, to help dramatize the subject of the opera. This is so because liturgy is communal, and the chorus, like the communal action in liturgy, signifies unity of purpose and belief. The chorus is of two types in *I AM Meditation*, onstage and offstage. It thus functions like the Greek chorus. The offstage chorus adds brio and depth to the onstage group singing. However, it does not always participate in onstage singing, and where it is not merely supporting the onstage chorus, it provides commentary on the unfolding narrative: (Threnody, Hear their Cry, Lift Up Your Heads, Surely Goodness..., Their Voice..., Keep Us). Onstage singing demands four divisions of the cho-

rus: Chorus of Mothers, Chorus of Children, Chorus of Disciples, and Chorus of Worshippers. Mothers and Children signify birth and regeneration. The disciples participate in Jesus’ actions in the opera. Delusional worship of Satan in Tableau IV finds correspondence in heavenly worship in Tableau VI.

The principal characters of the opera are three: Jesus (Baritone), John the Baptist—also as John the Evangelist—(Baritone), Eve—also as Mary, Mary Magdalene, and “Modern Woman” (Soprano). The minor characters are six: Adam (Tenor), Satan (Bass), Man in the Gallery (Baritone), Three Deceivers (Contralto, Tenor, Baritone). The demand on the minor characters is minimal. Each sings only once in the opera. The score calls also for non-singing characters: Angel in Tableau I, Cain and Abel in Tableau II, Boy with fish and bread in Tableau II, Peoples of the Nations in Tableaus VI & VII, Two men with Jesus in Tableau VII. All these can be culled from the onstage chorus.

Instrumental demand is moderate, requiring only that the string section be of adequate size (they do divide quite often. For example, both strings I and II sections divide, and violas, cellos, and basses do so as well.). The woodwind section comprises of the flute (doubling piccolo and treble recorder), clarinet in B-flat (doubling bass clarinet in B-flat), and bassoon. The brass section calls for horn in F, trumpet in B-flat, trombone, and tuba. Percussion section consists of timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel, harp, and piano. I have already mentioned the use of organ in the work. Whereas one player is sufficient for both woodwind and brass sections, it is preferable that more players be used where available.

## Music

But what should the listener expect to hear in listening to the work? He or she should expect to hear great choral writing. The threnody, “Hear Their Cry,” and “Lift Up Your Head” in Tableau II, “Surely Goodness and Mercy” in Tableau IV, “Their Voice Has Gone Out” in Tableau VI, and “Keep Us By Your Love” in Tableau VII are all solid choral numbers akin to what one would hear in an oratorio. Added to this are onstage choral numbers that, I believe, the listener will find satisfying. The “Kyrie Eleison,” the Chorus of Disciples written in 12 parts: “Master, the People are Hungry,” the Danse Macabre, the Chorus of the Soldiers, the Chorus of Mothers and Children should all give the listener aesthetic satisfaction.



The listener will hear wailing in the orchestra in the threnody; light, coloristic scoring in the opening number and in the Chorus of Mothers and Children; extended solo introductions; solo accompaniments to the solo numbers for the flute, bass clarinet in B-flat, trombone, violin, viola and cello. The listener will hear evocation and tribute paid to pieces from familiar tradition, all woven into the original music of the work. The introduction to the first murder, the interlude following the feeding of the multitude and the one following the arrest of Jesus allow the listener to hear the orchestra as a differentiated color. The listener will hear a certain accent in the music, resulting from the composer's background, especially in "Surely Goodness and Mercy" and "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." In sum, if the listener comes to *I AM Meditation* without preconceptions and bias, there is no reason why the musical experience, besides the dramatic one, should not be a positive one.

## Presentation

At one level *I AM Meditation* is a communal ritual that enacts the life and office of this community's leader. At another, it articulates the fundamentals of Christian theology. At yet another, it is an epistemology of a particular view of reality. Preparation and presentation, including the choices for the mise en scène should be sensitive to this. It is possible to perform only the "I am" declarations. (This will last between 35 to 40 minutes.) It is also possible to perform the work beginning only at scene 2 of Tableau II with the chorus, "Hear Their Cry," and ending at Tableau VI with the recessional, this though would mean that the last two "I am" declarations are left out. But beginning and ending thusly captures the core of the work's Christian message: the revelation of Jesus as messiah, his rejection, arrest, death, resurrection, and the proclamation of this fact. In this form, it is suitable for even a small church production, say, for example, during the Easter period. It reduces performance time by 50 minutes. It is preferable, of course, that the work be performed in its entirety to bring into focus the its subject.

But is *I AM Meditation* suitable only for the Christian community? By no means. Handel's *Messiah* similarly articulates the elements of the Christian story and faith, and yet no one thinks twice about performing it in the secular space or the Passions of J.S. Bach, which treat the same subject. Considered as a certain way of viewing reality, there is no reason *I AM Meditation* could not be performed in the secular space, especially since, as an artifact, it helps (or holds the potential to) foster community building, a community that functions as a genuine carrier of meaning and cultural truth.

After careful study of the score for Ishaya Yarison's *I AM Meditation*, composer Jacob Bancks wrote these words:

*"A composer could scarcely choose a more epic set of themes than Ishaya Yarison has in his I AM Meditations: all of human history; the struggle between good and evil; the incarnation, ministry, and resurrection of Christ; and the status of religious belief in the postmodern West. But as a trained theologian, Yarison is certainly equipped to tell these monumental stories, and it seems clear from examining his fervent and meticulous score that, for this work at least, no narrower lens will do. What we end up with is traditional narrative coupled with in-depth theological reflection, placing his work as much in the spirit of Hildegard's Ordo Virtutum as more recent examples of sacred opera like Britten's Prodigal Son or Messiaen's Saint François.*

*Yarison's music is complex yet transparent, and his careful text-setting shows his supreme respect for his libretto, much of which was drawn from sacred scripture. I-AM Meditations is clearly the work of an artist with much to say and eager, even anxious, to say it."*



# SIO Interview with the Composer

**SIO:** Tell us about your path as a composer.

**IJY:** Composition for me began as a realization that I, too, could write a song. I was about 12 at the time and a chorister in my home church. The music we sang was by indigenous composers. Harcourt White's music (familiar to the west) is a good example of how this music sounded. I just wrote a song and gave it to our choirmaster. Although I don't believe the song was any good, Mr. Iliya Sunkuru, the choirmaster, found a way to use a portion of it. I consider Mr. Sunkuru a mentor today, not only because of this experience but also because he nursed the musical flame in me. He is, moreover, the one who cultivated in me the love for literature.

I did not participate in musical activities throughout the six years of my secondary school education, which began when I was 14. But as soon as I completed secondary school, I became immersed in choral activities. I found that a great deal of progress had been made in the meanwhile in terms of repertoire. Choirs in the bigger churches were now singing more elaborate anthems both by Nigerian composers and British composers, especially from the *Empire Anthems* collection, which was in several volumes (about five, I believe). In the city, the combined choirs (amateur guilds) sang anthems by Handel (*Messiah*, especially) and Mozart. (My home town is just about 30 kilometers from the city, so I could just hop on a bus and attend rehearsals in the city). I again realized that I, too, could write anthems in the manner of the ones we were now singing. While I considered my options for University education, I was now heavily involved in choral activities. I was leading our denominational combined choir, the interdenominational combined choir of the area of my upbringing, which is similar to the county in the USA, and participating in the leading city combined choir. I eventually became the choirmaster of this group in 1995. Meanwhile choirs were now singing my own Hausa compositions. This resulted in a collection of choral anthems: *Wakokin Sujada Domin Choir* (Choral Anthems for Worship) in two volumes.

By this time, I was quite sure of where my passion lay and what my calling in life was or should be. I wanted nothing more than to be a musician, specifically a composer and a choral conductor. My acquaintance with Handel had so lit a flame in me that the only way to satisfy this yearning would be to learn how (as much as possible) to compose music of the same pedigree. Limited opportunities in Nigeria meant that educational

and career paths were (and still are) not clear-cut. I had begun participating in the Baptist Music Workshop, held during the summer at seminary in the city. Through this I learned that the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso (in the western part of Nigeria) offered sacred music programs at diploma and degree levels. I promptly applied, wrote the entrance exam, took the proficiency tests, and was accepted into the degree program.

I discovered opera here and could not get enough of it. I was retained by the school to assist in teaching lower level music theory, sight-singing & ear training, tonic sol-fa, beginning conducting, and beginning composition. I enrolled in the master's program when it began in 2001. For my final project, I completed the first act of a projected three acts of an opera on the Prodigal Son. My passion for composition and for opera was beginning to be sated. To pursue my other interest in choral conducting, I applied in 2005 to Luther Seminary's sacred music program to study with Anton Armstrong. After this I entered the University of Minnesota composition program in 2007 to continue my training as a composer. This led to an MA and a Ph. D in music. So my path as a composer has been thus: It began at my home church and expanded to choral activities in my county (local government), then to choral activities in the city and at the national level (in reality it's just the central and northern states and a few churches from Lagos); it continued through the Baptist Music Workshop and through a Baptist Seminary; it then culminated in the United States where I have trained as a conductor and a composer.

**SIO:** Tell us about your path into writing sacred music.

**IJY:** In Nigeria, the church is still the locus of musical activities, specifically the ones leaning towards art music. But even those who end up becoming popular musicians often begin their musical training in the church. It is natural then that I began writing sacred music. My collection of Hausa choral anthems in two volumes (*Wakokin Sujada Domin Choir*, 1995 and 1997) represents my earlier active contribution to sacred music. My goal, as I stated in the preface to the first volume, was to contribute anthems aimed solely at the glory of God and of His Son and at the edification of His church. I published a third collection of anthems in 2003: *Celebration*, a collection for Christmas and Easter.

**IJY (cont'd):** If my earlier compositions are a “natural product” of an upbringing in the church, the same is not true of my opera, *I AM Meditation*. Over the last five years, I have examined carefully the various views of reality. My conclusion is contained in the “if:” the possibility that there may be a reality beyond physical death. It is a gamble (like Pascal says) that is impossible for me to lose. In believing in God in the present life, I lose nothing: I am still intellectually curious and satisfied. I lose nothing by being morally moderate. If then I lose nothing by leading my life as I have chosen to lead it in the present life (enjoying philosophy, poetry, music and other arts, pursuing a professional life, opened to progressive scientific ideas even if not subscribing to every dogma, practicing—as much as possible—the Golden Rule while dismissing Nietzsche’s notion of “noble men,” etc, etc), what would I have lost if it turns out that there’s nothing beyond the present life? My assent to God is not for an after-life reward (that’s beside the point); it is rather a way of life.

I have used art in *I AM Meditation* to undergird my view of reality and the theory of knowledge that this view engenders. So this is a deliberate, rational choice to let my music be a medium of a specific kind of idea, the idea of the sacred and the spiritual.

**SIO: When we hear your music will we be able to identify "African" sounds? Do you bring your Nigerian roots into your compositions? Why or why not?**

**IJY:** Is there such thing as a "German classical music?" I doubt that such absolute distinction exists, although, of course, there may be German elements in classical music in general, a local or regional accent of sorts if you will. Thus, a German writes art music, even if in doing so his Teutonic predilection inevitably breaks through the music. In the same way my aim is not to write "African art music" but simply to write art music that is an outgrowth of who I am: a person who cannot completely escape the British colonial influence still residual in his national heritage; his Christian upbringing which leads to appreciation of writers (or poets) like George Herbert, John Milton, C.S. Lewis and idealist philosophers in general; and a person who has been subjected (or exposed) to the western way of life, thought, and training, with art and music occupying a central part of this. My music should flow out of these different aspects, which combine to form the whole person.

Nevertheless, indeed, my core Nigerian roots underlie everything I do, including music. The Nigerian sound is quite evident in my choral collection, *Celebration*. It is evident in *I AM Meditation* in the choral section of "The Lord is My Shepherd" and in the solo, "I am the

Way, the Truth, and the Life." One can also hear it in other anthems I have written. *Floa* for solo flute is informed by an indigenous myth. *Marks I & II* for piano are at the conceptual level (at least) African or Nigerian.

**SIO: Tell us about your first experiences in the US and with NOA.**

**IJY:** The NOA was a great experience. I got to meet George Shirley, the retired opera singer, and composers Akin Euba (a fellow Nigerian), Nancy Van de Vate, and William Bolcom, among others. I enjoyed the forums, the singing competitions, the opera readings and performances. I found the participants very gracious and eager to help. I have continued to enjoy the newsletters, which allow me to learn about new compositions and about what opera directors are doing.

The USA: first of all, one encounters an explosion of resources. You go to a bookstore and now it is no longer a problem of limited choices but of so many titles and subjects to choose from; it is almost overwhelming. The positive thing is that you can buy nearly anything you want if you have the money, a situation quite different in Nigeria, where resources are rather limited. Or if you cannot buy a thing, for example a book, you are bound to find it at a local library. I was elated to find what I'd call "CD-quality" musical performances all over the twin cities. What delight! I even got to attend live opera performances and live symphony and chamber performances. And now I could hear the famous St. Olaf Christmas concert. I couldn't have imagined all this in Nigeria.



Yarison with Nigerian composer Akin Euba at the 2007 NOA Convention.

**IJY (cont'd):** Socially, while one is aware of the underlying individualism of the culture, it is almost disorienting when one experiences it. Of course, one cannot escape the inevitably culture shock that accompanies living in a different environment. But one discovers that like any other place there are friends to be made and, at every juncture, people to help.

**SIO: What is your dream for this opera? (performed in full? in parts? Performed in Africa?)**

**IJY:** I'd like to see it performed, ideally in full, but if only parts can be done at first, why not? It is possible that the Muson Center in Lagos could perform it, perhaps in conjunction with a group from the USA. It would be wonderful to find a group or a school here in the USA willing to take on the opera and then taking it to Nigeria: Lagos, Ogbomoso, Iwo, Port Harcourt, Abuja, and Kaduna. But this is just a dream right now. In the coming months I will be working on a piano reduction and on creating orchestral parts in hope that I can find a group that is willing to perform it.

**SIO: What other of your compositions should we look for? What compositions are you currently working on?**

**IJY:** I hope to compose an oratorio based on the book of Revelation sometime in the future. The story of Job also interests me. I dream also that I may be able to adapt Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* into an opera or Ola Rotimis' *The God's Are Not To Be Blamed*, an adaptation of Oedipus Rex. While at the University of Minnesota, I began a large scale orchestral work titled "Kwonko" or "The Dawning." It is still at the very beginning stage. I hope to complete it eventually.



Yarison with William Bolcom at the 2007 NOA Convention.

The immediate project is to revise a song cycle I composed in 2010, titled, *Labyrinth* on texts by Margaret Walker. I am still not satisfied with the outer songs. I hope to rectify this soon. Perhaps, because I was burnt out from writing *I AM Meditation*, the only thing I have composed since is a piece for high school band. I have been writing poetry instead, something I also enjoy doing. But this is just a hobby.

## THE SACRED IN OPERA

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