

The Concept of Chromaticism in Highlife Music

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ABSTRACT

The stylistic approach to the employment of chromatic forms in highlife is rarely discussed in musicology. Therefore, the investigation into demystifying the symbolic meanings of chromatics through analysis of its theory and practice is long overdue. However, the symbolic meanings are enumerated with a view to validate the motives behind its evolution such as hybrid of forms or styles, its functions and significance.

Highlife is a musical form that originated in Ghana in the late 1800s and spread to Sierra Leone, Nigeria and other West African countries in the 1920s. It has influenced all subsequent music borne of Africa. Highlife is a fusion of indigenous dance rhythms and melodies with Western sounds such as brass bands, hymns, European foxtrots sprinkled with some Caribbean “kaiso” and Liberian rhythms. The instruments employed in high life include African drums, harmonicas, guitars, and accordions. By the 1930s, three distinct styles of highlife music had emerged: a ballroom dance style for the coastal “elite” class; a village brass band style; and a rural guitar band playing a “less Westernized style” (Dink 2).

By the 40s, bands were appearing along the coast of West Africa and thousands of records were being issued by groups such as Mensah’s Tempo, Ramblers International and Uhuru Dance Band. These bands played at mostly “society” and elite functions. The big band influence of jazz also influenced high life music of that era, and in 1947, the most important highlife band appeared: E.T. Mensah and the Tempos Band, which enjoyed great success and toured the many countries that gave rise to highlife.

Highlife can be compared with the parallel fusion styles such as ragtime, jazz, samba, blues calypso, rumba, swing, rhythm and blues, soul, reggae and disco evolved from African heritage in the new world.

This paper therefore analyses and reviews how chromatics is being applied in Nigerian highlife music through melody, instrumentation and harmony. The analytical approach to the concept of chromaticism is employed so as to demystify the symbolic meanings of chromatics in highlife music with a view to validate its evolution, significance and functions.

INTRODUCTION

The stylistic approach to the employment of chromatic forms in highlife is rarely discussed in musicology. Therefore, the investigation into demystifying the symbolic meanings of chromatics through analysis of its theory and practice is long overdue. However, the symbolic meanings are enumerated with a view to validate the motives behind its evolution such as hybrid of forms or styles, its functions and significance.

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Simon Blackburn reiterates that;

“The meanings and true condition of propositions are displayed by a process of revealing the hidden logical structure beneath the surface form of statements”(45)

Bertrand Russell also proffers and argues that;

“the complexity of a fact justifies why we have to begin with analysis in our epistemology.”(47)

This is an interpretation of a statement made by him earlier which states thus;

“The complexity and analyzability of symbols are more obvious than that of a fact”(47)

Demystifying the meanings of chromatic forms in highlife music through analysis further validates the sociological traits in its evolution. This explains why Theodor Adonor states that;

“A truly outstanding work is a reaction of the horror of history”(19)

The theorist drew aspiration from what Wilhelm Dilthey (1910) expressed, asserting that;

“Every meaningful work is rooted in a meaningful experience” (44) – a motion by Erlebnis half a century earlier.

CHROMATICS IN HIGHLIFE MUSIC

Highlife Melodies

The melodic lines of highlife are often times derived from the common diatonic scale. However, the use of flattened seventh note (VII^b) is most time in evitable in its rendition. This is a result of the blue note that is common in the 12-bar blues traditional Jazz of the Big Band Jazz from which highlife music was derived as in Jazz music; the use of the flattened seventh note is significant in that, it creates mood which may be erotic or otherwise. Sometimes, the lead vocalist stresses the note in an improvisatory manner to given a certain expression which is dependent on his mood.

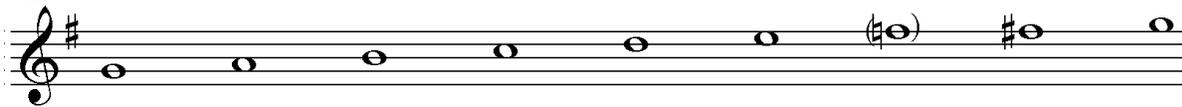
An example could be drawn from a popular Nigeria highlife songs titled, ‘*Ebami so fun Sisi Yen ko mai lo o*’

Transcription of the melody and the resultant scale are shown below.



The image shows a musical transcription of the melody for the song 'Ebami so fun Sisi Yen ko mai lo o'. It consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a treble clef. The first staff contains measures 1 through 5. The second staff contains measures 6 through 11. The third staff contains measures 12 through 16, ending with a double bar line. The melody features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and a final whole note.

Fig. 1a: ‘Ebami so fun Sisi Yen



The image shows the resultant scale for the melody in Fig. 1a. It is a single staff of music in a treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale is written as a sequence of whole notes: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, and C5. The final note, C5, is marked with a sharp sign (#).

Fig. 1b (ii): The Resultant Scale.

In the music shown above the seventh (leading note) and flattened seventh are used interchangeably.

Occasionally, there are some chromatic embellishments in some high life melodies such as ‘*Nike-Nike*’, where flattened third appears in addition to the flattened seventh earlier mentioned are perceived in the second theme of the song. The scale and transcription of the Nike-Nike melody are shown in fig.1c .



The image shows a musical transcription of the melody for the song 'Nike-Nike'. It consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a treble clef. The first staff contains measures 1 through 8. The second staff contains measures 9 through 16, ending with a double bar line. The melody features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and a final whole note.

Fig. 1c Nike Nike



Fig. 1 c(i): The Resultant Scale

The two chromatic notes as appeared in the melodic line are used interchangeably.

Highlife Instrumentation

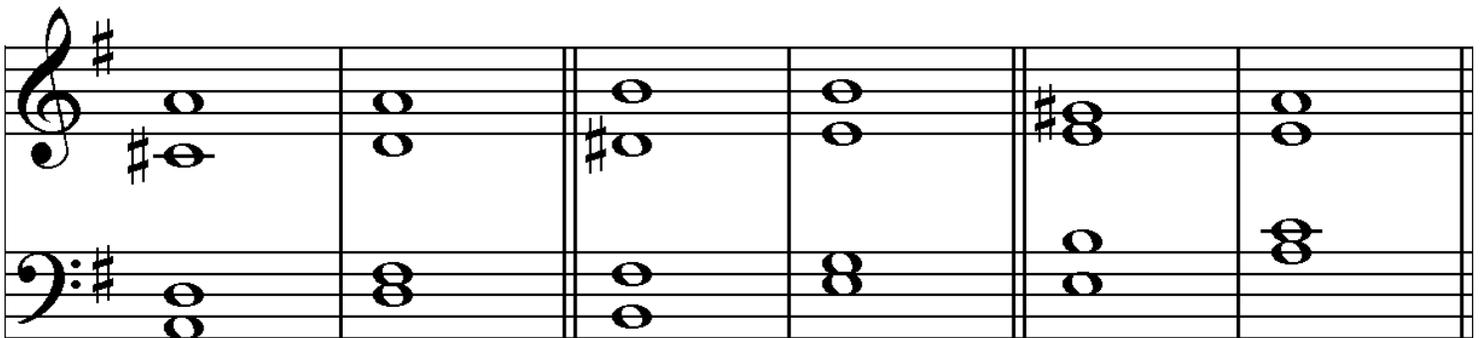
The instruments used in highlife are made up of combination of western instruments (melodic and harmonic) Afro-cuban instruments and some other West African instruments. The various instruments used in traditional highlife music include harmonicas, Brass (Jazz horns), drums, Guitar, Conga drums.

Some melodic or harmonic instruments that are chromatic are the guitar, harmonies and Brass wind instruments.

The brass (as in the brass wind section of the orchestra) is made up of transposing instruments such as the Trumpets, Cornets and Trombone, just as a whole. The aggregate of harmony formed by the brass instruments are sometimes chromatically altered chords, dominant seventh chords and major sixth chords are employed.

The altered chords are built on the supertonic, median and sub-median which are used in form of embellishments intermittently.

Occasionally, supertonic major chord is resolved to chord V, median major chord is resolved to minor chord VI and the sub-median major chord to and minor chord ii as shown in fig M



Super tonic	Its Resolution	Mediant	Its Resolution	Sub-median	Its Resolution
Major Chord		Major Chord		Major Chord	

fig. 1 d

Dominant seventh chord is built on the tonic and sometimes on the dominant. The dominant built on the tonic are used as a passing chord to subdominant major chord (chord IV) where as the major seventh chord that is built on the dominant are usually resolved to tonic major chord (chord II).

The major sixth chord that is built on the tonic is employed alternately as a passing chord to dominant seventh chord that is built on the same tonic. The difference between the two latter chords are the alternating flattened seventh degree of the major scale (flattened leading note) and the sub-median or the major sixth chord.

Guitar is another chromatic instrument that is used in highlife music and plays the same chromatic chords brass wind instruments play as a section in harmony. Unlike each brass wind instrument, guitar is a harmonic instrument which is used to play all the chromatic chords but with varying rhythmic pattern. Upward and downward strokes techniques are employed in playing the chords to accompany highlife music.

In highlife music, guitar player accompanies by strumming with varying rhythmic patterns (occasionally obstinate) and simultaneously laying emphasis on the chromatic notes which he plays alternately with a neighboring diatonic note. For instance he alternates the flattened leading note (seventh degree of the major scale). Occasionally, *appoggiatura* and *acciaccatura* are employed in embellishing accidentals with diatonic notes.

Subsequent development in highlife brings about the use of Bass guitar which is very prominent in the modern highlife. Like other instruments mentioned earlier on, bass guitar is regarded as a harmonic instrument and as well as a chromatic instrument because of the possible twelve-pitch successive notes it can produce. In traditional highlife music, a bass guitar player plays moving bass lines similar to that of traditional twelve-bar blues in Jazz music (swing-like Jazz).

Virtually all the chromatic notes are used rhythmically in embellishing their respective neighbouring notes. That is, each chromatic note is resolved rhythmically to its neighbouring notes (upper or lower neighbouring diatonic notes).

The use of chromatic melody and chromatic harmony is evident in highlife as revealed in the analysis of the popular music.

The findings through analysis of the chromatic forms in highlife therefore reflects its concepts (symbolic meanings) as enumerated below.

A psychological effect is achieved from the emotions that are derived from flattened seventh that is commonly used in the melodic lines of highlife music. This effect is as a result of the groaning expression of fantasy, emphatic notions, affections, erotic feelings with all manner of body gesticulations.

Furthermore, the connotative meanings of the employment of chromatics in highlife music are traceable to historical evolution of the West African style of music. It was mainly used for relaxation at palm-wine bars and the use and reaction of the flattened leading-note portrays intoxication of wine.

The use of chromatic notes and chords is as a result of hybrid of styles or forms that make up the highlife music style and the use of blues scales in traditional Jazz music is a contributing factor to the use of chromatics in highlife music (both in melodic and harmonic forms).

The rhythmic embellishment of chromatics that is employed when accompanying highlife melody is a reflection of African sense of rhythm be it *ostinato* (frequent or regular rhythmic patterns), *hockets*, *hemiola* or *cross-rhythm*. The rhythmic elements distinguish African chromatic usages from Western motives.

The improvisational approach to the employment of chromatics in African popular music like highlife, paves way to expression of thought or mood at will as against the rigidity and strictness in chromatic usages in classical music and its performance.

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