

# Omoge, Queen of African Music

By Benson Idonije

The rich musical culture of the Ikale people of Ondo State first registered an impression on me in the highlife idiom. This was through Crosdale Juba, a fine trumpet player who sang with deep feeling and emotion, but died in mysterious circumstances at the peak of his popularity, after his debut album in 1978.

But Comfort Omoge has consistently remained in its rootsy, downright cultural performance, singing in the typical African traditional style calling out for the group-vocal response of a 15-member aggregation whose ensemble sound is consolidated by well blended rhythmic patterns that take their roots directly from the cultural heritage of Okitipupa.

A talented and foremost female singer on the Nigerian traditional music circuit. Comfort Omoge's popularity should have assumed wider dimensions and her music legendary posture, but lack of encouragement from recording companies who are busy dissipating their energies on imitative music and foreign idioms, has slowed down her progress. She has great potentials for being a star of international repute from Africa.

The last time she recorded was 1980 for "Afrodisia," and since then nothing has come from her rich cultural repertoire. Her music is dying for production for the international market as she has a voice as strong as Mariam Makeba's.

Listening to her is a pleasant experience, and even though her songs are based on the folklorish tradition instead of mere social commentaries, she has a way of structuring them into distinct and remarkable melodies which she sings with such a naturally powerful voice and effortless ease at high, low and middle registers.

Omoge's music has several striking qualities to recommend it for general acceptability. The singing style which is dominated by her solo voice, has become tested and found qualitatively pleasant to listen to. She does not dabble into irrelevant lines for extra flourish and improvisation. Rather, she is thematic, and keeps her singing within the limits of the melodic structure. In addition, she is expressive and comes out with a clarity that conveys easily understandable meaning.

She operates with an accompaniment that does not overstate its percussive effects with intricate rhythmic patterns. All the instruments which are local and indigenous are very well coordinated by a leader who believes in using them effectively for the cohesiveness of the ensemble.

All these qualities and the elements that constitute them manifest themselves in her live as well as studio recordings. But the true dynamics of her music were faithfully captured by Afrodisia in 1980 on an album which represents the typical drums and voices the unlimited potentials and the uninhibited craftsmanship inherent in African music.

Titled "Irore re yi ran" with Comfort Omoge's portrait conspicuously displayed on the front cover, dressed in full traditional attire. The other side features the other members of her Asiko Music, comprising five women and nine men who sing and drum.

The album was recorded by PMAN award winner LAK Adeniran who has turned out numerous successful albums for Nigerian musicians.

Mounted on the first side are five beautiful songs opening with a traditional melody with leaning toward the scriptures and titled "Gbo Ohun awon angeli tin Korin" - which means: "Listen to the voices of the angels singing," followed by words of admonition and exhortation in "Gbemi to bebe idi," "Oro ana tajoso," "Adelebo dakun ma yobe," and "Ikale Lerun".

The other side is totally wedded in folkloric tradition and features two songs which give Omoge room to illustrate her stories with idiomatic expressions and proverbs, feeling her way through numerous choruses.

Comfort Omoge has tagged her music 'Asiko' which means music of the moment for reason of sound identity and categorisation. But the idiom is rather prolific and fundamentally cultural to be pigeon-holed in such an ephemeral manner.

Comfort Omoge's "Asiko" is too deep-rooted to be contemporary too remarkable to be dated. It is a celebration of African music.