

The Art Stampede's instructive note on criticisms

By Benson Idonije

The amazing success of the fourth Book and Art Festival mounted last weekend in Lagos by the Committee for Relevant Art (CORA), will continue to be talked about for a pretty long time to come. Combining the display of books and various works of art with the usual discursive, controversy hooked Stampede, a major resolution taken by the festival's forum was the need for art critics to be objective.

And in this regard, expert views were expressed by such notables as Dr. E.A Adeboye of University of Lagos; Dr. Kunle Filani deputy provost of Federal College of Education (Technical) Yaba, Lagos; Akin Adeoya, journalist and publisher of Brand and Products the popular lawyer/dramatist Fred Agbeyegbe, the movie producer, Mahmoud Ali-Balogun and the newspaper columnist, publisher, Tunde Fagbenle among others. One was also there to contribute to this heated discussion from the dimension of music, radio and television programmes.

A good, working definition for criticism in this context is the "act of appraising a piece of work and passing judgement on it for the benefit of the artist as an individual and the arts in general."

This definition presupposes that criticism should be done with a great amount of objectivity, a task that must be carried out from a purely professional standpoint that is borne out of experiential knowledge.

The artist is not bound to listen to the critic. He is the architect of his own fortune, even though he sometimes has a lot to gain from a critic who knows his onions.

But unfortunately, a lot of the reviews that get touted as criticisms are public relations materials that merely qualify the artists as the greatest whereas, in most cases, these are mediocre who need to be told the truth so that they can develop.

Over the years, this deceit from unqualified critics has given many artists the false sense of security. It has resulted in the proliferation of one album stars who are all now stuck, unable to move forward.

One of the attributes of good musicianship is originality. But one finds it exceedingly amazing when critics hail imitative artists whose sense of direction is in the Western pop idiom, as genuine talents with a bright future ahead of them.

The reason why Lagbaja for instance is making good impact today is because he has been able to create an original sound identity for himself. He has been greatly influenced by Fela alright, but he has tried as much as possible not to imitate him.

Rather than dabble in big band instrumentation in which a variety of horns is configured for ensemble sound, he allows the legion of talking drums to dominate. And to consolidate the fusion, the rhythm section unit of bass and guitar is introduced to establish the Western influence, while his saxophone serves as major solo vehicle.

Added to this unique, but simple configuration, Lagbaja establishes vocal harmony techniques of the call-and-response type. For him, this simple orchestra setting is convenient and professionally manageable whereas his counterparts who want to sound like Fela are busy lining up horns that often create discords and atonalities even though they are all coming out in unison, for lack of the professional know-how that Fela achieved with flattened and augmented chords.

For the critic, the music field can be categorised into two regions - the purely indigenous area where Nigerian music idioms such as apala, goge, dadakwada, Kalagu, sakara among others come into focus; and all the Western pop music including its fusion with African forms such as highlife and Afrobeat.

Indigenous music forms do not lend themselves to any technically scientific evaluation as guiding principles even though musicologists often come up with some analysis. Africans are by nature good musicians who have ear for good music.

All that is required is a voice that does not sound flat. Besides, it is important that all the instruments specified for the different idioms are present. This done, the group is in business. But as soon as a basic Western instrument like the guitar is introduced, the music ceases to be indigenous; it now begins to subject itself to the demands of Western convention because it has introduced chord programmes into the music, and must now obey set rules demanded by Western tradition.

Still on originality, an attribute that constitutes the artist's greatest potential, it has helped to mould the career of many artists who realise that music is an expression of culture, and so can express their own culture better than the foreign one. Even within the same cultural expression that is devoid of ambivalence and dissonance, artists must endeavour to create their own individual sound identities.

A case in point is the coming into prominence of the late apala king, Ayinla Omowura, in the seventies. Hitherto, Haruna Isola had reigned supreme with a steady but heavily rhythmic sound that conjured a majestic beat. He was a major influence with disciples spread all over the Yoruba speaking areas of Lagos, Ogun and Oyo states.

Then came Ayinla Omowura whose voice was harsh, guttural and blues-oriented. Unknown to him, his rhythm was in the unusual time signature of 6/8 and 5/4. He carried everyone away with his rhythm which though complex, was also racy.

The late Abioro, the major distributor for EMI Records on which stable Ayinla was signed was reported to have condemned the music on the ground that it did not sound like Haruna Isola, but producer Odion Iruoje insisted on recording and marketing it because of this originality. An Ibadan-based distributor took over who did not go beyond Mushin before all the danfo drivers and meat sellers exhausted the order.

The record was Danfo Osiere (the danfo driver is not cracy), a response to the poor image this set of drivers had at the time. The fame and popularity of this legend has since become history.

Originality is the basis of good art, but the various forms - all have their added attributes and qualities that have become guiding principles - be it in painting, sculpture, drama, movie, dance, radio and TV production, and others.

Just exactly the way a piece of music is judged by its originality, melodic inventiveness, rhythmic concept, harmonic progression and the like, a radio programme like a radio programme like the 'magazine' format should be evaluated, based on the quality of 'transitions' it establishes in terms of holding the various items together in a chatty, conversational, imaginative style.

In the same way, a home video or drama production should be appreciated along the lines of dialogue writing, casting, plot, conflict, quality of acting and all the fine elements associated with its production.

In order to be able to point out these points, the critic must be knowledgeable about the subject matter. Otherwise his criticisms cannot develop the artist. His views cannot add value to the promotion and advancement of the arts.