

A Chronicle of the Masters of the Music at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article presents a chronological timeline of the organists and masters of the music at the foremost Anglican Cathedral in Nigeria, from the inception of the music ministry in the late nineteenth century to the present. It specifically focuses on the training and the selection of the masters from among members of the Cathedral Choir, a rarity compared to the other churches and choral groups in Nigeria. This essay also documents the appointment of the first female musician to hold this distinguished position. It is noteworthy to observe the tenures of three generations of one musical family in this historical account. These remarkable musicians have indeed proven their mettle as purveyors of exceptional musical artistry and world-class performances at the heart of classical church music in the most populous Black nation.

Keywords: Godwin Sadoh, Cathedral Church of Christ Choir, Masters of music, Nigerian church music, Thomas Ekundayo Phillips.

Introduction

The Anglican Cathedral Church of Christ in Lagos, Nigeria, has been endowed with a pedigree of iconic geniuses who have served as organists and masters of music from the inception of the grandiose Gothic worship center in the early 1800s to date. These remarkable musicians have indeed proven their mettle as purveyors of exceptional musical repertoires and world-class performances, at the center of classical church music in the most populous Black nation. From the conservative age in the late nineteenth century to the eclectic, technological, multi-media, and multicultural blended worship experiences of the 21st century, those at the helm of the music ministry at the foremost Anglican Cathedral in Nigeria have been trailblazers.



Figure 1. The Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos.

Robert Coker

The Cathedral Church of Christ Choir is the oldest choir in Nigeria, with an average membership of about fifty male voices, half of whom are boys who sing the treble part. Robert Coker was born in 1840. He was the one who organized the first cathedral choir in 1895, which comprised young men and women. Coker was acknowledged to be the first indigenous organist and choirmaster in Nigeria, and apparently, the first to occupy this position at the Cathedral Church of Christ. Before he was appointed organist at the church, he was sponsored by the Cathedral Church to study music in England, which equipped him to create an excellent choir suitable for Christ Church that was later elevated to cathedral status in 1923. Coker was regarded as a musical genius of his time. He was the first indigenous musician to attempt the performances of Western classical music in Nigeria, notably Handel's *Messiah*. Consequently, he was nicknamed the Mozart of Africa. Coker died on February 9, 1920.

The choir was later reorganized during the tenure of Rev. N. T. Hamlyn, a British musician and pastor of the church. Hamlyn replaced the women of the choir with boys and young men, following the tradition of most British Cathedrals. The choir made tremendous progress, establishing it as a model for other church choirs. Hamlyn provided the choir with surplices and erected choir stalls at the east end of the church. As a strict disciplinarian, Hamlyn was always keen on regular and punctual attendance and was thus able to maintain a good choir, setting a high standard that has been maintained to this day. After the era of Hamlyn, there was a brief period of short appointments of organists such as D. J. Williams, J. G. Kuye in 1904, and later Frank Lacton, a Sierra-Leonean, who served until the appointment of Thomas Ekundayo Phillips.ⁱ



Figure 2. Thomas Ekundayo Phillips at the 1932 Organ.

Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips (1884-1969) is popularly referred to as the father of Nigerian church music for his extraordinary contributions to the growth and development of church music in the country. He was appointed in 1914 to the esteemed position of Organist and Master of the Music after completing his three-year musical training at the Trinity College of Music, England (1911-1914),ⁱⁱ making him the pioneer of this lofty position, and by extension, the first musician to be named Master of the Music in Nigeria. Ekundayo Phillips was born on March 8, 1884, in Ondo State, southwest of Nigeria, into the family of Bishop Phillips. Before his appointment at the Cathedral Church, he was organist at Saint John's Anglican Church, Aroloya, and Saint Paul's Anglican Church, Breadfruit, Lagos. Phillips's tenure was a remarkable turning point in the history of church music in Lagos and Nigeria as a whole. His era marked the building and moulding of a solid foundation on which the present choir stands firmly today as one of the best cathedral choirs in Africa.

Ekundayo Phillips's unprecedented tenure of almost five decades at the Cathedral Church witnessed a great transition, a period unparalleled in the history of church music in Nigeria. His accomplishments far surpassed those of his predecessors at the church. Ekundayo Phillips led the Cathedral Choir to greater strides, culminating in outstanding quantum leaps, since the choir was established to be a model for other parish churches. The choir sets the tone for classical choral works through the performances of challenging anthems and large choral music such as oratorios and sacred cantatas. In this way, Phillips succeeded in revolutionizing church music in Nigeria. Many British visitors remarked that the choir could favourably compare with the British cathedral choirs in England in terms of the quality of singing.

Gerald Knight, MA, FRCO, ADCM, Director of the Royal School of Church Music, London, at the time, remarked during one of his visits that the choir was second to none in the whole of West Africa. In the 1940s, some Europeans under the leadership of late S. R. Marlowe accompanied the choir with orchestra at concerts at the Cathedral Church and the Glover Memorial Hall. Ekundayo Phillips retired in 1962 after serving in the music ministry at the Cathedral Church for forty-eight glorious years from Trinity Sunday, 1914, to Trinity Sunday, 1962.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1964, Ekundayo Phillips was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for his contributions to the development of church music in Nigeria. The award was conferred on him by the then President of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), who was also a visitor to the University at the time. Phillips was also decorated with the award of Membership of the British Empire (MBE) by Her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth II, during the coronation ceremony of the Duke of Edinburgh. Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips departed this world on Thursday, July 10, 1969, at his residence, on 79 Agege Motor Road, Idi-Oro, Mushin, Lagos, at the age of eighty-five.^{iv}



Figure 3. Charles Oluwole Obayomi Phillips.

Charles Oluwole Obayomi Phillips (1919-2007) succeeded his father, Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, as the Organist and Master of the Music, and he faithfully served the church for exactly three decades, from Trinity Sunday 1962 to Trinity Sunday 1992. Obayomi Phillips was born on September 28, 1919, in Lagos. He began taking private lessons in piano when he was only four years old with Nigeria's most celebrated international classical musician, Fela Sowande (1905-1987). Obayomi Phillips received lessons in organ playing under the tutelage of his father as a choirboy at the Cathedral Church. At the age of fourteen, Obayomi Phillips had already started assuming leadership roles in music. He rose to the position of the school pianist at C. M. S. Grammar School and was later appointed by his father as the Assistant Organist of the Cathedral Church in 1933. After graduating from C. M. S. Grammar School, Lagos, he proceeded to Durham University, England, to study and subsequently received the Bachelor's degree in Commerce with Distinction in June 1946. While in England, Obayomi Phillips studied organ with J. A. Westrup, a Professor of Music at Durham University. He later studied organ with Christopher Idonill in

1976 at the Royal School of Church Music, London.

During his tenure as the Organist and Master of the Music at the Cathedral Church, Obayomi Phillips maintained the tradition of the Cathedral Choir and developed new ideas that made the choir soar in standard. Obayomi Phillips was first among all his organist colleagues in Lagos and the country. There was no one like him when it came to playing the organ. He played the most difficult organ pieces back in the day. For instance, he was the only organist in Nigeria at the time who played J. S. Bach's famous Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 532. No other organist attempted this piece, especially at concerts. He was also able to accompany the choir at the organ, singing challenging choral anthems. His playing was always crisp and flawless. While playing, he could detect when a whole part or a particular voice is singing out of tune. He would identify the voice, correct the intonation, and continue singing. At times, Obayomi Phillips would stop playing the organ in the middle of the anthem and leave the choir to sing alone. If there should be a single mistake of note, or the choir stops singing because he stopped playing, he would stop the choir and point out the error, he would then say, "What happens if power goes out or the organ malfunctions on Sunday? Will you stop singing?" That was how meticulous Obayomi Phillips was, paying attention to every detail in the music, whether he was conducting or accompanying at the organ. Despite the tremendous economic upheavals in the political, social, and religious life in Nigeria since independence in 1960, music at the Cathedral Church continues to be of the highest echelon. In addition to his strenuous duties at the Cathedral Church, Obayomi Phillips was the former President of the Union of Organists and Choirmasters in Lagos. This is an organization that oversees the maintenance of a high standard of music in all Anglican churches in the Lagos diocese. He was the Emeritus Organist at the Cathedral Church of Christ until his death in May 2007.^v

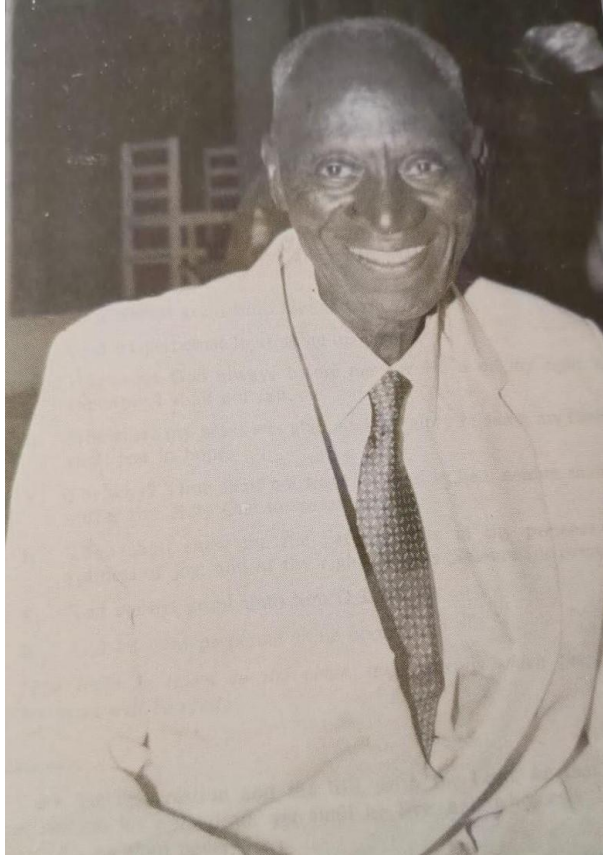


Figure 4. William Olayinka Sowande.

Olayinka Sowande (1910-1993), Fela Sowande's younger brother, was born in Lagos in 1910. He was a Substitute Organist under Charles Oluwole Obayomi Phillips for several decades at the Cathedral Church. The Master of Music, Assistant Choirmaster, and Sub-Organist were primarily responsible for the training of the choirboys. Hence, part of Olayinka's duties as the Sub-Organist involved training the choirboys in theory of music, sight singing, and vocal warm-ups before choir rehearsals and worship on Sundays. He also accompanied congregational singing of hymns, chanting of the Psalms of David, responses, and other liturgical music settings.

Olayinka's bigger assignments were accompanying the entire choir at Tuesday and Thursday rehearsals, playing organ preludes and postludes at services, performing solo organ recitals at special concerts including the choir festivals, as well as accompanying the choir in the performance of sacred cantatas and oratorios such as Handel's *Messiah*, John Stainer's *Daughter of Jairus*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *Hymn of Praise*, Haydn's *Creation*, as well as J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew's* and *St. John's Passions*. The choir and the congregation loved to hear him play the beautiful organ accompaniment to J. S. Bach's *Jesu Joy of Man's Heart Desiring*. The distinctive, endless weaving of the triplets in the right hand from the beginning to the end of the anthem creates an enduring sonorous sound with the baroque registration in the ears of the listeners. Therefore, it was not surprising after the retirement of Charles Obayomi Phillips in 1992 that Olayinka was appointed in July 1992 as the Organist and Master of the Music. However, old age did not permit him to stay in that position for too long, for he retired on December 31, 1992.



Figure 5. Tolu Obajimi.

Tolu Obajimi (b. 1939) made history on January 1, 1993, with her appointment as the first female Organist and Master of the Music in Nigeria. It is noteworthy that before her appointment at the Cathedral Church, the field had been dominated by men. Tolu served the church from 1993 to 2013. Historically, the Cathedral Church of Christ has a stringent, rich tradition of appointing someone from within the choir or cathedral musicians to the leadership position of Organist and Master of the Music. Obayomi Phillips received organ lessons from his father, Thomas Ekundayo Phillips. Obayomi Phillips gave Tolu Obajimi her first organ lessons and trained her to the proficient level necessary for appointment as the Cathedral Organist.^{vi}



Figure 6. Babatunde Sosan.

Babatunde Sosan (b. 1975) was officially appointed to the position of the Organist and Master of the Music at the Cathedral Church of Christ on January 1, 2014. This historical event was undoubtedly unique because Babatunde assumed the office on the centenary of the appointment of his late great-grandfather, Thomas Ekundayo Phillips, to the same position (1914-2014). Babatunde was born on January 26, 1975. His musical journey was charted by his first two

teachers, Arinola Sosan, his grandmother, and Tolu Obajimi. He began his musical training at the Cathedral Church as a choirboy in 1982 at age seven, during the tenure of Charles Obayomi Phillips. Following his graduation as a Physiotherapist from the Lagos University Teaching Hospital College of Medicine, Babatunde proceeded to complete a five-year program at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Greenwich, England. He was sponsored by the Women's Guild Auxiliary Society of the Cathedral Church of Christ and graduated with a Bachelor of Music degree (with Honors) in Piano and Organ performance.

Babatunde has performed two notable piano concertos, namely Beethoven's *2nd Piano Concerto in B Flat Major* and George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue for Piano Solo and Jazz Band*, both of which he performed in conjunction with the MUSON Symphony Orchestra, Lagos. The *Rhapsody in Blue* received such acclaim, as it was the first performance of its kind in Nigeria, that he was invited for a repeat performance at the MUSON Festival in October 2014.^{vii} Babatunde resigned from the cathedral position in January 2023.



Figure 7. Adejola Adeosun.

Adejola Adeosun (b. 1978) assumed the position of the Organist and Master of the Music in February 2023. Adejola was trained by his uncle, Pastor Lanre Adekunle of Christ Apostolic Church, Itire, Lagos, in the late 1980s on a harmonium, and later moved on to play piano and organ. Adejola obtained a National Certificate in Music Education from Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Lagos (AOCOED), and a Bachelor of Arts in Music from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State. Other academic qualifications include Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) graded certificates, Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) certificates, and certificates in both Theory and Performance of the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, England. He has gained a wealth of experience in music from notable musicians at home and abroad. Adejola likes choral music, organ playing, teaching theory, directing, and performance of 17th-century organ and choral works by G. F. Handel and J. S. Bach. He is a student member of the Royal College of Organists, London. In addition to his hectic duties at the Cathedral Church, Adejola teaches music at the Atlantic Hall Educational Trust Council, Epe, Lagos.

The taxonomical table below shows three generations of the Phillips' family appointed as Organists and Masters of the Music. This triad of musical geniuses had an indelible imprint on the choir, the music, and the affectionate congregation.

Name	Date of Birth	Years in Service
Thomas Ekundayo Phillips	1884-1969	1914-1962
Charles Obayomi Phillips	1919-2007	1962-1992
Babatunde Sosan	b. 1975	2014 – 2023

We could see that Ekundayo Phillips's longevity was the most compelling, spanning forty-eight years (1914-1962), while his son, Obayomi Phillips, was in office for exactly thirty years (1962-1992). Tolu Obajimi occupied the same position for two decades (1993-2013), but Babatunde's tenure lasted only nine years (2014-2023). Evidently, Olayinka Sowande spent the least amount of time in the office, from July 1992 to December 1992.



Figure 8. The Cathedral Church of Christ Choir.



Figure 9. The Cathedral Church of Christ Choir Accompanied by the New Oberlinger Organ and Orchestra at a Concert in 2013.

Conclusion

The Cathedral Church of Christ Choir has the most complex and challenging repertoire of church music in Nigeria, popularly referred to as the “cathedral music.” The repository comprised oratorios, sacred cantatas, challenging choral anthems, responses, chants, traditional hymns, contemporary praise choruses, and several settings of liturgical music. For the choir to be able to meet up with the standard and sing large collections of music every week, sight-singing is one of the topmost criteria of singing in the choir. While the boys are regularly given lessons in rudiments of music theory that include sight-reading, the men can only be admitted into the choir as adults if their sight-singing skills are top-notch.^{viii} The men and the boys are capable of singing through difficult songs within minutes. For illustration, in addition to their extensive and advanced weekly music repertoire, it takes the choir about two months to rehearse a three-part oratorio, and they are ready to perform in a public concert. Furthermore, the choir is the most researched from its inception in the late 19th century to date, culminating in a myriad of scholarly publications of articles and books that are catalogued in numerous libraries and notable archival centers worldwide.^{ix}

The church’s music ministry is the only one in Nigeria that all events are painstakingly recorded from one stage to another. There is an accurate documentation of all choir festivals, Christmas Carols, Advent Carols, Three-Choir Concerts, Augmented Choir Concerts, Community Hymn Singing, bulletins of every Sunday worship in the morning and evening, and other choral and instrumental concerts, and a list of its musicians, including the organists and masters of the music from Robert Coker to the present. Additionally, there are registers of all the singers from Ekundayo Phillips’s tenure to date. There is no other choir in Nigeria with such rare and impeccable records spanning three centuries. All these artefacts are meticulously catalogued in the Choir Library and the Cathedral Church of Christ Main Library.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that some of the most internationally famous Nigerian professional musicians had their early musical foundation at the Cathedral Church. For instance, Fela Sowande (1905-1987),^x Christopher Oyesiku (1925-2020),^{xi} Samuel Akpabot (1932-2000),^{xii} and Ayo Bankole (1935-1976);^{xiii} all had their early musical training as choristers under the tutelage of Thomas Ekundayo Phillips. Godwin Sadoh^{xiv} was a chorister at the church during the tenure of Obayomi Phillips, who gave him private lessons in theory of music, piano, organ, general musicianship, and composition. Suffice it to say that all of these musical geniuses ventured into the academic profession, and some of them rose to the pinnacle of their careers as professors of music. These distinguished professors include Fela Sowande, Samuel Akpabot, Lazarus Ekwueme, and Godwin Sadoh.

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ⁱ Sadoh, Godwin (2018). *The Centenary of the Cathedral Church of Christ Choir, Lagos*. Columbus, Ohio: GSS Publications, 66.

ⁱⁱ Trinity College of Music is now called Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, England.

ⁱⁱⁱ (Sadoh, 2018), 68.

^{iv} Sadoh, Godwin (2009). *Thomas Ekundayo Phillips: The Doyen of Nigerian Church Music*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 28.

^v (Sadoh, 2018), 70.

^{vi} (Sadoh, 2018), 72.

^{vii} (Sadoh, 2018), 73.

^{viii} After the voices of the choirboys broke in their teens, they would leave the choir until their voices are matured enough to sing alto, tenor or bass as adult members. However, other very good sight-singing adults can join the choir as adult from other parishes or independent choral groups in Lagos.

^{ix} Godwin Sadoh is the sole and pre-eminent scholar on the music ministry at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos, with over fifty published articles and books on diverse topics, premised on over two decades of rigorous, intensive, and expensive research. These publications are already cataloged in prestigious university libraries and other reputable archival centers worldwide, including American Ivy Leagues, Library of Congress, Smithsonian Libraries, University of Pittsburgh, University of London, University of Bayreuth, and several South African university libraries such as the University of Witwatersrand, University of Pretoria, and Kwazulu-Natal University, etc.

^x Fela Sowande was an organist-composer, jazz musician, broadcaster, and musicologist.

^{xi} Christopher Oyesiku was a basso profundo, extraordinary choral conductor, broadcaster, music teacher, and scholar. During his tenure as Artist-in-Residence at the premier University of Ibadan, he single-handedly directed over fifty stellar concerts.

^{xii} Samuel Akpabot was an ethnomusicologist-pianist-composer, trumpeter, popular musician, brilliant sport commentator, and a university music lecturer.

^{xiii} Ayo Bankole was an organist-composer, brilliant choral conductor, ethnomusicologist, and university music lecturer.

^{xiv} Godwin Sadoh is an organist-composer, pianist, choral conductor, music educator, ethnomusicologist, and a prolific scholar with over one hundred and sixty publications including twelve academic books.