

Olu Sowande: Centenary-Plus Celebration of a Nigerian Musical Legend

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The arrival of the American and European missionaries and colonization in Nigeria in the mid-19th century paved the way for the emergence of Western classical music in the country. This novel style of music was disseminated to talented Nigerians through the church, colonial schools, concerts, and other media. Nigerians learned to compose, read, write music, and play Western instruments such as the violin, piano, and organ in these forums. The great Nigerian music family of the Sowande is not exempt from this experience. They encountered classical music in most of these avenues and thus became naturally imbued with it.

The Nigerian classical music impresario, Olubunmi Jonathan Sowande (1916–1968), would have been 109 this year. Olu was born in Lagos on June 16, 1916, to Rev. Emmanuel Josiah Sowande and Comfort Sowande. He was the last of five children who were all deceased. The others are a professor and renowned organist-composer, Fela Sowande (1905–1987), Sola Sowunmi (1908-1979),¹ Yinka Sowande (1910–1993),² and Justice Tunji Sowande (1912-1999),³ of the Inner Temple and the first black judge in Great Britain. Olu's father passed on when he was only two years old. His father died from the 1918 flu epidemic. Throughout his life, Olu was very close to his mother and looked up to his older brother Fela as a mentor and fatherly figure. Olu attended St. Peter's Primary School, Faji, and graduated from the famous King's College, Lagos, in 1934. He taught at Aroloya School from 1935 to 1938. Olu joined the Federal Surveys on March 7, 1938, as a 3rd Class Clerk. He was later promoted to a 2nd Class Clerk in 1946 and a 1st Class Clerk in 1949, respectively.



The Sowande Family, 1968

Starting from the Back, From Left to Right, Tunji Sowande, Mrs. Sofunde, Tunde Sowande (Tunji Sowande's son), Mrs. Janet Sowande, Bunmi Sowande (Olu Sowande's Son), and Femi Sowande. Sitting are Mrs. Sola Sowunmi, Dr. Sofunde, Grandmother, Chief Sonekan (The father of Former Interim Head of State of Nigeria)

¹ Sola Sowunmi was the only female among the Sowande brothers. She was also musical.

² Yinka Sowande is a former Organist and Master of Music at the renowned Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos.

³ Tunji Sowande was also an accomplished musician. He formed a dance band in Lagos called the Chocolate Dandies, in which he sang and played the saxophone like his brother Olu. Tunji emigrated to England in 1947 and commenced his life as a professional musician by carving out another dance band where he sang and played the saxophone. He performed with his brothers and other distinguished musicians such as Paul Robeson. Tunji was a composer too. He performed two of his songs, *Ara Eyo* (People Rejoice) and *Ihinrere* (The Gospel), at Fela Sowande's memorial service in 1987.



Olu Sowande



Tunji Sowande, Sola Sowunmi, and Olu Sowande

Olu received his first voice lessons from his mother and performed every Sunday evening in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Sunday Half Hour Show. Fela gave him his first piano lessons at the age of twelve, but later, he studied with Yetunde Pratt, who was also known as Mrs. Enitan Browne. Olu joined the premier Anglican Cathedral Church of Christ Choir, Lagos, in 1925,⁴ under the tutelage of Thomas Ekundayo Phillips (1884–1969), a relative. His innate musical genius fast-tracked him to become one of the leading soloists. When his voice broke, he left the choir but came back a few years later as a bass singer. Olu played the role of the Emperor in the opera *Aladdin*, which was staged to raise funds for the parish's needs. He married his wife Janet on November 1, 1945. They had three children, Bunmi, Fola, and Femi Sowande.

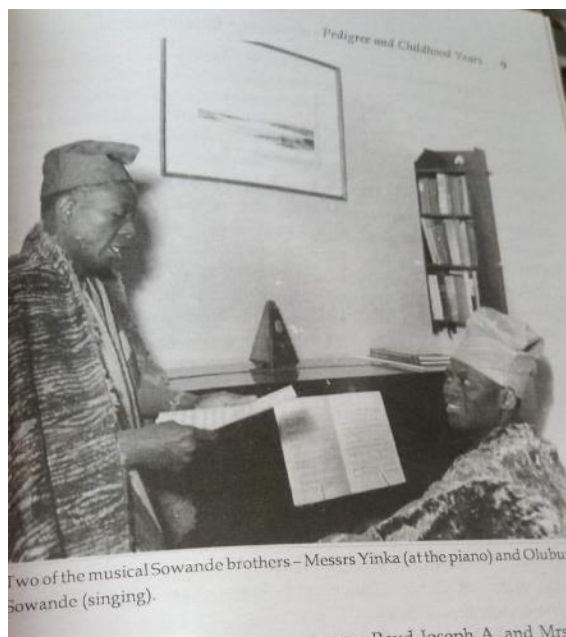


⁴ One of the pioneers of classical music and an extraordinary choral conductor, Christopher Oyesiku, was born in 1925, the same year Olu joined the Cathedral Church of Christ Choir, Lagos.

Olu Sowande and His Wife Janet, With his Sons, Bunmi and Femi Sowande, 1964

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Olu developed an interest in dance music. This led him and another friend, Justice Akibo Savage, a pianist, to join the Lagos Rhythm Brothers Dance Orchestra. He played the alto saxophone and sang almost all the vocal solos in the band. The band leader then was Victor Tunji Haffner. During World War II, Olu participated in several musical shows as a vocal soloist. He performed with members of the KNSA. His part in the Black and White Revue of 1945 and 1946 brought him fame in Lagos. In 1948, he was transferred to Jos, where he switched from dance music to sacred music. His passion for music made him return to Lagos to perform at the Festival of the Arts in 1952. Olu eventually got an appointment at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). On August 23, 1952, Olu was transferred to NBC as a Broadcasting Officer Grade III. While he was on a short visit to England in 1954, Olu took private voice lessons from a well-known Welsh Tenor, Gwen Davies. During this visit, Olu and his brother, Yinka, performed at the West African Arts Club as narrated by Mercedes Mackay:

The two talented brothers of the famous Yoruba organist, Mr. Fela Sowande, gave a joint concert of songs in May this year. The evening concert was organized by Mrs. Harold Lewis, in conjunction with the West African Arts Club. The club is most anxious to increase its activities in Nigeria, and Dr. Cudjoe gave an address of appreciation for the two artists. Olu Sowande of Jos, Nigeria, sang several Yoruba and Negro folksongs, one of which was arranged by his brother Fela. He was accompanied on the piano by his second brother, Yinka. A matrix of some of these songs was cut, and it is hoped later to publish the record. Olu Sowande has now returned to Nigeria (Mackay, 1954).⁵

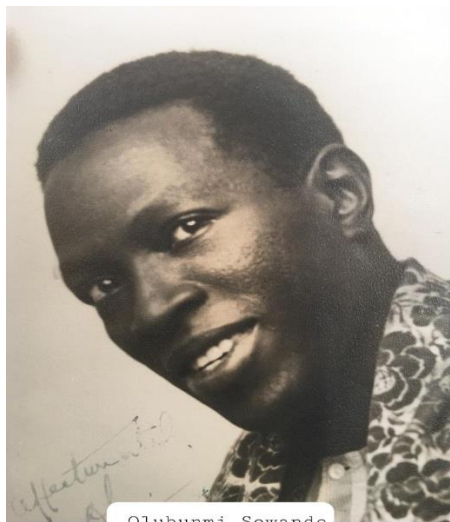


Olu Sowande Singing with Yinka Sowande Accompanying on the Piano

When the Lagos Musical Society produced Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *The Mikado*, Olu was selected for the part of Mikado. On April 3, 1956, he proceeded to England on a study leave to pursue advanced training at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, where he majored in operatic singing. He joined the London International Choir and introduced them to Nigerian folksongs. Olu was often one of the choir's soloists in and out of London. He was so successful that the Overseas Service of the BBC invited the choir to record some Yoruba songs for the program, "Calling Nigeria." Olu was also a member of the choir at St. Michael's Church, a professional choir, at Chelsea Square, London. Olu returned to Nigeria on September 27, 1960, as a Senior Programme Assistant at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. He was promoted in 1961 to Acting Deputy Head of Music and Head of Variety and Light Entertainment, on March 21, 1962. Olu had a weekly program

⁵ Mackay, Mercedes, (August 1954). Yoruba Music, Nigeria. *African Music Society Journal*. 88.

tagged "Olu Sowande's Show." One of his famous guests on the show was Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the progenitor of Afro-beat style popular music.



Olu Sowande

Olu appeared with some other Commonwealth artists at the Royal Commonwealth Society Annual Show – A Command performance, in which he was presented to Her Royal Highness, Princess Alexandra of Kent. For two consecutive years, he was invited to perform at the annual London Conference of the Council for Education in World Citizenship, a United Nations Organisation. An invitation to tour South Africa was unsuccessful as the South African Government refused him an entry visa at the last minute. This made a breaking news story in most newspapers in Nigeria. Olu was among the few lucky ones who performed before an international audience at the Inauguration Concert for His Excellency, the Governor General, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, in 1960.



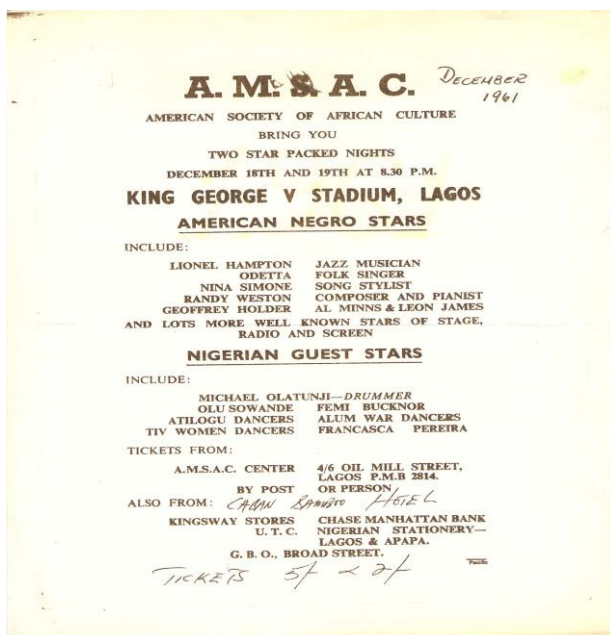
Olu Sowande With HRH Princess Alexandra of Kent After a Command Performance in the 1960s

Olu was an ace baritone and seasoned broadcaster. He sang at concerts and recitals at home and abroad, accompanied by his brothers Fela and Yinka Sowande, with several orchestras. He made the Nigerian song, *Ise Oluwa* (The Work of the Lord), popular in Nigeria and abroad. It was one of his favourite indigenous songs. In 1962, while he was performing at a concert in Germany, he lost his middle son, aged eleven. On his return to Nigeria, Olu took the news with courage and faith, saying, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be his name" (Job 1: 21). He shared music with fellow Nigerians by teaching music on programs such as "Let's Sing Together." As Head of Variety and Light Entertainment, Olu brought happiness, laughter, and information

to most Nigerian homes on his weekly Sunday show at NBC. He got the best out of the artists he worked with, which included Millicent Small, who sang her popular song, “My Boy Lollipop,” when she visited Nigeria. Olu lived a full and happy life. Unfortunately, he died in his prime at age fifty-two, on September 30, 1968. Olu’s mother had passed on exactly forty days before his demise. Olu was buried in London after the family decided not to fly his body home. He was survived by his two sons, Bunmi and Femi, with several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.⁶



Olu Sowande at WNTV



Olu Sowande in Lagos Concert, 1961

Ise Oluwa

This popular Yoruba Christian song has been arranged for various music genres by several Nigerian composers. Joshua Uzoigwe arranged it for a chamber orchestra and his *Nigerian Dances* for piano solo. Samuel Akpabot employed this tune in the *Allegretto* section of his *Overture for a Nigerian Ballet*, and in his *Ise Oluwa* (Nigerian Folk Tune), for chorus and piano. Godwin Sadoh arranged it for SATB and piano, string quartet, organ solo

⁶ Due credit is herein given to Olu Sowande’s third son, Femi, for providing most of the information and materials used in writing this historic article. He also provided and granted permission to use all the photos.

(from *Twenty-Five Preludes on Yoruba Church Hymns*), and in a piano solo collection entitled, *Childhood Dreams*. However, Phillips is credited as the first composer to utilize the song (Sadoh, 2009).⁷



Ise Oluwa Arranged by Olu Sowande (Part One)



Ise Oluwa Arranged by Olu Sowande (Part Two)⁸

As shown in the scores above, Olu arranged *Ise Oluwa* (The Work of the Lord) for vocal solo and piano accompaniment. This song can be classified under the Nigerian art music collection as an art song. It is in the Yoruba language, belonging to the Yoruba ethnic group from southwest Nigeria. The one-verse song is in a compound meter of 6/8 and the key of F major. For Olu to demonstrate his dexterity as a trained professional classical music singer, he inserted diverse forms of dynamic marks such as *mf*, *crescendo*, and *diminuendo* in the song. These dynamics further coloured the song with various shades of dramatic nuances. The song closes

⁷ Sadoh, Godwin, (2009). *Thomas Ekundayo Phillips: The Doyen of Nigerian Church Music*, 133.

⁸ Scores provided and used with the kind permission of Femi Sowande.

brilliantly loud, as indicated by the crescendo mark toward the end of the song. Olu performed numerous Nigerian traditional and folk songs arranged for solo voice and piano accompaniment by himself and his older brother, Fela Sowande, the most famous Nigerian classical musician worldwide. However, it is noteworthy that *Ise Oluwa* was his favourite, and he was indeed the first Nigerian vocal soloist to popularize this song worldwide.

CONCLUSION

Olu Sowande epitomizes a bundle of musical talents, having distinguished himself at home in Nigeria and abroad as a superb baritone singer and broadcaster. His Command Performances attest to his impeccable international record. He was one of the pioneers of Nigerian culture and indigenous music on the international stage at his concerts. Olu is remembered for his immense contribution to the growth and development of European classical and dance music in Nigeria and worldwide.

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