DOI: https://doi.org//10.63102/jaac.v9i2.202610

https://jaac-sca.org & https://journals.uew.edu.gh/index.php/jaac/ ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 9 Issue 2 June 30, 2026

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE SOUND ENGINEERING IN GHANA: THE MIDO FRAMEWORK FOR RECORDING AND STUDIO PRACTICE

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CITATION: Ayesu, S.N, Sackey, G., Arhin Jnr, B.O., Yeboah, E. & Awudja-King, F. (2026). Context-responsive sound engineering in Ghana: the MIDO framework for recording and studio practice, *Journal of African Arts and Culture, 9*(2), 157-167.

Abstract

This paper examines the recording techniques and studio practices of Dominic Opare Ansa-Asare, founder of MIDO Productions, an independent recording studio in Accra. Although Ghanaian popular music has received considerable scholarly attention, little research has examined the technical reasoning that shapes how Ghanaian engineers actually record and mix music. This study addresses that gap through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Ansa-Asare, exploring his pre-session preparation, microphone selection and placement, choir and ensemble miking, recording philosophy, mixing decisions, and approach to mastering. Thematic analysis of the interview accounts suggests that his engineering knowledge follows four interlocking technical stages: contextual preparation, capture integrity, translation mixing, and production stewardship, together proposed here as the MIDO framework for context-responsive sound engineering. Ansa-Asare describes how he does not apply established recording techniques, particularly for choral music, in the same way in every situation. He considers the ensemble, the performance space, and the listening environment before deciding how to record and mix. He reports recording without compression, testing his mixes in everyday listening environments such as cars, homes, and churches, and taking responsibility for the recording through to mastering. This reflects a form of professional knowledge developed largely through self-directed learning. The paper argues that this kind of practitioner knowledge deserves systematic documentation, both to preserve it and to inform sound engineering education and scholarship on African studio practice.

Keywords: *recording techniques, microphone technique, studio practice, sound engineering, Ghanaian music production*

1. Introduction

Research on Ghanaian popular music has grown steadily over the past three decades, with detailed accounts of highlife (Collins, 2018, 1994, 1989) and the social life of music in urban Accra (Plageman, 2013). These studies show how Ghanaian musical genres developed historically and how they connect to identity, commerce, and everyday life. What remains far less documented is the recording studio itself: the space in which a live performance becomes the finished sound that audiences eventually hear. Owusu-Poku (2021) offers one of the few close studies of Ghanaian sound engineering practice. Through the work of Francis Kwakye at the Ghana Film Studio, this study shows that the distinctive 'Ghana Film Sound' of the 1970s was not an accident of available equipment but a deliberate response to how Ghanaian audiences listen. This demonstrates that engineering decisions in Ghana are shaped by cultural and perceptual expectations, not by technical convention alone. Beyond this single case, however, there is very little documentation of how contemporary Ghanaian engineers actually make recording and mixing decisions: how they select and place microphones, how they manage the acoustic realities of local performance spaces, why they use or avoid compression, and how they adapt international training to Ghanaian performance conditions.

This gap exists partly because recording and mixing decisions depend on tacit, experience-based judgement that develops over years of practice, and this kind of knowledge is rarely written down. It cannot be reconstructed from finished recordings alone, since the reasoning behind a microphone placement or a mixing choice leaves no trace in the final audio. It also cannot be reliably captured through observation alone, since much of an engineer's decision-making happens quickly and is shaped by internalised experience that the engineer may not explain unless asked directly. Interviewing experienced practitioners therefore offers one of the few realistic ways of accessing this reasoning before it is lost.

Documenting this knowledge matters beyond the history of a single studio. Digital tools have made home and small-studio recording increasingly accessible across Ghana, and a growing number of aspiring engineers are entering the field with little access to formal training or mentorship. Much of what they need, how to adapt international recording techniques to Ghanaian performance realities, how to select and position microphones for local ensembles, how to make sound engineering judgements under time and budget pressure, is exactly the kind of practical knowledge that formal curricula rarely capture. Documenting an experienced practitioner such as Ansa-Asare therefore serves a historical purpose and a direct pedagogical one: it offers material that can inform music technology education in Ghana and similar African contexts.

This study examines the recording techniques and studio practices of Dominic Opare Ansa-Asare, founder of MIDO Productions, a recording studio established in Accra in January 2001, according to his account. Ansa-Asare represents an unusually well-documented case of self-directed professional development. Ansa-Asare developed much of his technical knowledge through self-directed learning, professional audio literature, practical experimentation and

interactions with experienced practitioners. His professional development was subsequently strengthened through British Council MIDI workshops and formal coursework at Berklee College of Music. Over more than two decades, his studio has worked across commercial jingles, gospel and choral recording, live sound engineering, and audio technology training, giving him experience across different genres, technologies, and performance contexts.

The central argument of this paper is that Ansa-Asare's engineering practice does not simply borrow Western recording conventions and apply them locally. His practice reflects a consistent set of technical judgements that adapt general engineering principles, on microphone selection, signal capture, mixing, and quality control, to the specific demands of Ghanaian performance contexts: the density and volume of choir-and-band ensembles, and the everyday listening environments he encounters in his work. Analysis of his interview data suggests that these judgements organise into four interlocking technical stages, proposed here as the MIDO framework for context-responsive sound engineering: contextual preparation, capture integrity, translation mixing, and production stewardship. Rather than isolated technical habits, these stages form a connected process that can be traced from the first planning decisions before a session to the final mastered product.

2. Literature Review

This study draws on several connected strands of scholarship: Ghanaian popular music studies, African studio cultures, recording and production theory, self-directed learning, and the relationship between recording technology and listening. Historical accounts of highlife (Collins, 2018, 1994, 1989) trace how successive waves of recording technology reshaped Ghanaian musical aesthetics and industry structures, while Plageman (2013) treats Accra's recording studios as social spaces of creativity and identity formation rather than merely technical facilities. Shipley (2013) shows how Ghanaian hiplife producers negotiate between local musical tradition and global commercial pressure. Owusu-Poku (2021) demonstrates, as noted above, that Ghanaian engineers develop context-sensitive recording methods that respond directly to indigenous performance environments. These studies establish that Ghanaian music production is inseparable from its social and cultural conditions, but they leave the specific engineering reasoning behind that production largely undocumented.

Studies of African studio culture more broadly support this picture. Meintjes (2003) argues that the recording studio is never a neutral technical space but a site where identity, aesthetics, and power are negotiated through decisions about microphone placement, mixing, and spatial processing, while Charry (2012) shows how African producers adapt digital tools to create production styles distinct from their Western origins. Both scholars treat African recording practice as creative reinterpretation rather than imitation of imported norms, a view this study extends by examining the specific engineering reasoning behind that reinterpretation in one contemporary Ghanaian case.

Ansa-Asare’s professional development can also be understood through studies of informal and self-directed learning. Knowles (1975) describes self-directed learning as a process in which individuals take responsibility for developing their own knowledge. Green (2002) and Lebler (2007) also show that musicians can develop skills through listening, imitation, interaction with others, and reflection on practice rather than only through formal instruction.

These ideas are relevant to Ansa-Asare because formal opportunities for training in sound engineering were limited in Ghana during the early period of his career.

Finally, work on music, identity, and listening explains why Ansa-Asare's adaptations matter beyond technique. Frith (1996) and Stokes (1994) argue that music actively constructs identity rather than merely reflecting it, Turino (2008) shows how recording technology transforms music from a participatory activity into a presentational one, and Sterne (2003) and Kheshti (2015) argue that ideas about sound fidelity are shaped by history and culture rather than technologically neutral. This literature converges on the view that music production is a culturally embedded practice in which technical decisions, creative judgement, and social meaning cannot be separated. What remains underexplored is how a specific, experienced practitioner translates this general insight into concrete engineering decisions, session by session. MIDO Productions offers a valuable case for examining that translation in technical detail.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative single-case design (Yin, 2014) to examine the recording techniques and studio practices of Dominic Opare Ansa-Asare in depth. A case study design fits this inquiry because professional engineering judgement cannot easily be separated from the specific practitioner, studio, and experiences that produced it. Reducing this knowledge to survey variables, or observing sessions without access to the reasoning behind them, would strip away exactly what this study seeks to capture: why particular decisions are made, not only what those decisions are. A single, purposively selected case makes it possible to trace that reasoning across an entire career, connecting early experiments with cassette recording to current mixing philosophy, in a way a broader, more diffuse sample would not allow (Creswell, 2013).

Ansa-Asare was selected through purposive sampling as an information-rich case (Patton, 2002). He has more than twenty-five years of experience as a producer and sound engineer in Ghana, spanning commercial recording, gospel and choral production, and live sound. He is recognised for his expertise in Logic Pro-based production, served as a facilitator for British Council MIDI technology workshops, and combines depth of experience with an unusual ability to explain the reasoning behind his engineering decisions. This case is not intended to represent every Ghanaian sound engineer; a single practitioner cannot stand for an entire profession. Its value lies instead in the depth of technical reasoning it makes available, reasoning that a larger, more representative sample would not allow the same access to.

Data were collected through two semi-structured interviews with Ansa-Asare: a Zoom interview on 23 January 2026 (approximately 2 hours 15 minutes) and an interview at MIDO Productions on 12 February 2026 (approximately 2 hour 10 minutes). The interviews explored early recording experiences, professional learning, session preparation, microphone choice and placement, choral and ensemble recording, mixing, mastering, and the adaptation of engineering principles to the settings in which he works. The interviews were conducted with his consent and used as the primary source of evidence. Informal familiarisation with the studio during the second visit provided contextual understanding; it was not a structured observation of recording sessions and was not analysed as an independent dataset.

The interview transcripts were analysed thematically. Transcripts were read closely and repeatedly, recurring technical ideas were identified and grouped into themes, and these themes were refined and organised into the four-stage framework presented in the findings below. This process moved iteratively between the transcripts and the emerging thematic structure, checking that each theme was grounded in the participant's own account rather than imposed from outside. The interview data remain the primary evidence for this study; existing literature on Ghanaian music production and professional audio engineering was used to help interpret and contextualise the findings, not as an independently collected data source. The proposed four-stage framework was developed from the interview themes and reviewed by Ansa-Asare to confirm that it reflected his professional reasoning. His review supports the faithful representation of his account; it does not constitute independent testing of the framework across recording projects. The account that follows represents Ansa-Asare's own professional reasoning, checked for internal consistency across interview sessions, rather than an independently verified record of his studio practice. In-depth interviewing was therefore appropriate for documenting the tacit knowledge, professional judgement, and reasoning that may not be evident from observation alone.

4. Findings

4.1 The MIDO Framework for Context-Responsive Sound Engineering

Ansa-Asare's engineering knowledge developed largely outside formal apprenticeship. His first recording, around 1987, was an instrumental arrangement of Presbyterian songs recorded live onto cassette using a borrowed mixer. Since the recording process did not provide an opportunity to edit or correct mistakes afterwards, the performance had to be properly prepared and recorded in a single take. This early experience contributed to his later emphasis on careful preparation before recording. He later gained further practical experience with a Tascam four-track recorder borrowed from George Abban, an engineer at Ark Studios in Tema. Working with the recorder introduced him to the technique of ‘bouncing’ recorded tracks to create space for additional recordings. These early experiences provided opportunities for Ansa-Asare to learn recording techniques through direct experimentation with the limited equipment available to him at the time. After establishing MIDO Productions in Accra in January 2001, as he dates its beginning, he built most of his technical knowledge through self-teaching: subscribing to Sound on Sound, studying engineering literature, and closely following the working methods of producers such as Bruce Swedien and Quincy Jones. As he explains,

> *"Self-learning helped me a lot. About 90%. Berklee College of Music also gave me a total different approach towards the science of sound engineering, ear training, studying the instruments in the world and their frequency spectrum."*

Formal training, when it came, sharpened rather than replaced this self-taught foundation. British Council MIDI workshops in 2001, led by Dr Gordon Ross of the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, introduced him to Logic Pro, and his skill was strong enough that Ross recommended him as a workshop facilitator from 2002 to 2004. Later, online coursework at Berklee, covering vocal technique, recording, critical listening, and live sound, deepened his understanding of the acoustic science behind decisions he had already been making by ear.

The interviews suggest that Ansa-Asare's technical practices are connected rather than separate. His preparation before a session influences microphone selection and recording, while the quality of the recorded signal affects later mixing and mastering. From the analysis, the researchers organised these reported practices into four stages that form the MIDO framework for context-responsive sound engineering. Contextual preparation concerns planning for the performers, space, and event. Capture integrity focuses on microphone selection, placement, and preserving the source sound during recording. Translation mixing concerns shaping the mix for the environments in which listeners will hear it. Production stewardship focuses on maintaining quality through mastering, duplication, equipment use, and professional relationships. The framework is based on this single case and is presented as a starting point for examining the practices of other Ghanaian and African sound engineers.

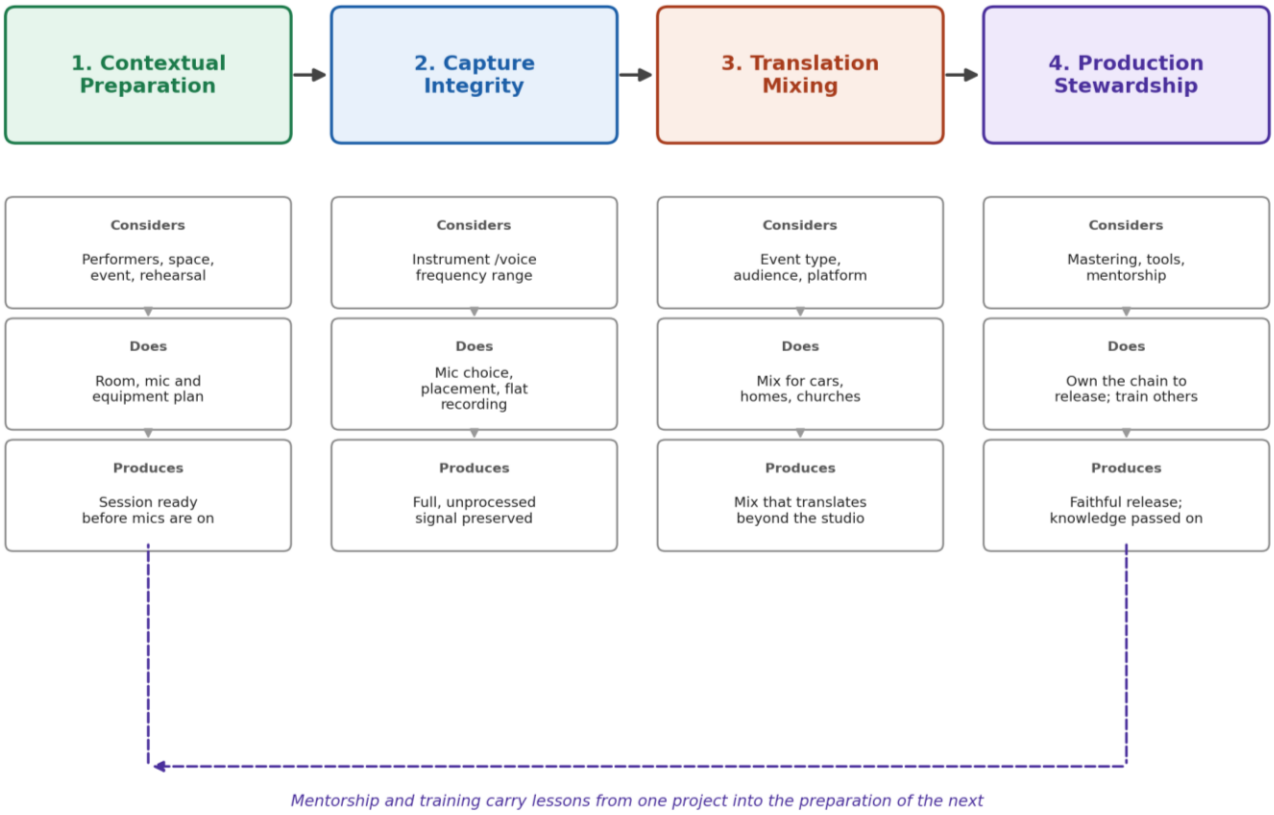

Figure 1: The MIDO framework for context-responsive sound engineering

4.2 Contextual Preparation

For Ansa-Asare, most of the work of a good recording happens before the session begins. His stated goal is to eliminate the need for last-minute adjustment once recording starts, so the session runs smoothly and the client's time is respected. Once a session is booked, he and his team assess the room, choose the microphones, and configure equipment for that specific recording; a choir, he argues, needs an entirely different setup from a solo artist. This preparation is usually done a day in advance and is not charged to the client:

> *"If you pay for a nine o'clock recording session and it's a choir, it means the day before I have work to do. You will not be paying for that. Because I don't want you to come and sit down and wait."*

Before a session, the studio gathers information about the performers, instrumentation, and whether the recording will use a live ensemble or pre-recorded tracks. This information helps the team to select an appropriate recording space and prepare the necessary equipment. The team may also attend rehearsals to understand the music and identify possible acoustic and technical challenges before the recording. This is similar to the ensemble sound checks reported by Owusu-Poku (2021) in Kwakye's work at the Ghana Film Studio. It suggests that careful preparation before recording may also be important in other Ghanaian engineering practices. For Ansa-Asare, decisions about the room, microphones, and session arrangement should therefore be made before recording begins so that the technical work can proceed smoothly.

4.3 Capture Integrity

The second stage concerns how Ansa-Asare approaches the capture of sound at source. He places considerable importance on microphone selection and positioning, estimating that these decisions account for roughly sixty to seventy percent of the quality of a final mix. This percentage expresses his professional judgement rather than a measured result. He considers the sound source and its frequency content, but microphone selection also depends on polar pattern, off-axis response, transient behaviour, the acoustic space, microphone distance and spill from other instruments. In his account, these considerations guide choices that cannot be reduced to matching a microphone to an instrument's fundamental frequency alone.

> *"For a particular engineer, maybe the conga, what he wants is the slap into the membrane. That's nice, but I will also be recording the conga looking for the fundamental frequency of the membranes. Knowing that I can aim to the second order or third octave of every frequency, I can always use EQ to bring that out. So I won't set off looking for the slap. In my mix, I can get the slap and also get the body of the conga."*

In this explanation, Ansa-Asare is referring to the second or third octave above a fundamental frequency. His point is that he listens for the tonal body of the conga as well as its attack and considers how frequency components can subsequently be shaped with equalisation.

Ansa-Asare relates this approach to Bruce Swedien's idea of 'acupuncture miking', where a microphone is placed carefully to capture the particular sound needed from an instrument or voice. This also influences his approach to dynamics. He prefers to capture a clean and complete signal during recording and make further adjustments during mixing rather than depend on corrective processing at the recording stage.

> *"When I'm recording, I want to record flat. But I should get every frequency I'm looking for. And then after that I will shape them with the EQ. There is no compressor during the recording process. No."*

For choirs and ensembles, Ansa-Asare describes adjusting main ensemble, spot and room microphones to the size of the group, its instrumentation and the acoustic space. One practical starting point is the 3:1 microphone rule, a guideline intended to minimise phase cancellation and unwanted sound bleed when multiple microphones are used simultaneously. For two microphones primarily assigned to separate sound sources, if the first microphone is placed a distance "B" from its intended source, the spacing between the two microphones should

generally be at least “3B”. This spacing can reduce the relative level of an unwanted shared source reaching the other microphone and thus lessen audible comb filtering when the signals are combined. It is not a guarantee against phase interference or spill, and it does not replace listening, checking polarity and timing, or adapting placement to the room and ensemble. Ansa-Asare uses such guidance flexibly rather than as a fixed prescription.

Ansa-Asare also considers noise and difficult room acoustics during setup rather than waiting until recording has started. In some situations, he does not try to remove all the natural characteristics of the room because they may contribute to the sound of the recording. He also works with the musical director, plans breaks for large choirs, and keeps backup equipment available. These measures help him to reduce avoidable problems and preserve a recording that can be shaped further during mixing.

4.4 Translation Mixing

The third stage concerns how a recording, once captured, is shaped for the environments in which it will actually be heard. Ansa-Asare describes his guiding principle as a ‘life approach’ to sound: a mix should not only sound good in a professional studio but should translate into the ordinary spaces where most people listen, cars, homes, churches, and shared public spaces. Because very few listeners hear music through studio monitors or high-end headphones, he treats real-world playback conditions, not idealised studio listening, as the true test of a mix:

> *"The idea is not to force someone to wear headphones to enjoy the music, but to ensure that it sounds right in natural environments. This is also why compression becomes necessary in many cases."*

Ansa-Asare also discussed live sound reinforcement for church services, concerts, corporate events and social gatherings. These examples concern real-time control of loudness, intelligibility and balance for a particular venue and audience, rather than translation checks on a finished recording. They are included as a related aspect of his context-sensitive professional judgement, but are analytically distinct from translation mixing for playback. In both situations, he describes negotiation with the client or musical director and the importance of matching technical decisions to the event.

> *"It should be a collaborative process. No one person knows everything all the time."*

Translation mixing therefore involves both technical and collaborative decisions. The engineer considers what is technically possible, the expectations of the audience, and the artistic intentions of the client or musical director.

4.5 Production Stewardship

Production stewardship concerns Ansa-Asare’s responsibility for the recording beyond the initial mix, as well as his equipment choices and the sharing of professional knowledge. He describes an earlier experience in which a mix was altered during duplication, leading him to pay closer attention to mastering and the final released version. He favours understanding existing equipment over frequent upgrades. His career account includes commercial jingles, gospel and choral projects, live sound and technical training. He recalls organising a sound-management workshop in 2007, which he considers the first of its kind in Ghana; this historical

priority is reported as his recollection. Through later workshops and mentorship, he has sought to share practical skills with emerging engineers.

5. Discussions

The MIDO framework adds a technical example to existing studies of African studio practice. Meintjes (2003) and Charry (2012) show generally that African recording practices are adapted to local cultural and musical conditions. Ansa-Asare's account provides a practical example of how he reasons about this during recording. For instance, he does not apply standard choir-miking techniques without considering that many Ghanaian choirs perform with full bands in louder and denser sound environments. His account therefore suggests that adapting recording techniques involves specific decisions based on listening, experience, and the conditions of the performance.

Ansa-Asare's practice of mixing for cars, churches, homes, and other everyday listening environments also shows that he considers where the final recording will be heard. This relates to Frith's (1996) and Turino's (2008) discussions of the social use of music. In his practice, the studio monitor is not the only reference for judging a mix because most listeners will hear the recording in less controlled environments.

The interviews also indicate the importance of self-directed learning in Ansa-Asare's professional development. He estimates that about ninety percent of his skills were developed through self-learning, while formal training later helped him to improve and understand some of the technical principles behind his practice. This supports Knowles (1975) and Green (2002), who show that professional knowledge can also develop through self-directed and informal learning. In contexts where formal sound engineering training is limited, sustained practice and targeted professional training can therefore play an important role in developing expertise.

These findings carry implications for how sound engineering is taught in Ghanaian tertiary institutions. If expert practice consists of context-specific judgement built on internalised technical principles rather than fixed procedures, curricula built solely around prescriptive technique risk producing graduates who can follow instructions but cannot adapt when those instructions do not fit the performance in front of them. Adding documented case studies such as this one, alongside conventional technical instruction, would expose students directly to the kind of reasoning Ansa-Asare describes: why a particular microphone was chosen, why a session was recorded flat, why a room's imperfect acoustics were preserved rather than corrected. This is a different kind of teaching resource from a textbook rule and one that is currently largely absent from formal training in the region.

The MIDO framework is based on one in-depth case and is not presented as a model of how every Ghanaian or African engineer works. Its four areas, contextual preparation, capture integrity, translation mixing, and production stewardship, provide a way of organising the practices identified in Ansa-Asare's account. Future studies can examine whether similar practices are found among other engineers in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. The framework can therefore serve as an analytical and teaching guide that can be tested and improved through further research.

The account is also relevant to sound engineering literature, which has largely been developed from Western technical sources (Huber & Runstein, 2014; Rumsey & McCormick, 2009).

Ansa-Asare does not reject these established principles. For example, he uses Bruce Swedien's idea of acupuncture miking and the three-to-one rule. However, he adapts such principles to the particular performers, spaces, and recording conditions he encounters. His account illustrates that technical knowledge becomes more useful when the engineer understands the principle and can apply it appropriately to the context.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative single-case study examined Dominic Opare Ansa-Asare's account of his recording techniques and studio practices. The interviews were interpreted through four related areas: contextual preparation, capture integrity, translation mixing and production stewardship. Together these form the proposed MIDO framework, an analytical description of one practitioner's reported professional reasoning rather than a tested model of studio performance.

The case suggests that sound engineering knowledge can involve adapting established techniques to the performers, spaces and listening conditions encountered in particular projects. It also illustrates how Ansa-Asare understands the relationship between sustained self-directed learning and subsequent professional training. These interpretations should not be generalised to all Ghanaian engineers without further comparative research.

By documenting the reasoning described by one experienced Ghanaian engineer, the study adds a practitioner-centred perspective to research on African studio production. Future work could examine the proposed stages through observed sessions, production records, audio comparisons and interviews with other engineers and collaborators. Such work would allow the framework to be refined, challenged or extended.

The MIDO framework may also be useful as a teaching prompt for discussing preparation, sound capture, playback translation and responsibility for the final product. Its pedagogical value remains a proposal for future application and evaluation.

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