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“MISE GLI LOO”: ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE MUSICAL FABLE SELF-SERVING, PREDICATED ON THE MUSICO-DRAMATIC GENRE OF STORYTELLING

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Abstract

This paper examines Mise Gli Loo, the opening chorus of Self-Serving: A Musical Fable, as a creative embodiment of Eve storytelling traditions within contemporary African art music. Grounded in Acquah's (2019) Anansegorndwom compositional model and informed by indigenous performance structures, the study analyses how traditional narrative practices such as call-and-response, antiphonal texture, and tonal language inflections are transformed into a modern musico-dramatic form. Drawing on practice-based research methodology, the work explores how African oral tradition can inform compositional processes, musical structure, and community engagement in performance. Through detailed analysis of rhythm, melody, texture, and harmony, the paper reveals how Mise Gli Loo functions not only as a musical invocation but also as a vessel for cultural memory and moral reflection. The findings contribute to ongoing conversations around the integration of indigenous African aesthetics into formal art music composition and pedagogy.

Keywords: African art music, oral traditions, Eve storytelling, Musico-dramatic form, practice-based research

1. Introduction

African oral traditions are rich repositories of cultural memory, transmitting values, histories, and philosophies from one generation to the next. For centuries, storytelling has preserved the beliefs, folklore, and lived experiences of African communities, often interwoven with elements of the performing arts, *music*, *dance*, and *drama*. As Banerjee (2008) notes, storytelling is not only a form of entertainment but also a powerful tool for education, cultural continuity, and collective identity. He suggests that we are all storytellers, whether consciously or not. The significance of storytelling cannot be overstated: it fosters intergenerational dialogue, nurtures creativity, and functions as a vital medium of communication and artistic expression (Banerjee, 2008; Carter-Black, 2007; Iseke, 2013; Scott, 2011).

Ruth Finnegan (2012) emphasises that African oral literature is not merely spoken word but a dynamic interplay of performance, memory, and artistry, deeply embedded in social life. Similarly, Nketia (1974) highlights the centrality of music in African oral traditions, noting that rhythm and tonal nuance are not decorative but essential to meaning-making. Barber (2005) further argues that oral performance should be understood as both text and action—an embodied, interpretive act that animates cultural knowledge. This paper explores these ideas through an analysis of *Mise Gli Loo*, a chorus drawn from *Self-Serving: A Musical Fable*. Framed within the evolving trends of African art music, the study situates the composition within the musico-dramatic genre of storytelling. Through theoretical and contextual frameworks, the paper examines the work's melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and textural features, while also reflecting on its broader implications for contemporary African narrative performance.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Kivunja (2018) defines a theoretical framework as a synthesis of established theories and concepts that provide a “theoretical coat-hanger” for analysing and interpreting research data. In essence, it offers a structured lens through which the meanings embedded in research findings are understood, drawing from previously tested and published knowledge.

This study is situated within two key theoretical perspectives: cross-cultural music-making, as articulated by Kim (2017), and African art music, as defined by Agawu, and cited in Adjei (2015). These perspectives frame composition as a process of creatively transforming pre-existing materials into new, individualised structures. This transformation involves a deliberate integration of traditional elements such as folk melodies, rhythms, and instruments with Western compositional techniques, resulting in a hybridised form of art music that retains indigenous identity while embracing innovation. In contrast, the conceptual framework serves as the researcher's interpretive map, outlining how the phenomenon under study unfolds and how its components interrelate (Adom et al., 2018). It is particularly vital in creative arts research, where it guides the exploration of artistic processes and the relationships between source material, creative intent, and final output.

This paper adopts the Anansegorndwom model propounded by Acquah (2019), a compositional framework for African musical drama. The model emphasises the importance of narrative as the foundation of musical creation, advocating for titles and themes derived from folktales, whether documented, community-based, or self-invented. It outlines four compositional stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification, echoing Wallas's classic model of creativity. These stages are supported by enabling conditions such as cross-cultural experience and multicultural ideology, which allow for the fusion of Western and indigenous musical idioms. In alignment with this model, the larger work *Self-Serving: A Musical Fable* was inspired by the Eve proverb “*Vide Adeke Mele Dokuitɔdidi Me O*” (“It does not pay to be selfish”). The fable was sourced from community oral tradition and documented in accordance with the model's prescriptions. The creative process involved adapting traditional materials, folktales, folk dances, language, tonality, and instrumentation through the four compositional stages. The resulting artefact, *Self-Serving*, embodies a cross-cultural synthesis of form and meaning. This paper focuses on one of its introductory movements, *Mise Gli Loo*, offering an analytical presentation of its performance structure within the musico-dramatic genre of storytelling.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a practice-based research methodology, a paradigm well-suited to creative arts research, where knowledge is generated through the creation, performance, and reflection on artistic works (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). The principal artefact under investigation, “*Mise Gli Loo*”, a chorus from *Self-Serving: A Musical Fable*, is both the subject and product of this methodological inquiry.

Rooted in ethnomusicological and artistic inquiry traditions, the research process was guided by iterative cycles of creative production, contextual analysis, and reflective interpretation. The compositional process followed the Anansegorndwom model developed by Acquah (2019), which outlines four creative phases: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Each phase was applied to structure the creation of *Self-Serving*, using folktales, folk dances, indigenous language, traditional and Western instruments, and tonal systems as creative material. The central theme derived from the Eve proverb “*Vide Adeke Mele Dokuitɔdidi Me O*” (“It does not pay to be selfish”) served as the conceptual seed from which the broader musical narrative emerged. This thematic seed was sourced from oral tradition and documented storytelling, in accordance with the Anansegorndwom model’s emphasis on narrative origin.

The compositional workflow included:

- **Preparation:** Engagement with source materials such as Eve folktales, traditional chants, and indigenous rhythms.
- **Incubation:** Time set aside for subconscious processing and thematic development.
- **Illumination:** Emergence of melodic, harmonic, and structural ideas reflecting the fable’s moral and dramatic essence.
- **Verification:** Formal composition and critique through self-review and peer consultations.

Data collection for this research was embedded in the creative act itself through the selection, adaptation, and arrangement of cultural and musical materials. The analytical portion of the study, focusing on the *Mise Gli Loo* chorus, applies formal musical analysis methods adapted from African art music scholarship (Nketia, 1974 & Agawu, 2003) to examine aspects such as texture, rhythm and meter, call and response, melodic contour, and instrumental arrangement. This fusion of creative practice and theoretical reflection offers a holistic approach to understanding musico-dramatic storytelling as an evolving African art form.

4. Creative Process and Structure

4.1 The Storytelling Structure in the Musico-Dramatic Genre

In setting the fable to music, I carefully examined the structure of traditional storytelling and the techniques employed in Eve oral narratives, with the aim of integrating these elements into the musical fable. It became evident that storytelling in this context is inseparable from musical expression. These musical elements often appear at the beginning (*prelude*), in the middle (*interlude*), and at the end (*postlude*) of the storytelling session.

In a typical storytelling encounter within Ghanaian Eve communities, the session begins with a formulaic call-and-response: the storyteller initiates with “*Mise gli loo*” (“Let us hear a story”), to which the audience responds “*Egli neva*” (“Let the story come”). The storyteller then introduces the main characters, and upon each name, the audience affirms with “*Wo dze dzi*” (“It has landed on him/her”). As the plot unfolds, it is common for members of the audience to interject with a song, sometimes claiming to be witnesses to the events, prompting communal singing and dancing. These spontaneous musical interludes are often repeated, enhancing memory, building excitement, and inviting broader participation. As Elder (2017) notes, “Repetition serves as a memory enhancer, but it also builds excitement and opens up space for more to participate and shine”. Throughout the narrative, music and dance are interwoven at various stages, performed by either the narrator or the audience. While any song, traditional or modern, may be introduced spontaneously, three distinct song types have gained prominence in Eve storytelling: Glimeha, Glimedeha, and Glinuwuha (Gbagbo & Elder, 2019).

- **Glimeha**, meaning “a song in the story”, is typically tied to a specific character or moment. The performer often imitates the character while singing, either solo or with the audience.

- **Glimedehe**, or “interjection/interlude song”, is not directly related to the plot. It may be a favourite or familiar tune raised by any audience member. Despite its incidental nature, it energises the session, reinforces cultural values, and deepens audience engagement.
- **Glinuwuha**, meaning “a song that ends the story”, is performed at the end of the tale. It signals the transition from one storyteller to the next, returning the performer to the role of listener and elevating another to the stage (Gbagbo, Elder 2019).

These techniques were consciously adopted in the creation of *Self-Serving: A Musical Fable* to evoke dramatic intensity and assign distinct voices to characters. This paper focuses specifically on the opening chorus *Mise Gli Loo*, an excerpt from the larger work, which serves as the audience’s invitation into the narrative world and the formal introduction of its characters.

4.2 Synopsis of the Musical Fable

Once upon a time, a severe famine struck Spider’s village, forcing him into the forest in search of food for himself and his family. Deep in the woods, he stumbled upon a mysterious stone remarkable for its large eyes, long eyelashes, and a beard. Overwhelmed by curiosity, Spider exclaimed aloud, “What kind of stone is this that has two huge eyes, a beard, and eyelashes?” The moment he spoke, an invisible force swept him upward. Fortunately, he managed to grasp a tree branch and escape harm. On his way back, Spider encountered Mr. Duiker and lured him to the site of the strange stone. Like Spider, Duiker could not contain his astonishment and cried out, “What kind of stone is this with two huge eyes, eyelashes, and a beard?” At once, the same unseen force hurled him to the ground with a thunderous *puu!*—Duiker was dead. Elated, Spider rejoiced, “My troubles are over. Today, my wife’s soup will be delicious!” He dragged Duiker’s body away for food. One by one, Spider repeated this cruel trick with other animals, using their curiosity to feed his survival until he met Squirrel. Cunning and observant, Squirrel witnessed Spider’s wicked acts and resolved to turn the tables. In a twist of poetic justice, Squirrel outwitted Spider, leading to the trickster’s demise.

At its core, the fable delivers a timeless lesson: selfishness has consequences, and cruelty begets downfall.

4.3 From Story to Structure: Linking Narrative to Musical Form

The synopsis of *Self-Serving: A Musical Fable* reveals a narrative deeply embedded in the aesthetics of Eve storytelling layered with moral instruction, suspense, communal participation, and dramatic irony. Its plot structure and character dynamics present rich opportunities for musical expression, particularly within the musico-dramatic genre, where narrative and sound are mutually reinforcing. In bringing this story to life musically, *Mise Gli Loo* functions as the formal invocation and narrative gateway, echoing the traditional call-and-response that announces the beginning of storytelling sessions: “*Mise gli loo*” (“Let us hear a story”) and the audience’s reply “*Egli neva*” (“Let the story come”). This chorus not only sets the performative tone but also enacts a communal contract between narrator and listener, evoking anticipation and co-ownership of the tale.

Analysing *Mise Gli Loo* thus requires attention not only to its musical features, rhythm, melody, texture, and tonal interplay, but also to its dramaturgical role. How does the chorus evoke participation? In what ways do melodic contour or rhythmic phrasing reinforce the dramatic mood or foreshadow the plot’s moral arc? What traditional forms are being reimagined through harmonic and instrumental choices? The following section explores these questions through a detailed analysis of *Mise Gli Loo*, demonstrating how the chorus functions as a musico-dramatic scaffold for the broader fable and how its structure mirrors the communal and moral essence of Eve oral tradition.

5. Analysis

"Mise Gli Loo," the introductory chorus of the musical fable *Self-Serving*, encapsulates the moral arc of the narrative, which critiques greed and selfishness. The composition, scored for voice and piano, features a dialogic interplay between the Glitola (narrator/cantor) and the Gliselawo (audience/chorus), employing the traditional African call-and-response technique within the framework of African art music and musico-dramatic storytelling (Mireku-Gyimah, 2014).

5.1 Call and response

Call-and-response is a hallmark of traditional African musical expression, characterised by the alternation between a solo voice (the caller) and a group response (the chorus). In *Mise Gli Loo*, this technique is employed with the Glitola (narrator or storyteller) delivering the call and the Gliselawo (audience or chorus) responding. The call first appears in measure 24, where the Glitola begins to introduce the story's key characters: Yiyi, Avugboe, Nyitsu, and Ado, each of whom is acknowledged by the Gliselawo with the affirmative phrase "Wo dze dzi" ("It has landed on them") (see *Excerpts 1 & 2*).

The image displays a musical score for three parts: Glitola S/T, Glawo, and Pno. The score is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Glitola S/T part begins in measure 21 with a rest, followed by a melodic line starting in measure 24 with the lyrics "Mi se gliloo". A blue box labeled "call" is positioned above this line. The Glawo part also begins with a rest in measure 21, followed by a response starting in measure 24 with the lyrics "E gli ne va". A blue box labeled "response" is positioned above this line. The Pno. part features a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with various dynamics including *ff*, *fff*, *mp*, and *p*. The score is marked with measure numbers 21 and 24.

Excerpt 1: Call and Response Structure

This structure is repeated throughout the piece (see *Excerpt 2*), faithfully mirroring the traditional format of Eve storytelling in which characters are introduced sequentially, and the audience signals their presence and engagement through collective responses. Beyond its structural function, the call-and-response format fosters communal participation, dissolving the boundary between performer and listener. As is customary in Eve oral tradition, this interaction transforms the audience into co-narrators, active agents in the construction of the story's meaning and emotional impact.

The image shows a page from a musical score for the song "Głowa" by Andrzej Zieliński. The score is written for three parts: Gtola S/T (Soprano/Tenor), Glawo (Alto/Bass), and Pno. (Piano). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score includes lyrics in Polish and musical notation with dynamics like *mf* (mezzo-forte). The lyrics are: "uu gboe dzi", "E nyi tsu dzi", "A do dzi", "Wo dze dzi loo", "wo dze dzi", "wo dze dzi", "wo dze dzi". The score is marked with a rehearsal mark 33.

Excerpt 2: Call and response illustrating the co-narrative structure of the piece

Thus, *Mise Gli Loo* does not only preserve but reimagines the participatory ethos of Eve storytelling within the musico-dramatic genre, using the power of collective voice to invite reflection, anticipation, and cultural memory.

5.2 Rhythm and metre

In *Mise Gli Loo*, rhythm and meter are central to the piece's expressive energy and structural coherence. The work is primarily cast in a simple duple metre (2/4), which reinforces the directness and steady pace of the storytelling rhythm. However, brief shifts to 1/4 time in measures 3 and 6 (in the piano accompaniment during the prelude) create a momentary disruption in regularity. These metric deviations serve as structural pivots, allowing key motivic phrases to cadence cleanly and signal a transition to new thematic material. These subtle changes in meter are not arbitrary; they heighten narrative tension and mimic the storyteller's rhythmic gestures, pauses, emphases, or dramatic pivots within a traditional oral performance. The effect evokes suspense and intrigue, drawing the listener deeper into the unfolding tale. The example in *Excerpt 3* highlights this brief but purposeful metric transformation.

Piano

mp

Leo

*

Piano

Excerpt 3: Change of metre

Moreover, rhythmic motives in the accompaniment closely mirror the spoken text and tonal inflection of the Eve language, reinforcing the story's cultural grounding and enhancing its natural cadence. As seen in *Excerpt 4*, these motivic patterns are consistent and deliberate, functioning as both narrative anchor and expressive device.



Excerpt 4: Motivic phrase

5.3 Texture

Musical texture refers to the way individual voices or lines interact and are layered within a composition, whether they move together in harmony (*homophonic*), independently (*polyphonic*), singly (*monophonic*), or responsively (*antiphonal*). Amuah and Acquah (2013) observe that texture expresses how many sounds are heard at once and how they relate to each other both vertically and horizontally.

In *Mise Gli Loo*, the texture is predominantly antiphonal, echoing the participatory call-and-response structure of Eve storytelling. The dialogue between the Glitola (narrator) and Gliselawo (audience/chorus) alternates responsively, reflecting an organic musical interaction akin to the conversational dynamic in oral tradition. This antiphonal layering enhances both the dramatic and communal qualities of the piece. As illustrated in *Excerpt 5*, the alternation of vocal lines creates a textural structure that is not only performative but also symbolic, underscoring the relational bond between narrator and listener. This mirrors indigenous Ghanaian song traditions in which the cantor and chorus maintain a living, responsive musical dialogue. Thus, texture here is not merely a musical device but a cultural expression of collective storytelling.

Excerpt 5: Antiphonal texture

5.4 Melodic organisation

Melody is central to the expressive identity of *Mise Gli Loo*, anchoring its cultural authenticity and emotional accessibility. As Salamon et al. (2014) observe, melody is often the most memorable element of a composition, the sequence of pitches that a listener might hum or whistle as the recognisable essence of the music. Mereku (2005) similarly defines melody as a succession of varied pitches arranged in a recognisable, organised shape. In traditional African music contexts, melodies often carry not only sonic identity but also linguistic fidelity and social meaning.

In keeping with these definitions, the melodic structure of *Mise Gli Loo* adheres to the tonal and linguistic contours of the Eve language. The composition avoids chromaticism entirely, remaining strictly within the diatonic scale to preserve the integrity of the language's tonal inflections and to reflect the typical practice in Ghanaian folksongs, which rarely modulate but remain rooted in a single key throughout performance. This melodic discipline allows the vocal lines to mirror natural speech rhythms and tonal patterns, reinforcing narrative intelligibility. Furthermore, the short melodic ideas are repeated consistently in both the call (Gltola) and response (Gliselawo) sections (see *Excerpts 6 & 7*). These repetitions serve both formal and functional purposes: they establish thematic cohesion, enhance memorability, and contribute to what might be described as the “authentic Africanness” of the musical language. Thus, the melodic organisation in *Mise Gli Loo* is not only a product of artistic intention but also a reflection of storytelling tradition, tonal language awareness, and participatory musical structure.

Excerpt 6 shows a musical score for two parts: Gtola S/T and Glawo. The Gtola S/T part has a melody with lyrics "Mi se gli loo" and "E gli tso uu dze Yi yi dzi". The Glawo part has a response melody with lyrics "gli re va" and "E gli re va". The music is in 2/4 time and G major.

Excerpt 6: Repeated melodic phrases in the call and response

Excerpt 7 shows a musical score for Piano (Pno.). The piano part features repeated melodic motivic phrases in the right hand, with dynamics *p* and *mp*. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment.

Excerpt 7: Repeated melodic motivic phrases in the piano accompaniment

5.5 Harmony

Harmony, though often seen as a supporting element, plays a pivotal role in *Mise Gli Loo* by reinforcing its tonal consistency and structural pacing. Schmidt-Jones (2015) defines harmony as the simultaneous sounding of pitches. Whether consonant or dissonant, that contributes to the vertical dimension of music. It becomes especially relevant when there is more than one pitch sounding at a time, offering emotional depth and textural variety.

In this composition, the harmonic structure is firmly rooted in tonal harmony, drawing on simple diatonic triads within a fixed key centre. The composer avoids chromatics and modulation, a deliberate decision aligned with the tonal stability found in most traditional Ghanaian folk music. This approach allows the harmonic language to remain accessible and grounded in the aural expectations of the storytelling context. The harmonic rhythm, the rate at which chords change, is notably slow and repetitive. This supports the storytelling flow, providing a sonorous foundation beneath the unfolding vocal narrative. As Schmidt-Jones (2015) asserts, a slow harmonic rhythm often characterises music with infrequent chord changes, creating space for melodic and textual nuance to emerge clearly. This restrained but purposeful use of harmony allows the vocal and rhythmic elements to take narrative precedence, while the underlying chords subtly colour the emotional and dramatic dimensions of the piece. The overall harmonic texture contributes to the musical fable's authenticity, solemnity, and cultural resonance.

6. Summary and Conclusions

Mise Gli Loo, as the opening chorus of *Self-Serving: A Musical Fable*, exemplifies the richness of African musico-dramatic storytelling by seamlessly integrating traditional Ewe oral techniques with contemporary art music sensibilities. Through its strategic use of call-and-response, antiphonal texture, diatonic melodic structures, and deliberate harmonic simplicity, the composition honours the narrative integrity and participatory ethos of indigenous storytelling while asserting its place within the canon of African art music.

Each musical decision, from metric shifts that mirror narrative pacing to repeated motivic phrases that echo oral memory practices, serves a dramaturgical purpose, reinforcing the communal and moral heart of the fable. The analytical examination of rhythm, texture, melody, and harmony reveals a deliberate synthesis of tradition and innovation rooted in cultural context and guided by a clear compositional framework. Ultimately, *Mise Gli Loo* stands as both a performative invocation and a pedagogical artefact, inviting audiences to reflect on ethical values through sound, story, and shared experience. In bridging oral tradition and formal music practice, the piece not only reaffirms storytelling as a living art but also demonstrates its enduring capacity to instruct, inspire, and connect across time and space.

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Adendum – Mise Gli Loo score

MISE GLI LOO

The musical score is for a piano piece titled 'Mise Gli Loo'. It is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 2/4. The score begins with a piano (Piano) marking and a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic. The melody is played in the right hand, featuring a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass line is played in the left hand, consisting of sustained chords and single notes. There are two 'Reo' markings in the bass line, one at the beginning and one at the end. A double asterisk (**) is placed between the two 'Reo' markings. The score ends with a double bar line.

Piano score for Pno. (Piano) across four systems of music.

System 1 (Measures 5-8): The piece begins in 4/4 time. Measure 5 features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Measure 6 contains a whole rest in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. Measure 7 is a 2/4 time signature change, with a *ff* (fortissimo) dynamic marking. Measure 8 continues the melodic line in the right hand.

System 2 (Measures 9-12): Measure 9 starts with a *mp* (mezzo-piano) dynamic. Measure 10 shows a crescendo leading to a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic. Measure 11 features a *p* (piano) dynamic. Measure 12 ends with a repeat sign.

System 3 (Measures 13-16): Measure 13 begins with a *mp* dynamic. Measures 14, 15, and 16 continue with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with a crescendo leading to a *mp* dynamic.

System 4 (Measures 17-20): Measure 17 starts with a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic. Measure 18 shows a crescendo leading to a *f* (forte) dynamic. Measures 19 and 20 continue with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with a crescendo leading to a *f* dynamic.

21

Gtola
S/T

21

Glawo

Pno.

f Mi se gli loo

mf E

ff *fff* *mp* *p*

25

Gtola
S/T

25

Glawo

Pno.

gli ne va

Mi se gliloo

E gli tso vu dze

gli ne va

29

Gtola
S/T

29

Yi yi dzi

Wo dze dzi loo

mp wo dze dzi

A

Pno.

33

Gtola
S/T

33

uu gbœe dzi

mf Wo dze dzi loo

mf wo dze dzi

E

Pno.

37

Gtola
S/T

37

nyi tsu dzi A dɔ dzi

Glawo

mf wɔ dʒe dzi wɔ dʒe dzi

Pno.

41

Gtola
S/T

41

f oh, Mi se gliloo e gli ne va Mi se gliloo e

Glawo

ff e gli ne va *ff* e

Pno.

45

Gtola
S/T

45 gli ne va oh Mi se gli loo e gli ne va

Glawo

gli ne va *ff* e gli ne va

Pno.

45

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