GUANYA PAU: A STORY OF AN AFRICAN PRINCESS
AN OPERA BY SHAWN E. OKPEBHULO
LIBRETTO BY JOHN K. BRACKETT

Pew Research Grant Proposal
2009-2010
Dr. Shawn E. Okpebholo

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I. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AND PERFORMANCE

According to the University of Nebraska Press, Guanya Pau: A Story of an African Princess was the first piece of long fiction written by an African in English. The author, Joseph J. Walters was a Via man who was born in Liberia in the 1860’s and converted to Christianity upon moving to the United States. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Oberlin College in 1883. In 1891 he published Guanya Pau, a simple, yet surprisingly modern narrative that subtly blends West African customs with Christian values.

Historian Dr. John Brackett of the University of Cincinnati, whose scholarship primarily includes black Africans in Renaissance and early modern Europe, wrote an epic poem based on Walter’s novel. (See Section VII) Several noted musicians reviewed Dr. Brackett’s epic poem and felt the poem deserved to be transformed into a major stage work; as a result, Dr. Brackett asked if I would take on the challenge of composing an opera and making his epic poem the libretto. I agreed.

The opera’s musical, rhythmic and textural styles will be an amalgamation of my own compositional technique and styles of traditional West African music. I will be primarily focusing on Nigerian styles and the techniques of griots of the Mandé societies of Mali, Guinea and Senegal. In preparation for this composition, I will travel to Senegal and Nigeria in January for more in-depth study of griots, the music of the Mandé people, and other traditional West African music and rhythms. Once this phase of research is completed, I will compose a modern musical stage work that will incorporate many of the styles absorbed and refined during my research trip.

This opera will be divided into two parts, each including six vignettes. Similar to late nineteenth-century western opera, the music will be continuous in both parts. Each vignette will include vocalists; some will have dancers and spoken narrators. Along with the addition of authentic West African music techniques, other aspects of the opera that will be nontraditional are form and orchestration.
Performance of Guanya Pau: A Story of an African Princess

This Pew Grant would support the research and composition process of the opera. Through the generous donations of supporters of the arts in Cincinnati, OH, this work will be professionally produced and rehearsed. The world-premiere performance will be in the late fall/early winter 2010 in Cincinnati.

Significant Scholarly Contributions

- Composition

Besides George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* or William Grant Still’s *Troubled Island*, there have not been many classical stage works with African American themes. Moreover, the same can be said about works with authentic African melodies and rhythms. With the blend of those elements Guanya Pau will have a unique place in the family of classical stage works.

- Theory

With many unique works introduced into the canon of music, analysis becomes an important element. Due to the different rhythms and nonconventional use of harmony, I feel that this opera will contribute to the ongoing quest to find new ways to study and understand 21st century music, as I integrate 18th century contrapuntal techniques of western music with 19th and 20th century vertical and linear music composition of West Africa.

- Musicology and Ethnomusicology

Although there have been several western composers in the late 19th century that have studied non-western music, Ethnomusicology as an academic discipline is relatively new with its inception in 1955. Most of my research will specifically deal with the ethnomusicology of West Africa—a part of the world deep with musical heritage and where much more can be discovered. While my main focus for this project will be to compose a major stage work, my musical findings should be a welcomed addition to the field of ethnomusicology.

II. REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE AND OTHER RESEARCH PRACTICES

The West African compositional styles that will be represented in the opera will primarily be learned by hands-on research that will take place during my trip to Senegal and Nigeria. I will interview and record modern day griots, native musicians in several small villages, and talk with scholars at several universities within those two countries. While I am in West Africa, I will
learn native African drumming on authentic Senegalese and Nigerian instruments. This will expand my rhythmic base, allowing me to adhere to authentic rhythmic styles that will be key to the success of the opera.

Although there is not much literature on the subject of traditional West African music, there are resources that would prove valuable in my research. Below is my preliminary bibliography.

**Bibliography**


**III. Timeline for Completion and Dissemination**

One stipulation for this grant is the ability for the project to be researched or completed in a timely fashion. The term ‘opera’ historically speaking is a heavy word that connotes a large, three hour, musical stage work that includes a major orchestra and large cast. Though the length of *Guanya Pau* will be an hour and a half in duration, the work will still be considered chamber. I will compose for a small orchestra and cast. With my normal writing speed, this work can be completed during the summer months.
I am also aware that this is a “summer” research grant. With this in mind, to allow myself to solely focus on composing the opera during the summer months, I plan to do most of my research beginning in January with my trip to Senegal. Below is my timeline for completion.

- January 11-14: Travel to Dakar, Senegal to research, read, and learn rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic styles of traditional West African music. Meet with modern day griots.
- January 14-28: Travel to Nigeria (Abuja, Benin City, and Lagos) to continue to research, read, and learn rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic styles of traditional West African music.
- February 1: Begin research and reading using domestic resources, libraries, universities, etc.
- March 15: By this date all research will be completed, and all materials will be organized.
- April 1: Develop detailed formal outline of the entire opera.
- April 15: Travel to Cincinnati to meet with librettist, Dr. John Brackett, to finalize outline of opera.
- May 25 - August 1: Compose the opera.
- Late Fall/Early Winter: Production, rehearsal, and professional world premiere of the opera.

IV. BUDGET

- Domestic Travel Expenses (Libraries, Universities, Meetings with Librettist)…….$750.00
  [Travels to Senegal and Nigeria will come from personal expenses, as part of the trip will be personal.]
- Study Material/Recording Device…………………………………………………………..$500.00
- Copying Costs………………………………………………………………………………..$1000.00
  [The term “copying” does not refer to Xeroxing, but it is an umbrella term for typesetting/engraving, editing, part-making, etc.]
- Other Expenses/Salary…………………………………………………………………….. $2250.00
  [Due to the substantial time commitment in composing an opera, I will not be able to take on other freelance projects.]

Total………………………………………………………………………………………….. $4,500.00
V. **INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND RESEARCH**

Like J.S. Bach and many other composers that have come before me, I compose music solely for the glory of God. Though most of my music is not explicitly Christian, I find that the relationship of the notes to the page is informed by my faith. And, because the compositional process is a continuous spiritual journey, I have trust that the Lord will always bless the outcome.

*Guanya Pau* is a special story. It is an exploratory tale that is to some extent a diatribe against polygamy and arranged marriages. Walters, the author of the novel, despite growing up in West Africa where those traditions were common, understood the moral wrongs with those practices. His conversion to Christianity prior to writing this novel is what makes this story special, as he is able to effectively make his newfound faith the foundation of the narrative. Like most of my music, this work is not explicitly Christian, but the inspiration is present throughout.

Because much of my research will involve meetings with native Africans in small, third world villages where the gospel may have never been told, I plan to focus some of my time on missions—a chance to share my faith. This unique form of integration between my faith and my research will provide important spiritual depth to this secular opera. Moreover, it will allow for the creative process to be a time when I not only grow as a composer, but as a Christian.

VI. **CURRICULUM VITAE (FOLLOWING PAGES)**