



Ghanaian Highlife Keyboard Accompanying Patterns: A Performance Considerations

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Abstract: The keyboard (piano) is employed in several musical forms globally, of which Ghanaian highlife music is no exception. It is a truism that the keyboard was not a prominent feature at the infantile stages of highlife. However, its prominence in the subsequent development of highlife also enhanced the soundscape of the music. In this paper, we investigate and document the various highlife keyboard accompanying patterns, examine the musical influences that have shaped these patterns' creation, and suggest a guide for their appropriate usage in highlife compositions for enhanced performance. Data for this study was collected through document review, audio review and interviews of renowned highlife keyboard players. As we analysed the keyboard patterns performed by renowned highlife keyboard players, it was revealed that the keyboard accompanying patterns are influenced mainly by indigenous Ghanaian drum and guitar patterns. We subsequently concluded that highlife keyboard accompanying patterns are employed as auxiliary to the guitar patterns. The keyboard patterns are fundamental in rhythm and chords; however, they could also be more sophisticated depending on the performer's knowledge and expertise in rhythms and the application of chords. Therefore, this study is recommended as a performance guide for musicians with an interest in highlife music.

Keywords: guitar patterns, highlife, keyboard patterns, popular music, soundscape

1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution of the keyboard to the soundscape of musical forms is a diverse and ubiquitous phenomenon. In some popular music forms, the significant role of the accompanying patterns of the keyboard makes it impossible to ignore or not to play during a performance. In other words, not playing the conventional keyboard accompanying pattern could make that particular music genre lose its distinctiveness. Hence, one is tempted to support the above statement with popular music forms such as *reggae*, *marabi*, *salsa*, *jazz*, *blues*, and *funk*. Similarly, Ghana's highlife music has its distinct accompanying keyboard patterns, which also enhance the soundscape of the music.

Akin Euba, as quoted in (Boamah, 2012, p. 142), traces the use of the Western keyboard instruments in Africa to date, says:

Western keyboard instruments were introduced to Africa by Christian missionaries (dating from the mid-nineteenth century in West Africa) and therefore disseminate through trade and other agents of cultural contact...Today, they are among the most common Western instruments in Africa and (in their electronic forms) have been widely adopted by pop musicians.

The keyboard was part of the *post-second world war* smaller jazz combo bands, which later became highlife dance bands in the late 1940s. Collins (2016, p. 49) outlined the final composition of the Tempos, the first Ghanaian highlife dance band in 1947 as follows: Joe Kelly (tenor sax and vocals), E.T. Mensah (sax and trumpet), Guy Warren (drums and vocals), Pop Hughes (sax), James Bossman and Okai Abosey (double bass), Peter Johnson (guitar), Von Coffie and occasionally Therson Coffie (piano/keyboard). Despite the early introduction of the keyboard into the dance band highlife tradition, the guitar band tradition, on the other hand, embraced the keyboard much later in the early 1970s. Dr. K. Gyasi is credited to have pioneered this move with his band, Noble Kings (Collins, 2018).

Ghana's first and foremost popular music, highlife, is gradually gaining attention in Ghanaian music scholarship. Several music scholars have investigated the various facets of highlife music, which have enhanced the knowledge and understanding of the subject. John Collins, a highlife historian, leads in this regard with a plethora of literature. Collins has done extensive work on the social history of highlife from the 1880s to the 2000s (Collins, 1994, 2005, 2018). He also did groundbreaking work by outlining the changing trends of highlife music and the factors that have accounted for the change. Because Collins' purpose was to uncover the social history of the music, the instrumental structures were relegated to the background. Agawu (2003), in his seminal work on *Representing African Music*, dedicated chapter six to popular music where he discussed polyglotism, the mixing of languages within a given text or utterance in highlife music. In an attempt to explain the compositional structure of highlife, Agawu subtly referred to only the bass guitar and trumpet concerning the verbal speech of the music.

In the recent past, some authors such as (Aidoo, 2014; Braddock, 2020; Coffie, 2020; Marfo, 2016; Yamson, 2016) have attempted to investigate some of the instrumental resources employed in highlife music. These attempts have focused on instruments such as the guitar, saxophone, drums and *atenteben* (traditional bamboo flute). Aidoo (2014), to augment the highlife literature, identified the saxophone as the most preferred instrument for improvisation in the dance band highlife tradition. Similarly, Marfo (2016), in his study on the Ramblers International Band, discussed the appropriation of the indigenous instrument in the band's instrumental setup. Marfo hailed the use of the *atenteben* (traditional bamboo flute) by the Ramblers International Band as an innovation in the dance band highlife tradition. We need to emphasise that the saxophone and the *atenteben* as individual instruments play an improvisatory role in highlife music. Hence, they cannot serve as a background accompaniment, unlike the guitar, keyboard, bass and percussion. Yamson (2016) outlined the various indigenous guitar patterns employed in highlife music. Yamson's work is highly commendable since it later became a springboard for further research on the distinguishing features of highlife music. Coffie (2020), in his seminal work, *Redefining Ghanaian Highlife Music in Modern Times*, also outlined a general instrumental structure of highlife music. Coffie subtly discussed the rhythmic influence of only one highlife keyboard pattern. He suggested that the guitar patterns be the chief criterion for determining highlife songs, crediting Yamson's work. The above discussion suggests that the study of highlife instrumental structure is still at the infantile stage.

Boamah (2012, p. 153) posited that *the growth of a music genre is assured as long as the practitioners continue to find new modes of expression*. Interestingly, Ghanaian keyboard players have explored and created highlife keyboard accompanying patterns over the years, which are distinctively Ghanaian. If one does not belong to the highlife tradition, playing as expected could be quite challenging. Moreover, the recent dominance of the keyboard in modern Ghanaian popular music has birthed more highlife accompanying keyboard patterns, which sometimes pose a challenge to the practitioner as to which pattern to employ in a given highlife composition.

The colonisation of Western instruments on Ghanaian highlife music can be traced to the 1880s when the West Indian soldiers were stationed in the then Gold Coast (Collins, 1994). According to Collins (2018), *adaha brass-band*, *palm wine guitar band* and *dance orchestra* were the three distinct forms of highlife before the term *highlife* came into existence in the 1920s. The three distinct forms of highlife music were influenced by Western brass-band music, guitar, ballroom music, and Western hymns' harmonies, as observed by Collins (2005). Collins' observation suggests that the keyboard (piano) did not directly influence highlife music at its infantile stages; however, it later became part of the dance band highlife tradition around the late 1940s (Collins, 1996). Coffie (2012) also asserts that even though the keyboard was used around the late 1940s–1950s, it was not a prominent feature in highlife compositions and bands. This situation is probably due to the heavy presence of the guitar and brass instruments. It is also worth noting that the guitar and brass dominated the guitar band and dance band highlife traditions between the late 1940s and mid-1960s. This phenomenon probably explains why the keyboard appears not to be an integral instrument in the instrumental setup of highlife from the early stages.

Around the late 1960s, the keyboard became quite prominent in both the guitar band and dance band highlife traditions due to the influx and influence of Western *pop* music and American soul and rock music in Ghana. As a result, the keyboard became a prominent feature. The influx of Western pop

music genres also led to subgenres such as *Afro-soul*, *Afro-rock*, and *Afrobeat* and gave the keyboard some prominence (Collins, 2005). Presently, the keyboard has become the most prominent feature in modern recorded highlife songs compared to the guitar and brass instruments. In as much as it has enhanced the soundscape of highlife music, this development has also created a situation where the modern Ghanaian highlife keyboard players and music producers grapple with the appropriate choice of highlife keyboard accompanying patterns to employ in a given composition.

A preliminary investigation into highlife keyboard accompaniment among some upcoming and established Ghanaian keyboard players and music producers revealed that some keyboard players find it challenging to play the corresponding highlife keyboard accompanying patterns to complement the guitar patterns. This challenge mostly creates competition between the keyboard and guitar accompanying patterns; as a result, they fight for recognition in a song or during a performance. We also observed that this needless competition between the keyboard and guitar sometimes creates unnecessary tension, which results in an *imbalance* of sound output in a performance. The above observation sometimes begs the following questions: what are the highlife keyboard accompanying patterns? What influences the creation of the keyboard patterns? Also, what guides the keyboard player in the choice of keyboard patterns in a performance?

Considering the discussions so far, it is evident that all the contributions made towards highlife literature on instrumental structures have given less attention to highlife keyboard accompanying patterns. The keyboard is inarguably one of the dominant instruments in modern highlife music; however, it is yet to receive attention in Ghanaian popular music scholarship. Against this background, we investigate and document the various highlife keyboard accompanying patterns, examine the musical influences that have shaped the creation of these patterns, and suggest a guide for their appropriate usage in highlife compositions for enhanced performance to fill the above lacuna.

2. METHOD

This study employs a practice-led research design. Candy (2006) defines practice-led research as research that leads to new knowledge and understanding of practice. The study employs this design because of our status as highlife music practitioners and music educators. We situated the study within the frame of practice-led research to uncover the various highlife keyboard accompanying patterns for a better understanding and application. Data for this study was collected through document review, audio review and interviews of renowned highlife keyboard players. Related literature and audio recordings of highlife music were reviewed as a first step to secure a basis for this study. As a second step, renowned highlife keyboard players from five highlife cities (Accra, Koforidua, Kumasi, Takoradi, Cape Coast) in Ghana were purposively selected for a face-to-face interview.

Furthermore, the highlife keyboard accompanying patterns of the selected keyboard players were sampled using the indigenous guitar pattern, *amponsah*, as a template. We used the *amponsah* guitar pattern as a template because it is the most popular and frequently used chords progression in highlife music; moreover, the keyboard functions as an auxiliary instrument to the guitar in the highlife music tradition. We also want to state that the keyboard players under investigation have over three decades of experience in live band music and have performed and recorded with many highlife artists and bands in Ghana. As a third step, the sampled keyboard patterns were reviewed, transcribed and analysed to identify the musical influences employed in the keyboard patterns. Also, for illustration, the highlife keyboard patterns were transcribed in the key of C major. Finally, we contrast our findings with the renowned highlife keyboard players' views and suggest a performance guide for keyboard players. It is worth noting that pundits in the field might distinguish the terms *keyboard*, *piano*, *synthesizer* as unique and distinct. Therefore, throughout this study, we use the term *keyboard* for consistency and the breadth of its terminological umbrella. We also refer to modern recorded highlife songs as highlife songs recorded between 1980 to the present. In the presentation of data and discussion of findings, the names of the renowned highlife keyboard players were not used for the sake of anonymity.

The keyboard pattern shown in figure 5 above is a slight upgrade of the pattern in figure 3. It also employs the comping technique, and its resultant rhythm can be traced to traditional Ghanaian drum music's first half of the *gome* timeline. However, this rhythmic pattern is also common to highlife bass drums, as shown in figure 6 below. Notice this keyboard pattern's chords structure and progression from bar 3–6 ($I_6 - I^7 - IV_4^6 - V_3^4$).

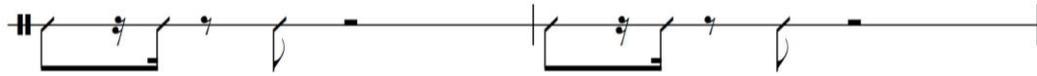


Fig. 6.

Highlife Keyboard Pattern (Intermediate 2)

♩ = 110

Castanet

Guitar

Keyboard

5

Cnt.

Gtr.

Kb.

5

5

Fig. 7.

As shown in figure 7 above, the keyboard pattern is similar in the playing technique to the pattern in fig. 5. However, the resultant rhythms and underlying melodies are different. Although these highlife keyboard patterns in figures 3, 5 and 7 employ the comping technique, they maintain slight rhythmic variations and resist employing elaborate melodies in the right hand. The above phenomenon is because the *amponsah* guitar pattern employs melody alterations. The keyboard maintains this progression in a performance context, which provides the chordal foundation for the other instruments to build on. Notice this keyboard pattern's chords structure and progression from bar 3–6 ($IV_4^6 - iii_4^{6dim} - IV - I_4^6 - vii_4^6 - I$). The resultant rhythm of this keyboard pattern can be traced to the *konkoma* bass drum pattern, a traditional drum and vocal music, as shown in figure 8 below.



Fig. 8.

3.3. Advanced Highlife Keyboard Accompanying Patterns

Highlife Keyboard Pattern (Advanced 1)

♩ = 110

Castanet

Guitar

Keyboard

Cnt.

Gtr.

Kb.

Fig. 9.

We want to emphasize that mastering the patterns as shown in figures 1, 3, 5, and 7 is a prerequisite for playing the keyboard patterns as shown in figure 9 above and figure 10 below; because, at this level, the highlife keyboard player combines the techniques of chops and comping with block chords and arpeggios.

Highlife Keyboard Pattern (Advanced 2)

♩ = 110

Castanet

Guitar

Keyboard

Cnt.

Gtr.

Kb.

Fig. 10.

Moreover, in the advanced patterns, the rhythm is highly syncopated. In addition, the keyboard player happens to be quite busy compared to the basic and intermediate patterns, which also allows the keyboard player to express his/her dexterity. Finally, it is worth noting that the underlying melody of the advanced patterns is what makes them distinct from the other patterns.

3.4. Performance Considerations of Highlife Keyboard Accompanying Patterns

In performing the highlife keyboard patterns in a composition, the keyboard player's creativity and understanding of the function of the patterns to the guitar patterns is key to the quality output of a song. Also, the creativity of the keyboard player should not be seen as competing with the guitar pattern for audience attention, as our respondents, renowned highlife keyboard players, inform. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the highlife keyboard accompanying patterns are not limited to providing basic chord progressions to a song. They could also interact with the guitar patterns by enhancing the guitar melodies with passing chords, chord extensions and substitutions that fall within the chord progression. Finally, we want to state that the highlife keyboard accompanying patterns, as illustrated in figures 9 and 10, are effectively employed when the guitar is absent in a composition or performance. In the above situation, the keyboard player attempts to fill the gaps that the absence of the guitar may have created in a composition or performance.

4. CONCLUSION

The keyboard (piano) has been part of the accompanying background instruments in Ghanaian highlife music since the late 1940s. The highlife guitar patterns are elaborated with lively melodies based on chordal progressions; thus, the keyboard patterns are structured on principles that provide the chordal foundation for the guitar patterns. The highlife accompanying keyboard patterns are employed as an auxiliary pattern to the guitar. The keyboard patterns are relatively fundamental in rhythm and chords; however, they could also be more sophisticated depending on the performer's knowledge and expertise in rhythms and the application of chords. Therefore, we recommend that the keyboard player exhibit a high level of discipline in providing the corresponding chordal progression to the guitar patterns in a performance setting; since the keyboard plays as an auxiliary instrument to the guitar to prevent unnecessary competition between the guitar and keyboard. We hope these findings are applied in professional practice and circulated to students-composers and performers. Just as conventional music theory details commonly used techniques by classical composers, conclusions laid down by this paper should not be used as hard and fast rules but rather as guidelines.

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