

## Bio

Kofi Agawu was born in Ghana, where he received his initial education before studying composition and analysis in the UK and musicology in the US. His work focuses on analytical issues in selected repertoires of Western Europe and West Africa. He is the author of five monographs and numerous articles and reviews. His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Dent Medal, the Frank Llewellyn Harrison Medal, the Howard T. Behrman Award from Princeton University, and honorary degrees from Stellenbosch University (2017) and Bard College (2019). He has served on the editorial boards of leading journals in musicology, music theory, African studies, and ethnomusicology. A Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, he is a Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, Honorary Member of the Royal Musical Association, and Adjunct Professor in the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. He was Music Theorist in Residence for the Dutch-Flemish Music Theory Society in 2008–09 and George Eastman Visiting Professor at Oxford University in 2012–13.



# African Music and the Challenge of Postcolonial Composition

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**Abstract:** Africa's art music tradition is not as widely known as it might be. For many people, African music typically indexes "traditional" music of ostensibly ancient origins or varieties of modern "popular" music. And yet, since the middle of the nineteenth century, Black Africans have routinely composed and performed for non-participating audiences such items as art songs, choral anthems, piano pieces, folk operas, and music for large and small ensembles. How might we explain the invisibility of this tradition in the competing discourses of music studies today? Drawing from a larger study in progress, I propose in this talk to lay bare some of art music's enabling conditions, starting with its birth out of the twin forces of missionization and colonization. Then, dwelling on a handful of examples from West Africa, I show that African art music evinces a distinct profile based on historically new patterns of co-presence among a work's parameters. In making a case for African art music, I will touch on contemporary debates about hybridity, essentialism, and decolonization, hoping not merely to disturb cosmopolitan views about art music from the South but to point the way towards a critical practice attuned to the specificities of the post-colony.

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