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ECHEZONACHUKWU NDUKA

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Monday Writer

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Echezonachukwu Nduka, Monday Writer, 12 October 2020

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About Echezonachukwu Nduka

Echezonachukwu Nduka, poet and pianist, is the author of two full-length poetry collections [Chrysanthemums for Wide-eyed Ghosts](#) (Griots Lounge, 2018), and [Waterman](#) (Griots Lounge, 2020). He holds degrees in Music from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Kingston University London, UK. In 2016, he was awarded the Korea-Nigeria Poetry Prize on World Poetry Day. Hailed by *Guardian Life Magazine* as Artist Extraordinaire, Nduka's literary works have been published in *The Indianapolis Review*, *Transition*, *Bombay Review*, *Saraba Magazine*, *Jalada Africa*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, *20.35 Africa: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry Vol. II*, and *A Thousand Voices Rising: An Anthology of Contemporary African Poetry*, among others.

A specialist in piano music by African composers, Nduka has performed at the National Opera Centre in New York, Gateway Playhouse (New Jersey), IMI Concert (St. Louis, Missouri), as well as numerous other venues. His work has been featured on BBC Newsday, Radio France International, Classical Journey Ep. 134, and Radio Nacional Clasica de Argentina.

He currently lives in New Jersey where he teaches, writes, and performs regularly as a solo and collaborative pianist. Official Website: www.artnduka.com

The Monday Writer Interview

Echezonachukwu Nduka

in conversation with Nnorom Azuonye

Son of an itinerant minister, what sort of literatures, apart from the scriptures, were you exposed to when you were growing up?



Fiction and plays. I have thought about this fact many times because now, I am more of a poet than a fiction writer, even though I have written and still write short stories. I have never written a play, but I read a lot of plays while growing up. For instance, Ola Rotimi's *'The Gods Are Not To Blame'*, *'Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again'*, Wole Soyinka's *'The Lion and the Jewel'*, *'Death and the King's Horseman'*, and others in that category. Camara Laye's *'The African Child'*, Chinua Achebe's *'Chike and the River'*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *'The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born'*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *'Toads for Supper'*, *'The Bottled Leopard'* and *'The Potter's Wheel'* were part of the first works that introduced me to the world and genre of fiction. My parents owned a decent library. But more interesting is the fact that some of those books were bought in their early years as college students, and they sometimes had annotations which aided my reading and made me see things from their own perspective. I wasn't thinking so much about what I read at the time. I only enjoyed the stories and how I was drawn in by the depth of language in which they were written. Perhaps, I should give some thought to why I was not very much interested in European literature, especially children's stories at that stage. We had them in our library, but I was more interested in books by African authors. Poetry came into the picture much later when I was in secondary school.

At what point in your life did you realise you wanted to write? Do you recall your earliest pieces and what they were about?

It must have been in 2012 when my poem was published in *The Kalahari Review*. I had just started writing again shortly before that publication. My earliest pieces were a lot of garbage presumably, because I wrote more than I read at the time, and I was more ambitious about getting published than learning the actual skill of writing. I wrote political protest poems, love poems, and poems about my environment.

Who formed your support and encouragement base when you started out? Are they still there now?

When I finally decided to take writing seriously, my support and encouragement base were mostly writers on Facebook who had formed literary groups online where comments were made on my writing. Griots Lounge published one of my poems on their blog and encouraged me to keep writing. Fast forward to six and eight years later, they have become the publisher of my two poetry collections. I am indebted to the generosity of writers such as Dami Ajayi, Jumoke Verissimo, and others who shared candid feedback on my early poetry manuscripts and gave me the support I needed to thrive. Timi Nipre encouraged me to finish the early drafts of my first manuscript. Toni Kan published my poems in Sunday Sun Revue (SSR) of Sun Newspapers where he was editor at the time. Those platforms, among others, were a huge source of encouragement. I still enjoy unalloyed support from some writers who supported me when I was starting out.

Your first and masters degrees were in music, and your analysis and research is on West African Composers. Sounds fascinating. Tell us a little about your work as a musicologist, particularly about *Choreowaves*.

My earlier preoccupation was with European classical music in all its many forms and styles: choral music, organ music, piano music, etc. But in addition to playing organ music in church, I performed as accompanist to choral societies and solo performers before I decided to focus on classical piano music for a while. It was while I was studying the rudimental European repertoire that my teachers, Dr. A.O Adeogun and Professor Christian Onyeji, introduced me to piano music by Nigerian composers. First, it was Joshua Uzoigwe's 'Ukom', then Christian Onyeji's 'Oga' and 'Echoes of Traditional Life'. Their compositions were quite unique, different in rhythmic and harmonic structures, and imitated traditional instrumental styles that I could relate to. So, I thought: African composers wrote piano music too! That was all I needed to know that I had struck gold. I did engage in popular music studies and analysis at some point, but I redirected my focus to African pianism. Since the past few years, I have dedicated my time to finding, studying, performing, recording, writing, and speaking about piano music by mostly West African composers. Recently, I recorded selected pieces from J.H. Kwabena Nketia's book '*African Pianism: Twelve Pedagogical Pieces*' published in 1994 for International Centre of African Music and Dance.

In 2018, I decided to record an EP that will comprise only solo piano works by Nigerian composers. I selected pieces by Christian Onyeji, Emaeyak Peter Sylvanus, Fred Onovwerosuokeye, and Chijioke Ngobili. The recording was time-limited, together with a discomfiting process that stirred my resolve to complete the recording. I had doubts at some point because I was concerned about the EP's overall quality. However, I needed to get the work out there, to make a bold statement about this

genre of piano music which I believe deserves more attention and appreciation. I gave some thought to what I wanted to call the EP, so I coined the word Choreowaves: a combination of dance and sound. What it implies is that African Pianism embodies the kind of classical piano music one can dance to. As I mentioned earlier, many compositions in the genre imitate rhythmic structures of indigenous African instrumental music, which are often responded to by dancing. In many African cultures, audiences do not sit still to watch instrumentalists perform, waiting to applaud afterwards. Everyone dances, and sometimes it's difficult to tell performers and audiences apart, if there are no costumes for distinction.

Shortly after *Choreowaves* came out, it drew some attention and got featured on BBC Newsday, *Classical Journey* Ep.134, and Radio Nacional Clasica de Argentina.

Are you optimistic that West Africans will one day warm up to classical music by West African composers and that this will someday appeal to the rest of the world?

I am optimistic, but I must admit that we have a long way to go, even though African classical music enjoys a bit of appreciation and patronage in Africa. What feeds my optimism is the enormous work that many artists such as William Chapman Nyaho, Rebeca Omordia, Glen Inanga, Darryl Hollister, Emeka Nwokedi, James Varrick Armaah, Jude Nwankwo, and a host of others are doing to promote African classical music both on the African continent and in the diaspora. A few years ago, Dr. Edewede Oriwoh launched the [African Composers](#) website that archives profiles and contributions of composers from all parts of Africa. I have always maintained that one of the major points of action would be to take African classical music from the universities and conservatories to major concert stages, while seeking useful collaborations. If you visit many departments of music on the continent during performance examinations, you would be overwhelmed by the rich diversity of music by African composers which a lot of people both within and outside the university know nothing about. Unfortunately, many of such performances come alive and die right there. That shouldn't be so. Africans will easily connect to this genre of music because there are several elements in such compositions that people can identify, understand, and appreciate. With constant performances, recordings, publishing, masterclasses, and collaborations, African classical music will take its prideful place on the continent, and in the world of music at large.

There is a temptation to think that writing is a side gig for you, but you have an impressive body of work in poetry, fiction and essays. Does your writing have a different life from your music, or do they work together?

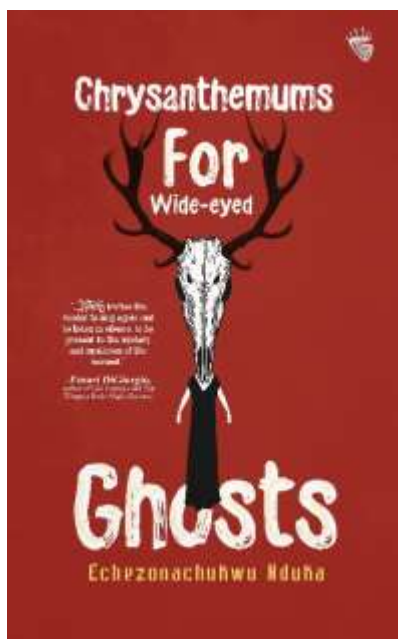
They work together, I suppose. I write as much as I play music because I am dedicated to both art forms in equal measure. In other words, I split my time between music and writing. My writing schedule only suffers a bit of neglect when I focus more on music mostly because I am preparing for a concert. To be clear, I don't write all the time. But

I consider reading, research, and meditation on themes as part of the writing process. There's a lot of music in my writing which could be found in themes, but also in the musicality of my poetry. As a creative and thinker, I am often caught in the web of exploration where both art forms feed each other.

One of the things I found fascinating whilst researching you for this interview was that in 2015 you translated the poems of Vladimir Vysotsky into Igbo language for the International Poetic Project Anthology (Marlena Zimna, ed.) was it a one-off thing or do you have original writings in Igbo and other translations into the Igbo language?

All of my original writings are in the English Language. The 2015 translation project has been my first and only translation into the Igbo language. I was specifically contacted for that project, and I took the offer with enthusiasm. To me, it was a huge opportunity to share my language with the world. However, I did not quite understand the importance of what I had done until I received a complimentary copy of the anthology and saw my translation alongside the works of many others in various languages. In the future, perhaps, I might consider taking up the task of translating literary works of interest into the Igbo language.

In October 2018, Griots Lounge Publishing released your first collection of poems; *Chrysanthemums for Wide-eyed Ghosts* which 'explores the intersections of death, love, music, wine, and the otherworldly.' Walk us through this book and what you set out to do with it.



My first poetry collection is a dark work of art. I set out to re-imagine the idea of death, afterlife, and love with an inquisitive language. There are also poems about religion, cities, and seasons. Speakers in the collection ask existential questions that tug at the heart of what it means to be human in an ever changing world. The few love poems in the collection are mostly on the negative side of romance. In fact, a reader took it personal and queried my love life, wondering why I didn't write a love poem with a happy ending. In one of the reviews of the collection, a critic argues that in the collection, I tend to build a bridge across the sea of grief. I agree. But of course, I am hopeful that the poems will speak to readers in many ways.

Just two years later you have another collection, *Waterman*, tell us about this book. Thematically, what sets it apart from *Chrysanthemums*?

Waterman takes a sharp turn away from the main thematic concern of my first book. It does not lend itself to dark themes of death and ghosts, but re-imagines the lives of people and places, interrogates memory, the sacred and mythical, sings aloud in many voices, all with a different depth of language and musicality. If there's a thread that connects all the poems in *Waterman*, it is music.



***Waterman* is due to be launched virtually on October 16, 2020. You will be reading and discussing your poetry. You are looking forward to it, surely, we wish you every success with the launch at <https://griotslounge.com/waterman-the-book-launch/>**

Thank you so much! I appreciate you and your team at SLQ.

INSIDE THE OLD ROOM

1.

Grandpa's chair bears forbidden histories
from his weight, the rust on its metal arm,
and one lost leg which now makes it a three-legged artifact.

Before he joined the queue of ghosts, he would
sit here humming, waiting for someone who never arrives.
He would tell stories of a war that ate many souls, his lost gun,
and the last cry of a child bloated from kwashiorkor.
I still remember his face, he would say.

2.

The only diary on this desk is filled with names
of people I do not know.
How does a name reconcile with its bearer who now breathes dust?
There is dust on the desk, cottons, books, files, and an old radio left
to mourn the sting of departures.

I think of lighting oil-lamps as playing the role of God.
First, wools soak the oil and matchsticks bring forth flames.
And here, this lamp, devoid of oil and wool, bereft of touch,
is death's signature placed on a stool, plagued by moonless nights
and spider webs.

3.

Photographs in monochrome are placed on a shelf,
their images staring longingly like a lonely lover awaiting
familiar laughter, or like a night of terror yearning for dawn.
There is no one left to say the angelus, none to measure
the depth of silences, of loss resonating in midnight moans,
sighs, and hisses. That tiny bell atop the fridge rang at the hours
of prayer. When Grandpa prayed, it was family census,
litanies, and amen too many to become a long song.
Here, he would say, here is where life used to be.
Bring it back, good Lord. But his was taken instead.
Inside the old room, departures are doors opening to new dreams.

(First published in *Bakwa Magazine* – A magazine of literary & cultural criticism:
February, 2017)

INSIGNIA

(for Christopher Okigbo)

The first is Okigbo's pipe.
His puffs were verses and songs
rendered *con spirito*.

Idoto's son dropped his pen,
closed the piano, and picked a gun.

At Opi, bullets cut short
a poet's verse, leaving his pipe
and pages as witnesses.

Spilt bloods are death's signposts
but a dead poet's blood is history
gasping for air, turning into thunder
and striking erring thrones.

He has found his way to *Heavensgate*
where he writes for breakfast,
smokes for lunch, and fires three shots
for dinner. But his pipe is still here,
like a loyal pet, waiting.

CONSERVATORY

Beethoven's music flows out of your room
like water under a bridge.

We talk about strangers sharing common melodies
and paying respects to genius bones.

You want to talk about notes, an ill-fitting song title,
and a cadenza racing through scores like a painter's dream —
but someone is dying in your room and it is not music.

I say how prayers mean nothing in the absence of ears.
Broken lovers are not always blue. Some are crimson,
with honey and a new list of skin care ointments.
I cannot make a sonata into lotions for skins dry
like mine. Piano music wakes the dead only in concert halls.

I am rehearsing my next life as a piano:
a 9-foot concert grand on stage with a name
so long the pianist would need extra fingers.

TRANSITION

1.

What the old teacher said to me, young philosopher,
cannot be set to music. I am in a mansion full of books,
drowning in a pool of voices and theories trapped in pages.
I can no longer vouch for my innocence in unguarded hours.
Even Epiphany, my piano, like twin sisters at daggerpoint—
weeps for this loss of sanctity.

2.

My teacher's testimonial suggests that I am hyperactive
in more than three worlds. Once, seated in a room of debaters,
I quoted two personal encounters:

An aunt took a pose and asked for a quick portrait.

After a careful gaze, I painted my mother instead.

She looked at the painting, held back tears and said
blood only conquers death in little drops.

I did not agree with her, nor what makes human blood
play tricks on the soul of artists. When I tried to paint her tears,
she held my hand.

Next encounter: I was a composer commissioned for a string quartet.

After days of hunger strike in the woods bonding with nocturnal silence
and daytime groans, I filled my scores with notes untamed.

And when the musicians played, their strings broke and the audience
threw roses on stage, not as kudos to players but as farewell
to the grand old cello. The instrument was older than the player,
the conductor, and a quarter of the audience.

3.

On my study desk, I am mediating between characters in a
playwright's error— writing agreements and speeches with which
the day of peace will be marked. It seems I am planting a tree.

At what point should I begin to worry about what fruits it would bear?

Would it bear fruits at all? I may not be sure of fruits, but I am sure of poems.

It is true that the old teacher once argued that poems are fruits. I disagreed.

Poems are poems, I said. And with that came a new baptism.

I was dipped in water and wine for good measure. The old teacher's counsel
was to go back to the beginning and stop at the end. There is no end,

only a beginning, I said. He asked me a question:

Who owns language? Native speakers or aliens and new comers to the tongue?

4.

In my room, a different kind of star has fallen.
There's no way to tell if daylight has dropped her weapons
and desecrated my windowpanes with whimpering presence.
I substitute ash with melons, tasting salt to tell the difference,
but my taste buds now exercise rights to protest.
What makes a holy day holy? The priest says he cannot tell.
He swore to submit to the whims of calendars all his life.
The old teacher broods on a badly painted portrait on my wall.
I suspect he doesn't know the answer either.

5.

In a book I'm reading, a man is mourning the absence of grief
with rum and incense. I have joined a group of wanderers who
have forgone the joys of living in denial. Here is what is left to happen:
The magician's wand will tell onlookers the terrifying secret of the abyss
that is its master's bag. The third eye sees what happens in the dark,
but the night is too burdened to bear witness.
So I'll write it down and wait for my turn to testify.

6.

Leave me now with nothing but lemons and the silver lampstand.
The trick is that there are no new tricks for the twice-beaten theorist,
only letters from ex-students full of questions.
The old teacher did assure me that the ultimate answer is yes and no.
I'd rather applaud the timpanist for whom drum rolls are thunderclaps.

7.

The old teacher knows the pain of philosophizing in winter,
knows that snowman in the yard is temporary envoy with
nothing new to say. Every winter, the old teacher's daughter
becomes an artist. Her snowman looked exactly the same since
the past five years—and there I was, young philosopher,
finding meanings in icy ephemeral beings.

8.

These changing seasons will teach me more than I already know.
To tell why snowflakes betray the weatherman's forecast is off the scope.
All learning is key for survival, says the old teacher.
Mine is an ill-fitting pendant, an engine of sorts for repelling fearful vibrations.
O harmonic resonance of all unguarded hours, keep me safe in the pages
of books I have yet to write. Every passing time wets itself with tears of inactions.
Ink flows back to feathers that deserve them.

9.

When Bonaventure of the brazen retaliators was served a hammerhead
at the construction site, he found new love in philosophy, mysteries and
unresolved puzzles weighing down his soul.

To him, every new moon sings of a question the world is yet to answer.
We may never know with whom the season is at loggerheads, but we know
who hoards halogens and gins to appease unkind weathers

10.

What the old teacher said to me, young philosopher, may have found
a worthy composer. Bespectacled on New Year's Eve, I spend hours
on letters and wine from a young kinsman.

The old teacher's note now rekindles my doubts.

O harmonic resonance of all unguarded hours, ride me to the precipice—
but rock me back gently to sail across the changing seasons.

(First published in *African Writer Magazine*: January, 2020)

'Inside the Old Room' and 'Insignia' are from *Chrysanthemums for Wide-eyed Ghosts*.
'Conservatory' and 'Transition' are from *Waterman*

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