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# *Omno Bello*

*Talking music with Nigeria's opera star*

# Omo Bello

## Talking music with Nigeria's opera star

Omo Bello, whose parents hail from Edo State, was studying Cell Biology and Genetics at the University of Lagos, at the same time nurturing a passion for music. She was taking singing lessons at the MUSON Centre with Princess Adebanke Ademola, singing in the church choir when somewhere along the line, the Cultural Attaché of the French embassy to Nigeria, Jean-Yves Gillon discovered her during a concert in Lagos and he was so moved by her performance that he got her a scholarship to have her complete musical studies in France. Born-and-bred in Lagos and now 25, Bello continues to garner raving, critical acclaim across the world. Many phone-calls, e-mails and Facebook messages later, **Weekend Magazine** had a chat with her. Excerpts:

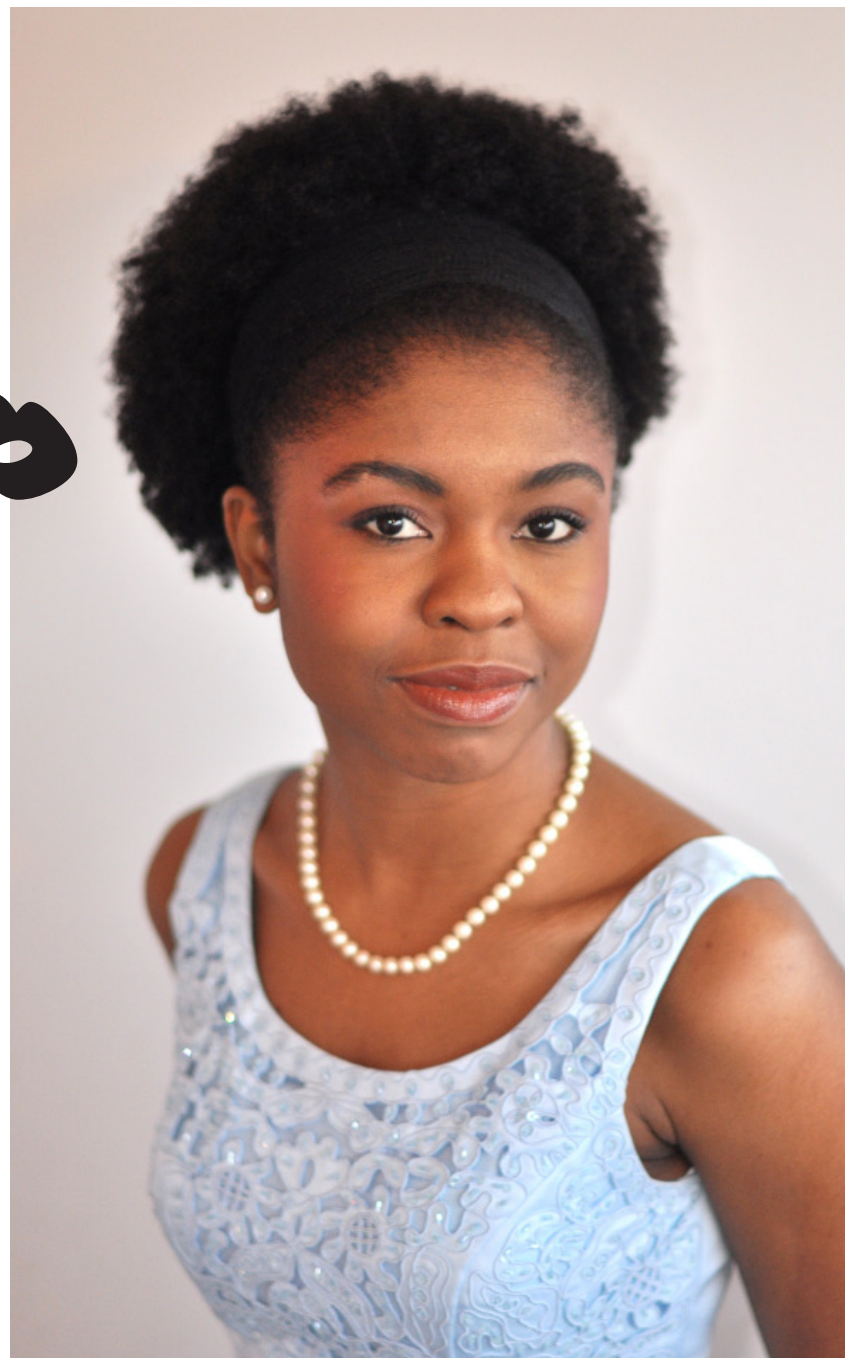
Abdulkareem Baba Aminu

**W**EEKEND Magazine: *You were studying sciences-based course at a point. Why did you choose to shift totally to Opera?*

Omo Bello: From the moment I was given

the opportunity to study music, it was very clear to me that I really wanted to become a professional opera singer and that I would go all the way. Nevertheless, I completed my Bachelor's degree with flying colours, as a form of reassurance to my parents and as a form of security for myself, being that I was wading into

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OMO Bello: "My dad was skeptical about my musical career, but he's very supportive now."



OMO Bello has won numerous international awards for her vocal work.



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unpredictable artistic waters. I was very fortunate to have completed my first degree at a very young age, so I had the luxury of being able to take on a completely different career path. The fact that I was given the resources to have such a complete and well-rounded musical education was a sign for me that I was chosen to be a lyrical singer, one of very rare Nigerian operatic singers in the world today.

**WM:** *Opera is not a well-known genre of music in Nigeria, even considered elitist. How do you intend to capture mainstream attention?*

**Bello:** Many Nigerians actually have the basic knowledge of classical music: the name of the composer Mozart or that of the famous Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti tends to systematically "ring a bell." As for opera and lyrical singing, I believe there is something very deeply passionate about the way the human voice is used in this type of music that can touch the sensibilities of the Nigerian public.

The lyrical voice is one that has been developed to its maximum vocal capabilities, through many years of discipline and training. The sheer power, magnificence and range of the human voice when it is used in this way it touches the soul, to say the least. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, black or white, it is a universal language.

I have seen many of my fellow Nigerians who didn't know anything about opera come to listen to me sing live in concert, and they leave the concert completely dazzled. If anything, most people don't have access to this kind of music since they are not given access in the media and in schools. I intend to simply incite people to come, sit back, listen and decide for themselves because I think it's something new, different, fresh and exciting. I have no doubt whatsoever of the ability of this music to capture mainstream attention.

**WM:** *When is your debut album coming out and what should first-time listeners expect?*

**Bello:** My first will be a 2-CD album dedicated to art songs from a collection of traditional German folk tales, called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn - The Boy's Wonderful Horn*. It's a collection of "Once upon a time" stories that teach valid lessons about life, love, war, disappointment, grief and with the right touch of comic relief.

These are simple stories of everyday life, for example, one of the songs teaches mothers how to make naughty children well-behaved, another tells the story of a little boy who is hungry and begs his mother for food, another tells the story of a village girl who is trying to woo a young village chap, or that of a young soldier who has to leave his wife and go to war.

As you can see, these stories are universal in their content, and the music is sublime - it appeals to all ages. This collection of stories was put to music by the Austrian composer, Gustav Mahler. There will also be piano music in the album. I will be accompanied by the French pianist Julien Guénebaut and the Japanese pianist, Etsuko Hirose. My debut album is scheduled to be released internationally during the last trimester of the year 2012.

**WM:** *Will you be coming to Nigeria for a performance anytime soon?*



BELLO has graced many a stage across the globe. "I simply love singing," she says.

**“Culturally-speaking, I went to France on a quest for the knowledge of a musical art form that originated in Europe, so from the start I was very open in my mind-set. I was extremely hungry to discover new things, practically like a sponge soaking up water rapidly. I still am like that. You must note that I was placed side by side with colleagues who had been studying music since they were 5 years of age**

**Bello:** My next concert in Nigeria will be sometime in March 2012 in Lagos, on invitation by the Italian Consulate. I will be performing with several artistes from the prestigious Italian opera house, the La Scala theatre in Milan.

**WM:** *You are based in France. How hard/easy was it for you to acclimatize to the culture over there?*

**Bello:** Culturally-speaking, I went to France on a quest for the knowledge of a musical art form that originated in Europe, so from the start I was very open in my mind-set. I was extremely hungry to discover new things, practically like a sponge soaking up water rapidly. I still am like that. You must note that I was placed side by side with colleagues who had been studying music since they were 5 years of age, who grew up going to the opera and to classical music concerts, played several instruments and could sight-read music like it was a piece of cake.

I was immersed into all of this at 21 years of

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"I was very fortunate to have completed my first degree at a young age," says Bello, who later switched gear to a career in music.



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age, so I knew I had a lot of catching up to do. Needless to say I had to work at least twice as hard as my colleagues since I wasn't born into this culture. One would expect that my first few years should have been hard, but on the contrary, that passion was my driving force, that in-born, God-given drive to succeed. That open-mindedness has helped me as I travel to so many different places in the world, discover different cultures, foods and lifestyles.

I currently live in Paris, and as the capital of France, it's a vibrant and multi-cultural city. I doubt I can ever be completely used to the extremely cold winters here in Europe, but otherwise, I'm doing very well.

**WM: It's rumoured that you have a planned collaboration with Asa, another France-based Nigerian artiste. Is that true?**

**Bello:** Hmmm... let's wait and see.

**WM: What do your parents think about your career choice?**

**Bello:** My father, an architect, was extremely skeptical in the beginning. His major concern was that my school grades not drop, even though I was spending so much time on those innumerable "rehearsals" and "choir practices". I not only kept the grades up, but I had excellent results and still pursued music.

You can imagine how much work I had to do so as to live that type of double existence of scientist by day and musician by night. My mother was more supportive in the beginning.

**WM: Sopranos are notorious workaholics. Do you have time for a romantic relationship?**

**Bello:** All successful artistes are hard-workers, without any exception. However, a person can and will always make out time to do whatever he/she chooses to do. So it's very possible to have a romantic relationship in spite of a hectic schedule.

**WM: To maintain a voice like yours, what special regimen do you stick to?**

**Bello:** I developed my singing voice formally in a specialised music higher institution, called a conservatory of music, for 6 years. To maintain the voice in its fullness,

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the entire body has to be taken care of. My daily training includes work on my singing technique, breath control, body fitness and endurance work.

I maintain an extremely clean lifestyle - no alcohol, smoking or junk/fast foods. I'm a nutrition freak and try to get the best out of what I eat because this tells on the way I look and how much energy I have at my disposal to perform. I do not scream, shout, nor speak in a loud voice for extended periods of time. In other words, as a singer, I live my life with this constant awareness that my instrument of work is within me at all times and this imposes a certain amount of responsibility.

**WM: At 25, your career is just beginning. How far do you intend to take your craft through the next decade?**

**Bello:** My international career is taking off... I currently hold a Masters degree in Singing from the National Conservatory of Music and Dance in Paris (CNSMDP), as well as a bachelor's degree from the CNSMDP and the Paris Sorbonne University. I equally possess numerous international distinctions and awards for singers of exceptional talents and extraordinary skills. I'm currently a goodwill ambassador of Rotary International, promoting peace between people through music, and I have acquired diverse and vast experience on international opera and concert stages across 5 continents. I will be releasing my debut album in the coming year 2012. As you can see, I intend to take my career to the very top.



THE world's her stage: From humble vocal beginnings, Bello is among the most favourably reviewed Sopranos in the world today.



GREETING dignitaries and fans after a performance.



BELLO, during a performance in France.



OF her career in music, Bello says: "It makes me very happy."