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Commentary

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Introduction

[1] The essays range from Matthew Butterfield's discussion of a single composition performed by Steve Davis to African American Miles Davis' "Tune Up", a play-a-long recording, to James Burns' study of six rhythmic archetypes, drawn from over forty transcriptions and audio examples covering a range of traditions throughout Africa and the Black Atlantic. Equal time for each essay is not possible, but instead, the following comments reflect my background and those issues about which I have already written. Comments will necessarily be limited to brief observations about (1) teaching methodology, (2) field and studio recordings and technology, (3) computerized notation and visual aids, (4) dance, (5) new ways of looking at music analysis, (6) Africa and the Black Atlantic conundrum, (7) geographic omissions, (8) Africa and drumming, and the (9) non-rhythmic components of drumming. (1)

[2] James Burns, David Locke, Rainer Polak, and Matthew Butterfield discuss issues concerning rhythm performed by drums and their accompaniment: Butterfield uses one musician playing a single composition; Polak uses a Jembe music ensemble from Bamako, Mali; and Burns and Locke use music from the Ewe speaking group from Ghana (also found in Togo). But unlike Locke who focuses on the actual Ewe tradition, Burns uses Ewe music as a point of departure in explaining his concept of six rhythmic archetypes. The fifth author, Martin Scherzinger, focuses not on drums but on the lamellae mbira dza vadzimu and accompanying instruments, a tradition of the Zezuru people of Mashonaland East, Zimbabwe (also found in Mozambique).

Teaching methodology

[3] Approaches to music analyses by Locke and Burns are based on their teaching experience at Universities and by Polak as a free-lance instructor. Their views rely heavily on western oriented teaching methodologies used for drumming instruction. Although the process of learning drum patterns are integrated into performances geared to Western audiences, they also depend on and are assisted by native musicians from Africa for information on cultural background and indigenous performance practices.

Field and studio recordings, and technology

[4] Polak and Locke deconstruct the music by isolating the drum components on multi-track recording equipment. In this way Locke was able to perform all the music and parts himself. Polak's study of Jembe drum ensemble music from Bamako, Mali was taken from live field recordings that were then manipulated in a recording studio. Polak acknowledges his shortcomings; the dancers and singers were rarely present during the recording sessions and so form depended on the players' imaginations. However, he feels that the isolated studio situation did not seem to alter rhythmic feels and phrasing strategies, which he verified with spot-check measurements of dance music, focusing on times when dancers spontaneously joined a recording session. He views formal analysis of musical structure as a complement to the historical and ethnographic approaches of others. Whether any one particular author utilized studio recordings or instead drew from field recordings was determined in part by the authors' stated purpose and how the material was utilized. On the one hand, Polak and Locke offered a step-by-step explanation of how to perform rhythmic patterns, demonstrating how each rhythm is integrated with other patterns. On the other hand, Butterfield works with sound in a studio setting. He largely ignores the interactive play common in the rhythm-section accompaniment. His approach was self-admittedly selective and not comprehensive, did not offer a complete explanation of Davis's performance decisions, and did not intend to theorize about modern jazz drumming

Computerized Notation and Visual Aids

[5] Using computerized notation and visual aids for organizing research can be a blessing and a curse in what I call "the tyranny of PowerPoint." It refers to audio and visual aids that promote the standardization of written and oral presentations and transcriptions. When used at conferences and in the classroom they may, in some respects, cause actual content and discourse to become secondary. I recall a story that Halim El-Dabh related to me about his early handwritten music score *Spectrum no.1: Symphonies in Sonic Vibration* (1957) for piano and derabucca and how it was being prepared for publication. The piece was converted from the handwritten to a computerized version of the transcription, much like the scores of the other composers' works included in volume 2 of *Towards an African Pianism: Keyboard Music of Africa and the Diaspora* (2005, 199–209). The result was that El-Dabh was no longer able to read the composition he himself composed! In particular, spacing between notes was dictated not by the composer *per se*, but by a pre-programmed computer software. It was then decided that El-Dabh's original handwritten score be included in the final publication. Although the computerized music notation currently in vogue has utilitarian value and possesses a kind of individual imprint, it lacks the aesthetic appeal and visual quirkiness of the handwritten score. Editors might instead allow authors to submit handwritten and/or computerized scores. Just think, what if we never had the pleasure of viewing or studying scores written in centuries past that some scholars today consider works of art? The completely computerized medium offered by *MTO* might take this into account when preparing future volumes.

Dance

[6] Scherzinger approaches dance as a critical component of rhythm, whereas Burns has not yet applied the concept of his rhythmic archetypes to the realm of African dance due to his limited experience in this area. He views dance as a prime topic for future collaboration with others with expertise in this field. In Polak's case dancers or singers were rarely present during the recording sessions. Thus, form was not dependent on actual collaborative performance, but on an imagined dance. The critical interrelation of these musics with dance might well be a topic for additional consideration.

New ways of looking at music analysis

[7] Butterfield comments on the elusive rhythmic quality known as "swing" and views timekeeping patterns in a more "liquid" way, where drummers "comp" on the other instruments in a drum set to provide greater intensity by supporting improvising soloists. Scherzinger describes rhythmic patterns reappearing phantom-like, in unpredictable places, explicating an important dimension of the temporal geometries of mbira music and of South African music in general. As a word of warning, Ghanaian scholar Nissio Fiagbedzi's new study of Ewe song reinforces the idea that one cannot even begin to talk about drumming and dance without discussing the ways song texts and melody are linked to rhythm (2009).

[8] The authors isolate the drum and idiophone patterns that sound simultaneously and study them individually. If there is any change within one or more of the instruments, however minuscule, the whole dynamic of the entire ensemble or left/right-hand parts of a solo instrument (mbira) changes, resulting in a collectively new pattern. According to Scherzinger, in mbira performance the smallest shift in motor pattern often metamorphosizes into inherent shifts that emerge from the total pattern. He also sees a reversal in perspective between rhythm in Western music, understood as a flexible set of pitch-events framed within a fixed grid of hierarchized timepoints (or meter), and in African music where rhythmic patterns can take on the specter of fixed reference points, while the meter has become ephemeral, indeterminate, and flexible.

Africa and the Black Atlantic conundrum

[9] Burns states that all six of his rhythmic archetypes have become widely distributed throughout Africa and the Black Atlantic. His approach to formulating ideas about rhythmic archetypes came from reading studies of African verbal performance that document the use of stock phrases in the pouring of libations, telling of stories, giving of speeches, and expressing of emotion. (2) Studies based on the Atlantic Euro-America-Africa connection are prominently discussed among western scholars, but little is written about the other connection coming vis-à-vis the Asia-Africa route by way of the East. Until the last twenty years, Asia's connections with Africa have been underrepresented in research relevant to the arts e.g. musicology, and ethnomusicology. One reason may have to do with a marketing strategy in which the West has touted West Africa as the ancestral homeland of African Americans. In turn, promoters have drawn upon a percieved search for an "authentic" Africa by commercially exploiting pre-designated cultural areas at the expense of others. Marketing campaigns targeting African Americans emphasize this connection for tourist dollars (Fikru 2000). Another reason is partly because the African Diaspora has been perceived by Western scholars as Africans living in America and Europe as a result of an exclusively westward migration. There appears to be a lack of awareness and maybe one of neglect about the history of the Asian-African migration. Western scholars speak of the Atlantic slave trade and its influence on music in the African diaspora with virtually no mention of influences coming from the Eastern slave trade and other trade across the Indian ocean connecting Asia and Africa.

[10] Gwyn Campbell asserts that the Africa-Asia connections should be studied in their own right and on their own terms.

African migration to Asia is a much older and more complex phenomenon than the black/white image of the Atlantic model (2008, 43–82). Not all Africans came to Asia as slaves and not all slaves were Africans. Apart from soldiers, sailors, and servants, Africans also migrated as free merchants. Numerous Africans rose to positions of authority as generals, governors, and eunuchs as exemplified in R.R.R. Chauhan's book Africans in India-From Slavery to Royalty (1995). A brief 6-year episode of Islamic rule occurred in 15th-century Bengal known as the Habshi or Ethiopian dynasty. Now African-Asian economic, social history, and artistic connections are being re-examined to show parallels between the Atlantic slave trade in the Western world, which has focused on black communities in the Americas and Europe, with studies on the Eastern slave trade. These publications include Ehud Toledano's Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East (1998, 155), Ronald Segal's The Black Diaspora (1995), and James Watson's Asian and African Systems of Slavery (1980).

Geographic omissions

[11] A related issue centers on countries that have been ignored in comparative music studies, particularly in East Africa and the Horn (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda) and North Africa (Egypt). For example, in academia, with few exceptions, Ethiopia has been virtually ignored from the ethnomusicological discourse of African music because it has been defined by scholars by what it is not: "not properly African, not sufficiently Middle Eastern, not mainstream Christian, and not postcolonial. Ethiopia fits no scholarly category beyond that of a vaguely defined 'other" (Shelemay 1996, 16–18).

Africa and drumming

[12] In the West, there appears to be over-emphasis on drumming and rhythm that serves to perpetuate the stereotype equating African music with rhythm and drumming. Though Locke acknowledges that African music is famous for its rhythm, he states that drumming is also melodic and furthermore that "listeners can hear the music of the drums contrapuntally, as separate lines in changing relationship, or monophonically, as one highly rhythmicized melody." There is a whole range of string and wind instruments central to African music, in particular in East Africa and the Horn and in North Africa.

Non-rhythmic components of drumming

[13] With the exception of Scherzinger, the authors tend to give less importance to the non-rhythmic aspects of the music, such as pitch, interval, ornaments and how they are all integrated into the rhythms that drive the performance. Scherzinger acknowledges that there is a need to look beyond rhythm at the non-rhythm aspects of music and about musical instruments other than drums that accompany drum performance: "...there is very little work involving non-rhythmic aspects of African music, such as pitch spaces or pitch processes... and still less work on the relation between pitch processes and rhythm." His analysis contributes to informing the way Africans hear African music (or Africans hear Western music) and he even concludes that "the actual perceptions Westerners have of rhythm and meter in general is more African than some of the West's general theories describing those perceptions would permit."

Final thoughts

[14] Scherzinger focuses on music analysis as a platform to explain techniques used in playing the mbira, while demonstrating how spirituality and contemplation are realized in mbira music itself. In fact, the relationship between spirituality and religion could have been brought out by Locke as well, for his essay deals with the metric matrix of Ewe religious music. The fact that spirituality can be attained musically would make a fascinating topic in itself, as illustrated by Scherzinger in his discussion of phantom melodies and rhythms as they relate to spiritual cosmology. It is hoped that this and other topics discussed in this commentary will be further explored and that a broader view of drumming and rhythm will eventually offer a richer rendering of music found on the African continent and the Diaspora.

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Footnotes

- 1. Since I paraphrase from the essays throughout my commentary, these sources will not be repeatedly referenced. Return to text
- 2. This reminds me of the "fake book", used by jazz musicians as a reference to help outline famous melodies, from which the musician may extemporize additional melodies, produce tropes on the basic melody line—essentially "faking it" (Huntley 2000, 159).

Return to text

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