



Commentary

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[1] It would appear that the once antithetical disciplines of music theory and ethnomusicology are entering a new phase of cooperation. Put differently, music theorists are showing an increasing interest in non-Western (and non-canonical) music. Publications and conferences attest to this. For example, in February of 2010, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst hosted a conference on the subject, *Analytical Approaches to World Music*. This unprecedented event brought established as well as emerging theorists and ethnomusicologists together with a handful of composers and performers to exchange ideas about various non-Western repertoires. The focus in session after session was the notes themselves—their extent, patterns of combination, mode of articulation and impact on listeners. It seemed to me then that a number of theorists had been especially hungry for this sort of encounter, that although they may have previously been held back from pursuing their interest by institutional factors prohibiting people who had not done ‘fieldwork’ from talking about non-Western music, the Amherst event helped to overcome such reticence. In the company of kindred spirits, one could finally and publicly experience the joys of performing linear analyses of Indian melody, juxtapose periodicities of contrasting world musics, share meticulous home-made transcriptions, debate the fine points of musical terminology, and freely distribute the reality of African rhythm into numbers, shapes and graphs just to see what would come out.

[2] In one sense, this Special Issue of *MTO* continues the momentum generated by the Amherst event even while announcing a significant presence for African music in a mainstream theory journal. It is perhaps no accident that two of the five contributors (David Locke and Martin Scherzinger) together with Michael Tenzer and myself participated in the February event; the remaining three (Rainer Polak, Matthew Butterfield and James Burns) would surely have felt at home there, too, had time and opportunity made their participation possible. Four of the five papers published here deal with rhythm in African music while the fifth (by Butterfield) offers a cogent demonstration of time-keeping in jazz. (I will confine my commentary to the four papers on African music so as not to overstep the limits of my knowledge).

[3] Why African rhythm? Because, as is widely known, the rhythmic dimension is elaborated with particular ingenuity in a host of repertoires across the African continent. Not surprisingly, this condition has engendered a significant body of writing that is gradually reaching a consensus on the nature of the underlying organizing principles. We are in good hands with our four authors not only because of their obvious commitment to theorizing but because each is active as a performer (Burns, Locke and Polak are drummers, Scherzinger an mbirist), thus guaranteeing a certain hands-on familiarity with their chosen repertoires. The geocultural spread cannot possibly cover all of Black Africa, but it is nevertheless commendable: Southern Ewe drumming (Burns and Locke), jembe drumming from Mali (Polak), and mbira music from Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Scherzinger). Indeed, Burns goes beyond the African continent to the Black Atlantic and in so doing widens the geocultural reach and promotes comparative musical thinking. The common concern of all four authors is to explain, by means of close analysis aided by transcriptions, prose, graphs, and audio and video clips, the intricacies of rhythmic procedure in selected African and African-diasporic repertoires. A word about each essay may help to provide a broad orientation.

[4] [James Burns](#) brings the fruits of a decade and a half of study of African drumming to bear on an explication of six foundational rhythmic archetypes. These patterns are familiar not only to performers but to (listening and dancing) members of the communities in which they are cultivated. Burns’ claim that these archetypes are subject to ingenious variation in the course of performance makes intuitive sense. Taking a holistic rather than atomistic approach to his materials, he emphasizes the rhythmic background that serves as ecology for each individual archetype. His pulse-based notational system enshrines potential as well as actualization, and is, in this sense, not only explicit from a representational point of view but also useful for didactic purposes. For Burns, isometricity and the presence of an underlying beat scheme are essential. Notable is his

willingness to engage with numerous authors, to discuss and contest their ideas, sometimes re-transcribing previous transcriptions within his own notational apparatus and conceptual schemes. In the process, he is able to demonstrate a strong unity across African and Africa-derived musical repertoires. It is true that Ewe music, Burns' subject and the grounds from which he reaches other idioms, has received considerable attention from scholars of African rhythm, but he manages to add fresh insights to what we know already and to point to avenues for further research.

[5] [Rainer Polak](#) trains his sights on a more micro level of structure while preferring an altogether more empirical approach. Focusing on *Manjanin*, a jembe piece from Bamako, Mali, Polak seeks to lay bare the sonic reality of African drumming within an economy of durations. Readers will benefit from his comprehensive assembly of supporting materials, from audio and video clips to comparative data about various performances. The main claim is that variations at the sub-pulse level are not unplanned or spontaneous deviations from an ostensibly 'correct' norm; rather, they are constitutive of that norm. Africanist music theory badly needs empirical studies like this because they help to get us beyond fuzzy impressions and mysticism; they can also sometimes carve a reality different from that which conventional notation proffers. Polak shows that we can indeed discuss the "feel" of African rhythm in reference to patterns of beat onset and micro-level deviations from those onsets. His study should aid technical understanding of the "ground" on which performers stand while bringing into view a popular but under-theorized African repertory originating in Mali.

[6] [Martin Scherzinger's](#) exploration of "temporal geometries" in African music begins with ambiguities and sustains an interest therein throughout the article. The beat scheme of his chosen repertory, mbira music, is said to be complex on account of a consistent use of interlocking patterns (some of them approximating strict canons), a 'digitalized' mode of execution and a foregrounding of repetition in the manner of American minimalist music. Gerhard Kubik, Paul Berliner, Andrew Tracey, and other scholars of mostly east and southern African music have noted the elusiveness of beat placement, and Scherzinger reinforces the idea of metric undecidability. Mbira music, he argues, is at base not metrically single but rather subject to a maximum number of metrical vantage points. Scherzinger's rhetoric almost approximates the minimalist aesthetic he seeks to model. His examples imply "different meters," a particular "situation" is "polymetric," an overall pattern evinces a "polyrhythmic complexity," and "there are at least three ways of perceiving (or parsing) the overall musical texture." He finds "perplexing ambiguities of meter-formation in basic mbira musical constructions," while a particular composite pattern "produces a variety of possible metric interpretations." Indeed, after demonstrating the inadequacy of some of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's metrical preference rules for the mbira repertory he is concerned with (a gesture echoed by Polak and earlier addressed more analytically by David Temperley), Scherzinger brings in the pitch dimension and concludes that "all twelve rotations of 3/2 are thereby suggested with equal validity. The implied meters of the inherent patterns are maximally ambiguous." Later, he finds "the metric situation can be characterized as indeterminate; a situation in which downbeat formation is *de*-hierarchized to a maximum degree." Even in patterns aimed at beginners, "mbira music is carefully crafted around malleable metric axes, whose shifting downbeats encourage perceptual modulations of metric perspective."

[7] The point is not lost on readers, but some will wonder, for example, which of the twelve metrical vantages of, say, a 12/8 composition is the most rewarding or pertinent. Scherzinger does not say how performers deal with this multiplicity (do they use rotation 11 on Monday, rotation 5 on Friday, rotation 7 on Sunday?), nor—and in this he stands apart from Locke, Burns and Polak—does he invoke the testimony of teachers or indigenous practitioners to show how one might perform ambiguously. His concern, rather, is to 'rehabilitate' rhythm and to suggest that the search for (metrical) order in earlier writings may have resulted in an unfortunate under-complicating of the structural bases of certain repertoires. The irony of this stance within the broader history of representing African rhythm is easy to overlook: first came the early, naïve explorers who found African music at once complex and incomprehensible; then came the first generation of analysts and theorists who tried to write it down in order to unveil its metrical and rhythmic structures, and who did so using questionable concepts (like polymeter and cross rhythm); then came another group of analysts determined to rid the field of the conceptual contamination introduced by earlier analysts; now come Scherzinger and others who think the corrective efforts of recent theorizing have gone too far, and that some of African music's complexity ought to be restored. One suspects that the pendulum will swing again.

[8] [David Locke's](#) essay is a detailed study of a Southern Ewe ritual music, Yewevu. Ewe music is of course one of the best-studied African repertoires, and Locke has contributed significantly to this literature. Here as elsewhere, he proceeds analytically, according equal attention to structural frameworks as to nuances of expression. His experience as a performer of this and other repertoires shows throughout, as do his pedagogical instincts. In the end, this magisterial article is not only a valuable documentation of five pieces from the Yewevu repertoire, but a more general demonstration of theoretical and analytical concepts that are essential to understanding African rhythm. The transcriptions alone tell a good part of the story, decked out with mnemonic devices and motivic and phrase groups. Dedicated readers not familiar with Ewe music will want to consult the sound sources affiliated with the article in order to benefit fully from Locke's insights. Notable is the direct incorporation of ideas from his teachers (principally Godwin Agbeli) and from African (read: born-in-the-tradition) music theorists (Willie Anku and Meki Nzewi), thus tempering the North-South divide evident in earlier theorizing about African music. (Burns, too, locates some of his stances within a similar dialogue). Locke never misses an opportunity to contemplate the special shapes of the African rhythmic elements and figures that show up in Yewevu. Contemplation has led him to an increasing awareness of—and admiration for—the plurality and multidimensionality of African musical phenomena.

[9] The collection of essays as a whole, then, has the potential to foster dialogue among and between groups of Africanists, ethnomusicologists and music theorists. Students of rhythmic theory will find much to contemplate in regard to the basic dimensions of rhythmic expression, and this may even enhance reflection upon the more familiar European canonical repertoires. (This is one of Scherzinger's hopes). Inevitably, a collection like this will have its share of internal dissonance. This is not something to lament, for as musicians we know all too well the value that dissonance possesses within a dissonance-consonance economy. Disagreements about meter, grouping, accent, duration, and period, dot the history of rhythmic analysis, and they are even more marked in Africanist music theory because of the absence of written scores and institutionally-supported theories. This is not an appropriate venue to bring up the many points—small as well as large—that were raised for me in reading these essays. I suspect in any case that several of them will emerge in the seminar room. But I should like to close with an observation about the understanding of meter in the four essays.

[10] Burns' Southern Ewe repertoire is anchored in 12/8 meter, and while he acknowledges different subdivisions, the foundations are firm: all six archetypes are domesticated within a 'rhythmic background' defined by the guiding meter. Ewe music thus emerges as metrically rooted, which is not to say that it is metrically simple. In Locke's *Yeweyu*, a 'feel' approximating 12/8 is operative in parts (though it is denied designation as such in his transcriptions), but the author's awareness of other factors impinging on any single event leads to a less hegemonic valuation of the metric matrix and more than token acknowledgement of such effects as dualism of tempo, polysemy in phrase discourse, and equivocality in phrase shape, among other factors that promote "simultaneous multidimensionality." The relativity of a "polyphonic perception", for example, would probably elicit a less uncertain response from Burns, whose understanding of the metrical basis of (Southern Ewe) polyrhythmic textures recognizes and contextualizes multiplicity without ever threatening the metrical foundation. Polak's position is in some ways closest to Burns in according a firmness to the metrical foundations of the *jembe* repertoires he analyzes. (None of the video clips provided to support his argument suggested any sort of metrical uncertainty to my [West African] ears). Peering beneath the surface, however, Polak finds non-isochronous pulses whose mode of succession is consistent enough to be thought of as structural or even definitional rather than merely ornamental; he thus complicates the notion of meter. Scherzinger, by contrast, virtually denies the stability of 12/8 meter beyond a tacit acknowledgment of its grouping function. As we have seen, he hears elementary ambiguities in the simplest of *mbira* patterns. These then increase the metrical possibilities at the most basic levels. Scherzinger's position places him at the opposite extreme from Burns.

[11] Can all four authors be right in what they assert about meter in African music? Are the differences merely the results of studying different musical idioms? Might there be some conceptual confusion or fuzziness within these competing theories? No doubt readers will have their own views.

[12] The publication of this first-ever issue of *MTO* devoted to African and African-American music is a happy occasion for all of us interested in these collective repertoires. The essays by Burns, Locke, Polak, Scherzinger and Butterfield will reward curious students and enliven discussion in many a seminar room. May the exploration of non-Western music by theorists intensify in coming years, and may the dialogue with ethnomusicology sharpen the profiles of both disciplines, leading them to incorporate what is helpful and to discard what is not, be it material or procedure. If, in the process, light is shed on *both* African music and music theory, we will all have been edified.

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