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Commentary

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[1] Enrique Menezes and Carlos Pires have translated an interesting series of research notes by Mário de Andrade that consider the origins of syncopation in Brazilian music. Syncopated rhythms are fundamental to samba, maxixe, choro, and other popular-music genres that have become emblematic of Brazilian musical identity. Andrade's comments contextualize syncopation as both a musical technique and a cultural expression of this identity. As a North American music theorist specializing in the theory and analysis of popular music, I am not equipped to comment on the relevance of these ideas to Brazilian music theory or musics, but I can connect them to similar ideas in Anglophone theories about art music from Western Europe and popular musics from the Anglosphere.

[2] Andrade considered the most immediate origins of syncopation in Brazilian music to be European, imported from Portuguese music, which may have been influenced by—or even influenced—African musics, and which was further developed by Afro-Brazilians ([1.4–1.5]). This perspective suggests a more complex and multidirectional process of transmission than the prevailing narrative, which ascribes rhythmic complexity in musics from the Americas to an African origin, disseminated through the transatlantic slave trade. Numerous commentators have described Afro-diasporic musics in the Americas as combinations of African rhythm with European harmony and form; see, for example, Díaz (2021), Fryer (2000), Kubik (1999) and (2013), Pressing (2002), Rahn (1996), and Schuller (1968). While this is very likely true to some extent, the degree to which it is true has been the subject of long debate, and the issue is clouded by the tendency of music analysts to focus on the rhythmic complexities of many African musics, and the harmonic and formal complexities of many Western European art musics, to the neglect of other important and potentially related musical parameters in both kinds of music. Several scholars have convincingly argued against the essentialisms inherent in this reductive narrative: Africa as a monolithic musical culture; rhythm in African musics as a parameter separable from dance, melody, and timbre; and conceptualizing nonisochronous rhythmic and metric patterns in these musics as dissonances; see Agawu (2003) and (2023), London (2012), Nzewi (1991), Perchard (2015), and Stover (2009).

[3] In Note #9 and Example 1, Andrade presents the basic syncopation  and suggests that a fundamental difference between its usage in music from Europe versus the Americas is the shift of accent from downbeat to off-beat. He describes this pattern as a displacement ([1.5], Note #9), suggesting that the shifted accent is qualitatively the same as the one on the downbeat. However, the second pattern in Example 1 not only shifts the wedge-shaped accent mark from the first note to the second, but adds a line or tenuto marking above the first note, implying that it retains a different form of accent. This aligns with some theoretical models of meter

and rhythm in European art music that distinguish multiple types of accent: Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff (1983, 17–18) would consider the first version of the rhythm in Example 1 a metric accent and the second a phenomenal accent.(1) Interpreting the second version as a metric accent would break their Metric Preference Rule 2, the "strong-beat early" rule, although they describe this preference as a weak one (1983, 76).(2) Some other theories of rhythm that include a distinction between perceived metric accents on strong beats and performed phenomenal accents, which include agogic or durational accents, are Epstein (1979, 61–63), Lester (1986, 16–19), and Kramer (1988, 89).(3)

[4] The theories cited immediately above were designed for common-practice art music. Andrade asserts that syncopated patterns like that in Example 1, which he expands to ♪♩ ♪♩♩, are uncommon in both Western classical music and European popular music, with the exception of Portuguese and Gypsy [sic] musics; he locates it primarily in "instrumental song," which seems to refer to dance music ([1.5], Note #9). In a later note, Andrade questions whether this type of syncopation might have a Scottish origin ([1.12], Note #35), and also considered this possibility in his essay "A música no Brasil" ([1.4]). Temperley (2019 and 2021) has examined the ♪♩♪ rhythm in Example 1 in American and European song repertoires from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and ascribes its origin to British influence, specifically the so-called "Scotch snap," and perhaps to the higher frequency of short stressed syllables in English. This applies only to syncopations in the second position in a group of four pulses; he describes syncopation in the fourth position as likely deriving from African-American music (Temperley 2019, 76; 2021, 19). I can find no studies of similar patterns in instrumental art music, but a cursory survey of Mozart and Beethoven piano sonatas turned up only brief instances.(4) This is a fundamentally different usage than the repeating patterns in popular-dance accompaniments discussed by Andrade—as Menezes and Pires comment, "it does not occur as a deviation but as a constancy" ([1.9]).

[5] The ♪♩♪ pattern also appears in Example 5 ([1.19]), a transcription of Amerindian music transcribed by the French musicologist Marguerite Béclard d'Harcourt, who identifies the pattern with Indigenous and Black musics, as well as cakewalks, two-steps, and tangos. The same pattern appears at the beginning of excerpts of Indigenous music in Examples 6 and 7 ([1.20]). This rhythm has elsewhere been identified with ragtime music; the term "primary rag" has been used both for this specific pattern and for rhythmic displacements more generally, in contrast to "secondary rag," a dissonance of triple groupings (Knowlton 1926, 581; discussed more fully in Berlin 1980, 128–34). Peter Kaminsky (1989) and Harald Krebs (1999) have made a similar distinction in relation to the music of Robert Schumann: in Krebs's terminology (1999, 31ff.), "displacement dissonance," which involves rhythmic groupings of the same size with one shifted forward or backward in time, versus "grouping dissonance," which involves rhythmic groupings of different sizes; Richard Cohn (1999) calls these "syncopation-type" and "hemiola-type" respectively. Andrade discusses an example of rhythm from Central African music discussed by the Austrian ethnomusicologist Erich von Hornbostel that demonstrates grouping dissonance ([1.15], Example 4). Andrade questions whether it qualifies as syncopation ([1.19]), demonstrating his recognition of a distinction between these two types of rhythmic dissonance.

[6] Andrade theorizes syncopation in Brazilian music as a structural background pattern rather than a rhythmic dissonance that needs to resolve, which Menezes and Pires connect to theorizations of timeline patterns in African musics ([1.7]). Such structures function analogously to the backbeat pattern that underpins much Anglophone popular music. The rhythmic displacement of the backbeat occurs on a larger level than the syncopations in Example 1, but the technique of accent shift is similar. The basic version of the backbeat comprises kick-drum attacks on beats 1 and 3 and snare-drum attacks on beats 2 and 4, in combination with a ride rhythm of regular 8th notes on cymbal. The snare drum is louder, higher in pitch, and sharper in timbre than the bass drum, placing several types of phenomenal accents on beats 2 and 4. Some analysts interpret this as a displacement dissonance (see, for example, Everett 2009, 10; Gotham 2021, 280; and Temperley 1999), but in practice it functions, like Andrade's syncopations, as a structural pattern that does not need to resolve. Other popular-music scholars describe this as a consonant pattern, including Biamonte (2014, [6.2]; 2020, 142), Butler (2006, 87), Cairns (2022, [2.4]), Fleming (2023, 75), Hesselink (2023, 69–74); Hudson (2019, 57), and London (2012, 19). Biamonte, Cairns, and Fleming relate the backbeat to Andrew Wilson's concept of "dual-aspect meter," which supplements the traditional metric hierarchy with another weighted beat that is integral to the meter, as in beat 2 of a sarabande (Wilson 2016, 65). This model of the backbeat strongly resembles Andrade's description of syncopation as "a true displacement of the strong accent which passes from the theoretical place to a place where it should not fall, a true rhythmic anticipation of the thesis" ([1.5], Note

#1). Some researchers consider the backbeat's emphasis on beats 2 and 4 as sufficient to transform them into strong beats rather than accented weak beats; see Abel (2014, 49–51); Geary (2019, 101–102); Gracyk (1996, 134–35); Schuller (1968, 8–10); and Shaw (1986, 166), quoted in Tamlyn (1998, 1: 223). This view seems to reflect a more general perception: an internet search for "strong beats on 2 and 4" reveals many vernacular sources that describe various Afro-diasporic musics, including rhythm and blues, rock, funk, reggae, and samba as having shifted the strong beats from 1 and 3 to 2 and 4.

[7] Menezes and Pires comment that a "striking characteristic of American syncopation [is] accentuation at a reference point that, in performance, does not fall exactly on the second eighth note, but blends with the triplet" ([1.8])—in other words, somewhere between a duple subdivision and a triple one. Although this does not clearly relate to any of the quoted material by Andrade, it evokes a rhythmic technique in New Orleans popular music, named the "open shuffle" by drummer Johnny Vidacovich, which presents simultaneous subdivisions of the beat into straight (equal) 8th notes and swung (unequal) 8th notes. This technique is discussed by Alexander Stewart (2000, 297), who traces its influence through the twentieth century to funk music. Menezes and Pires's comment still more strongly resembles what Benjamin Doleac (2020) calls a "between the cracks" rhythm that falls between a straight duple subdivision and a triplet shuffle, originating in New Orleans but used in a wide variety of American popular-music styles and genres.

[8] Andrade's observations frame syncopation as a vital element of Brazilian popular musics, like many other vernacular musics arising from Afro-diasporic cultures. Through his synthesis of analytical and ethnographic observations, Andrade's fragmentary texts highlight the ways in which syncopation reflects Brazil's cultural hybridity. Much work remains to be done on these topics, but the translation and commentary by Menezes and Pires present us with a constructive beginning.

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Footnotes

1. Lerdahl and Jackendoff's model of phenomenal accent encompasses a wide variety of stresses: sharp attacks, loudness, sudden changes of timbre, long durations, registral extremes, changes of harmony, "and so forth"; metric accent is a mental construct inherent to the meter; and a third accent type, structural accent, corresponds to tonal goals such as cadences (1983, 17–18).
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2. Some precedents for the strong-beat early rule are Kirnberger (1771–79, 2:114–15), discussed in Grant (2014, 6, 94–96, and 118–121); Hauptmann (1853, 241); Lussy (1874, 57–58), discussed in Caplin (2008, 676); and Berry (1976, 317). This rule is retained in David Temperley's revision of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's model (Temperley 2001, 32).
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3. Such qualitatively different accents also have a precedent in Kirnberger, who theorized three types of accent: grammatical (roughly corresponding to metric), oratorical and expressive (both forms of phenomenal accent), discussed in Caplin (2008, 670). In contrast, Jason Yust rejects the concept of metric accent on the grounds that its definition is circular and inappropriately equates the psychological construct of meter with the acoustic phenomena of composed or performed accents (2018, 21). He also rejects agogic accent as a type of phenomenal accent on the grounds that it is perceived only in retrospect, in contrast to dynamic or registral accents (2018, 18).
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4. A few instances of the first pattern in Example 1 from canonical classical piano repertoire are: Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 333, first movement, mm. 5, 9, 16, 25, 29; Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 570, third movement, 3, 9, 11, 17, 23, 25; Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 14 No. 2, first movement, mm. 14–19 (and as 16th–8th–16th, mm. 6–7); and Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 31 No. 1, first movement, mm. 66–68, 88, 90, and 92. Return to text

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