MTO A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY FOR MUSIC THEORY

Commentary

Anne Danielsen

REFERENCE: https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.24.30.4/mto.24.30.4.stover.html

DOI: 10.30535/mto.30.4.25

Volume 30, Number 4, December 2024
Copyright © 2024 Society for Music Theory

---

[0] *Sometimes, music is almost irresistible in drawing the listener into its flow. The forces behind the enticing feel of Brazilian popular song is the topic of Martha Ulhôa's essay on métrica derramada, the secret behind the magic feel that arises when the vocal part of the rhythmic dialogue of vocal and comp starts to wander off on its own. How is the relationship between these loosely connected rhythmic streams best described, and what can it teach us about the difference between the physical signal and perception?*

~

[1] In the English abstract to another text by Ulhôa entitled "Métrica Derramada: tempo rubato ou gestualidade na canção brasileira popular," the concept is translated, possibly by Ulhôa herself, as "malleable meter" (Ulhôa 2006). In Justin London's book about meter (first edition), this particular term captures the possibility that a sounding rhythm can be structured (and thus heard) according to a range of potential meters (London 2004, 50). However, *métrica derramada* seems quite different from the phenomena that London discusses. Ulhôa's malleable meter does not refer to those occasions when a sounding rhythm may be situated in different metrical contexts and thus shift with, for example, the musical context or the enculturation of the listener. Rather, it is described as "aspects of synchronization between singing and accompaniment and . . . issues of accentuation in the song" ([1.7]). In the present translation by Chris Stover, it is translated as "fluid meter." This phrasing captures a signature aspect of the rhythmic feel of the Brazilian popular-song tradition about which Ulhôa writes, with its relaxed, enticing, rolling flow. More specifically, it refers to those occasions when one part of a compound texture, usually the solo part, stretches the meter almost beyond recognition while still indirectly relating and adhering to the song's underlying basic structure. When one listens to the music example that is at the core of the present text ("Amor até o fim," performed by Elis Regina), it becomes clear that Ulhôa is trying to address the forces behind the magic that can arise when a soloist departs, usually in a laid-back manner, from the rhythmic-metrical structure implied by the comp section while at the same time remaining loosely tied to it.

[2] In the context of Brazilian popular song, the vocalist is the agent that stretches the structural boundaries of the accompaniment. According to Ulhôa, the secret to this feel is that the vocalist turns to *language-related* features of the melody, phrasing the lyrics not solely according to the musical context but also according to the prosody of the words, or, in Ulhôa's terminology, "one's manner of accentuating words in speech" ([1.1]). This "manner" can be leveraged to liberate the vocal part from the more regular and rigorous musical structures in play and consequently render the meter more fluid. In his analysis of the interaction between

musical and poetic meters in rap flows, Oddekalv emphasizes the role of stressed syllables in establishing competing structural cues in the rapped part of a musical whole: "When there are multiple rhythmic events from different layers which communicate the same general category (like a beat or a sub-beat), but the events do not share the exact same temporal position . . . stressed syllables have a crucial structuring role" (Oddekalv 2022, 183). As an example, he points to a passage from rapper Lisa "Left-Eye" Lopez's verse in TLC's international hit "Waterfalls" (1994), where (from approx. 3:30 onward) she departs from the established structural framework of the track and falls further and further behind the beat. This, in Oddekalv's words, leads the listener to anticipate a so-called metrical anchor: "a metrically defining event with which to make sense of it all" (184). As with the vocal performance in Ulhoâ's example, the syllable that works as a metrical anchor does not coincide with the temporal position of the downbeat indicated by the metrical structure (and borne by the comping tracks). Using the latter as a reference, it arrives as "late" as the following sixteenth note in the TLC example. Nevertheless, Oddekalv claims, we are in no doubt as to that metrical anchor's positioning on a "downbeat."

[3] This flexible relationship between a steady accompaniment and a free-floating yet integrated solo part is also central to jazz. In an article on Thelonious Monk's "Monk's Dream" (Danielsen, Johansson, and Stover 2023), we discuss how to analytically make sense of the flexible and changing rhythmic-temporal relationship between Charlie Rouse's improvised saxophone solo and John Ore's walking bass when the solo starts to depart from the accompaniment. In one passage (1:28–1:30), Rouse's beats both vary considerably in duration and are consistently more-or-less one sixteenth note behind the downbeats of the bass while still being downbeats (or at least that is how we hear it). We suggest different ways wherein we perceptually and cognitively "digest" this passage, one of which is that the two lines are simply *experientially* simultaneous and synchronized because they are part of the same coherent rhythmic structure. This is a possibility here because a perceptual structure of considerable "rhythmic tolerance," as Johansson (2010) has named it, is established from the very beginning of this performance. Thus, the temporal flexibility for experiencing two divergent streams as one coherent structure is considerable.[(1)]

[4] Maintaining the right balance between metrical regularity and the forces that challenge such regularity is key in many musical traditions, and, one might say, in artistic expressions in general: one needs a structure but also something that puts pressure on, or vitalizes, this structure. That said, the structural part of such a dialogue clearly varies in nature between the genres mentioned above. In rap, for example—due to the influence of funk, among other things (Danielsen 2006)—the first beat, or the One, is heavy and works as the main structural attractor in the metrical matrix. In Brazilian popular song, on the other hand, there is a "dilution of the measure" ([5.5]) instead: the different layers do not come together on one particular beat, and the meter is not articulated vertically across the entire structure. Based upon this distinctive character, Ulhôa makes the point that Brazilian popular song produces a circular feel (in contrast to what she calls the linear feel of much Western art music). However, when all the layers stress, for example, the first beat of a pattern, it may also produce a circular feel, in fact—see, for example, Snead's analysis of how repetition in many African American musics makes the groove cut back to its own beginning (Snead 1984). In fact, the recording of "Amor até o fim," which serves as the key example in the text, does not come across as particularly circular but rather conveys a relaxed, forward-moving feel. Of course, it moves forward without being goal-directed as in Western art music's linear, teleological musical forms, which Ulhôa tends to use as a foil to the *métrica derramada* feel. Along these lines, it bears mentioning that Ulhôa sometimes resorts to a strawman-like description of the importance of certain performative aspects of what she calls the "classical-romantic European tradition" ([5.11]). Perhaps more than anything else, though, this simply serves to remind us that something *has* changed after all in the broader field of music theory/musicology/ethnomusicology since the essay was written 25 years ago.

[5] In any case, it does not diminish the importance of Ulhôa's very pertinent point that the vocal part in Brazilian song tends not to syncopate with the beat. Even though the physical locations of some of the extremely laid-back vocal notes in "Amor até o fim" (she mentions a passage where the discrepancy is half a beat but does not indicate where it is in the song) fall on positions that are close to syncopations according to the metrical structure of the accompaniment, they are not so: "Song melodies would not be syncopated . . . Instead, the melodic flow would be non-metrical" ([1.6]). Quoting the Brazilian poet and ethnomusicologist Mário de Andrade, Ulhôa describes the accentuation as alternatively driven by a "musical fantasy, pure virtuosity, or prosodic precision . . . a subtle compromise between recitative and strophic singing" (cited in [1.6]). Vocalists play with the meter rather than dynamically accentuate the beats: "They can

accentuate certain words by changing the duration of the note they want to emphasize, either in the value of the sustained note or through ornamentation" ([5.11]). The vocalist is stretching time, but other features also play a role: higher notes have more tension and are more prominent than lower notes; leaps attract more attention than stepwise movement. In short, as Ulhôa makes clear, we must take into consideration aspects other than the temporal when we are analyzing and interpreting rhythm and timing in song.[2]

[6] Is *métrica derramada* an extreme form of microtiming or even an instance of participatory discrepancies (Keil 1995)? If so, the distance between the participants is indeed huge. In addition, while Keil wanted to direct attention to the vital effects produced by musicians *co-articulating* the same beat and thus contributing to the same auditory stream (Bregman 1994), *métrica derramada* asks musicians (and listeners) to *refer* to the same beat in two different streams. How we process two such distinct but loosely related streams as a coherent and synchronized whole is unclear, but we should try to find out more about it: this aesthetic strategy is both tried and true.

Anne Danielsen
University of Oslo
RITMO, Department of Musicology
Forskningsveien 3a
0318 Oslo, Norway
anne.danielsen@imv.uio.no

Works Cited

Bregman, Albert S. 1994. *Auditory Scene Analysis: The Perceptual Organization of Sound*. MIT Press.

Danielsen, Anne. 2006. *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. Wesleyan University Press.

Danielsen, Anne, Mats Johansson, and Chris Stover. 2023. "Bins, Spans, and Tolerance: Three Theories of Microtiming Behavior." *Music Theory Spectrum* 45 (2): 181–98.

Danielsen, Anne, Ragnhild Brøvig, Kjetil K. Bøhler, Guilherme S. Câmara, Mari R. Haugen, Eirik Jacobsen, ... and Justin London. 2024. "There's More to Timing than Time: Investigating Musical Microrhythm Across Disciplines and Cultures." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41 (3): 176–98.

Johansson, Mats. 2010. "The Concept of Rhythmic Tolerance: Examining Flexible Grooves in Scandinavian Folk Fiddling." In *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, ed. Anne Danielsen, 69–84. Routledge.

Keil, Charles. 1995. "The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: A Progress Report." *Ethnomusicology* 39 (1): 1–19.

London, Justin. 2004. *Hearing in Time: Psychological Aspects of Musical Meter*. Oxford University Press.

Oddekalv, Kjell A. 2022. "What Makes the Shit Dope? The Techniques and Analysis of Rap Flows." PhD diss., University of Oslo.

Snead, James A. 1984. "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture." In *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, 59–80. Routledge.

Stover, Chris. 2024. "*Métrica derramada*: Musical Prosody in Brazilian Popular Song by Martha Tupinambá de Ulhôa." *Music Theory Online* 30 (4).

Ulhôa, Martha Tupinambá de. 1999. "Métrica Derramada: Prosódia musical na canção brasileira popular." *Revista quadrimestral da Academia Brasileira de Música* 2: 48–56.

—————. 2006. "Métrica Derramada: tempo rubato ou gestualidade na canção brasileira popular." In *VII Congreso Latinoamericano IASPM-AL*, 1–9.

Footnotes

1. The concept of rhythmic tolerance emerges in Johansson's analyses of Scandinavian folk fiddling, which is also extremely flexible regarding timing.
Return to text

2. For a similar argument about analyzing groove in various Western groove-based genres, see Danielsen et al. (2024).
Return to text

Copyright Statement

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for Music Theory. All rights reserved.

[1] Copyrights for individual items published in *Music Theory Online* (*MTO*) are held by their authors. Items appearing in *MTO* may be saved and stored in electronic or paper form, and may be shared among individuals for purposes of scholarly research or discussion, but may *not* be republished in any form, electronic or print, without prior, written permission from the author(s), and advance notification of the editors of *MTO*.

[2] Any redistributed form of items published in *MTO* must include the following information in a form appropriate to the medium in which the items are to appear:

> This item appeared in *Music Theory Online* in [VOLUME #, ISSUE #] on [DAY/MONTH/YEAR]. It was authored by [FULL NAME, EMAIL ADDRESS], with whose written permission it is reprinted here.

[3] Libraries may archive issues of *MTO* in electronic or paper form for public access so long as each issue is stored in its entirety, and no access fee is charged. Exceptions to these requirements must be approved in writing by the editors of *MTO,* who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

This document and all portions thereof are protected by U.S. and international copyright laws. Material contained herein may be copied and/or distributed for research purposes only.

Prepared by Amy King, Editorial Assistant