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Commentary

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[1.1] I am grateful to *Music Theory Online* for this opportunity to offer commentary on the text "Koizumi Fumio on Nuclear Tones." I will present my commentary through several different frames or levels.

[1.2] On the first level, the project itself—the publication of translations of multiple texts on music theory from diverse languages and cultures, and secondarily the inclusion of voices like mine, representing still other cultural traditions (I am a practitioner of traditional Arabic *maqam* music from Egypt, Syria, and Palestine)—is tremendously important to the field of Music Theory, in my view. I believe the discipline of music theory has long suffered from a lack of true comparative study, has been Eurocentric and, frankly, White Supremacist, for most of its history.

[1.3] Music Theory has yet to catch up with field of Linguistics in being fully comparative, and is at least 108 years behind that field in my estimation: dating to the 1916 publication of Saussure's *Le Cours de linguistique générale*, which established a theoretical framework rooted in the comparison of different languages, the arbitrariness of the sign, and the description of language as a communication system. This took Linguistics out of the narrow frame of debates and analyses of the particularities of grammar of culturally dominant languages, and the normative, prescriptive aspect of the field that that entailed; a frame in which Music Theory still seems to be stuck. The negative results are both political and scientific: political in that the current frame of music theory advances the false narrative of European supremacy either explicitly or implicitly (by omission), and scientific in that true comparison on equal terms of music traditions from different cultures will lend insights into how and why music operates that the field, in its current state, is unable to address.

[1.4] Hence the current MTO special volume by the editors of Music Theory in the Plural is tremendously important in beginning to rectify these gaps in knowledge—at minimum it will allow English-language readers to begin to contemplate what they didn't know that they don't know.

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[2.1] On the second level of my commentary I'll say that the basic premise of Liam Hynes-Tawa's translation of Fumio Koizumi's text is convincing to me on the basis of the evidence presented: that there exist nuclear tones in Japanese melodies, and that many melodies exhibit two such tones, often a fourth apart. I'll take issue with some of the ways those nuclear tones are characterized in the next section (specifically around the concept of "control"), but, on singing and playing through the transcriptions provided, I could hear the tones

named by Koizumi in the text as poles of attraction. This is clear in Examples 1–7 (Koizumi's examples 25–29); however it was much less clear in Example 8 (Koizumi's example 30), and not clear at all in Example 9 (Koizumi's example 31). Example 10 (Koizumi's example 32) is a counter-example, and I agree with his assertions about the important role of tones (B, D, and F♯) not matching the pattern of the previous examples. His speculation about this difference pointing to a different cultural influence (China and Korea) is credible and audible—though without expertise in Chinese or Korean music I cannot verify or deny the specificity of the claim.

[2.2] Koizumi's concluding paragraph points to the importance of a comparative approach to developing these concepts more thoroughly. The little information I was able to find about Koizumi in English (https://www.geidai.ac.jp/labs/koizumi/nenpue/index.html) shows that he took that aim quite seriously. This text from 1958 is near the beginning of his comparative journey, which involved travels to India, Iran, and Egypt; field research on Hawaiian, Latin American, Mohawk, Inuit, and African music traditions; as well as deeper dives into other Asian music traditions (Southeast Asia, Korea, Taiwan) and a diversity of Japanese folk traditions. I would love to see translations of his work from later in his life, and whether he was able to answer his own question posed here about the relationship of Example 10 to Chinese and Korean music traditions.

[2.3] I was invited to offer this commentary specifically because the tradition I practice—the Arabic *maqam* tradition—is also rooted in tetrachords, and "nuclear tones a fourth apart" (to temporarily adopt the framing of this text). In the Arab tradition, the tetrachord is musically salient as well as theoretically explicit. On a superficial level, movement in the maqam resembles what can be gleaned from Ancient Greek descriptions of their music—melodies in the frame of a perfect fourth, with two tones in between at different intervallic distances. The medieval Arabs, the first to translate the Ancient Greek sources and make them available to Europeans (first in Arabic translations in Iberia), even adopted the Greek word "genus," Arabized to "*jins*," to refer to the tetrachords in *maqam* theory. Whether all *ajnas* (the plural of *jins*) actually involve melodies moving with tones a fourth apart (as claimed by medieval and contemporary Arab theorists) is another matter (some do, but many do not) (Abu Shumays 2013; Farraj and Abu Shumays 2019).

[2.4] On a superficial level, the movement of melodies within and among *ajnas* resembles the examples provided by Koizumi here. The bottom tone of the *jins* is usually the primary tonic, and the fourth scale degree relative to that is a secondary tonic. Melodies move around both the primary and secondary tonics, dipping above and below, displaying attraction to those tonics. Modulation happens most frequently to another *jins* stacked on the first, with the secondary tonic of the first becoming the primary tonic of the second. Hence what starts as melodic movement rooted on the primary tonic, with additional melodic movement emphasizing the secondary tonic, leads to tonicization of the secondary tonic, opening up modulation possibilities. Although the complexity of different types of *ajnas* (more genera with more "microtonality" than accounted for in Greek theory, and with probably more "microtonal" diversity than any other musical tradition currently practiced on Earth) and of their multiple modulation pathways is much broader than what is shown in Koizumi's examples, there is a similarity in that large-scale melodic movement through smaller tonal areas or clusters. A deeper comparison between these traditions might yield interesting insights.

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[3.1] The third level of my commentary will be on the weaknesses of the analysis in my view. For a moment I'll nitpick some of the examples, though that's not my primary aim here. Example 3 starts with the two nuclear tones being a *fifth* apart rather than a *fourth* apart: melodies moving between E4 and B4, then only briefly touching on E5 and realizing the fourth between B4 and E5. Example 8 seems to me to have *three* nuclear tones: first A4, then G4, then E4, then ending with A4. Example 9 is even more interesting, displaying the possibility of both F4 and E4 as nuclear tones alternating with each other (and the text doesn't acknowledge any difference between Examples 8 and 9 compared with the previous ones).

[3.2] This nitpicking could be totally off base, however, due to an important challenge: I can't hear the actual musical examples. This may seem a non-problem to readers of this journal, but to me it is significant. In my experience, the nuances of sound in actual music (precise tunings, rhythmic nuance, and melodic vocabulary) lead to feelings of tension, expectation, and tonicization that cannot be conveyed in written transcription.

Furthermore, the feelings of which notes are tonicized and which are notes of tension are aurally, culturally conditioned by experience. I know this both from learning Arabic music as a second musical language (after growing up in the U.S. studying Western classical music, theory, and composition and only beginning to learn Arabic music after graduating from college) and from teaching many students in the U.S. for the last two decades.

[3.3] Thus the first weakness of the analysis presented here is that it, like the vast majority of analyses done in the field of music theory, is an analysis of transcriptions of music, not an analysis of music. In my experience, musical analysis—that is, analyzing the sound itself rather than a transcription of it—provides much deeper and truer insights than an analysis of transcriptions. I've demonstrated the power of that approach on my website www.maqamlessons.com, as well as in thousands of classes where I've taught musical analysis exclusively through oral tradition—including my 40+ Maqam Lessons on YouTube. For those without such experience, the experiential proof I assert here is rooted in a more concrete fact: that notating music strips the overwhelming majority of information content from the sound in order to reduce it to notation. I don't have space to go into a detailed discussion here, but compare the file size of an MP3 of a musical recording against the file size of a PDF of its transcription, and you can get a rough illustration of the information loss (over 90%).

[3.4] In other words, it is impossible for me—or for you, dear reader—to make any claims on the validity of Koizumi's claims without hearing the music in question, and not only that, without learning enough of that music tradition aurally in order to develop the cultural expectations necessary to understand what is happening melodically.

[3.5] The second weakness of the analysis is the framing of the function of the nuclear tones as one of "control." Hynes-Tawa translates Koizumi as saying that "the nuclear tone controls the notes around it" [3]. We may be dealing with a translation issue, and/or with a nuance of the Japanese word that doesn't translate well into English; nonetheless this term is used enough times and in enough contexts that it seems thematic. Sentences and phrases like the following convey the idea that the the nuclear tones rule over, control, or dictate melodic motion: "When we see that the notes around a nuclear tone *do not easily leap* from the nuclear tone we can hypothesize that their nature is *subordinate* to the nuclear tone" [3], "each as subordinate to the other nuclear tone" [3], "sphere of *control*" [3], "*control over* melodies" [5.1], "the *control* of the nuclear tones" [7.1], "the control of the nuclear tones *regulates* the melody even more" [7.2] (emphases mine).

[3.6] This weakness, again, may seem a non-problem to those immersed in the cultural milieu of Euro-American music theory, where such concepts abound, or dare I say *control* thought. In my view it is one of the fundamental weaknesses of Western music theory—a note-centric, rather than melody-centric approach. The desire to find the *rules*, the *laws* of music, what it is that *governs* musical *construction*. These are chimeras rooted in the fundamental Platonic fallacy underlying music theory, which—as I alluded to above—disappeared in the field of Linguistics with the comparative revolution and the understanding of the fundamentally arbitrary nature of communication. Back to Koizumi's text, there is a big leap between observing that certain notes are poles of melodic attraction and asserting that they *control* melodies. The first is evident aurally. The second is a philosophical assertion ungrounded in any evidence and untested (and perhaps untestable) scientifically. What does this concept of "control" even mean in the musical context? Perhaps the ghost of the racist Heinrich Schenker can explain it to me.

[3.7] In contrast with this view, it is evident to practitioners of oral traditions that melody is built from melodic vocabulary stored in memory. This melodic vocabulary is as arbitrary as the sounds of spoken language or the constituent elements of any communication system (as demonstrated by Claude Shannon in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949) and in the field of Information Theory and contemporary telecommunication and computer science)—that is, culturally chosen and passed on as a shared language within social groups. The "function" of notes—a metaphor at best—emerges from the action of melodies; or we can say that melodic movement leads us to hear tension and resolution in different notes. The idea that there are laws and rules governing melodic construction—in any human musical practice—is as fallacious as the idea that the tunings of musical scales are the result of mathematical laws, rather than cultural choices that intersect with acoustical realities (Abu Shumays 2009; Farraj and Abu Shumays 2019).

[3.8] Which brings me to the third weakness of the analysis: there is no discussion of the melodic vocabulary of the musical examples, no discussion of the melodic phrases that move from one nuclear tone to another or

stay in one nuclear tone. Obviously it's possible Koizumi may discuss melodic vocabulary elsewhere in his text, and my complaint might simply be the result of my ignorance of those other discussions. But it is a weakness of this excerpt. I'll once again give a linguistic analogy. I could analyze the line "*so even the vocal music has comparatively precise pitches*" [7.1] as follows: "s**O** **E**v**E**n th**E** v**O**cal music has c**O**mparat**I**vely prec**I**se p**I**tches," showing the dominance of the vowels "O" and "E" at the beginning moving to a greater emphasis on the vowel "I"—instead of, for example, engaging with the meaning or content of the phrase, or discussing the grammatical roles of each word and phrase ("the vocal music" as subject, etc.). This type of analysis resembles what Koizumi's text does for the musical examples considered, and is also the kind of work that the vast majority of Western music theory writing performs.

[3.9] Again, the mathematical evidence for my claim was already laid out by Shannon (1949)—that analyzing text on the letter-by-letter level has a lower information content than on the word-by-word level; the aural, experiential evidence for my claim may be opaque to those without experience learning music through oral tradition. I don't have room for a "proof" in these pages, but suffice it to say that I view this type of musical analysis as equivalent to a phonemic analysis of language: considering the individual phonemes while ignoring everything of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, meaning, etc. (and worse, claiming that the phonemic analysis determines the grammar, or *is* the grammar). Most of what is relevant to musical sound and experience is missing. And the idea that music can be *reduced* to these concerns is fallacy: as in any arbitrary system, the vocabulary isn't determined by rules but by memory, and must be held in the large, internal lexicon of the brain in order to be usable. Or in other words, I'm saying that Koizumi's analysis barely tells us anything about the music analyzed.

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[4.1] The fourth and final level of my commentary follows from the third. You, dear reader, may be frustrated that I've lumped Koizumi in with blanket claims about "Western" music theory, when he's not even a "Westerner," and when I've already written about the value of bringing in diverse, comparative perspectives to Music Theory! In fact, I find the text presented here as further evidence (feel free to accuse me of confirmation bias) of the claims I've made in my recent talk "The Politics of Musical Scales and the Decolonization of Music Studies" (Abu Shumays 2024): that when attempting to decolonize music theory or pedagogy it is insufficient to bring in diverse voices, particularly if those Black and Brown individuals from different countries and languages nonetheless received musical and scholarly training in Western-style academic institutions in their home countries.

[4.2] Indeed, Koizumi's first musical training was in violin and piano (much like myself) and in choral music; many of his early musical experiences were in churches (he converted); and he studied at Tokyo University, writing a graduate thesis on European programme music—all before developing an interest in Japanese folk music. He, like myself, and like most of you, dear readers, was mentally and philosophically colonized long before he began his long (and laudable) journey in studies of comparative ethnomusicology. The Western philosophical assumptions (fallacies in my mind) underlying Euro-American music theory are palpable in this excerpt, as I discussed in the previous section.

[4.3] We can go a step further. Japan, like most countries in the Global South colonized by Europeans, accepted European cultural hegemony. It did so even more strongly after suffering the twin genocides of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. European-style political, economic, academic, and cultural institutions became seats of power in Japan, as in other countries in the Global South, and individuals around the world found it necessary to advance in those institutions in order to have any social power. Many embraced this "modernization" and rejected their native cultures. Still others attempted to re-embrace their native cultures, but without decolonizing their minds from the unconscious hegemony of Western philosophy. (I know, because I made the same attempt, before realizing my mistake, and even then the process of decolonizing my own mind and coming to understand the superiority, in most contexts, of oral transmission over written transmission and analysis of music was long and challenging.)

[4.4] Koizumi, like all of us, did the best he could under such circumstances. There is tremendous value to his discussion of Japanese traditional music, even if the analytical frameworks are lacking. (I don't find musical analysis all that useful anyway.) And there is tremendous value in MTO and Music Theory in the Plural's attempt to bring in diverse voices, even if those diverse voices may already be internally colonized with those

three little letters known as P-H-D. Nonetheless, music theory is desperate for a complete reframing, which can only begin when those with power in academic institutions (whether they be at universities or journals) begin to challenge their assumptions and methodologies. To put it bluntly, that reframing can only begin when music theorists realize that the field needs a comparative revolution, akin to that which occurred over a century ago in Linguistics, and that the elevation of oral tradition will be the most crucial component of that overhaul.

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