



Improvisation in West African Musics

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an ensemble are the *surdo* (large, bass, double-headed drum played with a mallet), the *caixa* (snare drum), the *pandeiro* (a tambourine), the *cuíca* (a friction drum with a wailing sound that is obtained by rubbing a wet cloth on the rigid rod attached to the drum-head), the *tamborim* (a small hand drum played with a wooden stick), the *reco-reco* (a güiro-type of scraper), the *frigideira* (small frying pan played with a metal stick), and the *agogô* (cowbell). The music associated with Brazilian carnivals consists of marches and *sambas*,

which are played in $\frac{2}{4}$ meter. The basic patterns and some variations performed by each instrument are given in Figure 18. Students can improvise syncopated alterations of these patterns, but the downbeat always should be stressed.

A bibliographical note

Studies focusing specifically on the use and practice of improvisation in Latin American music have never been published. A few descriptions are available, however, in general music histories or general studies of folk and popular music

in various countries. Bibliographical information on these is available in Gilbert Chase's *A Guide to the Music of Latin America*, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1962). For items published since 1960, consult the music and folklore sections of the *Handbook of Latin American Studies* series published by the University Presses of Florida. The most comprehensive description of Latin American instruments, folk songs, and dances will be available in the forthcoming *New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. ▢



IMPROVISATION

IN WEST AFRICAN MUSICS

David Locke

Anthropologists traditionally have distinguished between several broad culture areas in Africa. Melville Herskovits delineated eight categories: North Coast, Sudan Desert, East Horn, East Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, the Bushmen, and the Pygmies.¹ The traditional music of each of these categories has distinctive characteristics.

Along the North Coast, a strong Islamic influence can be perceived

¹Melville J. Herskovits, "A Preliminary Consideration of the Culture Areas of Africa," *American Anthropologist* 26 (1924): 50-63.

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in vocal style; instrumentation; melodic, rhythmic, and formal structures; and the place of music in society. Because the influence of Islamic/Arabic music is so pervasive, North African music is usually considered separately from black African music. This article's discussion thus is limited to sub-Saharan musics.

In the Sudan Desert, a fusion has evolved between the Islamic styles of the North Coast and the black African styles of Central and West African regions.

On the East Horn, music shows both marked Islamic influence and unique indigenous styles, such as the ancient music of the Ethiopian Coptic Church.

East Africa is characterized by

widespread use of melodic instruments and well-developed instrumental musics such as the *Shona mbira* and *Chopi marimba* traditions.

Central Africa has been influenced by both Arabic and African music, but is otherwise similar to West Africa in its music styles, although Central African music tends to be rhythmically less intense.

West Africa's archetypal music includes percussion ensembles with antiphonal choral singing.

The Bushmen and Pygmies practice contrapuntal yodeling in a hoquet style but use relatively few musical instruments.

Despite such diversity, certain general statements can be made about the musics of sub-Saharan Af-



Photo by Godwin Agbeli



Photo by Godwin Agbeli



Photo by Godwin Agbeli



Photo by Godwin Agbeli

rican peoples. First, rhythm occupies a preeminent position in the African aesthetic and, in most cases, the music has an infectious, propulsive quality. Second, song is the heart of an African music performance. Accompanied song is the most prevalent music genre, and pure instrumental music is uncommon. Because most African languages are tonal, a melody typically conforms to the rise and fall of speech tones. Third, music is integrated into the matrix of African social life. Communal music events accompany major phases of the life cycle—birth, puberty, marriage, death—and various community activities—work, recreation, worship, politics, medicine, and so on.

Spontaneous creation

In African musics improvisation is

composition at the moment of performance. It involves acts of spontaneous creation, unique and impermanent, but it is not completely free. It is bounded by strictures of style and by the training, technique, experience, and habits of a given performer. In this sense, jazz and African music are quite similar.² Ornamentation and embellishment constitute rudimentary improvisation whereas variation upon an existing theme is more sophisticated. But African improvisation is realized in its fullest capacity when new melodies, song texts, and rhythms are invented in the heat of performance. Since African musics are created and transmitted in the

²Ronald Byrnside, "The Performer as Creator: Jazz Improvisation" in *Contemporary Music and Music Cultures*, eds. Ronald Byrnside, Charles Hamm, and Bruno Nettl, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), pp. 223–251.

milieu of nonliterate, oral culture, improvisation is present to some degree in most styles.

Western explorers and missionaries developed the incorrect notion that African music consists of free, collective improvisation. Even today both lay and trained Western musicians may still overestimate the extent and the freedom with which improvisation is employed. Much African music is composed prior to performance and must be precisely recreated. For example, throughout Africa court musicians serve as their society's historians by recalling, through vocal and instrumental recitation, the illustrious deeds of the royal lineage and the legendary origins of an entire nation. To an outsider, historical recitations on a talking drum may sound like free improvisation, but in fact each

♩ = approx. 176

Leader Group

De mie - kpe mia - nya wo, 'fla-wuawo, De mie - kpe mia - nya wo hee, oo

Leader

hee, De mie - kpe mia - nya wo. De mie - kpe mia -

Variation 1

Leader Group

Variation 2

Leader Group

Variation 3

Leader Group

Variation 4

Leader Group

Variation 5

Leader Group

Figure 1. Agbekor vocal variations

stroke is predetermined by rigorous rules of language.

But African musicians do improvise on various aspects of music, including melody, text, form, polyphony, rhythm, and timbre. As a rule, they do not improvise upon scales. Let us examine each of these by using examples from traditional African musics.

Most African vocal music is antiphonal; a song leader's call is answered by a singing group's response. In this type of singing, it is common for the song leader to improvise melodic variations on the basic call while the group repeats the call with little change. Figure 1 shows the basic call and response of a *Ewe* (West Africa) song and five variations on the leader's part. The song is part of a fast section of a war dance called *Agbekor*, dating from the late eighteenth century.³ In performance this song is repeated at the discretion of the song leader before another song is begun. Songs are sung over complex rhythms created by a large percussion ensemble.

In discussing the attributes of good singers in West African society, J. H. Kwabena Nketia has stated that a musician "must be able to improvise texts, to fit tunes to new words, to set tunes to words extemporaneously, and to remember texts, so that he can recall verses of songs or the leading lines."⁴

Although Africans do not employ functional harmony in the Western sense, their music is not monophonic; on the contrary, homophonic parallelism, heterophony, and a wide range of polyphonic structures are employed. Melodic theme and variation is a common developmental technique that is heard in many African polyphonic instrumental and vocal traditions.

Figure 2 shows basic patterns of an uncomplicated work for the *nyunga-nyunga mbira* of the East African Shona people. The *mbira*, also known as the thumb piano, is a uniquely African instrument of many long, thin tongues of metal or wood attached to a sounding board that is placed within or over a resonating chamber. The *nyunga-*

meter: simultaneous 6/8 and 3/4

pace: variable

♩: left thumb

♩: right thumb

Figure 2. Nyunga-nyunga mbira patterns

nyunga mbira has fifteen keys tuned to a hexatonic scale (do, re, mi, sol, la, ti), and it covers a range of two octaves, usually from G to g'.⁵

Typically, a player develops a basic theme (Figure 2a) and then introduces time-honored variations (b and c). The musician repeats each phrase several times before moving on to the next, until he reaches a more complex pattern (d), which provides a platform for individual improvised expression. This pattern also contains the outline of the main vocal melody that is sung to vocables (e). This vocal line is developed through a traditional sequence of variations until eventually the musician is simultaneously improvising new instrumental and vocal parts.

Improvisation is also an important element in *Chopi* (East Africa) marimba music. According to Hugh Tracey, a five-step sequence is followed in composing elaborate

works for five marimbas of graded pitch.⁶ First, the music leader writes a poem about a local event, and then he or she creates a melody for the right hand that conforms to the tone sequence and rhythm of the verse. After the main tune is established, a countermelody for the left hand is created. The player then returns to the right hand and improvises a contrapuntal secondary melody. Finally, in a process of communal improvisation, the five players in the full ensemble develop complementary parts modeled on this secondary melody. Once the music is composed in this improvisatory manner, its basic outlines become fixed and it is entered into the *Chopi* repertoire.

West African dance drumming

So far we have examined improvisation with respect to different aspects of music structure in various African musics and have noticed that improvisation may be cur-

³David Locke, *The Music of Atsiagbeko*. (Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan University, 1978).

⁴J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974), p. 55.

⁵Paul Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Tradition of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

⁶Hugh Tracey, *Chopi Musicians: Their Music, Poetry, and Instruments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 5-6.

tailed by the semantic content and social function of the music. A more important limiting factor, however, is style. By observing the elements of West African poly-rhythmic dance drumming, we can better understand the interaction of stylistic discipline and improvisation in African music.

In the coastal and forest regions of West Africa, the typical percussion ensemble consists of an iron bell, gourd rattles, clappers, and drums with carefully graded pitches and timbres. These instruments contribute in differing ways to the total ensemble texture. Elapsed time is given shape and definition by the recurrent rhythmic pattern of the bell. Poly-rhythmic textures are created by rhythmic patterns played on supporting instruments. Middle-pitched drums engaging in rhythmic dialogue with the leading drum become responding drums. And the lowest pitched leading drum controls the performance by playing characteristic dance rhythms and giving choreographic signals to dancers.

The style of this type of West African dance drumming is influenced by several fundamental music principles. First, drum rhythm, vocal melody, and dance movement are all timed with reference to the bell pattern. Thus, players must not only know their own rhythmic patterns, but they also must be aware of how their lines relate to the bell pattern. Second, regularly occurring stresses or beats are important in helping performers maintain a steady pace. Although these beats are not usually sounded, they are implicit in the dancers' movements. Third, the beats are felt in extremely rapid time units, which we shall call pulses. Fourth, the time span of the bell rhythm and its division into beats establish meter, a concept that implies a musical period and the accents within that period. The concepts of bell pattern, beat, pulse, and meter all function to clearly structure elapsing time. Timing and rhythm are the most crucial dimensions of dance drumming. All performers share in a communally felt, almost hypnotic sense of time so that they can execute intricate rhythm combinations without the slightest mistake.

Although spontaneous creativity is generally produced from the

Figure 3. Agbekor percussion rhythms

leading drum, there is scope for imaginative variation in the music of the supporting instruments as well. Look, for example, at the standard rhythms these instruments play in the slow section of *Agbekor* (see Figure 3). In *Agbekor* the bell pattern is divided into four beats, which are further divided into three units of pulses. The bell pattern, however, is additively constructed—2+1+2+2+2+1+2—and staggered

against the four beats. Improvisation is almost never permitted on the bell. The rattle's rhythm reinforces the bell pattern and increases its density; patterns of the clap and drum one emphasize a 3:2 cross rhythm; drum two's pattern accents the second of the two off-beat eighth notes within each beat, while drum three's phrase accents both of them; and the rhythm of drum four maintains the pulse.

Experienced players can improvise on these standard patterns. The procedure for improvisation is to state the standard rhythm, develop it within strict stylistic limits, and then return to the basic pattern. Figure 4 gives three possible variations of the standard rhythm for each instrument. At the player's discretion, each variation is repeated several times before either another variation is introduced or the standard rhythm is restated.

Most variations are developed from the standard phrase by simply repeating one of its motives or developing it slightly. Other techniques include embellishment, increasing the density of spacing, and syncopation, which in this context refers to displacing a stroke from

its normal position within a repeating phrase. Most variations do not obscure the salient strokes of the standard patterns, and a player must take care not to upset the balance among instruments or to cover the leading drum part with overly busy improvisation.

While the improvisation of supporting instruments is limited to relatively simple techniques of ornamentation and variation, the individual creativity of the leading drum is given greater freedom; indeed, the stature of a leading drummer is largely determined by his ability to improvise. Nonetheless, the drummer does not have a wide scope for improvisation in all types of dance music. Certain dances, such as *Agbekor*, require the lead-

ing drummer to give so many choreographic signals that the music consists entirely of the combination of previously composed patterns, thus limiting improvisatory techniques to choosing the order in which patterns are played, substituting alternate patterns, and embellishing.

The idioms of music and dance are regarded as two aspects of one multifaceted art form. In many social dances, however, a less sophisticated relationship between music and dance exists, so improvisation has freer reign. The leading drummer states a rhythmic theme that is repeated by the responding drummers while the leader improvises upon it. After several minutes of improvisation, the leader states another

♩ = approx. 86

Bell

Rattle 1. 2. 3.

Clap 1. 2. 3.

Drum 1 1. 2. 3.

Drum 2 1. 2. 3.

Drum 3 1. 2. 3.

Drum 4 1. 2. 3.

Figure 4. *Agbekor* rhythmic variations

Figure 5. Kinka rhythms and variations

Key to leading drum strokes in Figure 5

: bounced stroke with palm in center of skin

: bounced stroke with stick in center of skin

: bounced stroke with fingers at edge of skin

: pressed stroke with fingers at edge of skin

: bounced stroke with stick in center of skin while pressing skin with fingers

er theme and the process begins again. Generally these themes are well known among the players, but the leading drummer can spontaneously create new patterns if he is so inspired.

Several rhythmic themes and leading drum variations from the Ewe social dance called *Kinka* are shown in Figure 5. The bell pattern, which provides the basic timing, and the responding drum phrase, which states the rhythmic theme, repeat continuously. The leading drum plays the standard phrase until the responding drums firmly establish their pattern, and then a series of extemporaneous variations begins. Each drummer develops a personal style based on variations that are pleasing to him, and his improvisations consist of reworking them in new ways. He is always free to invent new variations, however, as long as they remain true to the rhythm pattern stated on the responding drums. A. M. Jones has pointed out that:

It is the SEED of the pattern. The whole standard pattern grows out of this seed. So do all variations on that pattern. Thus, after establishing a pattern, the master drummer, by extension, simile, or any other artifice at his command, using the first phrase as the germinal idea, builds up spontaneously a series of variations which continue as long as the inspiration of that particular phrase lasts. Having started with the 'seed' as Tay [Jones' informant] puts it, the master drummer can go anywhere he likes, for everyone will know that your plant has grown from this seed.⁷

No matter how sensitively we research and analyze processes of improvisation in African musics, there remains a dimension that is beyond the ken of Westerners. When questioned on the source of their talent, African musicians point not to an inheritance of genes, but to their being the reincarnation of famous musicians; when asked about the origin of their musical inspiration, they do not discuss training and influences, but playing with ghosts during dreams or the way their hands are guided by ancestral spirits as they play. For African musicians, the ability to improvise and the talent of creativity are gifts from God.

⁷A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 175.

Selected readings

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The definitive study of *Shona mbira* music tradition with ample discussion of improvisation within the limits of the Shona aesthetic and social system.

Jones, A. M. *Studies in African Music, Vols. 1 and 2*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

This seminal work on *Ewe* drumming

contains extended analyses of leading drum improvisation.

Merriam, Alan. "African Music," in William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits, eds. *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

A concise review of all major scholarship on African music that provides a quick introduction to the subject.

Nketia, J. H. Kwabena. *The Music of Africa*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974.

The only general text on African music

that provides a comprehensive survey of a diverse field.

Selected recordings

Anthology of African Music. Ten albums are included in this collection; each disc costs \$11. Available from UNIPUB, 345 Park Avenue South, New York City 10010.

Drums of West Africa: Ritual Music of Ghana (Lyricord 7307)

Shona Mbira Music. Vols. 1-2 (Nonesuch 72007) ☰

IM PRO VIS ATION IN NEAR EASTERN MUSICS

Karl Signell

According to West Asian custom, guest instrumentalists are offered the honor of introducing a music program by playing a solo improvisation. The highest praise and esteem are showered upon the musician who has command over the difficult, creative, magical, and dan-

The author is an ethnomusicologist specializing in Turkish music.



Art by C. M. Dupré

A Turkish ney player