



Toward a Practical Theory of World Rhythm

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Our 21st-century world is one in which a wide variety of well-established musics continue to thrive and one in which new musics, many of them complex hybrids, are born every day. In such a world analytical theories and methods designed for discrete musics have obvious value, as do those that can illuminate features of a wide variety of musical pieces, styles and cultures in common terms that allow direct comparison. In this paper I propose one of the latter, a theory of world *rhythm*, defined as *the management of time in human musical processes*. The theory/method rests on the notion of “qualified rhythmic universals” (an expansion of an idea suggested by Bruno Nettl), those concepts that illuminate the rhythmic features of a wide variety of human musics, and for which reasonable arguments can be made as to their origins in human physiology, human understanding of the physical world or the psychology of human perception. These include the bi-laterality of human physiology, the foundational nature of the smallest prime numbers (2 and 3), and the human tendency to organize rhythmic phenomena into groups both as smaller “chunks” and as larger wholes (Gestalts). Finally, complex interpretive place is afforded to silences in musical situations.

Taken in combination, these phenomena lead to the heart of my theory, namely that *for the practical purposes of human music making, all rhythm can be understood and expressed as a complex web of relationships between durational groupings of two and three at various hierarchical levels*. Such a theory ultimately implies that the rhythmic dynamism of widely disparate musics stems from rhythmic consonances and dissonances produced in the interaction of unequal groupings of 2s and 3s at various levels, and further suggests ways in which the rhythmic structure of various musics may be compared to illustrate how prevalent patterns such as 3+3+2, 3+2+3, 2+2+3, etc., are articulated differently but may nevertheless be at the heart of such dynamism.

This paper explicates basic details of grouping, hierarchy and interaction (based in some respects on the prior work of Jay Rahn, Jonathan Kramer, Lerdahl and Jackendoff, and Cooper and Meyer), after which the analytical method is applied to brief examples from three different musical cultures. One of these examples follows.

Ewe “timeline”



This common pattern from West Africa illustrates tensions between metrical considerations and group identification. Kofi Agawu asserts that this pattern is to be interpreted rhythmically within the context of a steady beat – compound quadruple meter, four beats of dotted quarter notes – on the basis that the pattern is for accompanying dancing. Such an analysis certainly demonstrates a great deal of dynamism (tension) between the metrical pulse and the surface rhythms, as shown below, since rhythmic articulations would occur only on the first and last “beats.” However, additional illumination can be had by showing mixed groups of 2 and 3 at the lowest level, especially with regard to how these then form larger groups at the phrase level: the pattern of 2+3 that begins and ends the surface grouping is reflected at the higher level. The surface level grouping uses a principle noted earlier to assign each isolated eighth note to the previous group; the secondary principle of proximity does not apply in this case, since the eighth note is equidistant from the quarter notes on either side. The point here is not to argue for one overriding interpretation, but rather to provide a way of understanding and demonstrating the rhythmic vitality within this music – vitality that flows from both conjunction and disjunction of groups of 2 and 3 at various levels:

Analysis

A. Phrase level

or

B. Indicated Metrical Level - possibly

C. Pulse Level - not needed

D. Lowest Level (♪)

The second and third examples will be, respectively: an excerpt from an Inuit solo song and an excerpt from Henry Purcell’s “Rondeau” from *Abdelazar*. These comparative analyses will illustrate that the proposed theory does not in the end erase meaningful differences between musics. Rather, it highlights how “qualified rhythmic universals” may be manifested in a myriad of ways without at the same time necessarily denying that such universals may exist.

Biography:

Mark Hijleh, professor of music at Houghton College, has taught music theory and composition for more than twenty years. He studied composition, conducting and world music at the Peabody Conservatory, the University of Sheffield (UK), Ithaca College and William Jewell College. Hijleh won first prize in the 2002 National Association of Teachers of Singing composition competition as well as Honorable Mention in the 1993 ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers Awards. His music has been performed by the Buffalo Philharmonic and the Rochester Philharmonic (which he also guest conducted), as well as at the Kennedy Center and the University of Oxford (UK). Hijleh currently studies *shakuhachi* with Ronnie Nyogetsu Reishin Seldin and is actively interested in developing and promoting analytical theories applicable to a wide variety of world musics.