



Genres, Panpipes, and Background Tonal Frames: Pitch Structures in Buin Music

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How the tonal organization of a culture's music is constituted is a question that many theorists and analysts of both world music and music within the Western tradition have regularly pondered. This question becomes both more challenging and more interesting when there is no apparent theory of pitch articulated within a culture, either through written or oral means. This paper is an analysis of just such a case, setting out a theory of tonal organization for the music of the Buin people, located on the island of Bougainville in the country of Papua New Guinea.

A significant number of genres comprise the Buin corpus of song. On first hearing there are clear differences between these genres – differences of range, number of pitches, relationship to a pitch center (or lack thereof), phrase length, and rhythmic qualities, to name a few. This contributes to a natural categorization of the genres. But a more careful examination of the songs begins to show their commonality. More specifically, an analysis of these common features identifies a background tonal framework which determines overall pitch relationships within Buin music.

This ten-pitch framework supports the pitch content of all Buin songs, which range from three to ten pitches in inventory. A clear hierarchy of pitches exists within this framework: two background pitches are found in every song, while another pitch is found in nearly every song. The specific genre then determines the distribution of the remaining seven pitches. Both within the background tonal framework and the collections specific to a genre, pitches are best described as having centrality, priority, or possibility. Thus, in the background, three pitches have priority, while one is central. Within the middleground, genre-specific frame, these three pitches still have priority, but other pitches may also be prominent, based upon requirements of the genre. Most importantly, the choice of pitch center is genre specific.

This tonal framework finds physical expression in the most important instrument within Buin culture, the *takia*, or panpipes. In its most common version, a set of 10 pipes are

arranged in two groups of 5, so that the two groups are symmetrical in moving from lower to higher pipes. The pitches, played ‘westward’, from largest to smallest, are approximately B-flat², C³, F³, A³, D⁴, D³, G³ C⁴, E⁴, G⁴. These pitches equate to the pitches in the background tonal framework.

Not only does the *takia* circumscribe the collection of pitches on which Buin song is based, but the physical layout of the instrument and the corresponding movement necessary to play it correlates to the movement from pitch to pitch in Buin songs. The extent to which one affects the other is an open question, but it is possible to imagine either the pitch movement in songs regulated by the instrument, or the instrument’s construction reflecting common pitch movement in songs.

While the methodology used in this analysis of Buin music is primarily self-derived, based upon features present in the music, two recent methodologies contribute to the analytical endeavor. The first is a loose application of some analyses of twentieth century music, those which consider the collection of pitches via issues of centrality and priority. An example is Pieter C. van den Toorn’s work on Stravinsky. The second is an adaptation of scholarship that connects early music theory to practice, particularly in the discussion of mode. Part of my own work with English Renaissance music applies well to Buin music, in that against a background pitch structure single pitches are given prominence as keynotes, upon which airs (or modes) are built.

In addition, this analysis seeks to ground itself in Buin cultural thought, utilizing genre classifications, cultural descriptions of pitch movement, and indigenous names of pipes and notes that reflect the importance of relationships within the culture. It is the blending of three analytical strands – essential ideas derived first and foremost from the music, dependence upon recent analytical and theoretical ideas and models, and a reliance upon culturally-derived thought and language – that provides a distinctive perspective to the analysis of world music.

Short Biography

Dr. Jeff Meyer has taught courses in music history, music theory, world music, film music, and worship at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota since 2000. He also oversees Pempamsie, a West African drumming and dance ensemble, and leads study abroad trips to Prague, Ghana, and Great Britain. Dr. Meyer has also been involved in Bush Foundation grants on formative evaluation, summer study grants in lute performance, and three Centennial Grants: on the lutesongs of John Dowland, ethnic music in the Fargo-Moorhead area, and the generative analysis of rhythm in world music.

Dr. Meyer received his B.Mus. in ethnic music theory from Wheaton College (Illinois), a M.A. in music theory from the University of Minnesota, and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Minnesota. He has presented papers on the historically-based analysis of early English music at the South-Central Renaissance Conference, at the American Musicological Society's Midwest Chapter meeting, at the West Coast Conference on Music Analysis, and the International Conference on Music Analysis. His studies in world music have included north Indian tabla, Ghanaian drumming and gyil, and field work in Papua New Guinea. His film music work has centered on the film scores of Ennio Morricone.