

A Flexible Conception of Meter in Pacific Northwest Coast Aboriginal Music

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Ethnomusicologists have long been interested in the relationship between the vocal melody and drumming in North American Indigenous music, but they have often relegated the drum part to a subsidiary role in their transcriptions. In much North American Indigenous music, the drumbeat and the vocal melody seem to be following two different pulse streams, making the music difficult to transcribe in traditional Western rhythmic notation.

From a theoretical standpoint, non-alignment of melody and drumbeat creates problems for conceiving how time should be measured in these songs. In a traditional sense, this music does not have a meter since, in order to determine the meter of a piece, an isochronous pulse needs to be entrained at two or more levels.

In this poster, I propose an alternative method for transcribing North American Indigenous music using onset times and inter-onset durations. The method allows me to more accurately characterize the rhythmic relationship between the voice and drum. By using some analytical approaches, such as Christopher Hasty's, the underlying regularity of the music becomes apparent. This regularity allows us to establish a meter in a sense that is special to this repertoire, despite its lack of a steady pulse.