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# African Instrumental Music

SAMUEL AKPABOT

Contrary to the opinion of some scholars who maintain that all African music is tied to ceremonial occasions<sup>1</sup>, there are many aspects of African music totally unrelated to any traditional ceremony. It is not unusual to find musicians in an African village gathering together after supper to make music in the moonlight simply for the enjoyment of it. On such an occasion, the music may serve as background for a wrestling contest, a general sing-song in which everyone present takes part, a solo song of praise or insult or an instrumental improvisation. In all these instances, the *mood of the moment* dictates the type of music and its instrumentation.

African music has also been described by some writers<sup>2</sup> as "primitive"; primitive in this case not being used to denote a period of history, but rather the "backwardness" of a type of music. The fallacy of this premise has become obvious to contemporary ethnomusicologists, as the description of a piece of music as "primitive" is a clearly relative term. A band of African instrumentalists listening to a European orchestra playing a waltz with its insistent triple meter, would term the whole proceeding "primitive" in relation to their own more complex rhythms.

A better description of African music, especially the instrumental aspect of it, can be related to Alfred Einstein's evaluation of the music of the twentieth century: "Orchestral works of the new age are in a different way little else (than) shifting the melody from voice to voice—a sort of instrumental monody with rhythm accompaniment."<sup>3</sup> This definition of twelve-tone style compositions takes in many of the qualities of African instrumental music, which is linear, repetitious and very rhythmic, with a sparse use of two or three part harmonies.

The classification of African musical instruments presents a great problem. In African instrumental music, the sonority and capability of each instrument helps in some way to determine how it may be used orchestrally; it is possible to have an orchestra made up entirely of drums; but it is rare to find an orchestra consisting entirely of strings, woodwind or brass.<sup>4</sup>

Curt Sachs has classified most musical instruments into idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, chordophones and electronophones.<sup>5</sup> While this helps to generally differentiate one set of instruments from another, it is not quite adequate in discussing an African orchestra combining, for example, a drum with another per-

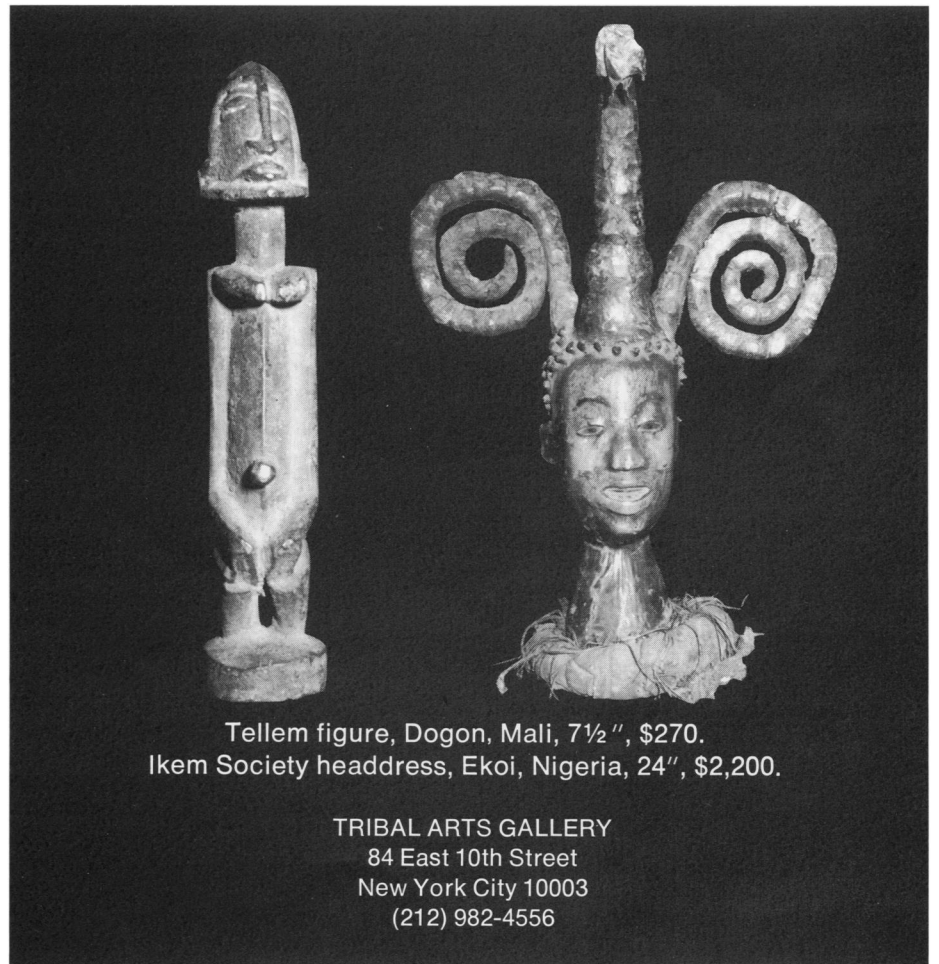
cussive instrument like the gong; one is a membranophone while the other is an idiophone. It would be better to divide the instruments into three categories: string instruments, blowing instruments and percussion instruments; the string and blowing instruments having definite pitches, and the percussion instruments having high, medium or low tones.

In trying to define African instrumental music, we have to consider two chief points: (a) factors which influence the instrumentation and (b) general characteristics of the various ensembles. The African musician has an extraordinary feeling for colour and effect which he brings to bear upon his instrumentation. The worship of an ancestral god is for him a very serious affair; and, therefore, the music for such ceremonies rarely uses any musical instruments that would give an impression of carefreeness. Usually, only the drums are used to invoke the spirit of these gods.

There are, however, a few instances where the gong is introduced into the ensemble. Generally, it can be said that the gayer the mood of the music, the larger the preponderance of percussive instruments other than the drums; the more serious and traditional the music, the more definite and exact the orchestration.

For instance, tradition has it that the god Obatala, the god of creation, had four wives who serenaded him every night singing and clapping their hands to rhythm. The god decided that it would be good to teach them how to play the drum; so, he had four drums made and named them after his four wives: Iya Nla, Iya Agan, Afere and Keke. These names have remained to this day; and in any music for the worship of the god Obatala, these four drums alone are used.

Another problem in defining African instrumental music is deciding what scale this type of music operates under; as this in turn will affect the style and limitations of the type of melodies produced. The most common scale used is the pentatonic, although Hugh Tracy is of the opinion that: "A few African communities may not recognize and employ a single scale or mode only, but may on occasion use more than one scale and from them evolve more than one mode of performance. A naturally pen-



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tatonic people may sing not only in pentatonic modes, but several modes.”<sup>6</sup> The tuning of melodic instruments like the xylophone, seems to be influenced by regional characteristics; and Gerhard Kubik has written about “microtonal divergencies which do not seem to occur systematically.”<sup>7</sup> Research carried out by the present writer in different parts of Nigeria proved that a two-stringed instrument is usually tuned a fifth apart and that this style of tuning also applies to other instruments with two tones like the wooden drum and the twin gong. A xylophone with two notes is tuned a second apart, and an end-blown flute with two stops is generally tuned a third apart, although some may be found to be tuned a second apart.

What of the characteristics of the musical context itself? In European music, it is possible to examine the melodic and rhythmic structure of a work, its orchestration, the types of harmonies used and its developmental technique; and from these, determine what period of musical history it could come from and what country or composer was most likely to produce that type of composition. Under the same premise, it is possible to classify a piece of music as being “African” by carefully examining a work or performance (since African composers are also performers) under five head-

ings: (a) melodic and rhythmic structure, (b) harmonic context, (c) developmental technique, (d) extemporisation technique and (e) instrumentation. The melodic and rhythmic elements are merged together here because to a large extent in African music, the melodic structure dictates the style of rhythmic accompaniment.

Possibly because most African melodies are built around the pentatonic scale and do not, as a rule, make use of half-tones, their scope is rather limited. There are a few instances of spun out melodies whose overall effect is binary: the second section carrying on and bringing to a conclusion the musical idea announced by the first. But by and large, these melodies are short, often fragmentary and always repetitive. The instrumental melodies are usually harmonised at cadences in two or three parts forming intervals of thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, and octaves.

An instrumental melody follows that pattern of a vocal melody which is inflectionary in conception; this means that a sentence can only have one curve if it is to maintain its meaning. The pitch, however, can differ. If a piece of vocal melody is harmonised in thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, and octaves, it will retain its original curve and meaning; but if second or third parts are made to skip about, the original curve is at once distorted and the sentence will take on another meaning. The African instrumentalist instinctively uses this same technique; and as a result the harmonies used in vocal and instrumental music are very similar in style.

There is, in African music, no development section as we know it in European music; rather the whole composition or performance is a *process* growing out of a single germ. In the course of this *process*, extemporisation sets in; and what starts out as a probing melody or melodic fragment announced by the orchestra leader for instance on his xylophone, is picked up by the other members of the orchestra who shift the melodic fragment from voice to voice until all the instruments have been heard. Next follows a section where the opening motif is repeated many times in varied forms, usually by means of embellishments. As this *process* continues, the volume of sound increases and the musicians become excited. There is no modulation; the solo instrumentalist continues to improvise over a steady rhythmic background until the performance ends fortissimo.

The drum is the foundation of all African instrumental music, fulfilling much the same function as the string section of a European orchestra of the classic era. The drum can be a skin drum, a wooden drum or a kalabash drum such as is used in the Northern States of Nigeria. There are drums of the hour-glass variety in these states. The present writer found, during his research tour there that in every case where one or more stringed instruments

were used in an orchestra, the kalabash drum, known as *koria* was preferred to the skin drum.

There are two main types of instrumental rhythm in African music: *percussive rhythm* and *melodic rhythm*. Percussive rhythm is that supplied by instruments like the drum, gong or rattle; melodic rhythm is supplied by melodic instruments which at the same time maintain their melodic line or fragment. The nearest thing to an African instrumental melodic rhythm is the *basso ostinato* used in European music. But whereas the *basso ostinato* generally controls (or is supposed to control) the harmonic shape of a piece of music, melodic rhythm in African music is a *moto theme* which continues regardless of any changes in the overall structure of the music. Thus, the harmonies that occur are incidental results of the contrapuntal movement. It is interesting to note that Bartok's harmonic structure in some of his works followed this African pattern. Grout is of the opinion that Bartok's harmonies grow out of the character of the melodies.<sup>8</sup> Every African instrumental ensemble has this *moto theme* which can either be rhythmic, melodic or a combination of both. In an orchestra of percussive instruments or of melodic instruments plus percussion, the rhythmic shape of the whole ensemble grows out of this *moto theme* which is, in effect, the steadying force of the orchestra.

African instrumental music is very complex, influenced as it is, by regional and sociological factors. A researcher into African instrumental music however must be prepared to approach the subject purely as music, placing sociological and other factors second. Otherwise, there is considerable danger of distorted or exaggerated interpretation. For example, the instrument makers of Africa produce the wooden drum simply by boring a hole into a selected piece of tree trunk. The resulting instrument is played with two beaters producing two tones generally a fifth apart. But anthropologists and sociologists visiting Africa have been known to liken the wooden drum to a naked woman and the two beaters to men making love to her!

Similarly, when a drummer or flute player in an African instrumental ensemble suddenly lets out a piercing scream in the midst of an exciting performance, it is generally because at that point he has exhausted the limitations of his two-tone flute, and his inventive mind craves additional ways of enriching the music. Accordingly, he resorts to his voice; and his rhythmic and impassioned scream acts as a kind of “vocal pedal point” to the insistent melody and rhythm going on around him. There is no particular “magic” about African music. And the serious researcher should not permit himself the luxury of escaping into mystical interpretations, thereby neglecting the clear and careful scholarship which the study of African music rightly demands. ■

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DOGON DANCE, *Notes, from p. 33*

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### Notes and References

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2. Griaule, M., (1938), *Masques Dogons*, Institut d'Ethnologie, Paris, p. 266.
3. *ibid.*, p. 263.
4. Harper, P., (1967), "Dance In A Changing Society," *African Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 10.

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6. Griaule, M., *op. cit.*, p. 336.

7. Griaule, M., *op. cit.*, p. 280.

8. Griaule, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 287-312.

9. Griaule, M., *op. cit.*, p. 312.

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14. McKinney, F., (1970), Personal Communication.

15. Dolo, O., (1970), Personal Communication.

The data contained in this study was collected between March, 1967 and March, 1971 during many extended field trips in the cercles of Bandiagara. Douentza, Koro and Bankass.

### MUD MANSIONS, Notes, from page 62

1. Cf. Prussin, Labelle "The Architecture of Islam in West Africa," *African Arts/Arts d'Afrique*, Los Angeles, Winter, 1968.

2. Burckhardt, John Lewis. *Travels in Nubia*, London, 1819, p. 212.

3. Red bricks had been used in antiquity along the Nile, but the skill of their construction was apparently lost after the arrival of the Arabs.

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### INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC, Notes, from page 64

1. Bruno Nettl, *Music in Primitive Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 6.
2. George Herzog, "Speech-Melody and Primitive Music" (in *Musical Quarterly*, 20, 1934), pp. 452-466.
3. Alfred Einstein, "The Newer Counterpoint" (in *Modern Music* Vol. 1, Nov.-Dec., 1928) p. 3.
4. One exception are the Chopi musicians of South Africa who have highly organised orchestras of only xylophones.
5. Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1940) pp. 455-467.
6. Hugh Tracy, "Towards an Assessment of African Scales" (in *African Music*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1958) pp. 15-20.
7. Gerhard Kubik, "The Structure of Kiganda Xylophone Music" (in *African Music*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1960) pp. 6-30.
8. Donald Grout, *A History of Western Music* (W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1960) pp. 612-618.

### ART OF LAMU, Notes, from page 57

1. Field work in Lamu, was conducted in June 1969 and July 1970, with groups of students of architecture from the University of Nairobi. Photographs were taken by various participants under general directions from M. M.A.A. Sadaruddin. Expenses were met by a research grant from the University of Nairobi.
2. For an introduction to Lamu's domestic architecture, see "The Stone Houses of Lamu," in the *Journal of the Architectural Association of Kenya*—May, 1971, by the author.
3. Religious singing, introduced to Lamu in 1935, is now an accepted part of the town's social and religious fabric. Three types exist; *Maulidi*, *Sama'i*, and *Hadhra*, all of which use Arabic verse in praise of the Prophet. Singing is always accompanied by tamborines, and sometimes supplemented by flutes.
4. The *siwa* is a tusk shaped trumpet (probably of Bantu origin), used as symbol of government, and blown at public ceremonies (assemblages, marriages, councils of war, etc. . .)

SHRINE SCULPTURE: IMAGE OF A DEVOTEE (*ERE OLO/ISA*). YORUBA, DAHOMEY (?). WOOD, BLACK PAINT, PIGMENT. HT. 2 1/4". WELLCOE COLLECTION, MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, UCLA. FROM *BLACK GODS AND KINGS* BY ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON. PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY DUPONT. SEE PAGE 73.