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# Is Western Art Music Superior?

# JUDITH BECKER

AMONG musicologists, music educators, and even some ethnomusicologists, the doctrine that Western European art music is superior to all other musics of the world remains a given, a truism. Otherwise intelligent and sophisticated scholars continue to use the word "primitive" when referring to the music of Africa, American Indians, aboriginal Australians, and Melanesians, among others. A more subtle form of this dogma is the concept that Western art music is intrinsically interesting and complex, while other musical systems need their social context to command our serious attention. According to this version of the theory of Western superiority, some exceptions are allowed, and music systems such as Persian classical music. Hindustani and Carnatic music, or Javanese gamelan music are classified among those musics which can stand on their own, be usefully extracted from context, are susceptible to intricately complex analyses, and are aesthetically satisfying in their own right. This, the most liberal edge of the theory of Western music superiority, has adherents of great persuasiveness among scholars who are deservedly respected within the disciplines of musicology and ethnomusicology. The following quotations illustrate this point of view:

"All human languages are apparently of the same order of complexity, but that is not the case for all musical systems" [Powers' quote from Ruwet].

If this be true—and I cannot imagine anyone would think otherwise once it is called to his attention—it highlights a fundamental deficiency in the general analogy of musical structuring with the structuring of languages. . . . To Ruwet's telling observation I would add not only that musical systems are much more varied than languages not only as to *order* of complexity but also as to *kind* of complexity.<sup>1</sup>

The conceptual foundations for this belief in the superiority of Western art music seems to consist of three main axioms: (1) that Western music

<sup>1</sup> Harold S. Powers, "Language Models and Musical Analysis," *Ethnomusicology*, XXIV/1 (January, 1980). Powers is a fine musicologist and ethnomusicologist. My quarrel with this small aspect of his writings in no way detracts from my great admiration for his work as a whole.

generally, and art music in particular, is based upon natural acoustic laws, the natural overtone series providing a link between man and nature, that is between culture and the phenomenal world; this intrinsic bond provides a physical and metaphysical base (with its Pythagorean transcendental orientation) which informs all music so created; (2) that Western art music is structurally more complex than other music; its architectural hierarchies, involved tonal relationships, and elaborated harmonic syntax not only defy complete analysis but have no parallel in the world; and (3) that Western art music is more expressive, conveys a greater range of human cognition and emotion, and is thus more profound and more meaningful than other musical systems in the world.

No one, I think, denies that Western art music has a foundation in the natural world, is very complex, and is deeply meaningful to its musicians and audiences. The problem lies in *denying* these attributes to other peoples' music. Because we often cannot perceive it, we deny naturalness, great complexity, and meaningfulness to other musical systems. Despite all protestations to the contrary, to deny equivalences in all three pillars of belief -that is, naturalness, complexity and meaningfulness, to the musical systems of others—is ultimately to imply that they are not as developed as we are. The doctrine of the superiority of Western music is the musicological version of colonialism. Thus the issue is not only an intellectual problem, it is also a moral one. Since moral issues are notoriously difficult to argue, I will base what I have to say on what I perceive to be the faulty thinking which underlies this widespread belief.

## 1. Naturalness

The idea that one's own musical system has a natural foundation, is rooted in the realm of nature, and is not merely an artifice of men's minds is a concept which is maintained by many peoples of the world. There are many ways to be "natural" musically. One concept commonly found in many parts of the world (India, the Middle East, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe) is that one's musical system is based upon acoustics, a phenomenon of the physical world.<sup>2</sup>

The quotation below is representative of writings on music history, aesthetics, or theory by Western scholars:

As is well known, when a note is sounded by vibrating a string, not only does the whole string vibrate, producing the fundamental note which is all that the untrained ear can

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For a recent publication which represents this approach to Western music, see Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 35-37. However, the correspondence between intervallic structures in Western tonal music and the overtone system has not gone unchallenged. For an illuminating discussion of the issues and further bibliography, see Norman Cazden, "The Systemic Reference of Musical Consonance Response," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, III/2 (1972), 217-43.

hear, but the two halves of the string vibrate in their own right at the same time; and so do the thirds, the quarters, the fifths, and so on, producing the rising succession of notes called the harmonic series. Taking the note C below the bass clef as fundamental, the first twenty-four notes of the series are as follows:



... This means that in nature itself, a single note sets up a harmony of its own; and this harmonic series has been the (unconscious) basis of Western European harmony, and the tonal system.<sup>3</sup>

Among those who share with us the overtone series as the natural physical basis for the construction of a complex musical edifice are several musical systems in Southern Africa. Players of the musical bow, an instrument which looks exactly like a hunting bow but with a resonator attached, sing songs whose melodies at some points coincide with and at other points veer away from the tones of the harmonic series. Simultaneously, the fundamental, or two different fundamentals (plus overtones) are reiterated by the rhythmic striking of the bow string:

The string gives forth its fundamental note, usually a deep sound, with great clarity, and one hears, in addition, several of the harmonics generated by that fundamental, even, at times, up to the eighth harmonic, the result being to the ear of the performer a clear chord.<sup>4</sup>

Ex. 1





A. Detail of *ugubhu* musical bow, showing playing technique:

(i) 'Stopped' note, with string pinched between forefinger and thumb nail;

(ii) 'Open' note, with free string.

B. Umakhweyana musical bow with centrally mounted resonator and divided string, 'stopped' with back of forefinger.

<sup>3</sup> Deryck Cooke, The Language of Music (London, 1959), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> P. R. Kirby, *The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa* (London, 1934-53), p. 198.

Ex. 2. Instrumental and vocal notes used in ugubhu bow-songs:

- a. Open and stopped fundamentals and second partials
- b. Selectively resonated harmonics
- c. Vocal notes, shown in relation to ugubhu fundamentals



Ex. 3. Example of an ostinato melody on the *ugubhu*, produced by selective resonation of harmonic partials 3 to 5 (recorded on Rycroft, 1969, side A, band 1)<sup>5</sup>



The South African musical bow is not the only sub-Saharan instrument with which musicians manipulate overtone structures in the composition of instrumental and vocal pieces. This technique is documented by both indigenous musicians and Western scholars for the *mbira* of Zimbabwe:

The presence or absence of tuned overtones is an additional factor in distinguishing the (tunings) of different *mbira*. John Kunaka, for example, reported that the instruments he builds are different from those constructed by other local blacksmiths because he "gives two voices" to the lowest pitch (B1) on his instruments. To achieve this he forges keys which produce an overtone of approximately a fifth or a third, two octaves above the fundamental pitch. He regards these tuned overtones as "helping" the music during the performance of an *mbira* piece. His preference is for an overtone of a fifth, but he feels the third also helps the music.<sup>6</sup>

While basing a musical system upon the overtone series enhances the claim of "naturalness" and is not unique to Western music, a much larger question is at issue. To say that a musical system is "natural" is to endow it with a kind of necessity, a kind of power which it otherwise might not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> David Rycroft, "The Zulu Bow Songs of Princess Magogo," African Music, Journal of the African Music Society, V/4 (1975-76), 59 and 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Paul F. Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1978), p. 69.

have. One way musical systems gain "naturalness" is to be conceptually linked with some other realm of discourse which is highly valued and whose validity is unquestioned.<sup>7</sup> The linkage of music with acoustics, that is, science, is to create a coherence between a very powerful realm of discourse (science) and a less powerful one (music). Another way of linking music with a highly valued system is the interpretation of music as the setting of texts, as in logocentric Arabic cultures. Another powerful linkage, this time metaphoric, is found in the idea that music is mimetic and imitates the sounds of nature. Music as the organization and elaboration of the sounds which would be in the world even if men were not is a theory fairly widespread in China, Indonesia, Melanesia, and ancient Greece. Among the 'Are of the Solomon Islands

instrumental music is "programme-music." Each piece, composed according to strict rules, carries a title which is a general resumé of the "programme." Bird calls, frog croaks, buzzing of insects and the cries of other animals, the patter of rain drops on a leaf, the murmur of a river or the roaring of the ocean, the crackle of branches in the wind; all the sounds of nature can furnish the theme for a composition. Man-made sounds can as well: children crying, the groaning of the sick or wounded, the snoring of sleepers, words, work noises, etc. . . . Certain pieces translate a visual theme such as the swaying of a spider or the come and go of people.<sup>8</sup>

Among other peoples of the world, frequently the source of music is the world of gods, spirits, or other supernatural forces; powers which are forcefully natural for those who live close to them. Alan P. Merriam delineates the concepts of the Flathead Indians of Montana for whom songs may be either created by men or supernaturally bestowed:

For the Flathead, the most important single fact about music and its relationship to the total world is its origin in the supernatural sphere. While it is recognized that some songs are individually composed by human beings, and that some other songs are borrowed from neighboring peoples, all true and proper songs . . . owe their origin to

<sup>7</sup> Conceptual linkages of musical systems with the natural world are not restricted to the two mentioned in this essay, i.e. acoustics and imitation. For an iconic linkage with nature, see Alton and Judith Becker, "A Musical Icon: Power and Meaning in Javanese Gamelan Music," in *The Sign in Music and Literature*, ed. Wendy Steiner (Austin, 1981), an analysis which is derived from Burke's analysis of how words refer to the realms of nature, the socio-political realm, language itself, and the supernatural (Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* [Boston, 1961], pp. 14-15).

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Zemp, "Are 'Are, Flûtes de Pan Mélanésiennes" (record notes) (Paris, 1971). The mimesis of Plato differs from the kind of mimesis described for the 'Are 'Are. For Plato, the musician was to imitate (among other things) "the utterances and the accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare" (Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* [New York, 1950], p. 5), or divine comedy (Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* [New York, 1966], p. 34).

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a variety of contacts experienced by humans with beings which, though part of this world, are superhuman and the source of both individual and tribal powers and skills. Thus sharp distinction is drawn by the Flathead between what they call "make-up" and all other songs. "Make-up" songs are those which are composed by individuals in a conscious process of creation and those which are known to be borrowed from other peoples. These songs have no inherent power, and, according to the Flathead, are "used for enjoyment." Non-make-up songs, on the other hand, are those which are taught or given to human beings by superhuman forces in a variety of situations. The Flathead believe that in former times all songs derived from such experiences and that none were made up by individuals or borrowed from other tribes.<sup>9</sup>

What is felt to be natural, correct, and true depends upon the correspondence between the musical event and some other realm of human experience. Naturalness has to do with relationships, with what aspect of the world outside of man is believed to be intimately connected to musical expression: natural, believed iconicities between music and the world outside music.

# 2. Complexity

Learning to perceive "naturalness" as a relationship between what a musician does and how he and his audiences construe his actions is easier than trying to perceive "complexity" in the same way. We tend to equate complexity in music with one particular kind of complexity, and then look for that kind in other musics. Not finding it, we designate that music as simpler. Among Western musicologists, our image of musical complexity correlates with levels of hierarchical structures, to the number of musical "lines" occurring simultaneously, to the relationships between similar musical elements found in different sections of the composition, and in some sense to the length of the composition. In Western music theory or music literature classes, complex, hierarchical, structural diagrams of "masterpieces" are offered as supporting evidence of the "greatness" of the work. In my teaching of world music, I have learned that if I produce a complex structural diagram of a piece of music from anywhere, the students will listen to the piece more carefully and will regard it with greater respect.<sup>10</sup> A structural diagram gives the music a legitimacy it does not have without the analysis. If, however, I am dealing with a piece which cannot easily be analyzed as hierarchical, which is basically reiterative

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ethnomusicology of the Flathead Indians, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology No. 4 (New York, 1967), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The importance of structural analysis in the interpretation of music became increasingly important in the twentieth century. The German musicologist, Carl Dahlhaus, has written perceptively on this phenomenon in *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge, 1983), p.77.

(a basic melodic phrase which repeats indefinitely), it is very difficult for students to focus on the tiny variations which make the phrase new each time. Complexity on a small scale, on a microscopic level, even if attentively listened to, rarely moves students. We tend to equate repetition with a lack of variation or imagination, with boredom.<sup>11</sup> Music which "doesn't go anywhere" is rarely valued by Classical concert audiences in the West.

Complexity is not intrinsic in the music itself; it is the relation between the sophistication of the intent of the player, the musical performance, and the sophistication of the reception by a listener. Accidental variation, even though infinite, does not count. Skill does. Calculated, deliberate alteration of pitch, duration, rhythm, overtone structure (tone quality), attack, or release according to prescribed constraints creates a kind of complexity in a single line which is as demanding of the artist as any single passage in a Beethoven symphony. A Japanese *shakuhachi* player or a solo singer of a Mongolian "long song" are particularly striking examples of this kind of complexity. Closer to home are the iterative songs of many American Indian traditions. Repetition in Shoshone music has been described as like a branch with many leaves.

A willow leaf has an elongated shape, a stem which runs through the center from which veins radiate out. Although similar, the particular pattern for every willow leaf is unique. Shoshone verse repetition is like a branch of willow leaves; each repetition outlines a new leaf, now simple, now subtle.<sup>12</sup>

Basically iterative music sometimes exhibits (when transcribed) an astonishing temporal architecture. The following example<sup>13</sup> is a partial transcription of an initiation chant from Benin (Ex. 4). The chant is analyzed as bipartite, consisting of an A and a B section. The transcription is to be read as continuous, the vertical layout facilitating comparison between repetitions. The chant is memorized and must be repeated perfectly each time. The A section is almost identical with each repetition, except for the short A's which recur at irregular intervals. The B section, by contrast, exhibits great irregularity and is sometimes omitted entirely. One might be tempted to describe this structure as a "verse refrain" were it not for the great irregularity of the B section and the occasional deviations of the A section. Iterative structures, or strophes, imply predictability. Yet the Benin chant is an example of the seeming paradox of an iterative, nonpredictable structure.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> John Cage tells the story, "In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting" (*Silence* [Middletown, Conn., 1976], p. 93).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Judith Vander, A View of Wind-River Shoshone Music Through Four Ceremonies (Master's thesis, Univ. of Michigan, 1978), p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Gilbert Rouget, ed., *Ethnomusicologie et représentations de la musique*, Hors série du numéro 42, augmenté de trois articles et d'un disque 45 tours (Paris, 1981), p. 10.

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Ex. 4.

# Structure d'un chant initiatique du Bénin

Gilbert ROUGET Transcription synoptique de TRAN QUANG Hai

L a notation musicale reproduite ci-dessous est celle d'un chant initiatique, enregistré en 1958 dans un « couvent » de la région de Porto-Novo,

□ Tran Quang Hai est technicien au CNRS.

au Dahomey devenu maintenant République populaire du Bénin. Il s'agit d'un de ces longs chants d'action de grâce qu'exécutent matin et soir, durant leur réclusion (laquelle durait à l'époque deux ou trois ans), les novices vouées au culte de Khèvioso, dieu de la foudre, l'un des principaux « vodoun » de l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves (cf. G. Rouget 1961 et 1980).

Structure générale :

• Deux constituants [A] et [B], complémentaires, s'opposant par des caractéristiques mélodiques et rythmiques différentes et faisant systématiquement alterner deux *tempi*. Cette alternance est figurée, sur la transcription, par un trait vertical discontinu. [A] consiste en une phrase mélodique chantée en tout vingt fois dont six (0, 1, 6, 12, 18 et 22) avec variantes. [B] consiste, d'une part en quinze phrases mélodiques toutes différentes mais de même caractère, d'autre part en une courte phrase sur un rythme de danse, de caractère différent des précédentes mais de même tempo, énoncée à trois reprises (19, 20, 21) et composant à



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elle seule la deuxième partie du chant. • Deux parties, I et II, très inégales, précédées par une introduction [i] et suivies par un *da capo* partiel (la partie [A] de la période 22 est l'exacte reprise de [A] de 1). La première partie est composée de dix-huit périodes toutes différentes, la plupart enchainant [A] et [B], la seconde d'une courte phrase énoncée trois fois de manière identique, hormis pour la dernière note.

On voit qu'il s'agit d'une architecture temporelle très complexe. Seule une transcription synoptique permettait d'en dégager la structure et d'en donner une représentation globale.

Le rite veut que ce chant, qui dure près de treize minutes, soit répété quatre fois, avec de très petites variantes de détail et se termine par une dernière séquence, de dix minutes environ, constituée de chants plus courts, de même style, mais d'un autre caractère. Chantées à la suite et durant, par conséquent, une heure quinze en tout, ces six séquences composent une très longue pièce vocale à la fois extrêmement répétitive, car ne mettant visiblement en



œuvre qu'une série assez limitée d'éléments mélodiques et rythmiques, et se renouvelant sans cesse, car ne donnant lieu à aucune régularité formelle immédiatement perceptible. En écoutant une suite vocale aussi longue, qu'apprennent par cœur et que doivent chanter sans faute des enfants entre trois et douze ans d'âge, on ne peut pas ne pas se demander comment s'opère sa mémorisation. C'est à coup súr la très forte structuration de cette musique qui la rend possible, et c'est ce qui rendait si nécessaire qu'on puisse se la représenter.

Il y aurait beaucoup à dire, bien entendu, sur les intervalles et les durées qu'utilise ce chant et dont le système ne pouvait être valablement étudié qu'une fois dégagée la structure d'ensemble. Bornons-nous à indiquer qu'une transcription automatique fournie par un Thirty Channels Analyser (sorte de sonagraphe élémentaire, mais ayant l'avantage de donner une demi-heure de lecture continue) a permis d'apprécier très précisément - grâce, ici encore, à une mise en forme synoptique la stabilité des durées (1). Pour ce qui est des intervalles, l'utilisation d'un Melograph (non celui de Los Angeles, mais celui de Jérusalem) n'ayant pas donné les résultats escomptés, Jean Schwarz, ingénieur du son de l'ER 165, a mesuré un certain nombre de hauteurs au Stroboconn, appareil dont on connait la très grande précision. La diversité de réalisation de ces intervalles, jointe aux fluctuations de la hauteur de référence (très sensible à l'écoute du disque, par suite de l'interruption séparant les deux extraits successifs du chant) pose un vaste problème. Celui-ci met en cause un si grand nombre de données et une combinatoire si complexe que seul le recours à d'autres méthodes (analyse automatique et traitement informatisé) permettrait de le résoudre.

(1) Cette transcription automatique a été très aimaolement réalisée pour nous par François-Bernard Mâche. Qu'il en soit vivement remercié.

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G. Rouget, La musique et la transe, Paris, Gallimard, 1980.

▲ Comme toute transcription synoptique, cette notation doit être lue continûment, en passant d'une ligne à la suivante sans tenir compte des irrégularités de longueur. Les segments chantés par une soliste sont indiqués par un S et un trait suscrit. - La partie encadrée en couleur est celle qu'il n'a pas été possible de faire figurer, faute de place, sur le disque. Cf. disque, le Courrier du CNRS, face B.

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Other kinds of complexity, many-leveled polyphony, and long compositions, are readily found in areas where music is often designated as "primitive." The reasons why this fact has been so often overlooked are various and complex in themselves. The simplest reason is ignorance. One still finds textbooks of music history which imply that polyphony was invented in medieval Europe or that non-Western music exhibits no complex architectural forms.<sup>14</sup> Complex polyphonic music is characteristic of large parts of the world including highland New Guinea and sub-Saharan Africa. Improved exposure, however, does not necessarily change people's thinking. One reads accounts by British civil servants describing the Burmese oboe as "... noise ... not relished by people who do not care for the bagpipes"<sup>15</sup> or the multilayered, constantly shifting relationships of Akan drummers in West Africa as "the simple beating of the tom-toms." These statements reflect the writer's problem of perception. Oftentimes, our own listening habits preclude our hearing the subtlety and complexity of a different music. We listen for harmonic richness where the simultaneity of variations is the interesting part (the Burmese orchestra or McCoy Tyner). Not hearing what we expect, we hear only "noise." Nothing in our musical experience prepares us to hear Akan drumming as a set of fixed, repeated patterns which are "out of sync" so that the relationship between the parts is constantly shifting and there is no proper beginning and ending.

False perceptions also result from certain assumptions made inside and outside academia concerning the relationships between written music and memorized or "read" performance on the one hand and oral transmission and performance on the other. For a long time, at least until the publication of Albert Lord's *Singer of Tales*, many scholars assumed that musics which were not written down, compositions which had no identifiable composer, were "improvised" in the sense that one would improvise a makeshift shelter thrown together haphazardly with whatever was at hand if caught in the rain. We now know (and should have always known) that "improvised" music is more system than not, and that lack of notation by no means implies freedom of expression.

A more subtle form of the bias in favor of notated music and literacy, one held by many ethnomusicologists of the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>16</sup> was that

<sup>14</sup> E.g., see Christopher Headington, *History of Western Music* (New York, 1974), p. 45; Joseph Kerman, *Listen* (New York, 1972), p. 35; Leonie Rosenstiel, *Schirmer History of Music* (New York and London, 1982), p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> Shway Yoe, The Burman: His Life and Notions (New York, 1963), p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> The following quotation exemplifies this attitude: "Many of the musical cultures of the Orient have retained their practices . . . through the powerful channels of oral tradition. . . . Through imitation and rote learning the most detailed and complicated musical practices have evolved with little or no supporting 'theory' written or oral. . . . To the ethnomusicologist, therefore, falls the responsibility to communicate to those people . . . the regulative principles underlying their tradition,

"preliterate" peoples did not have anything comparable to a theory of music, a well-articulated notion of the relationships between the parts of a composition, and did not know how pieces are constructed. The fieldwork of Western scholars with more than a minimal command of the local language, and a broader definition of what consitutes a theory of music, has begun to dispel the myth that only Western peoples (and Indian and Chinese peoples) have a theoretical framework and a technical language for their music systems.

The musical practices and music theory of the 'Are 'Are from the Solomon Islands have been extensively documented in a series of articles, records, and films by Hugo Zemp.<sup>17</sup> 'Are 'Are panpipe ensembles are classified under the first of four general types of music:

Ex. 5. Schematic representation of the four panpipes in the 'au paina ensemble playing the same voice quadrupled by octaves. Only the "octaves" (aano suri) of the longest pipe of the first instrument are indicated between brackets, but the 'Are'are recognize all the octaves occurring on two different-sized instruments and on the same instrument.<sup>18</sup>



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for it is only in Western society that a long and conscientious effort has been made... to establish objective methods for the study of music and 'speech' communication *about* music' (Mantle Hood, "Music, The Unknown" in *Musicology* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963], pp. 302, 304).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Zemp's films are "Musique 'Are 'Are" and "La Coupe des Bambous," produced by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (SERDDAV), 1978.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Hugo Zemp, "Aspects of 'Are 'Are Musical Theory," Ethnomusicology, XXIII/1 (1979), 12.

The most important interval in the compositions for "grouped bamboo" ensembles is a second, smaller than our major second  $(C \rightarrow D)$ , larger than our minor second  $(C \rightarrow C \ddagger)$ , called *rapi 'au*, which means "bamboo twins of different sizes," that is, "The tones produced by the 'twin bamboos' are thus considered as two close, but nevertheless distinct entities." The term is used to designate this second played either on one instrument by blowing simultaneously into two adjacent pipes, or by two musicians, each blowing only one pipe. In 'Are 'Are panpipe music, contrapuntal lines coincide either on *rapi 'au* (a second) or the octave, *aano suri*. Another kind of second, a major second (*hari 'au*), is only used melodically, never as a kind of chord, as is the *rapi 'au*.

Melodic segments are called *ro'u mani'au*, meaning the folds or joints of something, or the section between the joints. 'Are 'Are musicians will fold a piece of string, or draw lines on the ground to help a beginning musician visualize the proper progress of a piece.

Ex. 6. "Folds" or "joints" in a piece of string, visualing the concept of *ro'u mani'au* "melodic segment."<sup>19</sup>



In some types of composition, one of the voices may play a constantly repeated figure, an ostinato called *uuhi ta'a po'o*, which means to blow a single part.

A melodic segment played at a different pitch level from one just performed-a sequence in English-is called *haimaaniha*, or "imitation" in 'Are 'Are. If the last part of an imitation is replaced by a cadential formula, the segment is called *uuhi ha'arua*, "to blow twice."

There is much more to 'Are 'Are panpipe musical theory, but perhaps this is enough to demonstrate that peoples with simple technologies may have complex verbalizations about musical structure.

Related to the difficulty of not being able to perceive complexity in the music of cultures with a simple technology is the fact that we tend to equate simple musical instruments with simple music. In our culture, where only children's instruments are simple, where any serious musician eventually has access to a complex instrument, jew's harps and penny whistles are not the focus of intense creative expression. A serious musician

<sup>19</sup> Zemp, *ibid.*, p. 14.

who does not advance to a more acceptably complex instrument will never be considered entirely legitimate and will be interpreted as some sort of clown. Equating a simple instrument with simple music is one of many unconscious assumptions which serve us ill when dealing with a distant musical system. Among New Guinea highlanders astonishingly complex music may be produced on a jew's harp. The intricacy and difficulty of performing on the Australian *digeradoo*, a hollowed eucalyptus log which is played as a trumpet, has been documented by several scholars, and there are now white virtuoso *digeradoo* players on this continent.<sup>20</sup>

Like a violin, a *digeradoo* may be played simply or complexly. All degrees of complexity of intent, along with degrees of ability to carry out complex intent, exist in all cultures. If, with or without instruction, we cannot readily perceive the complexity of a *digeradoo* performance, the fault does not rest with the musician. One must always assume that a musician of another culture is as sensitive to fine musical distinctions, is as caring about tone, attack, and phrasing, as our good musicians are. Not all are, of course, but variations in complexity of intent, and skill in carrying out intent, are not determined by geography, race, or culture.

# 3. Meaningfulness

As one moves from discussing issues of naturalness, to the question of complexity, to the problem of meaning, the relationships involved and the ways one discusses them seem to become even more complex in themselves. In terms of meaning and expressiveness, music systems resist comparison, defy structural analyses, and cry out for particularized, detailed descriptions.<sup>21</sup> If music systems are comparable at any level, such as scales, formal structures, instrumental techniques (and this can be argued either way), they become truly incommensurable in relation to meaning. Musical systems of different cultures "mean" different things. It is most difficult to extract oneself from the system of meaning of one's own music and imaginatively project oneself into the meaning system of another. At best, we make farther or closer approximations.

Two strikingly contrastive systems of musical meaning are those which frame Western European nineteenth-century Classical traditions and the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> For an illustration of the subtleties of performance on the *digeradoo*, consult the recording "The Art of the Digeradoo," Wattle Ethnic Series, No. 2, Australia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> See the essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), pp. 3-30, for a compelling argument for and demonstration of richly detailed ethnography.

epistemology of the song traditions of the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea.<sup>22</sup>

Two ideas of musical meaning predominate in Western Europe, both in the scholarly and philosophical literature and in the common everyday realm of the intuitions or expressed concepts of lovers of Classical music. One is that music has no meaning outside of itself, that meaning is inherent in its structure. The other is that music expresses human emotions. While it might seem that one could hold both these views simultaneously or sequentially, in the history of musical scholarship of the past century and a half they have tended to be mutually exclusive and antagonistic. The structuralist position came to prominence in the nineteenth century, in part as an outgrowth of eighteenth-century rationalism, and in part as a reaction against certain seintimental excesses of Romantic music critics. Edward Hanslick, the nineteenth-century music critic and philosopher, was the most influential representative of this tradition:

The word "Anschauung" ("viewing," "contemplating") is no longer applied to visual processes only, but also to the functions of the other senses. It is . . . eminently suited to describe the act of attentive hearing which is nothing but a mental inspection of a succession of musical images. . . . In the pure act of listening, we enjoy the music alone, and do not think of importing into it any extraneous matter.<sup>23</sup>

In the early twentieth century, the influential theorist, Heinrich Schenker, taught essentially the same philosophy, but strengthened it with an awesome superstructure of analyses based upon the concept of a simple chordal progression which underlies all nineteenth-century tonal music and whose transformations result in the complexity and variety found in the scores of nineteenth-century composers.

Stravinsky also embraced the concept that music is structure, and any other source of meaning is irrelevant:

One could not better define the sensation produced by music than by saying that it is identical with that evoked by the contemplation of the interplay of architectural forms.

I consider that music is, by its very nature powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc... If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion, and not a reality.<sup>24</sup>

Strongly held as this idea has been, the concept that music expresses emotion has probably had more popularity among music lovers—as well

<sup>22</sup> For the Kaluli material, I am indebted to the book by Steven Feld, Sound and Sentiment, Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression (Philadelphia, 1982).

- <sup>23</sup> The Beautiful in Music (Leipzig, 1885; New York, 1974), p. 21.
- <sup>24</sup> Chronicle of My Life (New York, 1962), pp. 91-93.

as adherents among scholars—than the idea of music as abstract form.<sup>25</sup> In 1687 John Dryden wrote in the Song for St. Cecilia's Day:

> The soft complaining flute In dying notes discovers The woes of hopeless lovers, Whose dirge is whisper'd by the warbling lute. Sharp violins proclaim Their jealous pangs and desperation, Fury, frantic indignation, Depths of pains, and height of passion For the fair disdainful dame.

Three hundred years later, Deryck Cooke, in *The Language of Music*, explores and describes the multiform iconicities of musical expression in the Western Classical tradition. From the first pages of the book, Cooke takes direct issue with all the formalists, rationalists, and structuralists who (like Schelling and Stravinsky) find architecture to be "frozen music":<sup>26</sup>

The widespread view of music as "purely music" limits the listener's understanding of the great masterpieces to their purely aural beauty—i.e. to their surface attraction —and to their purely technical construction. This latter is no more (and no less) than the magnificent craftsmanship whereby composers express their emotions coherently: it is forever unintelligible to the layman, except emotionally, and ultimately inexplicable to almost anyone but a potential composer. Music is, in fact, "extra musical" in the sense that poetry is "extra-verbal," since notes, like words, have emotional connotations; it is, let us repeat, the supreme expression of universal emotions, in an entirely personal way, by the great composers.

In addition to the meanings of music as structure and as expressing emotion, there is yet another concept: music is an expression of the infinite, the ineffable. Either the formalist position or the emotionalist position can be transformed into the idea that music is the ultimate expression of infinity. The Pythagorean doctrines of musical and planetary ratios, each a reflection of the other, the concept of the "music of the spheres" and its reiteration in earthly music, are the earliest historical antecedents for considering European music as suprahuman. In the third century A.D., the Neoplatonist Plotinus wrote:

Any skill which, beginning with the observation of the symmetry of living things, grows to the symmetry of all life, will be a portion of the Power There which observes and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> For a theory of emotion in music based on musical expectations and fulfillment, see Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago, 1956).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The characterization by Schelling of architecture as "frozen music" is discussed in Beardsley, p. 233.

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meditates the symmetry reigning among all beings in the Intellectual Cosmos. Thus all music-since its thought is upon melody and rhythm-must be the earthly representation of the music there is in the rhythm of the Ideal Realm.<sup>27</sup>

Transmuted and transformed but still recognizable, the idea that music induces a sense of eternity, of the infinite, became an important element of aesthetic speculation in nineteenth-century Germany.<sup>28</sup> Through either approach, music as design or music as emotion, the listener could gain glimpses of "the inner life of the world itself":

For feeling, in the Romantic theory of art, is not only the primary cause and most important effect of art; it can also be a source of knowledge. The antecedents of this emotional intuitionism, or insight-theory, can, like other Romantic ideas, be traced back into the 18th century  $\ldots$  at least to the theory of sympathy, or the moral sentiment, in Hume and Adam Smith. But in the Romantic poets and novelists, these epistemological concepts blossomed into a more ambitious if much less clear, notion of a special gift, the ability to participate feelingly, not only in the inner life of other human beings, but in the inner life of the world itself.<sup>29</sup>

In 1813, E. T. A. Hoffmann wrote:

It [music] is the most romantic of all the arts-one might almost say, the only genuinely romantic art-for its sole subject is the infinite.<sup>30</sup>

Not all possible kinds of meaning are part of our everyday verbalizations or scholarly writings about musical meaning. Rather, we choose a few kinds of meaning as those we feel best express linguistically our experiences at concerts, operas, or recitals.

For the Kaluli of the twentieth century, the sources of meaning and the way of meaning are very different. Music is not considered as an exclusive creation of man, but is the reworking by a composer of bird sounds. For their most important song genre, gisalo, the call of the muni bird, a kind of fruit dove, is the primary model. This association between song and bird call is itself multilayered in meaning. When a Kaluli dies, his spirit leaves his body in the form of a bird. Birds which live around villages and which sing or call loudly are believed to be both natural objects and spirit reflections of deceased relatives. The specific association of song, sorrow, and weeping with the call of the muni bird is articulated in a myth

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Quoted in Beardsley, p. 86.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, "The Idea of Absolute Music," paper delivered at the American Musicological Society Midwest Chapter meeting in 1977; and Leo Treitler, "History, Criticism, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony," 19th Century Music, III/3 (1980).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Beardsley, p. 253.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Strunk, p. 775.

about an older sister and a younger brother who set out to catch crayfish by a small stream. Rather than giving them to her younger brother (the normal and culturally valued reaction), the girl puts them away to give to other relatives—each time refusing the plea of her sibling. Finally, in a state of loss and despair, her brother turns into a *muni* bird and ever after sings of his hunger, his sense of loss and abandonment. The four descending pitches of the *muni* bird D-C-A-G



are not only the core pitches of all gisalo songs, but are also the "weeping" pitches, the intonation followed by Kaluli men and women when weeping in response to a moving and beautiful song or when attending a funeral. Gisalo songs are heard in two contexts, both ceremonial. When sung by a spirit medium during a seance, the song is not considered to be a creation of the medium, but of the departed soul who speaks through the medium. In the other situation they are heard during the all-night ceremonies held at one long-house with members of another long-house as guests.<sup>31</sup> A few specially trained and talented guests assume the role of singers and dancers and sing gisalo with specifically composed texts intended to evoke nostalgia and sorrow in particular hosts. If enough hosts weep, the all-night song and dance ceremony is considered a success. Gisalo texts name the places which are important in the memory of a specific host, such as a garden which he worked with a deceased son, or the place of a former house. Gisalo take the hosts on a nostalgic journey which is intended to touch upon the pain of remembrance and the memory of loss.

A transcription of an actual gisalo is given below (Ex. 7),<sup>32</sup> briefly indicating the chorus (male members of the dancer's long-house) in the sa-gulu section. Actually, the chorus sings throughout, followed by the lead singer (the composer-dancer) a fraction of a second behind. This close canon is typical of Kaluli group singing, which is never in unison (considered unnatural by the Kaluli because water or birds do not do so).

The Kaluli composer of gisalo creates a song which he sings at an allnight ceremony dressed as an elaborately ornamented and seductive bird and in which he evokes through melody the *muni* bird and its associations with ancestors, loss, and abandonment. For the Kaluli, this results in an expressive act which is supremely moving and is their most valued cultural

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> For a general ethnography of the Kaluli and a description of the long-house ceremony involving *gisalo*, see Edward L. Schieffelin, *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (New York, 1976).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Steven Feld, pp. 187, 190.





Musical examples from Stephen Feld, Sound and Sentiment, Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression (pp. 187, 190), University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

expression. Man's relationship to his own life, his past, and his relationship to those who have died are all brought to the forefront of his consciousness for reflection and for grieving. Musical performance is personal, intimate, and sorrowful.

Individual reactions to Western Classical performance may be as intense as among the Kaluli, but musical performance is more commonly felt to be somewhat abstracted from a personally felt emotion. We feel the sorrow or the joy vicariously, through the skill of the composer and performer, and we are not required to make any direct introspection of our own past. One cannot say which music is more expressive, or meaningful, or which refers to a greater range of human cognition. Each should be studied and understood on its own terms; one cannot usefully be evaluated against another.

Evaluation is only viable *within* a culture, particularly within a genre. Standards of excellence are as stringent and as clear cut for a *gisalo* performance as for Schubert lieder. Expressiveness appears to be closely related to skill in all cultures. The difficulty with comparison and evaluation arises when one compares an intimately known musical genre with one barely understood. Musical systems are radically contextualized and intermeshed with other realms of culture and demand particularized analyses.

Western art music is neither superior nor inferior to other musical traditions. Musical systems are simply incommensurable.