Global Perspectives 3: Ostinato Forms

Both Global Perspectives examples included in this chapter come from Africa, a continent that harbors some of the most varied, diverse musical cultures on the planet. In spite of this incredible diversity, some features tend to appear in many different African cultures. Intricate rhythmic patterns are often associated with African music, but perhaps even more universal is the use of ostinato patterns—melodic and/or rhythmic patterns that repeat obsessively. While both excerpts provide examples of ostinato, it is even more fascinating to note how different these musics are from each other—yet another example of form versus content.

The first example comes from Gambia, a tiny nation in the West African savanna that hugs the river from which it takes its name; the second from the Mbuti pygmies, who inhabit the Ituri rain forest in the heart of the enormous African continent. This manual begins with background information on each culture and its musical traditions. Use it as you see fit for your own preparation or for class presentation. Following this you will find specific information about each example as well as teaching suggestions.

Music of Gambia

Although Gambia is Africa's smallest nation, its 1.2 million people divide into at least five major ethnic groups. The largest of these, the Mandinka, ruled the Mande Empire, which controlled Saharan trade routes and most of the West African savanna from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Even though that empire has long since faded, descendants of the Mande are still widely dispersed throughout West Africa. In fact, they can be found today in virtually every West African nation, and they account for a significant percentage of the population not only in Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Senegal (where they are the dominant group), but also in Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. In spite of the many peoples and language groups found in West Africa, the broad dispersion of the Mande has resulted in a body of traditions shared by most nations in this region. The "praise song" is one of these. The instruments and terminology associated with this genre may vary from one nation, ethnic group, or dialect to another, but these songs and their singers form an important part of West Africa's cultural fabric.

It is difficult to talk about the Senegambian region without mentioning the role it played in the slave trade. As the Mande Empire waned, European explorers and traders made progressively deeper inroads into West Africa. By 1544, the Portuguese were using the island of Gorée (now part of Dakar, Senegal) as a holding station for African prisoners destined for shipment to locations in the Caribbean or in North or South America. It would be convenient to place all of the blame on the Europeans, but many Africans were sold to the slave traders by other Africans. In some cases, prisoners of war were sold by their captors for a handsome profit; in others, bands of marauding thieves made a living by kidnapping the unfortunate souls who crossed their path. However it happened, a significant proportion of slaves in the New World came from the Senegambian region of West Africa. Sterling Stuckey, Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Samuel Charters, and many other scholars have long turned to this region when looking for the sources of African American musical styles such as spirituals, blues, and jazz. When Alex Haley was doing the genealogical research that resulted in his spectacularly successful book, *Roots,* he visited a small village in Gambia. And the person he consulted in that village was a *jali*—a griot!

Griots and Griottes

Griot is the word used to denote the "praise singer" in West Africa. The word itself is problematic; not only is it a French word and thus not the original African term, but some scholars believe it fails to fully describe the roles these singers play in society. In spite of this, *griot* continues to be used widely as a generic term for the profession, in part because French remains an official language in many West African nations and in part for convenience—since different languages and regions have different names for the griot. Several examples should suffice: in the Senegambian Mande region (including Gambia), the griot is a *jali*; in the central Mande area (in and around Mali), *jeli;* for the Wolof speakers of Senegal, *gewel;* for Soninke speakers, *geseré;* for the Songhay, *jeseré;* and for the Fulbe, *gawlo*.

Of course, the English term *praise singer* is also an inadequate descriptor, suggesting that the griots are masters at ingratiation and little else. The very first chapter of Thomas Hale's excellent book *Griots and Griottes* (Indiana University Press, 1998) is titled "A Job Description for Griots." That chapter's subheadings make the varied and essential roles played by the griot painfully clear: genealogist, historian, adviser, spokesperson, diplomat, mediator, interpreter, translator, musician, composer, teacher, exhorter, warrior, witness, and praise singer. In addition, the griot frequently participates in or leads ceremonies that mark rites of passage, including the naming of a child, initiations, courtship, marriages, the installation of chiefs, and funerals. It comes as no surprise, then, that the services of the griot are in high demand, and these practitioners take great pride in their versatility—in their ability to provide precisely the right song for every occasion. According to Hale, "At events related to birth, initiation, marriage, family history, sports, music, and government, the *griots* and *griottes* are there to witness the occasion, to enliven it, to facilitate it, and to convey what happened to others."

Griots have been a fixture in West Africa for centuries. The first written description of the griots comes from Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth-century Moroccan visitor to the court of Mansa Sulayman, ruler of the powerful Mande Empire. Ibn Battuta's writings suggest that the profession was already highly developed, and it is likely that griots had been around for several centuries before that. It is interesting to note that even at this early stage, the griots were a class of professional musicians. Indeed, we should view their songs as a kind of classical music that enjoyed the patronage of the courts and in turn enhanced the prestige of those courts. Seen in this light, the griots were not so different from Renaissance and Baroque musicians such as Josquin, Weelkes, Monteverdi, or Purcell.

In past centuries, a griot would hold permanent employment at the court of a king or chief or some other noble personage. As a member of the court, the griot held a position of great prestige and was extravagantly rewarded for providing so many essential services. In fact, it was thought that the words and songs of the griots possessed an almost magical power. (Recall the reference to sacred Navajo songs as spiritual high-voltage wires.) The appropriate praises and exhortations were thought to prolong the life of the chief, ensure victory in battle, provide protection from curses, and so on. But the griot's songs had the power to cause harm as well as to bestow blessings, and so the griot was someone to be feared. In this light, it was crucial that the griot receive the best possible education. Incompetence was not an option; in fact, it was downright dangerous. The profession handled this through a system of hereditary guilds. Families became highly specialized in this craft, and they taught their sons and daughters the tricks of the trade as soon as they expressed an interest. Griots

still take great pride in their lineage, and many griot families trace their roots both to the famous griots of the Mande Empire and to Muhammad himself. (Islam is the dominant religion of the savanna.)

In modern times, the griot has become more of a freelance artist who provides services to anyone who requests them—but always for a price. The role of the hereditary guilds remains strong. In Gambia, family names such as Kuyateh, Jobarteh, and Suso retain a strong association with the profession. The singer of our minstrel song, Foday Musa Suso, belongs to one of these families, though he is only one of hundreds of griots with the Suso name. To ensure their livelihood, griots have also had to develop an entrepreneurial spirit. They have become expert at finding new ways to make themselves invaluable to the communities in which they live. The finest musicians among them have even found their way into international musical careers, including Foday Musa Suso—one of the most successful Gambian musicians. Suso immigrated to Chicago in the 1970s, and over three decades he has collaborated with many famous American musicians, including jazzers Herbie Hancock, Jack DeJohnette, and Pharoah Sanders; techno wizard Bill Laswell; and classical artists Philip Glass and the Kronos Quartet. For information on Suso's current activities, visit him online at www.fmsuso.com.

Such transformations are commonplace in the long history of the griots, and they dramatize the fact that this is a living tradition. Initially, the griots took the ancient bardic tradition and transformed it into something much more comprehensive and essential to their society. Such adaptations have continued in more recent times, as the world has changed in so many ways. That Foday Musa Suso reinvented his role by taking advantage of new opportunities offered by the West should come as no major surprise. Even more historically significant was the transformation of the griots into the songsters and blues singers of the early twentieth century. Several scholars have noted that the early blues singer fulfilled many of the same roles as the griot: storyteller, spokesperson, professional musician, social commentator. The evidence for these connections is sometimes tenuous, but Michael Coolen (*Black Music Research Journal,* 1991) has noted some striking similarities between the blues and the *fodet,* an instrumental genre practiced by the Wolof griots of Senegal. In any event, Africans in America adapted the traditions of the griot to their new context as slaves, and African Americans adapted them once again after Lincoln abolished the institution of slavery. Much research remains to be done, but many scholars are vigorously taking up the challenge—at long last.

The Kora

Much like the bards of old, griots accompany their songs with a variety of different instruments. Often they will sing only with their own accompaniment, but instrumental ensembles are also common. As we have seen, the choice of instruments varies according to region and family traditions. The most common instruments played by Mandinka griots of Gambia are the balo, a seventeen- to twenty-one-keyed xylophone with gourd resonators; the konting, a five-stringed, oval-shaped lute; and the kora, a large, twenty-one-stringed bridge-harp. Neighboring regions may prefer the balo or the konting, but the kora is the instrument most often used by Gambian griots. It is no surprise, then, to find Foday Musa Suso accompanying himself on the kora in our *Listen* recording.

In appearance, the kora resembles a very large lute. Half of a large kettle gourd (calabash), some sixteen to twenty inches in diameter, is used as the instrument's resonating chamber. The hollow side of the gourd is covered tautly

with cowhide, and a tall bridge rests on this surface. A wooden pole just over four feet long pokes through the gourd, serving both as the instrument's neck and as the tailpiece/endpin on which the instrument rests. This pole and the bridge are most often made from African rosewood. Once made from animal hide, the twenty-one strings are now made of nylon fishing line. One end of each string is attached to the neck, and the other is knotted to an anchor secured to the tailpiece. Unusually, these strings pass over notches on the *sides* of the bridge, rather than the top—half on the right side and half on the left.

In performance, the kora is more like a harp than a lute. The purpose of the neck is to support the strings. There is no fingerboard, and the player never fingers different notes or chords as he or she would with a guitar or lute. Instead, the player simply plucks the strings in harplike fashion. For Western listeners used to seeing a bassist or cellist positioned behind the instrument, it comes as a surprise to see the griot seated in *front* of the kora, facing the strings, bridge, and soundboard. The tailpiece/endpin rests securely on the ground, supporting the instrument's weight and providing the best possible resonance. With the smaller, outside fingers, the player grabs onto two handholds—rosewood sticks inserted into the gourd on each side of the bridge—and plucks the strongs with the thumb and forefinger of each hand. The picture on page 98 in *Listen* should give you and your students a good idea of how this works. Better yet, use Roderic Knight's *Mande Music and Dance* DVD (see Video Recordings below); Part II includes several segments that allow students to watch Gambian kora players at work.

The tuning of the kora is a subject unto itself. Several tuning systems are in use, and preferences for one versus another vary from region to region, but the ones most frequently used share several common features. They all provide seven notes to the octave, as do most Western scales. Though these scales are not perfect, equal-tempered intervals above the tonic pitch—fourths, fifths, and octaves—they come very close to their Western equivalents. There is great variety in scale-steps 2, 3, 6, and 7, however. If you would like more detailed information on tunings, Eric Charry's excellent book *Mande Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) is a good place to start.

Laminba

This song represents one of the most prominent genres practiced by the griots of West Africa: the praise song. Titled "Laminba," this song was sung by Foday Musa Suso during a celebration at the home of Musa Koli. According to the liner notes from *Sounds of West Africa: The Kora and the Xylophone* (Lyrichord LYRCD 7308), this celebration "involved a continuous flow of food, money and music that lasted for nearly a week. A kora player could not leave the compound of any of these men without being laden down with gifts." Such songs might praise living patrons—the Lyrichord recording also includes a song praising Musa Koli himself—or they might praise great heroes of past generations (perhaps to encourage greater generosity in the here and now). Many of these praise songs are centuries old, and some are more recent—tailor-made for a specific patron. Sadly, there is no translation readily available for this song, so we cannot be certain of the precise context for "Laminba." One thing we can be sure of: Patrons place great value on the role of the griot in celebrations such as the one described above.

In presenting this work to your students, begin by playing the music several times to introduce its features. Help them to listen for the sounds of the voice and kora, the ostinato pattern, the downward melodic motions described in the textbook, and the dissonances that become increasingly prominent near the end.

To dig a bit more deeply, focus on the two specific aspects that contribute most to the overall shape of this song—the kora ostinato and the vocal melody.

The ostinato is frequently varied in this performance, but it retains the same basic shape throughout. The most commonly heard version is some six beats long: the kora's lowest string sounds on the first of four beats on "tonic" followed by two beats on "dominant." Encourage students to use the deep, resonant sound of that low string as an anchor point in following the ostinato as it repeats. Though occasionally omitted, it provides a useful point of orientation nonetheless. As students become familiar with this ostinato, point out two common features of almost every Gambian kora performance—*kumbengo* and *birimintingo*. Playing low notes with the two thumbs, the kora player lays down a basic ostinato, the *kumbengo*. The kora player uses specific techniques to vary this ostinato, but it remains recognizable in spite of these variations. In contrast, the two index fingers pick out high-pitched, virtuosic, rapidly descending scale patterns that have a very free, improvisational feel to them. These are called *birimintingo*. While these patterns can repeat, they do not occur one after another after another in the manner of a true ostinato; they are used infrequently and irregularly. You can hear examples of *birimintingo* at 0:00, 0:17, 0:32, 0:53, and 2:07. These instrumental episodes appear in the gaps between vocal phrases, and you can even hear Suso softly humming and singing along with the *birimintingo* starting at 0:57.

The vocal melody is also based on simple patterns that vary when repeated. In fact, two simple phrases serve as the basis for much of the melody, and we hear these clearly when the voice first enters at 0:22. The **a** phrase begins on scale step 3, jumps to scale step 5, and descends, mostly by step, to either scale step 1 or scale step 7. The **b** phrase begins on a higher pitch, usually scale step 7, and it also descends, mostly by step and most often to scale step 3. These phrases are the key to hearing the overall shape of the song, which can be diagrammed as follows:

intro	**a b**	gap	**a b**	gap	**a b**	$\mathbf{a}^2$ *a*	$\mathbf{a}^2$ **a′ b′**	$\mathbf{a}^3$ $\mathbf{a}^3$	coda
0:00	0:22	0:32	0:42	0:51	1:26	1:35	1:42	1:57	2:08

As the diagram suggests, this song starts out sounding like a typical strophic song, with two phrases per stanza and short instrumental interludes. About a minute into the song, however, we discover that the interludes have taken on a life of their own, and the string of variations on the **a** phrase that follows (1:26–2:08) signals an abrupt move away from simple strophic form. The repetitive nature of this extended vocal section is reminiscent of sacred chant from Chapter 6, especially the varied repetition of **a** and **b** phrases in "K'adnikini'ya'," but also in any work based on a reciting tone formula. These chant formulas provided a vehicle for expressing the sacred power of their texts simply and directly, and Suso seems to be doing something similar here. This repetition emphasizes and intensifies the words more than in any other part of the song. It is as if Suso is listing out the attributes of the patron in this section, and the extended interludes that frame it serve as emphatic punctuation marks—or perhaps a kind of halo.

Finally, take time to compare this work with "Dido's Lament." Both can trace their lineage back to the ancient Greek bardic tradition; both feature a solo voice with simple plucked-string accompaniment (plus bowed strings in Purcell); both spin out their melodies over a repeating instrumental ostinato, freely repeating simple motives; both differentiate clearly between the roles of melody and ostinato; both repeat their large structural units; both were intended as a public entertainment. Clearly they do not create the same mood, yet the similarities are compelling.

Pygmy Polyphony

Perhaps the oldest surviving group of native Africans, pygmy tribes inhabited the central African rain forests long before the ancient Egyptians recorded their presence there. Several millennia later, British explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley also reported encounters with the "Wambutti" people of the Ituri rain forest.[2] Today, approximately 168,000 pygmies reside in these extensive (but dwindling) forests. The lush rain forests they call home have seen political boundaries drawn and redrawn around them through the centuries. The regions they inhabit fall within portions of the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire), the Central African Republic, Gabon, Cameroon, and the Congo Republic. About 80,000 of them live in Zaire; 40,000 of these comprise the largest pygmy group—the Mbuti tribe of the Ituri rain forest.

Like other pygmy groups, the Mbuti are nomadic hunter-gatherers who rely on the forest for their every need. It is tempting to think of these "people of the forest" as the people who never left Eden. Their religious beliefs stem from the awe and respect they accord the forest and the spirit that guides life within it. The forest is their friend, and they cultivate a symbiotic relationship with it. They take only what they need for their sustenance, and they never deliberately harm the forest in any way. Rich as the forest is, however, they must move their camps periodically to avoid overharvesting the fruits, berries, and game in a given area. Because of their nomadic existence, they place little value on possessions—what good is something if you can't take it with you? What they have they share with everyone, especially the food they gather. This attitude of sharing and cooperation extends to their political organization as well. There are no chiefs. Individuals are valued for whatever expertise they possess, but everyone's contribution is needed, and a true egalitarian ethic dominates all interactions.

The Mbuti are not the only inhabitants of the Ituri region; other groups moved in more recently (though still many centuries ago), particularly Bantu peoples. The Bantu, with their hierarchical political and religious structures, settled primarily in villages. For a time, some of them attempted the Mbuti lifestyle but found themselves uncomfortable in the forest. For the Bantu, the forest was full of demons and evil spirits that needed warding off. They cleared the forest for their villages and plantations, creating clear lines of demarcation. The peaceable Mbuti have generally cultivated friendly relations with the Bantu villagers. In fact, the Mbuti will visit local villages periodically on trading expeditions. The Mbuti supply fresh meat and forest goods to the villagers even though the self-sufficient Mbuti need little from the villagers in return. Time in the village offers a brief respite from daily forest work and a chance to relax, make music on village instruments, and enjoy local alcoholic beverages. In spite of their rich musical culture, the Mbuti have few musical instruments of their own—they'd need to be carried during each move, after all. But their ingrained musicality allows them to quickly master Bantu instruments, and the Mbuti often surpass the skill of the village musicians. The Mbuti also come to the villages for certain rituals, including a male circumcision ritual that takes place near the time of puberty. For the Bantu, this ritual marks one's coming of age; uncircumcised males of any age are not accorded adult status by the Bantu. So the Mbuti make this concession to enhance their status with the villagers, even though they practice their own much more meaningful puberty rituals in the forest. This example summarizes many aspects of the relations between Mbuti and Bantu. To the forest dwellers, the constant rituals and

[2]Henry M. Stanley, *In Darkest Africa.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890, 2: 100–09.

divinations of the villagers seem unnecessary, but they tolerate them to maintain amicable relations. The villagers, on the other hand, suspicious (and ignorant) of anyone and anything from the forest, do their best to remake the Mbuti in their own image.

In the forest, however, the Mbuti are their own masters. Here they follow their own customs. Perhaps the richest and most distinctive Mbuti tradition is their music. Visitors to some camps have marveled at their seemingly constant music making; songs are often heard all day long—and well into the night. Songs accompany almost every activity of their lives, including elephant hunting, small-game hunting, honey gathering, male and female puberty rituals, and the sacred *molimo* observance. (See Further Listening Examples below for teaching suggestions on an Mbuti *molimo* song.)

A Hunting Song for Chorus

Start your presentation with some background material. Feel free to use any of the information presented immediately above. If you would like to know more about the Mbuti, consult the books of Colin Turnbull, such as *Wayward Servants: The Two Worlds of the African Pygmies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1965). At the very least, use the notes below to help your students understand the significance and uniqueness of central African pygmy musical traditions.

Although the Bantu music of many villages in the Ituri basin reflects a broader African tradition found in other regions of the continent, the music of the central African pygmies comes out of a much different, and much older, tradition. The pygmy peoples may have adopted the Bantu language many centuries ago, but they did not adopt their music. One might expect an ancient tradition to be "simpler" than more recent ones, but the opposite proves true here. It is awe-inspiring to realize that this music—from what may be the oldest continuous musical tradition on the planet—remains more complex than many African styles that grew up around it.

What makes this music unique? It employs an elaborate vocal polyphony unlike anything else in African music. We heard ostinato patterns in the music of Gambia, and we will hear rhythmic counterpoint from Yoruba drummers, but nowhere else do we hear such an elaborate layering of ostinatos or such a rich melodic counterpoint. In the Gambian music we heard one ostinato at a time; Mbuti music is created from multiple ostinatos used simultaneously. Each voice sings his or her own melody, repeating it again and again. Some melodies are related to each other but start at different time intervals; others are the unique expression of individuals within the ensemble. Each melodic repetition begins and ends at a different point than the others, creating an effect reminiscent of the imitative texture and continuous motion found in Renaissance polyphony. These various repeating melodies—the *interlocking ostinatos* described in the textbook—thus interweave and overlap in surprising ways. In addition, some works employ techniques reminiscent of rounds, hocket, or call-and-response patterns. The result is a rich and beautiful polyphony unlike any other music.

Start with just a few preparatory comments. Call attention to the antiphonal (back-and-forth) singing between two solo voices that dominates the first minute or so. Gathered around the fire at the end of the day, these two young men take a "tag-team" approach in telling the story of the hunt earlier that day. This should prove easy to hear and follow once students can distinguish one solo voice from the other. Without giving away too much, alert them to the full-blown vocal polyphony that emerges around 1:30 or so. Now play the

entire piece. Ask students to describe what they heard, especially toward the end. With such rich counterpoint, it is difficult to hear every voice after just one hearing. Students will have the same difficulty here as with Josquin's Renaissance polyphony—with so much going on and no single "lead" voice, it's hard to know what to listen for (see Listening Idea 7 below). Tell your students there is no one "right" voice to listen to; they should just sit back and enjoy the experience. Play from 1:30 to the end several times and ask your students to listen to a different part each time. If you wish, sing along with one or two different patterns with each playing. Once they become familiar with some of the melodic patterns and attuned to the rich texture, go back and play the entire excerpt, but this time ask them to listen with special care to what is going on behind the antiphonal solo voices. At first we hear only a few voices humming or singing softly, but gradually these voices grow in number and in strength, and from 1:30 to the end of the excerpt we can hear the vocal polyphony quite clearly. Suddenly the listening experience becomes much richer as students begin to hear individual voices emerging, adding their special sound to the mix. We become accustomed to following a single melody in most Western music, but this habit doesn't serve us well in this hunting song—the antiphonal melodies are probably the least interesting layers in this music.

Finally, to place this work in its context, provide your students with some information about the purpose of this music. Hunting songs serve a utilitarian function. As individuals fan out to hunt large game such as the elephant, they sing their own ostinato pattern. The patterns allow the hunters to keep track of one another's location as they move in on their prey. In fact, they may not even regard this as singing, in spite of the rich polyphony they create. The hunting song in the recorded set actually serves as an epilogue to the day's hunt. The hunters gather around the fire to tell the story of the hunt. On this particular occasion, two young men tell the story of the hunt and of the bravery of the hunters who participated. The polyphony that gradually emerges actually recalls the sounds and the atmosphere of the hunt itself, much like an automatic replay from a televised sports event.

What a rich musical experience—and how rich the culture that produced it! The Mbuti spirit of cooperation and egalitarianism has made a deep impression on researchers who have entered its sphere. (Louis Sarno, a New Jersey native, was so enchanted that he moved to Central Africa to live with the Bayaka tribe.) Some of these scholars suggest that the vocal polyphony of these tribes mirrors their social interactions. Each singer's role is valued and necessary, and each singer makes a unique contribution—marvelous affirmation of both the individual and the community. Modern American suburbanites focus all too readily on the seemingly "primitive" living conditions of these tribes, an outlook echoed by anthropologists who placed pygmy groups at a Stone Age level of development. Nonetheless, modern civilization, with its strife and world wars, has much to learn from this incredibly stable society—one that has managed to provide for the common welfare since before the dawn of recorded history.

Summary Thoughts

In spite of their differences, the essential feature that links the Gambian and pygmy examples with music throughout the African continent is the ostinato. Uses of ostinato can differ strikingly: The ostinato in Purcell's lament creates an impression different from the looser one of the passacaglia in Frescobaldi's