Global Perspectives 3

Ostinato Forms

Though we borrow the term *ostinato* from Italian Baroque music, the technique is much older than the seventeenth century and is dispersed around the globe. The organizational principle at stake is, indeed, basic: Set up a brief repeating musical unit and use it as the foundation for other, more varied melodies and harmonies.

Musical forms built according to this principle come in a wide variety of shapes and patterns. We have already begun to appreciate this variety in comparing "Dido's Lament" by Purcell with Frescobaldi's Passacaglia: The first presents a free-flowing melody over an unchanging bass line, while the second rings changes on an underlying harmonic pattern.

African Ostinatos

Nowhere in the world is ostinato form more prominent, or practiced with a richer array of techniques, genres, and instruments, than in Africa. Up and down the continent, ostinato forms multiply in fascinating variety: from North and West African nations, with ancient traditions of troubadour-like singers accompanying themselves on a single instrument, all the way to South Africa, with its electrified, rock'n'roll–derived Township Jive. (Rock itself is a great repository of ostinato forms.)

The two examples of African ostinato forms heard here come from Gambia, a small nation lying along the West African coast, and from the Mbuti pygmies of the rainforests of Congo in central Africa.

A Minstrel's Song

In the Gambian excerpt, a singer-reciter named Foday Musa Suso accompanies himself on a plucked-string instrument called a *kora*. This is a complicated affair, a cross between a lute and a harp, with two sets of strings, twenty-one in all. The player, as our picture shows, holds it facing himself, plucking the strings with the thumbs and index fingers of both hands. Traditions of a singer accompanying himself on an instrument like the kora or harp or lyre are very ancient around the Mediterranean Sea, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or Africa—think of the biblical David with his harp or of Homer singing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to the lyre.

In West Africa, singers to the kora often belong to guilds, with musical expertise passed down in families from generation to generation. Foday Musa Suso comes from such a family and guild. For centuries these singers have fulfilled a wide variety of social roles, singing the praises of patrons and rulers, narrating in song historical or legendary events, contributing to weddings and other celebrations, and—especially in recent times—simply providing informal entertainment. Their styles have also fed into recent developments in African pop music. In fact, Foday Musa Suso himself emigrated from Gambia to Chicago in the 1970s, where he made a name for himself playing music that fuses jazz, pop, and traditional African styles.

Our recording is an early one, from before Foday's move, and offers a brief example of the kind of praise song a West African minstrel might sing for a wealthy patron. But our main point in introducing it is to sample an African ostinato form. After a short introductory flourish on the kora, Foday lays down an ostinato pattern, plucked mainly on the low-pitched strings with his thumbs. He overlays this here and there with quick, cascading melodies, played on

Foday Musa Suso, with kora, crossing over to jazz performance.

the higher strings with the index fingers. Enriching the texture further is his singing, a freely repeated melodic phrase that starts high and drifts languidly down (first heard at 0:22). In between these phrases, Foday seems to be absorbed in his kora playing, singing quietly along with the fast melodies he plucks above the ever-present ostinato (listen especially from 1:01). To bring the performance to a close, he reserves a special effect: two strings, dissonant with each other, plucked in syncopated rhythms high above the ostinato (starting at 2:11).

Pygmy Polyphony

Since it was first recorded in the 1950s, singing in Mbuti pygmy communities has become famous for its delicate and complex polyphony. You may recognize the style, even if you have not heard recordings of pygmies before, since it has often been imitated by pop and world-beat singers such as Madonna and the group Zap Mama.

Pygmy polyphony is created in improvised group singing, sometimes in rituals central to the society, sometimes to accompany work, sometimes for simple pleasure and relaxation. It involves a technique common to many kinds of African music: *interlocking ostinatos*. In a pygmy chorus, various voices form an intricate, repetitive texture by singing over and over again their own short melodic motives—often only one or two notes—in quick alternation. The overall effect is of a multistranded, hypnotically recycling ostinato. This choral ostinato can be savored on its own or else, as in our example, used as the foundation for freer melodies of lead singers.

A Hunting Song for Chorus

Two exclamations for the whole chorus announce the beginning of a song describing the bravery and daring of an elephant hunt. At first, we hear no clear ostinato. Instead, two lead singers alternate prominent melodic phrases while, underneath them, the chorus softly sings—almost murmuring—an indistinct, ostinato-like melody.

Then something marvelous happens. At about 0:44 on track 32 the individual melodic motives of a polyphonic ostinato begin to crystallize in the chorus. We hear the polyphony taking shape. (How many distinct components of the ostinato can you make out?) By 1:30 the choral ostinato is fully formed and clearly articulated; it continues through to the end of the song (not heard here) underneath the soloists.

The singing is underlaid throughout by the simplest of instrumental accompaniments: two sticks struck together to mark the beat. The Mbuti rarely employ more elaborate instruments in their choral singing, though in other contexts they regularly play on drums, flutes, musical bows, and other instruments.

This song was recorded in the mid-1950s by Colin Turnbull, a British anthropologist who was among the first to study the pygmies. He described their society poetically and lovingly in a book still read today, *The Forest People,* but he didn't give the names of the singers of this song.

Mbuti villagers, singing and dancing to tall drums