

droning and machine-like sense of rhythm. (posted to SEM public list-server 9 July 1998)

You might find these remarks offensive or amusing—or you might agree with them. Like the other examples, they illustrate that listeners all over the world have prejudices based on the music they know and like. Listening to music all over the planet, though, fosters an open ear and an open mind. Learning to hear a strange music from the viewpoint of the people who make that music enlarges our understanding and increases our pleasure.

Sound is anything that can be heard, but what is music? As we have seen, not all music-cultures have the same idea of music; some music-cultures have no word for it, while others have a word that roughly translates into English as “music-dance” because to them music is inconceivable without movement. Writing about Rosa, the Macedonian village she lived in, Nahoma Sachs points out that “traditional Rosans have no general equivalent to the English ‘music.’ They divide the range of sound which might be termed music into two categories: *pesni*, songs, and *muzika*, instrumental music” (Sachs 1975:27). Of course, this distinction between songs and music is found in many parts of the world, even in North America. Old-time Baptists in the southern Appalachian Mountains (see Figure 1-1) sometimes say, “We don’t have music in our service,” meaning they do not have instrumental music accompanying their singing.

Other music-cultures have words for song types (lullaby, epic, historical song, and so on) but no overall word for music. Nor do they have words or concepts that directly correspond to what Euro-Americans consider the elements of music: melody, rhythm, harmony, and so forth. Most of the readers of this book (and its authors) have grown up within the cultures of Europe and North America. Consciously and unconsciously our approaches and viewpoints reflect this background. However, we must “get out of our cultural skins” as much as possible in order to view music through cultural windows other than our own. We may even learn to view our own music-culture from a new perspective. Today, because of the widespread distribution of music on radio, television, film, video, sound recordings, and computers, people in just about every music-culture are likely to have heard some of the same music. Although the local is emphasized throughout this book, music-cultures should not be understood as isolated and untouched but rather as ways of life that resist homogenization. In particular, thinking about the interaction between the local and the global can help us appreciate music-cultures, including our own.

If we want to understand the different musics of the world, then, we need to understand them on their own terms—that is, as the various music-cultures themselves do. We also need a way to talk about music as a whole without imposing our ideas of music inappropriately. To start, we can ask whether there is something about music common to all music-cultures, whether the people in those cultures are aware of it or not. If we

Music or Nonmusic?

Figure 1-1

Song leader Russell Jacobs leading the singing at the Left Beaver Old Regular Baptist Church in eastern Kentucky, 1979.



Jeff Todd Titon

determine what that something is, then we can use it to guide our study of all music.

To approach this question, we might ask whether certain sounds are music. The answer does not involve simple disagreements over whether something people call “music” is truly music. For example, some people say that rap is not music, but what they mean is that they think rap is not good or meaningful music. Rather, there are difficult cases that test the boundaries of what differentiates sound from music, such as the songs of birds or dolphins or whales—are these music?

Consider bird songs. Everyone has heard birds sing, but not everyone has paid attention to them. Try it for a moment: Listen to the songs of a hermit thrush at dusk in a spruce forest (CD 1, Track 2). At Walden Pond, Thoreau heard hermit thrushes that sounded like these.

Many think that the hermit thrush has the most beautiful song of all the birds native to North America. Most bird songs consist of a single phrase, repeated, but the hermit thrush’s melody is more complicated. You hear a vocalization (phrase) and then a pause, then another vocalization and pause, and so on. Each vocalization has a similar rhythm and is com-



CD 1/2

Songs of hermit thrushes (0:31).
Field recording by Jeff Todd Titon.
Little Deer Isle, Maine, 1999.

posed of five to eight tones. The phrase is a little higher or lower each time. If you listen closely, you also hear that the thrush can produce more than one tone at once, a kind of two-tone harmony. This is the result of the way his syrinx (voice box) is constructed.

Is bird song music? The thrush's song has some of the characteristics of music. It has rhythm, melody, repetition, and variation. It also has a function: Scientists believe that birds sing to announce their presence in a particular territory to other birds of the same kind, and that they sing to attract a mate. In some species one bird's song can tell another bird which bird is singing and how that bird is feeling. Bird song has inspired Western classical music composers. Some composers have taken down bird songs in musical notation, and some have incorporated, imitated, or transformed bird song phrases in their compositions. Bird song is also found in Chinese classical music. In Chinese compositions such as "The Court of the Phoenix," for sona (oboe) and ensemble, extended passages are a virtual catalog of bird calls and songs imitated by instruments.

Yet, people in the Euro-American music-culture hesitate to call bird songs music. Because each bird in a species sings the same song over and over, bird songs appear to lack the creativity of human expression. Bird songs do not seem to belong to the human world, whereas music is regarded in Euro-American culture as a human expression. By contrast, people in some other music-cultures think bird songs do have human meaning. For the *Kaluli* people of Papua New Guinea, bird songs are the voices of their human ancestors who have died and changed into birds. These songs cause humans grief, which expresses itself in weeping (Feld 1990). The *Kaluli* give a different meaning to bird songs than Euro-Americans do. Does this mean it is impossible to find a single idea of what music is? Not really. Euro-Americans may disagree with the *Kaluli* over whether bird songs have human meaning, but they both agree that music has human meaning. Our thought-experiment with bird song and its meanings in different music-cultures suggests that music has something to do with the human world. We can go further and say that music is sound that is humanly patterned or organized (Blacking 1973).

Let's take another example of a sound that tests the boundary between music and nonmusic. Listen again to CD 1, Track 1. Throughout the life of *Worlds of Music*, listeners have found the Ghanaian postal workers' sounds especially intriguing. Recently we learned a little more about the circumstances of the recording. Henrietta McKee Carter (personal communication to Jeff Todd Titon, July 2000) wrote as follows:

Sometime in 1975, Bill Carter and I were sitting in Jim and Ernestina Koetting's quarters at the University of Ghana chatting with Ernestina, while awaiting dinner. Jim came in excitedly, picked up his recording equipment and disappeared, saying on his way out that he had just heard something he wanted to record. He came back a while later and described the scene.

These postal workers hand-canceling stamps at the post office of the University of Ghana are making drumming sounds, and two are whistling;



CD 1/1

Postal workers canceling stamps at the University of Ghana post office (2:59). The whistled tune is the hymn "Bompata," by the Ghanaian composer W. J. Akyeampong (b. 1900). Field recording by James Koetting, Legon, Ghana, 1975.

but there are no drums, and the workers are just passing the time. How, exactly?

Koetting (Titon 1992:98–99) wrote as follows:

Twice a day the letters that must be canceled are laid out in two files, one on either side of a divided table. Two men sit across from one another at the table, and each has a hand-canceling machine (like the price markers you may have seen in supermarkets), an ink pad, and a stack of letters. The work part of the process is simple: a letter is slipped from the stack with the left hand, and the right hand inks the marker and stamps the letter. . . .

This is what you are hearing: the two men seated at the table slap a letter rhythmically several times to bring it from the file to the position on the table where it is to be canceled. (This act makes a light-sounding thud.) The marker is inked one or more times (the lowest, most resonant sound you hear) and then stamped on the letter (the high-pitched mechanized sound you hear). . . . The rhythm produced is not a simple one-two-three (bring forward the letter—ink the marker—stamp the letter). Rather, musical sensitivities take over. Several slaps on the letter to bring it down, repeated thuds of the marker in the ink pad and multiple cancellations of single letters are done for rhythmic interest. Such repetition slows down the work, but also makes it much more interesting.

The other sounds you hear have nothing to do with the work itself. A third man has a pair of scissors that he clicks—not cutting anything, but adding to the rhythm. The scissors go “click, click, click, rest,” a basic rhythm used in [Ghanaian] popular dance music. The fourth worker simply whistles along. He and any of the other three workers who care to join him whistle popular tunes or church music that fits the rhythm.

Work song, found in music-cultures all over the world, is a kind of music whose function ranges from coordinating complex tasks to making boring and repetitive work more interesting. In this instance the workers have turned life into art. Writing further about the postal workers’ recording, Koetting says,

It sounds like music and, of course it is; but the men performing it do not quite think of it that way. These men are working, not putting on a musical show; people pass by the workplace paying little attention to the “music.” (Titon 1992:98)

Even though the postal workers do not think of this activity as a musical performance, we have presented it as music here because it is humanly patterned sound and the whistled melody is a hymn tune written by a Ghanaian composer. Even so, not all humanly patterned sound is music. For example, although speech sometimes has musical attributes, we do not claim that speech is music. Whether canceling stamps at the University of Ghana post office is “really” music is a philosophical question. What do you think?

People in various music-cultures pattern sounds differently. What patterns do musical sounds follow? Several aspects of musical sound that our music-culture recognizes and talks about in ordinary language should be familiar to most readers of this book: rhythm, meter, melody, and harmony. These are ways of describing patterns or structure (form) in sound. It will

be interesting to see what happens to these Western (but not exclusively Western) ideas when for better or worse they are applied to every music-culture throughout this book. Here we briefly review these ideas. Next we turn our attention to how music becomes meaningful in performance. Finally we consider the four components of a music culture, which in music textbooks are not usually considered rudiments but are no less a part of humanly organized sound: ideas, activities, repertoires, and the material culture of music.

Rhythm and Meter

In ordinary language we say "rhythm" when we refer to the patterned recurrence of events, as in "the rhythm of the seasons," or "the rhythm of the raindrops." As Hewitt Pantaleoni writes, "Rhythm concerns time felt as a succession of events rather than as a single span" (1985:211). In music, we hear rhythm when we hear a time-relation between sounds. In a classroom you might hear a pen drop from a desk and a little later a student coughing. You do not hear any rhythm, because you hear no relation between the sounds. But when you hear a person walking in the hall outside, or when you hear a heartbeat, you hear rhythm.

If we measure the time-relations between the sounds and find a pattern of regular recurrence, we have metrical rhythm. Think of the soldiers' marching rhythm: HUP-two-three-four, HUP-two-three-four. This is a metered, regularly recurring sound pattern. The recurring accents fall on HUP. Most popular, classical, and folk music heard in North America today has metered rhythm. Of course, most of those rhythms are more complex than the march rhythm. If you are familiar with Gregorian chant, of the Roman Catholic Church, you know musical rhythm without meter. Although not music, ordinary speech is a common example of nonmetrical rhythm, whereas poetic verse is metrical (unless it is free verse). Think of the iambic pentameter in Shakespeare's plays, for example. Most of the musical examples in this book, including the postal workers' canceling stamps (CD 1, Track 1), are examples of metrical rhythm. In a metrical rhythm you feel the beat and move to it. The song of the hermit thrush is both metrically rhythmic and not (CD 1, Track 2). You can find a beat while the thrush sings a phrase, but after he stops you cannot predict exactly when the bird will start again.

"Tsuru no sugomori," the Japanese *shakuhachi* piece (CD 4, Track 1), lacks a steady, dancelike beat. Its rhythm is flexible and related to the performer's breath. That it is unmetered does not mean that it is undisciplined. On the contrary, the uneven pulsation makes it harder for the student learning *shakuhachi* to convey the required precision in the sounds and silences that enhance one another (see pp. 338–343).

On the other hand, the rhythm of *karnataka sangeeta* (CD 3, Track 1) is intricate in another way. The opening *alapana* section has a flexible, non-metered rhythm, but the following sections are metrically organized. This classical music of South India divides a metrical rhythm into long, complex,

Structure in Music



CD 4/I



CD 3/I