An analysis of Drums, 1-4

By Alex Kelley

Introduction

While studying the music of West African drum ensembles over the last three months, I've been struck by both a feeling of familiarity and of great distance. At times, it all felt completely comfortable and natural, the explanations of rhythm and form given in the papers we've read fitting in perfectly with my own experience and perception. And yet, there was always something difficult to grasp when listening to the music. Always a struggle to hear the cycle of the piece beginning as it was notated, or an inability to separate out instruments from one another. This challenge has been invigorating and interesting. In writing music that took direct inspiration from these ensembles, I hoped to be able to learn more about how this music was built by attempting to do something similar. I wanted to write a piece which took from the Ewe and the Mande music this rhythmic complexity while adding something from my own music tradition. I chose to write music which followed these ensembles rhythmically as closely as I could, while also adding pitches, scales and harmony from Western music. My intent was to bridge the two worlds, allowing a western listener to access the music more easily through familiar melodic and harmonic material while also challenging listeners more familiar with the African tradition, adding to the rhythmic complexity and ambiguity something analogous from the tonal dimension. My hope is that each listener is able to use the materials in the music which is more familiar to his or her tradition as a guide to more easily access the material which is foreign and challenging.

Instrumentation

This piece is written for two pianos and double bass. I chose to write for these instruments because they seemed to me to be effective bridges between Western and African musical aesthetics. Piano has long been a critically important instrument for European music. Many of the greatest masterpieces of the western art music tradition are written for it, and its been important for that tradition for hundreds of years. The piano is also very important in jazz, the other western music tradition that I know well. As well as its use in jazz ensembles, it is very important for all instrumentalists as a secondary instrument. Many jazz musicians study piano in order to better understand the harmonic and formal structure of their music. The piano seems to resonate in several ways with many African music traditions as well. Many African traditions use instruments which are similar in layout and timbre to the piano. The Balafon, Xylophone, and Mbira are just several examples. (Nketia 77-81) Also important, especially since my piece takes the music of drum ensembles as its inspiration, is the percussive quality of the piano. The piano can represent both the rhythms of drum ensembles and the pitches which I added to them. In an ensemble with two pianos, a four part texture can be built, in which each hand takes the part of a single drum.

The acoustic bass, however, does not have a close analog in African instrumental traditions that I am aware of. However, it's low pitch allows it to take the place of the master drum, often the lowest in pitch. This is in stark contrast to the role the double bass plays in most western music, that of timekeeper and supporting instrument. As a bassist myself, I thought it would be interesting to adopt a more African aesthetic for this western instrument, and have it act as the leader in the ensemble. The bass does this by playing themes over the ostinatos formed by the pianos, and also by improvising new themes. The bass also acts a leader in a formal way, by playing set patterns which signal the other instruments to proceed to the next section.

Formal organization

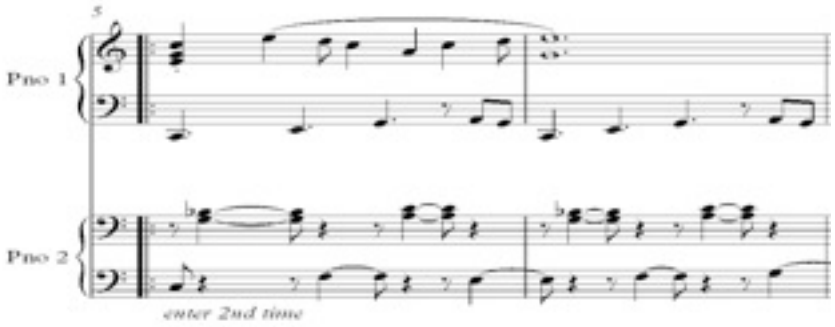
The organization of Drums 1-4 is directly influenced by David Locke's description of Godwin Agbeli's arrangement of Yewevu. Though each movement of Yewevu is a faithful adaptation of a traditional performance, Agbeli's arrangment is several steps removed from it's original performance context. Locke uses the translation of the the Ewe word vu as the title for each movement in Yewevu. This word, translated literally as drum, is also used to indicate an item of repertory as well as music making in general. For Locke, this is “a conscious act that at once distances Yewevu from its original cultural context while at the same time moving it into a more 'universal' world of 'music-for-its-own-sake.'” (Locke, Yewevu in the Metric Matrix 13) Drums, 1-4 does not represent any traditional Ewe style, and in fact is a deliberate effort to fuse elements of Ewe music with other traditions across Africa and the west. Even still , in writing this piece I wanted to participate in Locke's idea of a stylized representation of traditional African music. Though my piece is for the most part through-composed, I would ideally like it to be heard as an arrangement, the presentation of several pieces from a genre of music. My piece attempts to just one realization of an 'imaginary' genre. The themes used by the lead bass, the choice of specific pentatonic scales, these could be heard as just one of many possible interpretations of this imaginary tradition, elements arranged for a performance context by me.

The piece is organized in four movements, or 'Drums.' However, there are no pauses or breaks between movements. As much of the music of West African drum ensembles depends heavily on sustaining a constant pulse throughout a performance, even for several hours, I thought it best to organize my piece this way

as well. The pulse and the 12/8 meter continue throughout. Instead of breaks in the music, Drums are distinguished by changes in texture rhythm, harmony, and formal structure.

The first Drum is the simplest of the four, both harmonically and rhythmically. The piece is organized to resemble a 12 bar blues, though not strictly. This Drum also has the sparest texture of the entire piece. The material in it is presented first by a single piano, making it easy to hear each distinct melody and rhythm. the second piano is added to the first upon repetition, playing contra-metric and harmonically dense material.

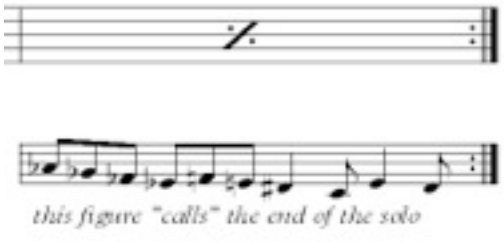
(mm 5-6, Drum 1)



Drum 2 formally most resembles the rhythmic and structural framework of the Yewevu and Agbekor Ewe ensembles. The pianos play an ostinato, with only the bassist and the RH of piano 2 playing variations, acting as lead and response drum. This movement has two sections, which are marked by an abrupt change in the harmony. This modulation is not prepared in the western sense, by the use of chords leading into the new tonal framework, but 'called' by the lead bassist. The material played by the lead bassist just before this shift is different than what precedes it. It does not repeat as the other themes do and it does not use the harmonic material of the supporting piano parts. This is meant to imitate the communicative role the lead drum plays in Ewe ensembles. (Locke, Yewevu in the

Metric Matrix 24) This figure in the bass alerts the ensemble to the coming harmonic shift, just as lead drummers plays specific patterns to alert the other drums to a change in texture, or rhythm. This idea continues throughout the middle two movements, and is used to signal the end of Drum 2 and Drum 3.

Drum 3 contrasts from Drum 2 most clearly in its rhythmic framework. Whereas Drum 2 took its inspiration from Ewe music, Drum 3 most resembles Mande music. Here each piano part is meant to represent a bell pattern. This movement is open ended, and repeats indefinitely until the lead bassist soloist plays the 'call' to signal the other musicians to go to the next section.



(Bass, mm 12, Drum 3)

Drum 4 is the only movement in this piece which does not directly use an African drum ensemble to craft its parts. Instead, Burn's rhythmic archetypes are used to craft the rhythmic material. This Drum also has the densest rhythmic texture, and should be seen as the climax of the piece. The aim here is for all the parts to begin in unison, and each to break away in turn, contributing rhythmic and melodic material to the whole. At the conclusion of this dense section, each part returns to rhythmic and harmonic unison, and ends on a cluster built from the C, F, and G pentatonic scales, just as the piece began.

Rhythmic Organization

The rhythmic framework of Drums, 1-4 is based Willy Anku's idea of a pan-African ensemble,

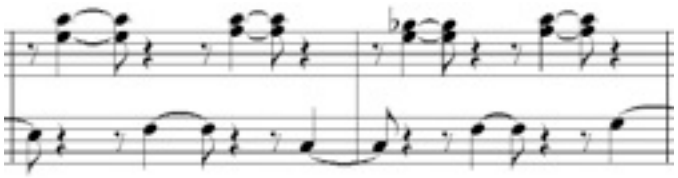
an impromptu performance by drummers from all over West Africa. He argued that this kind of performance would retain aspects which are common to all West African drumming without seeming to be from any particular Ethnic group. The most universal of these elements is Anku's idea of a structural grid, a broad rhythmic framework on which many different rhythms could be projected. My piece is composed upon one of Anku's grids, a 12 eighth, note pattern divided into four equal pulses. The conception of the ensemble as pan-African also meant that I was able to take rhythmic ideas from each of the traditions I've studied, as well as add my own patterns which seemed compatible. In crafting my own rhythms, I fit each of them into this 12/8 grid, while also attempting to adhere to some heuristic principles. David Locke describes Ewe music as being felt simultaneously in 3, 4, 6, and 12 beats in a bar. Many of my rhythmic inventions make use of this principle, attempting to imply several of these divisions. (Locke, “Principles of Offbeat Timing and Cross-Rhythm in Southern Ewe Dance Drumming” 219) I also made liberal use of James Burns' rhythmic archetypes, which he describes as being important in many African and African diasporic musics.

Much of the rhythmic material in my piece are direct borrowings from West African drum ensembles. In Drum 1, Piano 1 is based almost entirely on the interplay between the rhythms of a standard bell pattern accompanied by a rattle.

(mm 3-4, Drum 1)

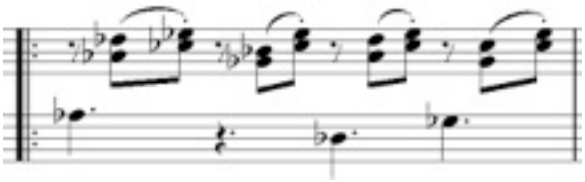
Here, the RH plays the standard bell pattern, while the LH fills in the spaces between, just as the rattle does in Ewe music. These spaces between form an interesting pattern in and of themselves, dividing the first half of the bar in 2, and the second half in 3. This pattern, and variations of it, inform the first piano throughout Drum 1 and Drum 2. The phrasing of these

movements is also influenced by Ewe ideas about the standard bell pattern. As Locke describes it, the bell pattern always begins on the second stroke, and proceeds towards the Regulative Time Point (RTP) on beat 1. Since this RTP is perceived as a resting point and a time of maximum stability, rather than an accented beat, I began most of the phrases of Drum 1 directly after this RTP. Ewe patterns are used in other parts of my piece as well. In Drum 1, Piano 2 plays a simplified version of the Kidi pattern in Agbekor. (Locke, "Africa/Ewe, Mande, Dagbamba, Shona, BaAka" 82)



(Piano 2, mm 8-9, Drum 1)

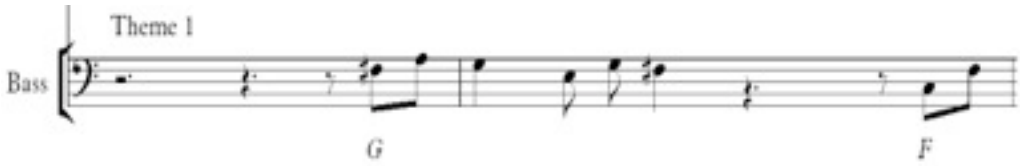
Throughout Drum 2, the RH of Piano 2 plays a common Kagan pattern (Locke, “Principles of Offbeat Timing and Cross-Rhythm in Southern Ewe Dance Drumming” 220)



(Piano 2, mm 17, Drum 2)

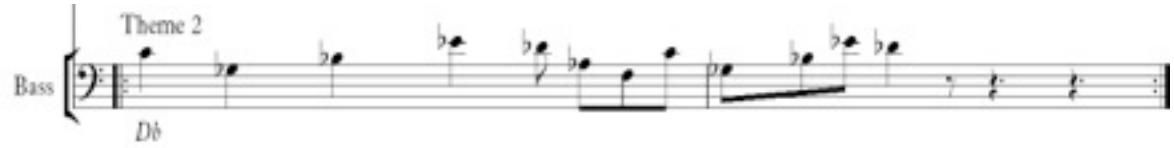
patterns from Mande music are also used. In Drum 3, each of the parts imitates a bell pattern in Mande music. Two of these patterns are lifted directly from Dunungbe, and the third is a rotation of the other two, not present in Dunungbe, but derived from it.

Many of the rhythms in Drums, 1-4 are taken directly from James Burn's idea of rhythmic archetypes. These are broad rhythmic tropes which are to some degree “universal” to African music, found in many different African musical traditions. As such, they are effective building blocks for crafting an “African” style. My piece uses Burn's archetypes in many places. For example, they were used to craft the lead bass themes in Drum 2. Theme one of the first section is an example of RA 6, the “shifting 3's archetype.” Here three 8th notes and then a rest are repeated 3 times, dividing the bar into three groups of 4, rather than 4 groups of three. (Burns 82)



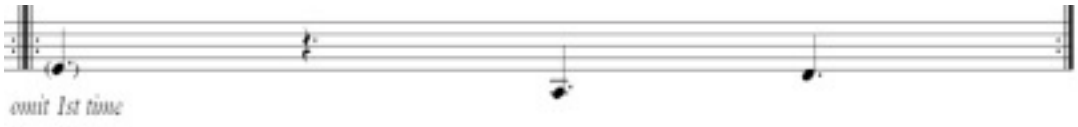
(Bass, mm 3-4, Drum 2)

Theme two of the second section of Drum 2 makes use of Burns' large interweave, RA 3. The lead bass forms a 3:2 polyrhythmic relationship with the accompaniment on a large scale, over 6 eighth notes.



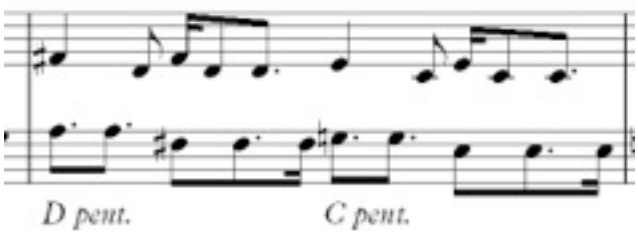
(Bass, mm 19, Drum 2)

The archetypes are also used in the accompaniment for this Drum. The LH of Piano 2 is made up of his "3-4-1" Archetype (RA 5) This articulates the main pulse of the music while also maintaining a cyclical structure. The rest on beat 2 gives this pattern its interesting contour. (Burns 78)



(Piano 2, LH, mm 2, Drum 2)

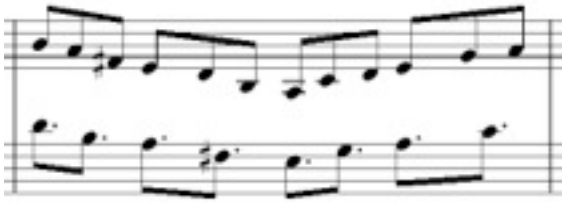
Burns' archetypes are used most often, though, in Drum 4. The relationship between the two hands of Piano 1 halfway through this movement displays RA 1, or the small interweave. (Burns 40)



(Piano 1, mm 9, Drum 4)

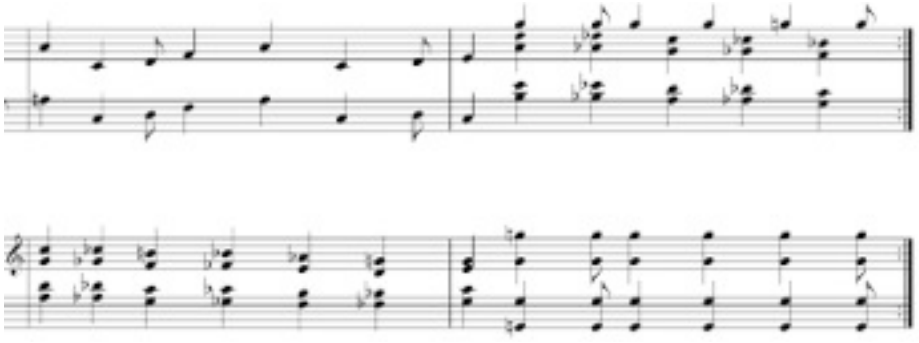
At the same time this is going on, however, the two hands of piano 2 are performing a medium

interweave (RA 2), a 2:3 polyrhythm which resolves itself every three eight notes. (Burns 49)



(Piano 2, mm 9, Drum 4)

Also important for the rhythmic organization of this piece is Locke's idea of plural perception. My piece is written in 12/8 and for the most part is divided in 4 groups of 3, but I have attempted to explicitly divide the beat in several other ways throughout the piece. The final two bars of Drum 1 are one example. Here both pianos play a pattern which divides the bar into 6 equal parts.

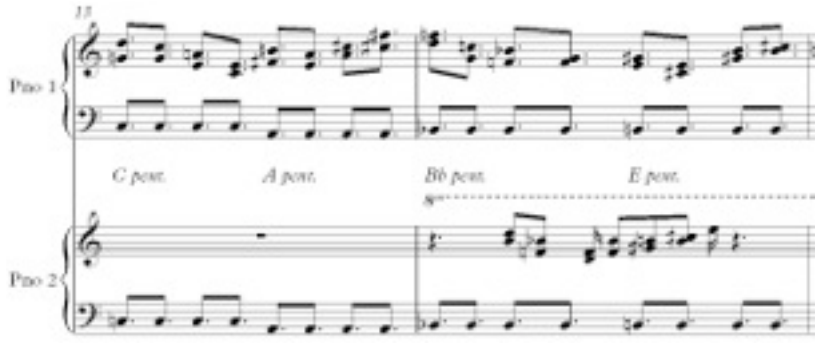


(mm 14-15, Drum 1)

The lead bass parts in Drum 2 also make use of this idea. Theme 2 of the first section divides the bar into three equal sections.

(Bass, mm 7, Drum 2)

The last five bars of Drum 4 also articulate a different perception of the beat. Here each part plays a pattern which divides the bar in 8 equal parts. This is the only section of the piece where the ternary feeling begins to be lost, as this division is played relentlessly by all parts and continues to the end of the piece.



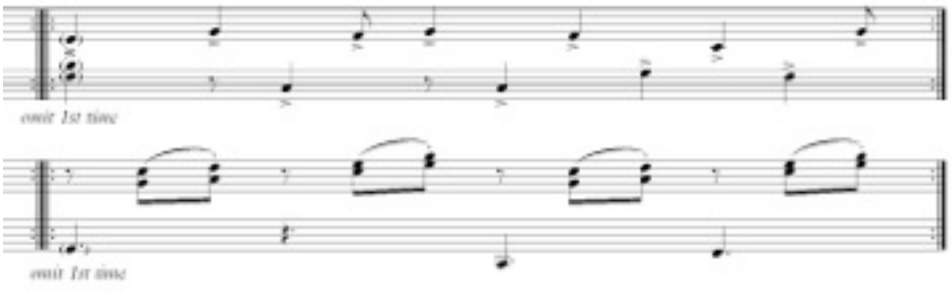
Mm 13-14, Drum 4

Rhythmic ambiguity/Tonal ambiguity

One aspect of African music that I wanted to bring out in my piece was the sense of multidimensionality and ambiguity that David Locke emphasized in "Yewevu in the Metric Matrix." For Locke, Ewe drum ensemble music can be perceived in many different ways simultaneously. A listener can flip between several perceptions of the beat, of the rhythm, and of the relationships between parts. This ambiguity takes place primarily in the rhythmic dimension. (104) Since my piece aimed at combining these rhythmic structural elements with pitches, I wanted to devise a scheme that would preserve this rhythmic ambiguity while also extending it into the tonal realm.

In my attempt to synthesize several Western and African musical practices, I chose not to simply graft western chord progressions and melodic treatments onto an African rhythmic framework. Instead, I wanted to use a tonal framework that would not be foreign to African musical practices. Though African tonal systems are very diverse, and countless scales can be found across the continent, It seems that anhemitonic pentatonic scales are important for a number of African musical traditions. (Arom 218) Since these also have an important place in western music, I decided that these should serve as the main organizing principle for the pitches of my piece.

These pentatonic scales provide the main source of tonal ambiguity in my piece. The primary way that they do so is by the simultaneous use of two or three related pentatonic scales. This passage from Drum two provides an example.



(mm 2, Drum 2)

Here, the two pianos play a mixture of three major pentatonic scales, C, F, and G. Piano 1 and the left hand (LH) of piano 2 play only the roots of these three scales. The right hand (RH) figure

of piano 2 uses one of these three at a time. The effect of this is that, though the tonalities of C, F, and G are implied, none is stated directly. Each of these could be perceived as a tonal centre. The Bass part directly states one of these three tonalities, and the RH of piano 2, acting as a kind of tonal 'response drum,' shifts its pattern to match the bass. As these two parts shift between these three scales, the intent is for the listener to experience a gestalt shift, hearing each tonality emerge from the texture one by one.

Drum 3 offers a different way to experience the tonal ambiguity brought by the mixture of pentatonic scales. Three pentatonic scales are played simultaneously again, but this time forming a tone collection which is used as melodic material for the improvisation of the lead bass. This improvisation, just as the written bass themes in Drum 2, attempts to bring out the inherent melodic and rhythmic qualities of the other parts.

Pentatonic scales are also main sources for the material in Drums 1 and 4. However, only one scale is used at a time in these movements. In Drum 1, the harmony is diatonic, moving leisurely between C, F, and G. This section makes the least use of pentatonic ambiguity of the piece. In contrast, though Drum 4 also limits itself to one pentatonic scale at a time, the rapid movement between scales and the lack of any implied tonal centre provides us with a use of pentatonic ambiguity not previously seen in the piece. Each scale is stated in each of the piano voices, but the resultant vertical structure does not form western chords or harmony. The result is something like Gerard Kubik's description of African derived “timbre-harmonic clusters” in the blues, in which “chords flash up as didactic accents not requiring a continuous linear development.” (Kubik 108) These pentatonic clusters provide a sense of harmonic progression which does not conform to western tonal hierarchy. These uses of pentatonic scales, while not acting in identical ways to the rhythmic ambiguity in Ewe drum ensembles, does provides a tonal counterpart which acts along with the rhythmic material in the piece to increase the

multidimensionality and possibility of plural perception.

Conclusion

Writing this piece was not an easy task for me. At every step I felt myself over my head, engaging with musical styles and traditions which I did not fully comprehend. Though the rhythms that I used were direct copies of ones from every African tradition I wished to emulate, I knew that the notation I used could never completely represent the intricacies and complexities of the music. And yet, writing this piece, and especially playing it, feeling the polyrhythmic relationships between my two hands on the piano, brought me much closer to understanding this music than I had been before. An attempt to craft the multidimensional framework of a West African drum ensemble proved for me very instructive for understanding how they work. It also has given me an even greater respect than I previously had for performers, and especially the innovators. of those styles. Though my piece was composed self-consciously, given bar lines and numbers, and printed on a page, the music that I tried to imitate arose organically, piece by piece. I imagine this long, slow development, with each aspect of the music transformed over time, discovered anew with each generation of performers, as the key to its strength and resilience, its forward momentum tempered by the intricate weaving of parts, each contributing in its own way.

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