

## PATTERNS OF NEGRO MUSIC

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The study of musical forms can make an important contribution to an understanding of the nature of human civilization, its processes of change, and the historical relationships between various bodies of custom. That the value of this contribution has been thus far but little recognized either by students of human civilization or by musicologists is not strange, since each field is sufficiently broad to demand the entire attention of specialists. The student of comparative culture must be prepared to deal with the habits of peoples whose modes of behavior differ as widely as do those of Eskimos and South Sea Islanders, of Zulus and aboriginal Australians. The musicologist, also, even though he may restrict his research to problems in the field of western European and American music, must utilize techniques so specialized that little time remains to him for the consideration of materials outside his specialty.

We may thus ask at the outset how the comparative study of music can contribute to an understanding of the processes of human civilization; or, conversely, how a knowledge of these processes helps the investigator concerned with understanding the derivation and significance of a particular musical style.

To answer the first question, it must be recognized that music, as a part of any given body of tradition, can be studied like any other aspect of custom. But the peculiar value of studying music for this purpose is that, even more than other aspects of culture, its patterns tend to lodge on the unconscious level. Especially as regards the processes of change, it seems to manifest that phenomenon which, in the field of linguists has been termed "drift." This implies an almost imperceptible, but consistent and steady change as a result of the continuous introduction of many small elements, all of which are in accord with the underlying structure of the accepted musical style. The cumulative result is

that this process eventuates in something which, though differing from the earlier form, is still recognizably related to it.

This process is to be seen, for instance, in the changes that, over the generations, have taken place in style of European folk music and, in more recent times, in that of our more sophisticated musical forms. Each generation, we find, has had its "modern" music, to be protested against by those devoted to an earlier convention. Yet each new step toward "modernism" has been shown to consist of nothing more than the utilization of intervals which represent the next series of overtones to the combinations already accepted. The point is that this process has gone on within the framework of our polyphonic patterns of music which emphasize harmony, patterns that were established when unison singing gave way to two-part melodies, and later, in the Middle Ages, much against the edicts of the Church, the major triad was completed by the addition of a third element.

For the musicologist, an understanding of the wider significance of changes of this sort in our own culture, and the variations in tonal and rhythmic patterns that exist outside our own civilization, afford a perspective that is not only useful to any investigator of human behavior, but in this particular field materially broadens the basis of his approach to his specific concerns. The very techniques that are employed in analyzing foreign musical idioms are, from this point of view, revealing. It was not until a generation ago that the musical significance was realized of the fact that in our society, music is more intimately related to the playing of instruments of fixed pitch than in any other. Today the importance of the piano, with its rigid tonal system, in conditioning our musical reactions is recognized as paramount, not only in

shaping the way in which we express ourselves musically, but the way in which we hear music. It is recognized, of course, that the particular scale we employ is a convention arbitrarily selected from subtly differing tonal values that have an infinite range; that, for example, whole tone scales, or pentatonic scales can give material quite as adequate for the making of musical style as the chromatic system prevailing in our music. Yet the fact that within the limits set by our scale system we regard true pitch as so important, sets us off from folk who do not base their music on mechanically tuned instruments; among such people, for example, a reaction of distaste such as the trained musician in our culture feels when a singer

the left hand, and a  $9/4$  in the right—with a rhythmic consonance every 36 beats, is well-nigh impossible.

For the musician, then, to understand that the idiom of his own culture is merely one of an almost infinite variety is of considerable value; a further understanding of the significance of this fact in terms of the techniques employed in recording and analyzing foreign idioms is equally important. As in all scholarly research, to attain the greatest precision and accuracy is essential, and in the study of a strange music, this can be achieved only by the use of recording apparatus. Because of early conditionings, the ear of a person in any culture is so trained that one who attempts to study differing styles soon learns that he



Fig. 1. Drummers and dancers in the market-place of Kano, Nigeria (British West Africa).



Fig. 2. Members of a cooperative society singing to give rhythm to the hoe-strokes of those working. Dahomey, French West Africa.

flats a note is, for example, unknown. A given tone has only a more or less constant value, and even a quarter-tone deviation causes no discomfort, if, indeed, it does not go unrecognized.

The comparative musicologist, however, will realize that with casual regard for true pitch may go a far greater sensitiveness to rhythm than is the case among ourselves, where in all but the most sophisticated "modern" compositions, and in certain forms of dance music, rhythm is subsidiary, and rarely falls outside the limits of the  $4/4$  or  $3/4$  patterns, or some variant on these. The difficulties which many persons in our culture experience in beating out a  $5/4$  measure is an example of this. For such persons, to master a simple South African piece on the marimba which requires the player to follow a  $4/4$  beat in

cannot trust himself to write down the music he hears, however facile he may be. Having collected his data on cylinders or disks, he can, however, later in his laboratory, with the aid of tuning fork and metronome, transcribe what has been brought from the field. Here, without distraction, he can analyze prevalent scale systems, record the complexities of rhythm, indicate the extent of individual variation in singing and, should he have sound films to work with, attempt to assess such intangibles as singing style and motor behavior while singing.

No body of music can better document the advantage to be gained, both by the social scientist and the musicologist, from research in the field of comparative musicology, than that of the Negro peoples of Africa and the New World.

For here are to be found patterns which, because of the historical relationships involved, have certain broad similarities that reflect the contacts between peoples of Africa and the Negro New World, and at the same time reflect the local developments that have occurred in the various areas involved. Negro Africa, south of the Sahara, comprehends thousands of tribes, among all of whom music plays an important rôle in the daily life and the ceremonial round. The Negro slaves who were brought to the New World, deriving principally from West Africa and the Congo, brought their music with them, not only to the United States, but to the Caribbean Islands, Central America and the northern tier of South American countries, the Guianas, and Brazil. And in all these areas Negro music to some extent reflects this African background. In essence, this forms the fundamental basis for the overlay of European characteristics which, differing in terms of the contacts of these people with Spanish or Brazilian or French or Dutch or English musical styles, and the intensity of these contacts, gives to the musical expression of each local group its special flavor.

The principal characteristics which mark off the underlying pattern of Negro music may be broadly described. The convention whereby the statement of a theme by a leader is repeated by a chorus, or a choral phrase is balanced as a refrain against a longer melodic line sung by the soloist, is universal. This has been commented on by all who have heard Negroes sing in Africa or elsewhere, and is to be found in spirituals and work songs in the United States as well as in various kinds of melodies heard in the West Indies and South America. An intimate and often intricate relationship between the melody and its accompanying rhythm—carried on by drums, rattles, sticks beaten one against the other, hand-clapping or short non-musical cries—is also ubiquitous. So prominent is the element of rhythm in Negro music that this music is ordinarily conceived as relegating its melodic line to second place, though this concept has only partial validity. For as is demonstrated by the songs sung by choruses of chiefs' wives in Dahomey, West Africa, on the occasion of rites for the royal

ancestral cult, or by some of the Shango cult songs from Trinidad, British West Indies, or by some of the Brazilian Negro melodies, a long and complex melodic line is by no means unknown in Negro songs. Yet the need to ornament an underlying rhythmic structure is fundamental, and when Negro music as a whole is considered, this trait must receive close attention.

The phonograph records played in connection with this discussion in illustrating the characteristics of Negro mentioned above, and documenting the unity of Negro musical style, bear out the theoretical and methodological points with which this discussion opened. It is evident, when these melodies and rhythms from South Africa, from the Congo and West Africa, from Brazil, Trinidad, and Haiti, are heard, that the derivation of the music sung and played by the Negroes of this country will become apparent. At the same time, when the differences between the musical style of these various areas are noted, it will be remarked how these various musical conventions, regarded as cultural patternings, throw light on what has happened to aboriginal Negro musical endowment in contact with various European cultures. The Brazilian songs, it will be noticed, show a strong Iberian overlay, through which African stylistic values manifest themselves in terms of the complex rhythms of the percussion instruments, and in the prevalence of the leader-and-chorus convention. It will be noticed in the Trinidad recording of "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" how, using a "Sankey"—a Sankey and Moody hymn—the thematic material has been so reworked in terms of African conventions that they finally take a form far removed from the slow stately measures of the original—a form, indeed, that is essentially the form of the "swing" rhythms that United States Negroes have introduced into the secular dance melodies popular today among all groups in this country.

These records are the following; unfortunately, here only tribe or area represented, type of song, title, and in the case of commercial discs, the company manufacturing the record, and its number, can be given:

## Africa

## South Africa

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|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Zulu: Nkonto Ka Tshaka | } Gallo (Pty.) Ltd., Johannesburg.<br>} South Africa, No. G. E. 86 |
| 2. Zulu: Malombo          |  |

## Congo

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|------------------------------|---|
| 3. Bahutu: Chant and Dance   | } Denis-Roosevelt Expedition, No. 10.<br>} Reeves Studios, Inc., New York City<br>} Same, No. 2 |
| 4. Babira: Songs             |   |
| 5. Manbetu: Songs            | } Same, No. 1   |
| 6. Congo Dialect Song: Iduba | } British Zonophone Co., London.<br>} No. E. Z. 439   |

## West Africa

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|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 7. Yoruba: Igi Da Pa Ele Po   | Zonophone No. E. Z. 305 |
| 8. Yoruba: Oyibo Sewun Ti Oto | Zonophone No. E. Z. 549 |
| 9. Yoruba: Tani Nawa Oni Baba | Zonophone No. E. Z. 426 |
| 10. Fanti: Kwesi Kadagyi      | Zonophone No. E. Z. 560 |
| 11. Fanti: Nsamo Pom          | Zonophone No. E. Z. 475 |

## New World

## Brazil

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 12. Macumba: No Fundo Do Mar }   | } Victor (Brazil) No. 34158 |
| 13. Macumba: Caboclo do Matto }  |                             |
| 14. Batuque: Babão Miloquê       | Victor (Brazil) No. 33253-A |
| 15. Jongo: São Benedito é Oro Só | Victor (Brazil) No. 33380-A |

## Haiti

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| 16. Vodun song: Ibo Lélé                      | } General Records, New York,<br>} No. 5001 |
| 17. Vodun song: Joué Kanga Joué               |  |
| 18. Vodun song: Moundongue yè yè              | General Records, No. 5002 B                |
| 19. Vodun song: Ciyè Ciyè 'ti<br>Bobine Carrè | General Records, No. 5003 B                |

## Trinidad

(Note: All Trinidad recordings were made in the field by M. J. Herskovits, during the Northwestern University Expedition of 1939.)

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| 20. Bele song: Me no well-o                  | No. 65 b |
| 21. Bele song: Chamber po', Chamber po' Lady | No. 31 a |
| 22. Bongo song: Killin' Peter Agent          | No. 70 a |
| 23. Bongo song: Dolaido                      | No. 79 a |
| 24. Bongo song: I wan' a Pretty Woman        | No. 47 b |
| 25. Spiritual: Our Father }                  | } No. 31 |
| 26. Spiritual: 'Rasslin' Jacob }             |          |
| 27. Baptist Shout: Jesus, Lover of My Soul   | No. 58 b |
| 28. Shango cult song: Yemanja                | No. 96 b |
| 29. Shango cult song for Osho: Menia, Menia  | No. 97 a |
| 30. Shango cult song: Adjadja-e              | No. 98 a |

This music has considerable point for the current controversy as to the derivations of American Negro songs, particularly the spirituals. The discussion of this matter goes back to about thirty years ago, when H. E. Krehbiel published his volume "Afro-American Folk Songs," in which he attempted to show that the spirituals were essentially African. His hypothesis was generally accepted, until a re-examination by various students some ten or fifteen years ago noted striking similarities between the spirituals, and hymns—in some cases what may be called folk hymns—of the white people of this country, in both melodies and words. Since then, scholars have tended to align themselves on one side or the other, though, curiously enough, in no case has anyone who has written on the matter had any large acquaintance with African music, even, indeed, as large an acquaintance as would be gained by hearing the series of records played in connection with the presentation of this paper.

To a person acquainted with the range of local style included in such a collection as is represented in the records listed above, this discussion must seem pointless, and somewhat unrealistic. For one thing, the problem of origins goes beyond the spirituals, involving also the roots from which such other forms of Negro music as work-songs, songs of recrimination, "blues" and other dance forms have been derived. As far as the spirituals are concerned, a realistic approach would seem to indicate a conclusion that their present form represents responses on the part of Negroes both to the music of the Whites heard by them in this country, and a reworking of this material in terms of the aboriginal stylistic patterns of their ancestral African forms. In stating this, the renderings of the spirituals written for concert presentation are not meant, for though they may be beautiful, they are nonetheless artificial versions, transcribed into current majority patterns of music. The living spirituals, sung by devotees affiliated with groups whose worship is outside the commonly accepted conventions of American religious behavior, sung in lowly Negro churches, in places of worship such as the colloquially known as store-front churches, and the like, are quite differ-

ent. For in these humbler gatherings, the "swing" element, so important in secular Negro song, also predominates in the sacred songs, and the synthesis of both African and European elements is plainly to be discerned. Jazz and swing are rarely taken into account in discussions of the derivations of Negro music. Yet it is not an accident that the exponents of these musical styles who are most effective in their presentations are Negroes. The importance of rhythm in this dance music, the improvisation that characterizes its playing, the repetition of thematic material are all distinctly African. It is more than chance that this music is so closely associated with the dance, for the relationship of song and rhythm to dance in Africa and Negro America is fundamental.

In considering some of the problems present in the study of Negro music, therefore, it has been indicated how advantageously certain controversial issues can be approached through the use of these materials. In the case of a question which is of great importance for this country at the present time, that of the derivations of Negro custom in general and the carry-over of Africanisms in all aspects of Negro behavior, it has been shown how an approach of this kind affords definite data that throw light on the mechanisms which can then be considered in terms of their applicability to the change in other aspects of custom resulting from the contact of Whites and Negroes. From the larger point of view, also, it is to be seen how the study of comparative musicology makes for an understanding of the fact that the musical style of our own culture is but one of an infinite number of possible varieties of musical expression, and that the student who approaches our music with this fact in mind will find new values in it which arise from a deeper realization of its significance as a part of the musical resources of humanity as a whole. Finally, as concerns the student of society, it is apparent that music, objectively recorded and competently analyzed, can offer effective guides to an understanding of the mechanisms of cultural change, and of the historic relationship between cultures as they exist over the earth at the present day.