Approaches to Unfamiliar Music

The label of this week’s subject matter, “non-Western” music, groups unfamiliar music and marks it as “Other.” When I was a slightly younger, naïve initiate in my first theory course, I assumed that we would be learning the universals of music. I figured, well, everyone in the world has music, it must all be kind of similar in some interesting ways. When we instead began by reading from Fux, I quickly realized that music theory, as a field in the West, has been based on a single tradition of music, not music in general. The readings this week, though, show music theory’s somewhat recent investigation into Other music. And while there are commonalities, these authors reminded me that music, how it is produced and how it is conceived of, varies extraordinarily from place to place in sometimes quite fundamental ways. Even the basic language we commonly use to describe the components of Western music can be problematic. Some foreign terms are easily reconciled, such as the Chinese “flowering” for what we would call ornamentation, but they shed light onto a different take on the concept. (Instead of ornamenting, or decorating by addition, the idea of “flowering” perhaps offers a more fundamental change of a musical idea.) For Tenzer, the concept of melody is a difficult one to grasp in Balinese Gamelan: “We have a semantics issue here, in that the closest vernacular equivalent of [melody]—lagu—is more flexible than the English one. In Bali “melody” can be any of the whole complex of strata.”¹ He must differentiate “core melody,” “figuration,” and solo and analyze each component in order to understand what “melody” even is in Oleg. In Locke’s discussion of African metric matrices, the concept of “meter” must be reexamined, since the

main grouping mechanism (the Ensemble Thematic Cycle) is a holistic blending of various components rather than the traditional meter-as-grid or –as-container conception of Western music.

In Western music, theorists tend to value harmony and voice leading, and their structural ramifications, most frequently. In other traditions, what features are salient? Do salient features mark form? How does music cohere? Is what is perceptually obvious also what is important? Are there linear narratives that result? In each article, the first step towards any of these questions seems to be identifying the music’s most important feature, to figure out how it “works” in a given context, and then to justify analyzing it.

For Shuster, the task is a relatively simple one. The most obvious unique feature of Tuvan music is its use of harmonics to create texture/timbre, melody, and structural groups. By use of spectrographic analysis, Shuster is able to concretize the music in a “time-out” setting for investigation of the whole song as a unit. Shuster’s approach is largely descriptive, explaining what’s going on perceptually in various groupings. I thought this was a very efficient way of getting at the essence of Tuvan singing, but I ended up with a few questions. My biggest issue arises with his assertion that “surfaces share similar motivic resources but these are not developed or processed in any way but rather succeed one another forming a type of nonlinear, mosaic unity.”

To me, it seems that the connections he made between the phrase segments highlight important temporal relationships between motivic occurrences. Motives and comparisons between sections receive most of the attention in this section of the analysis, so it seems odd that he seemingly sweeps these aside in this concluding statement that the music is “nonlinear” and “mosaic.” For example, the third phrase segment of the given Khoomei

\[2 \text{Lawrence Shuster, Article draft on Spectrographic and Timbral Analysis of Multiphonic Throat Singing in Tuva and Mongolia, 10.}\]
performance “incorporates motivic features from both preceding phrases.”\(^3\) This phrase segment and its use of previous motives “recall” the earlier musical material. Later, the sixth phrase segment “continues to recycle motivic material previously observed in phrase segments two and five,” though it incorporates timbre and intensity from the fourth phrase segment.\(^4\) To me, this sounds similar to a sort of fugal treatment from Western music. Different bits of motivic material are recycled and repurposed in different contexts, often with variations. I could perhaps understand a fugue as a “nonlinear, mosaic unity,” but I think the processive aspects of the motivic evolution necessitate a linear, temporal understanding. Perhaps I am missing some nuances in the analysis, and I do not mean to be overly critical since I enjoyed Shuster’s analysis and found it to be an enlightening way to approach this music.

This issue of temporality and conception of time is at the heart of all of the analyses we read this week. I think the reason for this is that we, as theorists or analysts of Western music, take for granted the dual nature of music’s relationship with time. As Tenzer explains in his article, all music inherently deals with both stasis and motion, with being and becoming. In much Western music, the act of development, say of a melody or through modulation, represents the “becoming” while the analyst’s structural understanding of a piece as a unity represents the “being.” But what is it in other music? Is it even appropriate to conceive of a piece in stasis? I think the end of Tenzer’s article sums up this issue quite well: “In a nutshell, the tired assumption is that Balinese music (and maybe Shuster’s conception at Tuvan music as well) is static and Western music isn’t. I am not here to argue that this is or isn’t the case as much as I am to persuade that the distinction between static and progressive musical time is itself false.

\(^3\) Shuster, Draft, 9.
\(^4\) Ibid., 10.
Musical time, consistent with experience of lived time, is not either/or. It is both/and."\(^5\) Tenzer problematizes this binary in order to show that *Oleg* music of Bali, though fundamentally reliant on periodic structure, “can yield complex linearity.”\(^6\) In doing so, Tenzer identifies and then investigates the salient musical feature of this kind of music that motivates analysis (periodicity, whereas it was harmonics for Tuvan music).

Roeder, engaging with Chinese Liuban melody of the Silk-and-Bamboo tradition, focuses on how perceptually apparent groupings are formed through cognitive process. This process is similar to Hasty’s approach to rhythm, and is by now a familiar concept in music theory. Basically, perception of music and ability to understand grouping both rely on a dynamic understanding of past events in order to construe the present as a beginning, continuation, or ending. Liuban music, with its easily perceived, brief “bursts” of events lends itself to this type of grouping conception. Roeder notes that in prior literature, only the highest level groupings of Liuban have been studied, and that this “final-state” conception leaves much to be desired in how this music can be heard and appreciated on a more immediate level during listening or contemplation. He investigates the development of “flowering” techniques and their relation to grouping as one mode of inquiry into this music. As he summarizes in his conclusion, though, Roeder “hesitates to claim that Chinese musicians conceive of Liuban processively…What I do claim is that when I listen to the melody according to these principles [of process and flowering], many of its features…that otherwise seem arbitrary and unconnected to me instead seem focused towards achieving a specific rhythmic effect that other melodies do not achieve.”\(^7\) Roeder is rightly concerned with the methodological issues that arise when attempting to understand the music outside of one’s own culture, and I appreciated his statement of bias. Too often I find

\(^6\) Ibid., 233.
myself confused as to where the analyst’s assumptions about a culture’s conception of music and his/her own understanding of the music intersect or overlap in an analysis.