

Comparison of Western Music and African Music

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This article provides a review of Western and African music. The study made a comparison of Western and African music against a biased background towards Western music especially during the nineteenth century when music was interpreted from a Euro-centric perspective. It is important to investigate Africa's contributions to the music industry. Different interpretations were informed by lack of literature on African music prior to colonization because African music was not recorded in written form. It was entirely based on oral tradition. Failure by early European ethnomusicologists to appreciate traditional African music further isolated African music. Areas of differences are seen in the way Africans treat their rhythm. African rhythms are complicated as compared to Western rhythm. Data for the study were collected using review of related literature on both Western and African music. Major recommendations from this study are as follows, a cross cultural paradigm is needed to enable researchers related stake holders to understand the significance of both Western and African music.

Keywords: Western Music; African Music; African Rhythms; European Ethnomusicologists; Western Rhythms

Introduction

A comparative study of Western music and African music was always a difficult subject matter to handle in the nineteenth century. One of the major reasons why it was difficult to come up with such a comparison was the fact that African music was not known until the middle of the nineteenth century. In the light of these views, the Western definition of music did not match with African music. However, in the middle of the nineteenth century serious researches which were carried by ethnomusicologists such as Waterman, Merriam and Kauffman led to the understanding of African music. Although their researches triggered disagreements especially when it comes to comparing Western rhythm and Africa rhythm. Therefore, a comparison of Western music and African music can be written through time, beat, rhythm and meter. Also popular marimba songs like Nancy of Western music and Singonki of African music can bring more light in the comparative study of Western music and African music.

Definition of Terms

Music

Aiello and Slobada (1994) define music as, "The art form that expresses feelings and meanings through the qualities of sounds and the relationship between sounds (p. 54). In this view the expression of feelings and meanings is realized through the quality of sound production. A combination of musical elements such as rhythm, tonality, dynamics, and so forth are also involved in an effort of understanding musical sounds. In other words this view can be summarized and defined as organized sound and noise. Davies (1994) stated that, "Music is said to be the language of emotions (p. 5). Following this view,

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music is regarded as an art that is difficult to understand as it is usually influenced by many attributes. For example, definition of music can depend on the culture or society an individual belongs. Therefore, music can be defined as the agreement of the people of a culture as to the sounds and the ways of using these sounds that are pleasant or effective.

Western Music

It is regarded as a type of music that emanated from Europeans and their former colonies. This type of music encompasses most of Western classical music, American jazz, country and pop music and rock and roll.

African Music

Chernoff (1979) defined African music as, "A cultural activity which reveals a group of people organizing and involving themselves with their own communal relationships" (p. 36). Here, music is viewed in terms of communal gathering, where people share the cultural activities of a particular society. The music expresses the day to day activities of life. Barz (2004) defined music "as a social event" (p. 5). On the other hand, Nkenti (1974), seem to concur with Chernoff when he defines African music as, "A public performance that take place on social occasions when members of a group or a community come together for the enjoyment of leisure, for recreational activities" (p. 21). In this case, many scholars agree on the definition of African music as it is viewed as that kind of music that celebrates culture and group gathering.

Importance of Understanding Definitions

Defining, Music, Western music and African music highlighted some interesting issues on comparing Western music

and African music. It appears that the relevancy of sounds is echoed in all the definitions. This is interesting in the sense that, it is a similarity that can be found when defining any type of music despite cultural differences or background. Sound dominates any type of music as it is the focal point of music in general. The issue of cultural aspects brings in many differences as cultural beliefs changes the view of many people when it comes to defining music. For example, most Europeans and Americans believed that music can only be defined along the lines of great composers such as Beethoven, Bach and Mozart. However, as there was no mentioning of African Mozart, Bach and Beethoven, African music was considered noise and most of the instruments which were used did not exist in the western orchestras. This means that understanding the context and definition of one's music is important as it leads to a fruitful comparison (Warren & Warren, 1970).

Function of music in a society is another area of importance that brings misunderstandings as some people fail to understand the functions of music in another culture. Warren and Warren (1970) also pointed out that, "Music follows the African through his entire day from early in the morning till late at night, and through all the changes of his life, from time to time to come into this world until after he has left it" (p. 3). This entails that comparing Western music and African music requires some point of focus, guide such as looking at the comparison of rhythm, meter, time and beat.

Rhythm in Western Music and African Music

Bebery (1975) views rhythm as the reflection of the constant presence of music. This means that rhythm cannot exist without music and it is part and parcel of a combination of sounds that existed in music. In this case, rhythm will be then viewed as the regulating and ordering of tune. A further outgrowth of this view is the fact that rhythm can also be viewed in terms of its relation of tones using patterns of short and long notes. And the relevancy of rhythm in both Western and African music is that, it has meter, tempo, duration and time. It is through these views that some people from western cultures failed to understand African rhythm. Cheronff (1979) stated that, "People from Western cultures historically have had a difficult time understanding anything African, some say that they are bored, that the music is monotonously repetitive..." (p. 27). This confusion led to many conflicting views among scholars, but the main factor was on understanding the issue that African rhythm is controlled by social events and specific situations. Chernoff gave an example of Ashanti children who sings to cure a bed wetter, in Benin they have special songs of children who cuts their first teeth, court music for lovers sung by Hausas in Nigeria, work songs which are common in almost every country in Africa and the rhythm of the Hutu men who puddle a canoe against the current are governed by the situation and social context. Therefore, this brings in the idea of complex rhythm which is the basic characteristic of African music.

Complex rhythms are the major feature of Variation III of the marimba song Singonki. The song started with the basic chords then suddenly changes to some kind of short notes, dotted notes (represented by points in time) mixed by the same chord found in Variations I and II. However, in Variation III the complex rhythm disappears towards the middle and is substituted by the same basic chords which opened the song. It should be noted that the first parts of the Basic pattern, Variation I and II are

also characterized by these complex rhythms but they only appear once. Therefore, this means that rhythm is the foundation of African music as it is indicated in the song Singonki. Senghor in Chernoff (1979) says that, "Rhythm is the basis of all African art" while A. M Jones also pointed out that, "Rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans" (p. 40). Therefore, what it means here is that, although there are some similarities in rhythm, Western music is basically more about harmonic potential of tones. However, a closer look at Nancy the Western marimba solo, rhythm is simple and it is not complex like the type of rhythms we find in Singonki. More active rhythm, shorter note values are only realized in bar 7 where the beat is steady and regular at the same time, there is change of meter to five beats. Also the irregular rhythm of Variation II put some kind of pressure on the first notes. This unfamiliar characteristic of rhythm makes it feel like it is one rhythm and yet the marimba is exerting two rhythms which might be viewed as poly-rhythm. In Nancy there is interlocking of the rhythm in bar 10 where the interlocking occurs between hands.

In most cases complicated rhythms are found in ensembles such as the drum ensembles and marimba ensembles where there is a combination of drums, shakers, clapping, whistling, ululation and dancing. Singonki a Lozi traditional marimba song involves a lot of dancing and that is the reason why the song is characterized by some kind of complicated rhythms. Singonki unlike Nancy encompasses a lot of percussion instruments and always calls for audience involvement. Barz (2004) stated that, "East African rhythms (as is true elsewhere in Africa) are in Balikoowa's understanding more "complex" because they are performed by different ethnic groups who play assorted types of traditional music..." (p. 24). The complex nature of their rhythms emanates from the fact that each individual maintain a certain rhythm which brings out a variety of rhythms. This is typical of Eastern African societies which do not confine themselves to a single rhythm. Another unique aspect of African rhythm especially of Sikuma people of East Africa is that bystanders are given their own repetitive rhythmic pattern of clapping. Normally during such ensembles the leader controls the ensemble through rhythmic changes that signal change of tempo and that is the reason why we do not have tempo making in the marimba song Singonki. Another reason is that the rhythmic change, tempo, time, beat are all guided by the dancers, their intensity will determine the flow of the song.

The issue of African rhythm has often been a point of discussion by many Westerners some refers to these complicated rhythms as poly-rhythm and others confuse it with cross rhythms. Warren and Warren (1970) define poly-rhythm as, "Two or more basic rhythmic patterns going on at the same time" (p. 31). However, cross rhythm is also viewed by Warren and Warren (1970) as a situation, "When the accents of a song follow shortly after the accents of an accompanying rhythm of instruments of handclapping..." (p. 31). The way the notes of Singonki are arranged typically portray a kind of cross rhythm because the way the drum, shakers and clapping will try to accompany the marimba will result in cross rhythm. This is also a significant difference between African music and Western music because Western music is basically comprised of regular rhythmic pattern and bar lines which are put in place when a strong accentual note occurs. Nancy is characterized by a basic rhythmic pattern where we also have a regular beat especially the first three measures. African music does not include the

“three-quarter time” which is common in Western music. Western musicians clap and beat the basic rhythm for example a Beethoven symphony but this does not occur when clapping an African rhythm because of the issue of poly-rhythms and cross rhythms mentioned above. What it basically means is that African rhythm is independently expressed and that is the reason why sometimes it appear to be clapped in the wrong way which many Western musicians view as an “off-beat” but the independent expression maintains the music. Therefore, African music because of the nature of its rhythmic structure it does not involve bar lines but make use of scales and in this respect syncopation does not exist in African music.

A Summary of Major Differences between Western Music and African Music

Agordoh (2005) highlighted quite a number of issues about both Western music and African music. Some of the major differences are summarized below (**Table 1**); Adapted from; African Music, Tradition and Contemporary, Agordoh, A.A (2005; p. 26)

Time, Beat, and Meter

When talking of time, African Music and Western music seem to differ because music in Africa is written in pentatonic scale where there is sliding of notes. For example 2 2 3 2 3 because the language is very tonal especially in Ghana and most of West African countries. The words have a specific tonality and this poise a major difference with Western music when it comes to time, beat and meter. The music is so much concerned about pulsation instead of beats. There is a feeling of pulsation, strong relation to movements and basically the use of a time line is the basis of major differences (Jones, 1954). A time line is often referred to as, repeated grouping of pulses which is what is reflected in the song Singonki, where the notes we find in Western music are represented by points in time. In Nancy time is spacious and sometimes, especially in measures 10 to 16 time stays very regular and steady. However, the time line used in Singonki is mostly used in idiophones and membranophones because they do not have long sounds.

The beat in African music is in most cases given by the dancers as they are part and parcel of the music, and clapping, whistling, and ululating is a way of involving the audiences and that is the reason why they sometimes supply the musicians with the beat. In Western music the beat is in most cases specifically for musicians, they have their main beat. However, in African music, the musicians on the other hand have an additional beat and they keep this beat through their body movements and one Fante drummer was quoted saying that they are guided by what they call a “hidden rhythm”. This rhythm often influences the beat as the musician tries to put in some improvisations (Chernoff, 1979).

Conclusion

The major differences between African music and Western music in the nineteenth century were on what really constitute the definition of music. It only emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century that a comparison of African music and Western music was conducted because there was a better understanding of African music. This understanding came as a

Table 1.

Differences between western music and African music.

WESTERN MUSIC	AFRICAN MUSIC
Music is noted.	It is not notated but passed on through oral tradition.
Distinction is made in terms of “arts” and audience, first group tending to be limited in number.	It is communal, audience are not separated from artists. Music is a part of life, not separated from it.
Music is created and owned by one.	Traditional African music, when created can be used by all.
Music is divorced from aspects of everyday life.	Stress is placed upon activity as an integral functioning part of the society.
There are orchestral instruments which are grouped under the strings, the woodwind, the brass wind and the percussion.	There is an enormous variety of instruments grouped under chordophones (strings), membranophones (drums), aerophones (winds), and idiophones (self-sounding).
There is little or no use of handclapping.	Handclapping is used as an idiophonic device in making music.
Western art music has one rhythm in command. There is unified performance. Western art music sometimes modulates to other keys.	Use of complex rhythms, poly-rhythms. A piece of African music has always 2, 3, or four different rhythms at a time.

result of serious researches of African music which was carried out by ethnomusicologists and some scholars who were interested in carrying out studies of African music. In this discussion it was noted that the major difference between African music and Western music is on what many scholars referred to as complicated rhythm which is a major feature of African rhythm. This difference was also noted in the song Singonki which is characterized by poly-rhythms and cross rhythms. In Nancy, interlocking of the rhythm was also noted and this is also not seen in the song Singonki. However, the only major similarity between the two songs was on the use of time signature which appeared in the two songs.

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