

RECORD REVIEWS

AN EXAMPLE OF HAMMER AND CHISEL MUSIC FROM LIBERIA

Among the excellent recordings which Richard A. Waterman made in West Africa there is one example of work music which is particularly fascinating owing to its unusual character. It is the "Mano Work Song" recorded at Ganta, Northern Liberia.¹ It is not the song itself I wish to discuss but the accompanying music of bell-like sounds produced by the hammers striking the stone-cutting chisels. At first it seems to be an irregular sound produced by hammers of different size and consequently of different pitch. But soon it is realized that, in fact, much more is happening which justifies us in calling it the "music" of the hammers.

The musical score consists of two systems of staves. The first system has two staves: the top staff is labeled 'Individuals' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Group'. The 'Individuals' staff shows a melodic line with several motifs marked with brackets and letters 'a' and 'b'. The 'Group' staff shows a steady 4/4 beat accompaniment. The second system also has two staves, with the top staff continuing the 'Individuals' line and the bottom staff continuing the 'Group' accompaniment. This system includes motifs marked 'b'', 'a'', 'b''', 'a''', and 'b'''. The notation ends with 'etc.' in the bottom right corner.

Figure I

The main group consists, probably of a larger number of hammers of inexact pitch which, with their regular 4/4 beat, give the background to the "music". This presumably represents the main group of workers. I mark this group in the lower staff by the note "c" because a 'c'-sounding tone seems to be predominant among the sounds produced by this group. From this more or less neutral background arise individual sounds of hammers which produce notes that can clearly be identified as forming the scale f-g-b-flat-c-e flat, that is, a pentatonic scale.

As stated, these notes are produced by individual hammers, not by two or more in unison. It may be mentioned here that it was difficult to distinguish everything that was occurring in the recording because of the multiplicity of hammers in the background, and moreover their rich overtones make it equally hard to determine the correct notation. So these examples only show the main musical lines which may be heard.

The notation starts with the ninth bar of the recording when the main beat of the background group is already regulated and the individual hammers start their melodious play. In this particular music which might easily be thought to be accidental with no special meaning, it is important to look for and distinguish the real musical patterns, motifs, rhythms, and form. First we found there was a complete pentatonic scale. Secondly it became clear that the rhythms of the individual parts were of a definite musical character and not merely beats incidental to the work. From the fourth bar onwards it was evident that a rhythmical play takes place which thereafter develops certain variations of bar 4. The main interval and musical motif of these rhythmic variations is the fourth.

As to the melodic line, two definite musical motifs can be recognized: the first one is marked "a", the second one, the fourth motif already mentioned, is marked "b". It is often said of African music that a musical motif is rarely played or sung twice in exactly the same form; and in our example neither motif appears in the same way a second time. The rhythms and the melodic phrases produced in this example of hammer music are so essentially musical in shape that it can be surmised that this is intentional and produced as *music*. The repetitions and variations confirm this supposition.

Some unresolved questions arise from listening to this recording. In many African songs a leader-chorus antiphony is used, and in work songs the leader himself may not work but lead the singing as his sole job; and it may well be that the individual parts of the hammering are carried out in similar fashion by a "leader" with "helpers" or assistants who while holding the main beat of the work can easily "play" with their hammers and produce the music in this way. Another important question is whether the melodic "solo"-hammers are in fact tuned. One cannot answer this question from listening to a record only.

Moreover it would be interesting to know whether this kind of "music" is usual not only among the Mano but whether it is known to other African peoples also. It seems as if there might be a strong relationship to drum music for, in many cases, tuned drums are used, as a number of records from different parts of Africa testify. There might be an even more direct connection with the music of tuned stamping tubes or sticks which are used both in parts of Africa and among the negroes of Haiti as well.²



Figure II

Finally, it should be remembered that music produced by tools is not restricted to Africa. Curt Sachs shows two interesting examples of this kind in his book "Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft"³ The first example noted by Jaap Kunst was the rhythmical music of rice pounding by bamboo pestles as heard in Java, where stamping pestles of different length and size produce different tones. The example in Fig. II gives the rhythmic effect of this pounding music, the high pitched pounders being shown in the upper stave and the lower ones in the lower stave.



Figure III

The second example (*Fig. III*) shows the music which is produced by pounding Kava-roots at the preparation of the famous national drink of the South Sea Islanders. The present example is taken from Ponape, Caroline Islands, Micronesia. Kava is the sacred drink prepared by virgins. The preparation itself is a sacred ritual and associated with certain prescribed ceremonial acts. The Kava roots are pounded on specially chosen flat stones which are tuned to different notes.

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NOTE

Similar "work music" may be heard in the shipyards at Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika, where African workers hammering rust off the steel sides of ships under repair frequently hammer in regular sequences of blows producing a pleasant effect which no doubt assists them in the performance of their monotonous task.

—Editor.

- ¹ Riverside Record RLP 4001, band 20.
- ² Folkways Record P 403, Side II, 5.
Records of tuned drums from Uganda—G.B. 1511. G.B. 1512. (78 r.p.m.)
Music of Africa Series. L.F. 1173. (L.P. 33½ r.p.m.)
Obtainable from the International Library of African Music.
- ³ Leipzig 1930, p.p. 65 and 71.