

#17

Song

In contrast to the uniform time values of song #16, the rhythmic topography of this song is much more highly differentiated. A signature feature of the tune is its melodic rhythm that makes frequent use of the short-short-long rhythmic figure (eighth-eighth-quarter) that manifests 3:2 in the 2-3-1 mode. Otherwise, I find this to be a conventional Ewe dance-drumming song with features shared by many other songs (for example, song #11).

In the recorded performance, the singers enjoy playfully varying the rhythm and melody of the tune. The rhythmic variations affect how the melody moves through four-feel beats with two-note, onbeat-offbeat figures. There are two approaches: short-long (eighth-quarter) or duplet (dotted eighth-dotted eighth). The first note always is on the beat, so the two types of figures differ only in the musical impact of the second note. In the case of the short-long figures, the second notes occur either in unison with strokes in the ball phrase or between the bell's notes, that is, in the "spaces" or "holes" in the bell phrase (pulses 2, 4, 7, 9 or 11). The duplet figures, on the other hand, not only create 2:3 cross rhythms with the ternary pulses within four-feel beats but set up very fast interlocking relationships with bell strokes. In staff notation these composite rhythms would need to be represented as sixteenth-eighth figures that are more typical of drumming than vocal music. The question arises: are these polyrhythmic and polymetric effects intentional? I think so. In my view, the singers' awareness of and familiarity with the aesthetic impact subtle rhythmic variations informs their musical actions.

I have transcribed the vocal performance on two staves--the top for the male singers, the bottom for the females--because the men and women so regularly take different tuneful paths through a given phrase. The norm is to achieve unison on phrase finals. Because everyone sings the same words, their rhythms are in unison but when they do not sing the same pitches we hear "Ewe harmony." The intervals derive from the pitch set that is part of the song's basic nature or identity, in this case, a hemitonic pentatonic scale (1-2 \flat -4-5-6 \flat). The most frequent two-pitch "chord" is a perfect fourth but the other intervals also occur. Again we face the issue of the singers' intention. Should we characterize the singers' musical process as melodic, harmonic, or contrapuntal? In my opinion, the singers primarily are working with tune, that is, they are thinking melodically. However, I believe that the singers are aware of the harmonic consequences of their melodic inventions and purposely seek to create the vertical sonorities that thicken the melodic line.

Drumming

The music of the drums is the same as in composition #7 (3:4 polymeter) but the drum language is different. Sogo is able to express three different drum language texts simply by altering its timbre: B is gaden, C is dega, and D is gaga. GFA presented four different drum language texts during research, although he never plays them quite so plainly on the recorded performance.

In this performance we witness the way sogo and kidi closely listen to each other: when sogo offers a new call, kidi receives it with an appropriate response (see mm.37, 48, 76, 85 and 100). Responding to sogo's change (m.37), kidi leaves its regular 4-pulse

figures and begins a more shapely phrase of 12-pulse duration. In m.48 sogo tells kidi to go back to "basic," which kidi now plays as one bounce followed by three presses. (Sogo calls for the same change in m.76 and back to the modified basic in m.85.) In m.100 sogo returns to the opening call and kidi responds with the two-bounce plus two-press figure, which it repeats until the end of the performance. This sort of interchange between sogo and kidi is typical of Agbadza. In fact, in contemporary Eweland the normal procedure in Agbadza drumming is for the sogo to play together with a kidi phrase for a while and then roll and ask for a new phrase; the music never stops. What marks our project's manner of performing Agbadza as "old school" is this very issue: in each item the sogo and kidi stay on the same theme throughout because GFA has intentionally paired drum language and song text. This is the way Agbadza was played in the time of his great-grandfathers; he is bringing it back.

One special feature of GFA's sogo technique in this performance warrants mention: he uses a special melodic sound on the drum (indicated by diamond-shaped note heads) in which he presses the drum skin with one hand (or elbow) while striking it with the other (mm.29-30, 54-60, 86-89, 112-113). His improvisation in #17 is a remarkable demonstration of his instrumental virtuosity and mastery of Agbadza's musical system.