

Short Notes on Strong Beats: Case Studies in African and Afro-Diasporic Meter

Thematic Topic: Theory and analysis of Latin-American popular music

Many scholars of Sub-Saharan and Afro-Diasporic repertoires often cite the ostensible metrical malleability of the music they study, without acknowledging that performers and enculturated listeners usually only understand one metrical orientation to be correct. For instance, Scherzinger (2010) claims that the “simplest” mbira tunes from Zimbabwe are “maximally ambiguous” from a metrical perspective, and Jones (1957) has been criticized for providing polymetric interpretations of Ewe songs. In particular, Jones’ placement of contrasting barlines appears to be entirely dependent on where long notes fall in each instrument or voice: to him, it is apparent that long notes must always fall on beats, while short ones must always fall on weaker parts of the beat. Thus, because of the metrical expectations they bring, these authors express their own metrical dizziness and fascination instead of showing the conditions for how a knowledgeable listener must entrain to the music if they are to dance to it correctly in a common social setting.

In this paper, I show how some metrical signals that are usually indicative of metrical strength in Western classical music are often found in weak metrical positions in Sub-Saharan and Afro-Diasporic repertoires. Specifically, I observe that short note values seem just as likely to lie on a beat onset as their longer counterparts. This contrasts with music of the Western common practice, where long note values signal metrical strength in what Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983) term “Metrical Preference Rule 5a” (MPR5a).¹

Table 2 shows the results of a limited corpus study, in which I took 15 examples from Simha Arom’s *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm* and from A.M. Jones’ *Studies in African Music*. For each of the pieces, I noted whether note length was always indicative of metrical strength, sometimes indicative, or never indicative. I concluded that MPR5a did not help with establishing the beat in over half of the corpus—in other words, longer note values frequently fell on weak parts of the beat.

As a next step in my exploration, I transcribed several pieces from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa and analyzed which metrical signals, in the form of MPRs, might apply at various pulse-levels. In each of the examples, under the correct metrical structure—determined to be

¹ Table 1 lists the presently relevant metrical preference rules (MPRs) as well as their definitions.

correct by either personal field research, presence of a timekeeper, or dance steps—the shortest note values fall on strong beats.

Example 1 shows the first four measures of the Colombian *currulao*, “¿Lo que suena qué será?” by Grupo Naidy. Every potentially applicable MPR is listed at each metrical level from the fastest, ♪-level, to the slower ♩-level. From measure two onwards, the shortest note values (♪) lie on the beats, while the longer notes (♩) fall on weaker subdivisions. Thus, in the ♪-level of the analysis, MPR5a (highlighted in blue) is at play at almost every pulse *except* on the beats shown one level slower. Therefore, to hear this introduction in the correct metrical framework, a listener cannot understand long notes to carry metrical weight. Instead, looking at MPRs present at slower pulse-levels, it seems that MPR5e and 5f are at play—particularly on the downbeats of measures three and four—meaning that prolonged pitches and changes in harmony are better indicators of strong beats in this repertoire than long note values.

Examples 2 and 3 correspond to “Wigue,” an Afro-pop song by Dobet Gnahoré, and “Kuraya-Kuraya,” a Dagomba children’s song from Ghana. In both, since the shortest note values lie on beats, weighting MPR5a at faster levels would render incorrect interpretations of the beat and measure at higher levels of metrical structure. Example 4 shows mm. 1-6 of “Toro Mata” as performed by Perú Negro. If a listener is to entrain to four compound beats per measure, then when they hear the guitar opening, they must not weight MPR5a strongly, since apart from on the downbeat, the relatively long quarter-notes fall on weak subdivisions of the beat.

Although MPR5a clearly does not work for establishing the correct metrical structure in these case studies, some other metrical preference rules listed by Lerdahl and Jackendoff, as well as rules proposed by other scholars, may indeed help a listener to entrain to a correct metrical hierarchy—the beginnings of pitch or harmonic prolongations (MPR5e and 5f) seem particularly useful here. However, in measures where few MPRs carry to the beat-level or deeper levels, it seems that only prior familiarity with the rhythmic particularities of the style provides a stable understanding of these metrical structures. Thus, what many theorists perceive as metrical ambiguity is simply a structure different from that with which they are accustomed. Indeed, as music psychologists tend to agree on (London 2012), meter perception is above all a learned behavior.

Keywords: Meter. Metrical Preference Rules (MPR’s). African Diaspora.