

62. Mustapha Tettey Addy (Ghana) Agbekor Dance (for Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Agbekor Dance is a war dance which originates with the Ewe people who live on the Atlantic coast of western Africa (the area around south-eastern Ghana). Legend has it that the inspiration for the dance was Ewe hunters' stories of monkeys in the forest changing into human form to dance and play drums. Traditionally the ritualistic purpose of the dance was for warriors to perform to their village before or after battles; indeed Agbekor translates to mean "clear life" and refers to the warrior's state of mind after conflict. It features stylised dance movements which represent the different stages of battle. Nowadays the Agbekor Dance is most commonly witnessed at either community social gatherings (e.g., weddings and funerals) or as cultural entertainment for tourists.

There is no rigid, formalised structure to Agbekor Dance, the music being closely linked to dance movements with the dancers instinctively responding to any changes in the accompaniment.

As with traditional folk music the world over, Agbekor drumming is an oral tradition by which knowledge is passed from generation to generation without using written music. A slow absorption of the style and necessary skills, otherwise known as enculturation, along with much patient instruction, means that an ensemble may spend many months practising in solitude before they feel ready to perform in public. The Ewe people hold skilled drummers in the highest esteem and consider them to have inherited the spirit of their ancestors.

Performing forces and their handling

There are three instruments playing in Agbekor Dance excerpt in the Anthology:-

Gankogui - hand-forged and made of iron this instrument consists of two bells, the smaller, higher-pitched one resting on top of the larger, lower one. The bells are tuned approximately one octave apart in pitch and played with a wooden stick. The gankogui acts as timekeeper throughout an Agbekor performance.

Sogo – known as the “father” drum, the sogo is a barrel shaped drum which is played with sticks, hands, or a combination of both. Two different pitches are produced by altering the playing technique – a rebounding stroke produces the lower-pitched “De” sound and a non-rebounding stroke, whereby the drumhead is dampened or muted, resulting in the higher-pitched “Ku” sound. The sogo acts as the supporting drum in this performance.

Atsimevu – known as the “grandfather” or “master” drum, the atsimevu is the largest drum used in Ewe music. It is semi-cylindrical in shape and derives its name from the tilted position in which it rests on its stand. Playing techniques are similar to the sogo but a greater variety of sounds is to be expected of the performer, with fingers, hand and stick all used and different parts of the drumhead struck to create a large range of timbres. In addition the player can hit the wooden side of the drum to create a very percussive “click” sound and this is indicated on the stave by cross-head notation.

In African music there is a deep-rooted connection between drumming and speech with musicians considering different drumming styles almost as different languages. The wide range of pitches and timbres available to the atsimevu player leads to the expression “talking drum” in this context.

The “master” drum is played by the master drummer who, as the most skilled, experienced and respected member of the ensemble has the function of leader. He is responsible for communicating performance directions to the other players and, in Ewe music, has the most complex part, often including an element of improvisation. The master drummer in Anthology No. 62 is Mustapha Tettey Addy, one of the most famous of Ghanaian musicians.

Texture

- The opening of the extract consists of monophonic gankogui.
- The gankogui plays an ostinato throughout the performance.
- A two-part texture is created halfway through Bar 1 with the entry of the atsimevu.
- Finally, the arrival of the sogo in Bar 3 introduces the highly complex, three part, polyrhythmic texture which, with brief variants, remains with us for the rest of the piece.
- At Bars 29-30 the atsimevu plays in rhythmic unison with the gankogui for two ostinato cycles.
- Homorhythm is very briefly present in the final three notes of the excerpt.

Structure

The structure of African Music is closely related to its function either as dance music or as an accompaniment to everyday activities and tasks. For that reason repetition is the principal structural feature present in the music. Allied to this is a subtle process of variation whereby individual parts will alter to create interest. The piece is through-composed.

- The gankogui ostinato is repeated throughout without any alteration and all other instruments orientate themselves to this vital structural foundation.
- This particular ostinato is the most commonly found pattern in the music of sub-Saharan Africa, and musicologists have named it the standard bell pattern.
- The sogo part also contains a great deal of repetition of a three quaver figure alternating between "De" and "Ku" sounds. Some simple variants are incorporated, e.g., added semiquavers in Bar 6 and dotted rhythm in Bar 36.
- The atsimevu begins with a deceptively simple series of dotted crotchets but as the piece grows, befitting the master drummer's status, the patterns grow in complexity and virtuosity.

Melody

- Although the written score uses Bass and Treble clefs and seems, thereby, to define pitches with total precision, in reality, apart from the gankogui part, all pitches are approximate and cannot be considered melodic in nature.
- Some sense of relative pitch is present in both sogo and atsimevu.
- The atsimevu part, whilst not "melodic" as we would understand the term, does contain high and low notes; at least four different pitches, almost extending to the range of an octave, can be identified.
- The gankogui part does contain a clearly discernible octave interval from A to A.

Tonality & Harmony

Given the aforementioned approximate and relative nature of the drum pitches no sense of either Tonality or Harmony can realistically emerge.

Rhythm and metre

Rhythm and Metre are by far the most important features of Agbekor Dance and involve a complexity of relationships between parts which can seem baffling to Western ears.

- The tempo is fast and the metre is 12/8, compound quadruple.
- The gankogui plays a rhythmic ostinato throughout the performance which serves as a time line and acts as reference point for the other performers.
- Despite the time signature of 12/8, the gankogui part consists of an additive rhythm of 2+3+2+2+3, which gives a syncopated effect.
- The concept of a main beat is fundamental to this music; additionally the gankogui helpfully emphasises the first beat, or downbeat, of each four beat pattern by playing the sole lower octave note in its ostinato.
- The music is polyrhythmic throughout.
- Cross-rhythms are common, e.g., in Bar 14.
- The atsimevu part contains the greatest rhythmic interest and complexity including triplets (e.g., Bar 41), ties (e.g., Bar 44), double dotting (e.g., Bar 8), unusual accents (e.g., Bar 14) and many irregular rhythms (e.g., Bar 38).
- Syncopations are a permanent feature because of the aforementioned gankogui pattern but also appear regularly in the atsimevu part.
- The sogo part from Bar 3 plays a simple three quaver pattern but it is rhythmically displaced to start one quaver after each main beat giving, in metrical terms, an anapaestic effect throughout the piece.
- The master drummer reacts to the playing of the sogo later on in the piece (beginning at the last quaver of Bar 14) by displacing his rhythm to be one quaver before each main beat.
- Metrical disruption is a common feature of the later passagework in the atsimevu part; e.g., in Bar 35 the first half of the bar almost seems to subdivide into three thereby creating a hemiola-like effect and the next beat clearly lapses into simple time.

Whilst it is important for the purposes of musical analysis, and for our admiration of the performers, to understand how the constituent rhythms of Agbekor Dance fit together, we must not forget that it is the cumulative effect which gives this music its hypnotic power. Such ensembles aim for an instinctive, shared precision of timing and rhythmic weight which locks the rhythmic groove together in a totally natural way – it should come as no surprise that Jazz music is the closest we come to emulating such a performing style.

Listening Guide

Vital to a proper understanding of the “feel” of this piece is the notion that a compound quadruple metre is the foundation against which all rhythms react. This can be challenging from the very start where we can easily (and erroneously!) hear the gankogui sounding in simple time; that aural error causes our understanding of gankogui syncopations to be misplaced (in simple time we would hear the initial syncopation on the fourth note but in compound time a syncopation is correctly felt as early as the second note). Once our ears have adapted to hearing the correct metre the seemingly confusing atsimevu entry suddenly fits beautifully into place.