

AN ATTEMPT TO SEGMENT A NENETS' MELODY: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Background. Large part of vocal music in the world allows segmentation of songs into lines of equal length, but there exist music cultures which accept different types of structure. For example, several Siberian nations compose only part of their melodies on the basis of equal duration. One of such nations are the Nenets (they represent circumpolar culture) whose compositional principles are examined in the current research.

Aims. The aim of this research is to establish structural principles in Nenets music, in order to reach thus the idiosyncratic musical thinking of the Nenets.

Methods. An experiment and free interviews have been applied here. Conceptions on the possible segmentation of Nenets melodies of the culture carrier are compared to those of the researcher. The durations in melodies were measured with the help of program *Multi-Speech*.

Results. Based on structure, Nenets songs fall into equal-length compositions and unequal-length compositions. The results of the experiment showed that the conception of a melodic line as a structural unit concurred for the culture carrier and the researcher in case of equal-length compositions. With unequal-length compositions identification of melodic lines presented differences in results.

Conclusions. Differences in segmentation originated from different principles in segmentation. The researcher's approach focused on music (based on repetitive melodic motifs at the beginning of the line); the informant's approach focused on the text (based on syllables with demarcation functions). Furthermore, it appeared that it was important for the representatives of the Nenets traditional culture *what* the singer wanted to say and not *how* he was going to shape it into a song. In the working process emerged also a hypothesis that certain structural phenomena may have religious background.

1. BACKGROUND AND AIMS

American ethnomusicologist Alla Abramovich-Gomon (previously Gomon) has studied Nenets music since the 1970s. She has established two different types of melodies. The first one is a composition with periods of equal duration. Abramovich-Gomon also states that melodies of the first type are characterized by regular metrical organization. Melodies of the second type are free in meter and the duration of a period alternates (Gomon 1980: 213).

In 2000 I had an opportunity to work with two different Forest Nenets informants from the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region in West Siberia. One of them, Tatva Logany (b. 1959) is an excellent singer. [\[IMAGE_151_01.JPG\]](#) His repertoire includes songs in various styles created at different times. The singer lost his eyesight at the age of three. He has not received any formal education and is completely illiterate. The songs that I am going to describe were performed by Tatva Logany.

An other informant, Juri Vella (b. 1948) is known as a Nenets poet. [\[IMAGE_151_02.JPG\]](#) He graduated from the Poetry Department of the Moscow Literature Institute and writes poetry both in the Nenets and Russian languages. He is also well versed in the traditional music of Forest Nenets, and, most importantly, he can analyze it to some extent.

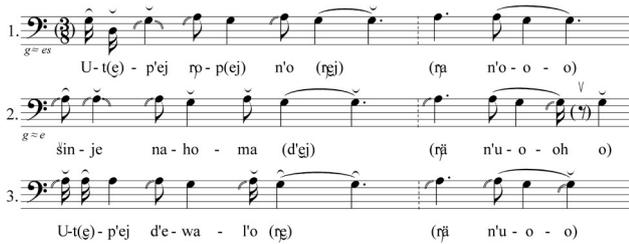
My main purpose was to learn how the Nenets structure their songs into smaller units. I was primarily interested in the melodic line – does this unit exist for a culture carrier and does it coincide with the researcher's view.

Notations I had made before working with Juri Vella suggest that the periods defined by Abramovich-Gomon fall into lines with different features. The basic unit of the period of equal duration is a melodic line, which is repeated with minor changes (referred to below as equal-length compositions). Lines that differ both in length and in pitch structure form periods of alternating length (unequal-length composition) (Ojamaa 2003: 260-262). We will examine two songs: one of them represents an equal-length composition, and the other illustrates an unequal-length composition.

2. SEGMENTING AN EQUAL-LENGTH COMPOSITION

We started to establish structural units in songs where it appeared unproblematic to define melodic lines from the researcher's point of view. These songs consisted of melodic lines with equal length.

The informant's task was to listen to the song and switch off the player where in his opinion one unit ended and another began. Already on first listening Example 1 (Matu's personal song) makes an impression of a song with a regular form, where melodies are of equal length. [\[SOUND_151_01.WAV\]](#) In addition to the melody repeated with minor change, such an impression is enhanced by the text. A sequence of asemantic syllables (*ya no* and variants) is repeated at the end of each line, which could be called a refrain.



Example 1: Matu's personal song

Translation: Utpi is the only son, *nã n'ol* Once upon a time, *nã ñuo-hol* Utpi is an orphan, *nã ñuo* /.

The informant did not have any difficulties in dividing the melody into lines. He did not hesitate when marking the end of the melodic line after the refrain. Thus the conception of the structure of the song by the informant concurred with that of the researcher.

3. SEGMENTING AN UNEQUAL-LENGTH COMPOSITION



Example 2: Utpi's mother's personal song

Translation: In the Pyhlyat-tundra there are one hundred reindeer doe goose necks- / like. One hundred reindeer doe. / The orphans were raised by four Nahany mothers. I raised an orphan. / In Pyhlyat-tundra / there are one hundred reindeer doe like a flock of geese /.

Example 2 (Utpi's mother's personal song) presents a song that we propose to call unequal-length composition. [\[SOUND_151_02.WAV\]](#)

The notation of Example 2 presents the researcher's conception of the structure of the song. It is based on the repetition of similar melodic motifs. It means that the motif that opens the first melodic line of the song will also open the following lines.

The informant listened to the whole song twice without making any interruptions. He considered it only natural that he was unable to determine where the line changed. In the informant's view it is great art to be able to sing so that the lines fuse together – not everyone is capable of that. After this, as he was expected to segment the song, the informant tried to find suitable places for interruptions. The results are marked in the notation by vertical lines, with encircled numbers at the top.

In order to make sure that he had marked the end of the line in the right place, the informant tried to perform the song himself. He was not satisfied with the outcome, that is, he was unable to sing exactly the way the original singer had performed it. He then decided to find out if the text might help to structure the song. It appeared that the informant did not have a clear conception how to segment the text into lines. He divided the text into segments that were easy to translate, but they were too short to stand for melodic lines. In notation these segment boundaries are marked by lines that end with a number surrounded by a rectangle.

The informant explained that the Nenets have many songs where a sentence carries on to the next melodic line, therefore songs cannot be divided into melodic lines based on the text. We may add that it is a compositional peculiarity observed by ethnomusicologists analyzing the music of various Siberian nations. For example, an Hungarian ethnomusicologist Katalin Lázár writes about Khanty music that the melodic units and the text units need not overlap. It is quite common that one sings the beginning of a sentence at the end of one melodic line and the end of the sentence occurs at the beginning of the next melodic line. According to Lázár, this is how the singers try to achieve the feeling of continuity in the song (Lázár 1988: 291).

In connection with defining the line boundaries Juri Vella also added: "Europeans breathe when the line ends, and it helps us to establish the end of the line. The Nenets breathe at random positions, so that breathing does not show anything."

His claim presents, of course, only part of the truth. It is well-known that breathing pauses do not always fall to the end of the line even in the performance of European vocal music, be it in art or folk music. On the other hand, breathing in Nenets songs is not always arbitrary, as we could see in Example 3. [\[SOUND_151_03.WAV\]](#)

A breathing pause does not finish a melodic line, but it still appears in a regular position. A breathing pause is followed by a segment that combines a previous line with the next, thus rendering the song as if an uninterrupted sequence.

1. *pa*-h(ej) - ta - ho - o - o - *pa*- (d'e)j
(pe) w'e- šat taw-(te-e-e-e - we)- li'e (peh η'i)

2. man' (jej) n'im-mi - i - (ei) - *pa* - t(e)
(pej) šij- ka - lha - ho-o-o - ou *pa*-ne (peh - η'i)

Example 3: Household-Spirit-like Nynny (narrative song)

Translation: I didn't make it here unaided. / My name is Household-Spirit-like Nynny. /

Example 3 demonstrates a feature that has presumably a connection with shamanism. A Siberian shamanic ritual is a responsory in a musical sense. Tradition dictates that singing should continue uninterrupted, because otherwise it could not reach the gods and spirits. Such principle of continuity may have transposed to secular music. Secular songs are solo songs where it is impossible to hide breathing pauses with responsory technique. It could be suggested that the Nenets compensate this lack with shifting pauses into positions where they have the least impact on the unity of the song.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The segmenting of Nenets songs into what we refer to as equal-length compositions (Examples 1 and 3) indicated that the conception of melodic lines concur both for the culture carrier and the researcher. However, it should be added that strictly speaking, melodic lines in equal-length compositions are not of equal duration. An interesting contradiction emerged. The unequal length of the lines may have been caused by the refrain. In Example 1 it diminishes in each consecutive line both in time (3648, 3571 and 2725 msec.) and in number of structural units (i.e. the number of eighths varies in refrains). On the other hand, the major factor making us perceive these lines to be identical while listening to the song is particularly the presence of the refrain, and its regular repetition at the end of each line.

In segmenting that song which we describe with the term *unequal-length composition* (Example 2), the opinions of the tradition carrier and the researcher partly differed. The basis for the structuring of the song in notation was a repetitive melodic motif. Its repetition was irregular, which also determined the unequal length of the lines.

The informant was unable to explain his criteria for deciding upon the change of lines. Initially they seem to be determined at random. In course of a more thorough analysis it appears that this is not the case. The informant has made quite logical choices in marking line change, but his logic is different from that of the researcher. While the researcher's variant considers the beginning

of a line to be most important, then the informant proceeds from the end of a line. A longer sequence of asemantic syllables (asemantic syllables in the song text are given in brackets) or a breathing pause with following asemantic syllable(s) appear in demarcation functions in Nenets songs. This is the case in songs with refrains, and in those without refrains containing lines of unequal length. The informant has indicated line break after the mentioned sequences. The major difference in the songs is generally the occurrence of one longer sequence of asemantic syllables in equal length compositions, as opposed to several such sequences in unequal length compositions.

1. *g=es* U- t(e) - p'ej ηp- p(ej) n'o (pej) (pa n'o - o - o)

Figure 1: Location of the sequence of asemantic syllables in equal-length composition

1. *g=f* Pej- h'a- t(a- aj) w'en- k(e - e - ej) - na (pe - e - ei) d'oh-(le) - d'a-
at - če - (e - e-e - e) d'ap-tu w'e-ek-(e - e - e-e - ej)

Figure 2: Location of the sequences of asemantic syllables in unequal-length composition

While referring to Leonard Meyer (e.g., Meyer 1968: 34-35) we may claim that the appearance of such a sequence is a clear stimulus to the informant, making him to expect an (probable) ending to a structural unit. This would also explain the reason for the informant not to fixate the end of the line right after the first sequence, without waiting for the additional musical events.

If we now were to compare again the results of segmentation, we may see that the difference in the conceptions of the informant and the researcher are not that great in fact. Also the lines segmented by the researcher end with a sequence of asemantic syllables, though not with the one appearing initially but with the one that is followed by a particular repetitive melodic motif.

It was undoubtedly untraditional for the informant to divide songs into melodic lines, and yet it proved to be an applicable procedure. In Example 1, the informant found it possible to split lines also into two half-lines by marking the border before the refrain. An attempt to break up the line into even smaller units (e.g., bars) was a complete failure. The measure 3/8 is the interpretation of the transcriber. Such a grouping is suggested by the regularity observable in the alternation of durations, which does not mean, however, that the culture carriers likewise do it. There are no bar-lines given in the notation, because the range of variation of duration is significant: the duration of an eighth occurs between 300 to 500 msec.

Example 2 is characterized by free meter. The duration of an eighth fluctuates between 200 to 450 msec. But in contrast to Example 1, the durations do not fall into groups of even imaginary bars. Thus the conclusions drawn from the current analysis concur with earlier observations by Abramovich-Gomon, according to which periods of equal length present regular meter, and periods of alternating length present free meter (Gomon, *op. cit.*).

Based on the experiment results and interviews we may state that the approach of the researcher focuses on music (is based mostly on particular melodic motifs), while the informant's approach is focused on the text (is based on the sequence of syllables). Hereby emerges an essential principle that governs the musical thinking of the Nenets. We can illustrate it also with the following fragment from an interview.

Researcher: "Do Nenets singers occasionally make mistakes, sing wrong notes for instance, like a pianist may hit a wrong key while playing a piano piece?"

Informant: "How could you make mistakes when you know the content of the song – when you know what you wish to tell about? Then you would also know the right words you have to sing."

5. REFERENCES

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