

PERCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY IN THE TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF CENTRAL AFRICA

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One may say that in the traditional music of Central Africa ambiguity is omnipresent. Ambiguity concerns the constituent parameters of the organisation of time as well as those of pitch, blurring on both domains the perceptual orientation of the observer foreign to the culture under consideration.

Organisation of time: on its majority, the music of this region is cyclic. It obeys a regular periodicity based upon an entire and even number of equidistant and non-hierarchical pulsations, which, for the most part, are not materialised : between the period and the pulsation, there is no intermediate marker that would be the equivalent to a regular strong beat.

The rhythmic events produced in this music can, or can not, contain accents. When they have accents, two possibilities may occur : their distribution is regular – but regularly contrametric (offbeat) – or their spacing is irregular.

In the numerous repertoires which are devoided of any accentuation, the rhythmic organisation is based on the opposition of timbres, or even only on the contrast between durations.

In all cases, the perceptual orientation is not easy.

Organisation of pitch: the most widespread scale in this region is the anhemitonic pentatonic, which is not well-tempered. The tuning of the instruments is deliberately ambiguous, to which the buzzing of vibrating elements is added. This two phenomena render the perception of the degrees of the scale extremely difficult to apprehend. Yet, at the same time, these phenomena confer to the instruments more melodic resources.

Two other principles, that concern the melodic configurations, must be mentioned : the principle of commutation – that consists of substituting two or more sounds in a given position of the cycle ; the principle of mutation, that allows every piece to be performed in any of the five possible configurations of the pentatonic scale.

All these phenomena contribute to create and maintain a constant tension. Therefore, ambiguity may be considered as a constituent principle of this music.