



Thought and play in musical rhythm: Asian, African, and Euro-American perspectives

edited by Richard Wolf, Stephen Blum and Christopher Hasty, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2019, 440 pp., £29.99 (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-1908-4149-2

Rainer Polak

To cite this article: Rainer Polak (2020): Thought and play in musical rhythm: Asian, African, and Euro-American perspectives, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, DOI: [10.1080/17411912.2020.1839925](https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1839925)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1839925>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Nov 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 79



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Thought and play in musical rhythm: Asian, African, and Euro-American perspectives, edited by Richard Wolf, Stephen Blum and Christopher Hasty, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2019, 440 pp., £29.99 (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-1908-4149-2

Since the 2000s, a wave of mutual opening between music theory and ethnomusicology has become apparent. The most prominent platform for this interdisciplinary exchange is the *Analytical Approaches to World Music* movement, which has two edited volumes (Tenzer 2006; Tenzer and Roeder 2011), a biennial conference, and an online journal (www.aawmjournal.com) under its flag. The main thrust of this movement is the application of music-analytical perspectives to culturally diverse genres and repertoires. The edited volume reviewed here works in a similar spirit, dealing with the topic of musical rhythm in a wide range of musical cultures from different regions of the world. The thirteen chapters focus on the analysis of formal and conceptual aspects of rhythm. Together, they offer a multi-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspective, which combines viewpoints of music analysis, music theory, historical musicology, comparative musicology, and ethnomusicology.

The team of editors consists of two ethnomusicologists, Richard K. Wolf and Stephen Blum, and a music theorist, Christopher Hasty. In their introduction, they decisively reject the idea that rhythm is an 'element' of music. Instead, they emphasise that everything which could be understood as an element of music – for example, sound, melody and harmony – is necessarily realised in the process of events that unfold over time. The editors further suggest that the chapters should be read with special attention to the relationship between universalising and local (genre- or culture-specific) approaches to theoretical conceptualisations and performance practices of rhythm in music. They list six themes that they propose run through the chapters: forms of representation, units of rhythmic patterning, periodicity/cycle, meter, experiential qualities, and interactions (e.g. between performers or ensemble parts).

The thirteen chapters are not divided into sections. However, a certain structure is created by the fact that two contributions by Christopher Hasty at the beginning and at the end literally frame the book. Hasty's opening contribution is a theoretical treatise of a largely propositional character, which only towards the end refers to illustrative analyses of European religious and art music. He sets out key concepts of his theory of rhythm as an event-based, always contingent, constantly changing, and often unpredictable process. His ambition is to integrate subjective and objective, experiential and representational aspects or, as the title of this chapter reads, *Thinking With and About Rhythm*. Hasty's second contribution – the final chapter of the book – examines new metric possibilities as explored in compositions of new music from Japan, USA, and Europe in the late twentieth century. One characteristic of this music, the study suggests, is its intention to challenge or at least playfully complicate expectations of metric regularity which some listeners (or metric theories) might bring into the game.

John Roeder's contribution can be read as a précis and presents a brilliant application of the core concept of Hasty's opus magnum, *Meter as Rhythm* (1997): the concept of meter as the perception of event durations projected forward in time. For Hasty, this 'from event to event' measuring in a highly dynamic reference framework of metric projections already is

meter, that is to say a process that is as metric as it can get. By contrast, other theories – for example, those based on the concept of a hierarchy of pulse trains (e.g. London 2012) – would see this event to event evaluation only as a meter-finding mechanism, but not yet as a fully established metric percept (see Caskel 2020 for a historical and theoretical discussion of the duration-based Hastian as opposed to pulse-based metric theories; see Mirka 2009 for an applied approach to integrating both perspectives; and for some direct debate, see London 1999 and Hasty 1999). By applying Hastian projective analysis to pieces from Iran, Papua New Guinea and India, Roeder is able to propose plausible interpretations of musical intentions that work with types of freedom and degrees of regularity. This understanding goes considerably beyond the analytically less productive concept of so-called ‘free’ rhythm, which is negatively defined as non-pulsed or unmeasured rhythm.

Stephen Blum’s chapter on Persian music theory and performance practice is also inspired by Hastian thought. The performance of Persian sung poetry, Blum argues, flexibly follows the prosody and meters of poetic language, which is less strictly periodic than universalist theories of meter often assume, but that also should not be confused with unmeasured rhythm. Thus, the argument is similar in theoretical thrust to Roeder’s, and ultimately Hasty’s work.

David Locke’s study of rhythm in the genre *Agbadza* from Ghana stringently applies a set of rigorous analytical concepts that he has developed over decades. Locke’s overarching claim is that ensemble polyrhythm in Ghana is metrically malleable and thus open to multidimensional interpretations, deliberately playing with perceptual uncertainty, rivalry and multi-stability. His contribution to the present volume productively integrates the analysis of ensemble drumming, singing, and dance.

Eugene Montague argues for the recognition of the bodily conditions and processes involved in the production of music. The selected examples of classical piano music playing and punk rock drumming and singing are stimulatingly diverse. Montague focuses on physical constraints: for example, when we are not already where we want to be when learning, practicing or rehearsing, or when the tempo in performance is too fast or threatens to be too fast. This is a clever choice with regard to the goal of showing the significance of the body in making music.

Fernando Benadon analyses virtuosic, playful, polymetric drum solos played over ostinati by internationally known modern (fusion) drummers such as Steve Gadd and Trilok Gurtu, among others. Benadon introduces the analytical concept of ‘synchronisation space’ to illuminate the deliberately and astonishingly complex relationships that modern drummers create between the rhythms they play, the stable ostinati in which the rhythms linger, and the (poly)meters they allude to and question at the same time.

Sumarsam’s chapter deals with the complex concept of *irama* in the theory of Javanese gamelan. *Irama* concerns the relationships between tempo, metric density and rhythmic pattern, the changes within which contribute to the creation of musical form. The discussion of this concept benefits from a thorough contextualisation in the regional history of its theoretical discourse.

The chapter by Takanori Fujita explores rhythmic elasticity in the theory, training and performance of Japanese *Noh* songs, their percussive accompaniment, and the interaction between drummers and singers. A fascinating phenomenon in this context is a positively valued (micro)rhythmic detachment between the ensemble members. This style of temporal coordination, which explicitly acknowledges large asynchronies between the performers, is reminiscent of Charles Keil’s (1987) concept of participatory discrepancies, which has recently been challenged by experimental studies (Butterfield 2010; Senn et al. 2016).

Miriam Roving Olsen examines local conceptions of musical time held by Berber-speaking people in the Atlas mountains of Morocco. The communal celebration music (*ahwas*) in

this region shows unique rhythmic-metric transformations (e.g. from what might be represented in conventional time signatures as 4/4 to 7/8) tied to structural accelerandi (Lortat-Jacob 1980). Olsen describes how local participants theorise temporal aspects of their performance practice in very different terms. Instead of using music-theoretical concepts typical of Euro-American discourse (e.g. rhythm, meter, and rhythmic/metric transformation), they employ botanical metaphors of plant growth that relate to their everyday life as farmers.

James Kippen contributes a chapter on the music history of North India. He explores music-theoretical treatises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to trace a profound change in the notion and performance of *tal*, the central rhythmic-metric concept in Hindustani music. Kippen links to Perso-Arabic influences the increasingly central role of the *theke*, which is a form of fixed composition that drummers and particularly tabla players use to lay out the identity and characteristics of the *tal* under performance. This increasing prominence of the *theke* indicates a change in the concept of *tal* from a largely quantitative structure of a cyclic temporal space to a qualitatively characterised representation of that space.

Richard Widdess' chapter develops the theoretical concept of heterometric music in South Asia. Heterometric structure emerges from metric changes within a piece, that is, when metric cycles of different length follow each other in a specific order. Widdess triangulates regional comparison (including South India, North India and Nepal) with historical, cultural and cognitive interpretations, creating a rich perspective on the concept.

Richard K. Wolf, similarly to Widdess, offers an empirically rich, comparative perspective across South Asia, drawing on his extensive fieldwork in India, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Wolf argues, on the one hand, that metered percussion music from the region can be more flexible than established notions of rhythm in South Asia tend to assume; and, on the other hand, that *alap* performance in 'classical' music from India may be more temporally regulated than its status as a key example of free or unmetred rhythm would suggest.

The book comes with many musical examples in diverse notational systems and a companion website that provides media for most of the chapters. This assists greatly in the conceptual and sensory understanding of the written analyses. Overall, the volume is successful in its goal of putting local and universalising conceptualisations of rhythm into productive tension. While some chapters insist on the relevance of local ethnotheories (which would not be considered music theory from a narrower, conventional point of view), other chapters use a modest degree of culturally/geographically plausible generalisation to move from local theoretical concepts to abstractions at the regional level. Still others revise a universalistic concept, such as meter, in the light of, and enlightening, previously disregarded materials (for instance, those conventionally relegated to the residual category of 'free' rhythm). The book succeeds also in pointing to the relevance of event- and process-oriented perspectives on rhythm, even though not every chapter works under that assumption, or towards that goal.

Thought And Play In Musical Rhythm is a uniquely rich compendium for performing musicians, teachers, composers, music theorists and (ethno)musicologists who are interested in the cultural diversity of musical rhythm. Many readers will be drawn to the editors' suggestion that the study of rhythm by definition amounts to an acknowledgement of the temporal dimension and thus the processual nature of music, which invites perspectives on performance and experience. However, the majority of chapters do not say much about the performers' experiences and performance contexts of the music they focus on. Rather, the strength of the book lies in the many insights into rhythmic experience from the perspective of a distanced audience or experienced listener, a perspective frequently taken in music theory. This often concerns the authors' own listenings, whose positionality is not much

discussed, rather than those of the communities of practice who created the music under study. Those ethnomusicologists who tend to find analytical approaches to formal characteristics of music problematic (e.g. Rice 2014: 62) are unlikely to accept such perspectives without reservations. However, this should not diminish the value of the reviewed volume as an effort on the borderline of music theory and ethnomusicology.

References

- Butterfield, Matthew W. 2010. 'Participatory Discrepancies and the Perception of Beats in Jazz'. *Music Perception* 27(3): 151–175.
- Caskel, Julian. 2020. *Die Theorie des Rhythmus. Geschichte und Ästhetik einer Denkfigur des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Hasty, Christopher Francis. 1997. *Meter as Rhythm*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1999. 'Just In Time for More Dichotomies – A Hasty Response. Response to Justin London's review of 'Meter as Rhythm''. *Music Theory Spectrum* 21(2): 275–293.
- Keil, Charles. 1987. 'Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music'. *Cultural Anthropology* 2(3): 275–283.
- London, Justin. 1999. 'Hasty's Dichotomy. Review of 'Meter as Rhythm' by Christopher Hasty'. *Music Theory Spectrum* 21(2): 260–274.
- . 2012. *Hearing in Time. Psychological Aspects of Musical Meter*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lortat-Jacob, Bernard. 1980. *Musique et Fêtes au Haut-Atlas*. Paris: Mouton Éd.
- Mirka, Danuta. 2009. *Metric Manipulations in Haydn and Mozart. Chamber Music for Strings, 1787–1791*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rice, Timothy. 2014. *Ethnomusicology. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Senn, Olivier, Lorenz Kilchenmann, Richard von Georgi and Claudia Bullerjahn. 2016. 'The Effect of Expert Performance Microtiming on Listeners' Experience of Groove in Swing or Funk Music'. *Frontiers in Psychology* 7: Article 1487. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01487.
- Tenzer, Michael, ed. 2006. *Analytical Studies in World Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tenzer, Michael and John Roeder, eds. 2011. *Analytical and Cross-Cultural Studies in World Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rainer Polak

Music Department, Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics

 rainer.polak@ae.mpg.de

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1839925>

