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ETHIOPIAN VOCAL POLYPHONIC TECHNIQUES: A GLOBAL INSIGHT*

Introduction

The first object of this article is to draw the (ethno)musicologist's attention to traditional polyphonic music from Ethiopia, a country strangely neglected by systematic researches in spite of an incredible diversity of people, languages and cultures. Due to that diversity, only vocal polyphony will be presented here. Our second objective is to show through selected examples that all kind of polyphonies can be found in that Eastern African country. Till now, it was common to consider that polyphony was the privilege of southern Ethiopian populations. Our third purpose is to point out that different kinds of polyphonic techniques are also at work in other parts of the country.

For that purpose, different kinds of sources have been used. The first one is taken from the late Jean Jenkings recordings done in the field between 1962 and 1966. Her LP published in 1970 by Tangent Records, re-issued by Ocora/Radio-France in 1994 is still the best general outline on the subject. Besides Simha Arom's recordings on Jewish Ethiopian liturgical music published in Paris in 1990, the other valuable source is coming from a vast corpus of recent recordings done in the framework of two international programs - respectively the French-Ethiopian cooperation program in Ethnomusicology (2000-2003); the *Ethiopian Traditional Music; Dances and Instruments* Unesco/Norwegian-Funds-in-Trust program (2004-2008) – for which many French and Overseas students cooperated with me.

Needless to say that our presentation here cannot be exhaustive: a full book should be devoted to that matter. However, although limited, the different following given examples will provide a global insight of different kinds of polyphonies still taking place in Ethiopia. For that matter, we will follow the typology of polyphonic techniques as established by Simha Arom and his team of ethnomusicologists at CNRS Paris – from which I belong – published in 2005 in Einaudi Encyclopaedia of Music (Enciclopedia della Musica, vol. V, 2007 for the French Edition).
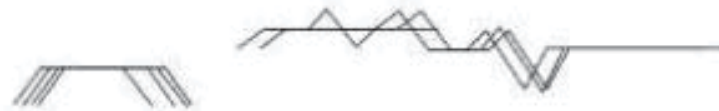
Heterophony

Heterophony does not belong to polyphony by the very fact of non-systematic structural principles. However, because it includes many different kinds of multi-linear expressions – some of them being very closed to polyphony – its mention seems appropriate for introducing our presentation. Heterophony is characterized by

a more or less simultaneous performance of two (or more) sounding sources *of the same melodic reference*. This is in pieces which are non-measured and where melodic phrases are especially long that the phenomenon is particularly obvious: performers may start and finish (almost) together the same melodic line, trying to do so in between with little success due to the lack of adequate tools.

In some cases, performers even do not try to sing together, as illustrated by the singing of the Kemant (Agaw) population, living in North-East of Ethiopia (Tourny, *unpublished*). There, strong heterophony is considered as the ordinary and the right way for collective singing. *'We always perform like this'* say the high priests and priests when singing *Kedassie*, the main Kemant ritual. *Anemeni*, a singing prayer taken from that ritual is based on the following melodic contour:

However, its collective rendition – repeated three times – sounds much more like this:

Many other factors can produce heterophony, like the possible disparity of competence between performers, the specificity and the diversity of their apprenticeship and/or geographic origins. In the case of the Jewish Ethiopian liturgical music, coming from the Northern historical part of the country, the melodic system based on *centonisation* (i.e. musical patchwork) generates sometimes multi-part singing that is very closed to polyphony. The entire system working on just nine melodic stereotypes (Tourny, *under press*), it happens that some priests from the choir may use another melody than this expressed by their colleagues, a melody structurally different, although considered as culturally identical. In the first two verses of the prayer *Aytie ma 'Aytie* for the day of Atonement, the soloist uses, respectively, the two lines (ex. 1,2).

In their answer, members of the choir uses both of them (ex. 3).

In other words, the superposition of melodic patterns generated by *centonisation* is a possible explanation – among others – of the genesis of Polyphony.

Overlapping

In a context considered as *monodic* where two (or more) performers alternate, overlapping may occur by the *anticipation of one melodic line before the ending of the second one*. This produces a rudimental polyphony:

This phenomenon is also considered as a possible explanation for the birth of polyphony: the earlier the anticipation comes about, the more the melodic lines overlaps and the more polyphony takes place. This theory can be illustrated by the following example coming from the Bench (former Ghimira), living in Southwestern Ethiopia (ex. 4). In a wedding song dedicated to the bride, one singer systematically overlaps with a second singer to such a point that their two different melodies come frequently together.

Drone

Drone refers to *one or more holding notes working as a basis for one or more melodies*. It can be simple (one line) or multiple (different lines), continuous or discontinuous. This universally used technique can be found in different parts of Ethiopia. In south central Sidama region for example (*cf.* Jenkins, 1994), a soloist dialogues with a chorus producing a singing discontinuous drone. Then, the drone choir divides into two. One pants while the other produces a singular vibrato (ex. 5).

More in the south, collective men songs from Arbore people (Gabbert, *unpublished*), displays many examples of drone singing. In the following one, like in many cases, the drone performed by the choir acts clearly as the modal term of reference of the piece, as expressed by the *finalis* of the melodic part (ex. 6).

In another piece, where two soloists alternate, an additional line enriches that modal drone, in parallel third. With the main singing tone of the soloist expressed a third above, a common chord regularly emerges from the ensemble (ex. 7)

Homorhythm

Homorythm proceeds from *the realization of two or more different parts subjected to the same rhythmical organisation*. Melodic movements can be parallel or divergent. Parallel

movement is widely used in Africa, being in thirds, fourths or fifths. It is typical to collective singing of Rashaidas, a Bedouin people populating the Northern part of Ethiopia (*cf.* Jenkins 1994). In a song devoted to big Muslim festivals, choirs of men and women are repeating together one single melodic pattern, each choir being con-

ducted, respectively, by the leader of the community and his wife. At the beginning of the piece, the women's leader starts to sing in parallel fourth with the men) (ex.8), joined afterwards by the other women in parallel fifths, producing outstanding consonances (ex. 9).

That interval of fifth then becomes the rule till the end of the piece (ex. 10).

According to Jean Jenkins (1994), this kind of parallel singing in parallel fifths may be the result of physiological differences between male and female voices and could illustrate another theory of the origin of polyphony.

Imitation

Imitation in music can be produced through four different ways: a) the temporal gap between the musical pattern and its imitation does not vary; b) the imitation starts – or not – from the same pitch than this of the musical pattern; c) the imitation reproduces – or not – the same time values than these of the musical pattern; d) the imitation reproduces – or not – the same melodic frame than this of the musical pattern.

Canon represents the most perfect form of imitation by the fact that the temporal gap between the musical pattern and its imitation does not vary and that the imitation is the exact

reproduction of the melodic pattern. The following piece, *Alelo*, taken from the Southern

Maale repertoire (Ferran 2005), is a remarkable illustration of imitation in music. Two soloist girls sing in canon, striking wooden blocks, while a choir of men and women dance around them, singing in imitation another melodic pattern (ex. 11).

Hocket

Hocket results from a *rigorous temporal interpolation between different parts performed in the framework of a unique scalar system, producing here and there musical consonances*. The interweaving between notes is generated by their juxtaposition and/or by their overlapping. In many cases, each part produces one single note, but one can find – especially in vocal music – series of different notes, like in the following example taken from the Ari polyphonic music, coming from south western Ethiopia (Fournel 2002). The performance of *Weya*, a piece used for big festivals, starts with two women singing short motives, then progressively joined by the five parts of the choir, each one producing one single pitch (ex. 12).

Counterpoint

In oral traditions, counterpoint represents the most complex polyphonic technique. Most of the time, it occurs in music that is measured. Counterpoint refers to all kind of polyphonic forms based on the superposition of two – or more – distinct melodic lines whose rhythmical articulations differ. Melodic movements may be similar or divergent. In Ethiopia, instrumental counterpoint is used all over the coun-

try, whereas vocal counterpoint is frequently associated with music instruments. Imitation, overlapping, hocket, homorythmic texture and drone are all kind of techniques that can be used in countrapuntic

music. In southern and western Ethiopia, one could find many striking kind of vocal counterpoint. The taken example could seem much less spectacular in that it presents the combination between just two female voices recorded in Harar, the eastern Ethiopian Muslim holy city (*cf.* Jenkins 1994). That choice is motivated by two main reasons. The first one is that it clearly illustrates counterpoint singing, using different adding techniques such as overlapping, imitation and homorhythm. The second one is aesthetic. The style, which is typical to that east African population sounds very close to many polyphonic songs from Balkans and East European areas, due to its singular consonances, forcing voices and typical glottal endings (ex. 13).

Conclusion

Far from being exhaustive, our presentation nevertheless provides a basic knowledge of vocal polyphonies taking place in Ethiopia. It is clear that traditional music from Nilo-Saharan and Omotic populations shares many common patterns with their western and southern African neighbours, as well as traditional music from Cushitic and Ethio-Semitic populations shares many common patterns with their northern and eastern neighbours. The strong manifestation of polyphony among the numerous populations concentrated in the State of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia is a fact that is pretty well known. Unfortunately, till now, these southern polyphonies have overshadowed the other multipart music that take place in the rest of the country. Less known, these polyphonies are not less systematic, singular and worthy.

From a musical point of view, all kind of multi-part vocal techniques can be found among the Ethiopian populations, from the simplest one to the most elaborated one, from the most expected one to the most surprising one. The same occur with instrumental and vocal-instrumental polyphonies. And when we realize that our knowledge in that field is still patchy, the recent coming of a new generation of ethnomusicologists and anthropologists in Ethiopia is a cheering prospect.

Notes

[1] I would like to express my gratitude towards Echi Gabbert for her kind permission for the use of her Arbore recorded material and Hugo Ferran for his expertise concerning Maale vocal music.

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მაგალითი 1. ლოცვა *Aytie ma 'Aytie/.* პირველი სტროფი
Example 1. Prayer *Aytie ma 'Aytie/.* Verse 1

მაგალითი 2. ლოცვა *Aytie ma 'Aytie/.* მეორე სტროფი
Example 2. Prayer *Aytie ma 'Aytie/.* Verse 2

მაგალითი 3. ლოცვა *Aytie ma 'Aytie/.* გუნდის პასუხი
Example 3. Prayer *Aytie ma 'Aytie/.* Choir response

მაგალითი 4. ბატარძლისადმი მიძღვნილი საქორწილო სიმღერა. [ბენჩი (ყოფილი გიმირა). სამხრეთ დასავლეთი ეთიოპია] (Jenkins, 1994)
Example 4. Wedding song of the Bench people (former Ghimira, South Western Ethiopia), dedicated to bride (Jenkins, 1994).

მაგალითი 5. სოლისტის დიალოგები გუნდთან. ცენტრალური სიდამა, ეთიოპია
(Jenkins, 1994)
Example 5. Soloist dialogues with chorus. Central Sidama, Ethiopia (Jenkins, 1994)

მაგალითი 6. მამაკაცების კოლექტიური სიმღერა (არბორე, სამხრეთ ეთიოპია.
გაბერტი, გამოუქვეყნებელი)
Example 6. Collective men songs from Arbore people. South Ethiopia (Gabbert, *unpublished*)

etc.

მაგალითი 7. ფრაგმენტი ნიმუშიდან ბურდონით პარალელურ ტერციებში
Example 7. Fragment of the piece, with drone in parallel third

etc...

მაგალითი 8. რაშაიდას (ბედუინები, ჩრდილოეთ ეთიოპია, Jenkins, 1994) სიმღერის დასაწყისი – ქალების დამწყები პარალელური კვარტებით მღერის მამაკაცთან
Example 8. The beginning of the collective song of Rashaidas, a Bedouin people populating of North Ethiopia (Jenkins, 1994). The women's leader starts to sing in parallel fourth with the men

მაგალითი 9. რაშაიდას სიმღერის გაგრძელება, პარალელური კვინტებით (ქალების პარტიაში)
Example 9. The song of Rashaidas continued by other women in parallel fifths.

მაგალითი 10. ნიმუშის დასასრული პარალელური კვინტებით
Example 10. End of the piece with parallel fifths

Women

Men

მაგალითი 11. *Alelo,* სამხრეთ მაალეს რეპერტუარიდან (Ferran, 2005)
Example 11. *Alelo,* from the Southern Maale repertoire (Ferran, 2005)

Soloist 1

Soloist 2

Choir 1

Choir 2

Soloist 1

Soloist 2

Choir 1

Choir 2

etc.

ოლივიე ტურნი. დანართი

მაგალითი 12. *Weya*, სამხრეთდასავლეთ ეთიოპიიდან (Fournel, 2002)
Example 12. *Weya*, from South Western Ethiopia (Fournel, 2002)

მაგალითი 13. *Weya*, სამხრეთდასავლეთ ეთიოპიიდან (Fournel, 2002)
Example 13. *Weya*, from South Western Ethiopia (Fournel, 2002)