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Between Introspection and Exhibition: Body-related Aspects of Musical Performances.

Visual Signaling, Motional Patterns, Tactility, and the Significance of Playing a Guitar Behind One's Head*

Overview[1]

This paper will focus on non-auditory aspects of musical performances but will exclude all phenomena that could be labeled as dance movements. Dramatic or theatrical aspects (such as acting or specific stage outfits, etc.) will only be considered insofar as they are directly linked to the production of sound. My intention is to provide a tentative typology of body-related aspects of music-making. Thus, three types or settings in which they play a vital role in musical performances will be discussed and illustrated by examples taken from various cultures.

1. Visual signaling

Probably the most obvious cases of non-dance body activities are certain movements of the performers that may serve as structural signals, i.e. as means of externalizing cognitive concepts[2] hidden in the musical sound stream. Let us look at some examples.

In Carnatic, i.e. South Indian classical, music one may audibly clap the underlying metro-rhythmical cycles, called *tāla*, of the metered sections of a piece.[3] It is also common practice that musicians and/or knowledgeable listeners in the audience mark the metrical structure by mere gestures of their hands, i.e. without any sound. Thus, one of the most frequently played cycles, *āditālam*, consisting of 4 + 2 + 2 beats, would be rendered inaudibly by putting the two palms together in a vertical motion on the first beat of each segment, by counting off the three remaining beats [66] of the first segment (4) with the fingers of the active hand and by laying it into the palm of the other hand on the weaker beats of the two last segments (2 + 2). From an intra-cultural point of view, these gestures are completely sufficient to identify the specific metrical cycle (*tāla*) being performed. This

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[2] U. Wegner, "Cognitive dissonance as an experimental device in ethnomusicological research," [in:] *For Gerhard Kubik. Festschrift on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*, eds. A. Schmidhofer and D. Schüller, Frankfurt am Main and New York: Peter Lang, 1994, p. 462.

[3] On Carnatic *tāla* cf. for instance D.P. Nelson, "Karnatak Tala," [in:] *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, v: *South Asia. The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. A. Arnold, New York and London: Garland, 2000, pp. 138–161.

visual rendering of what is going on in the music at the same time may help members of the audience whose musical expertise is not sufficient to reliably identify the *tāla* themselves. It is also an opportunity to present oneself as a musical connoisseur.

Likewise in North Indian Hindustani music, especially in those virtuosic passages where a melodic soloist is in constant dialogue with the drummer (usually a *tablā* player) and each tries to challenge the other by playing metrically-disorienting phrases, musicians sometimes look at each other in accord when returning to the metrically focal point of *sam*, i.e. to the downbeat, or "one," of the underlying *tāla* cycles[4] after their sometimes mystifying excursions. This is not only a moment of appreciation of each other's control of metro-rhythmical intricacies, but also serves as a display of their virtuosity vis-à-vis the audience.

Nodding one's head or tapping one's foot as a visual marker of the metric system that underlies a musical performance is also found in jazz or among African musicians. Especially in traditional African music it may be difficult for a non-specialist to reliably deduce the metrical orientation from the performance, since a regular, isochronous beat is not always materialized, i.e. played, by any of the musicians. It may be just in their minds as a mental grid to which they fit their respective musical patterns. A vivid example taken from the repertoire of the Central African Gbaya people has been presented by Simha Arom. Consider the following cyclical pattern, which seems to consist of six time units, five of which sound while one is silent[5]:

x x x x x .

Cyclical pattern of the Gbaya

Hearing this without any accompaniment or reference, one would certainly not expect that this pattern is, in fact, based – at least in the Gbaya tradition – on a cycle of eight beats with a ternary subdivision yielding the 24 smallest units or pulses. Thus[6]:

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| ' ' | ' ' | ' ' | ' ' | ' ' | ' ' | ' ' | ' ' |
x . . . x . . . x . . . x . . . x . . . . . . .
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Beat relationship of the rhythmic pattern shown above[**] [67]

[4] On Hindustani *tāla* cf. for instance J.R. Kippen, "Hindustani Tala," [in:] *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, v: *South Asia. The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. A. Arnold, New York and London: Garland, 2000, pp. 110–137.

[5] In this kind of notation, an x represents a stroke, or impact; a dot stands for a silent pulse.

[6] In this notation, vertical marks indicate the pulses; the longer marks represent the metric framework, i.e. the beat.

[**] After S. Arom, "The constituting features of Central African rhythmic systems: a tentative typology," *The World of Music*, 26/1 (1984), p. 61. [In contrast to the submitted text this footnote is missing in the published version.]

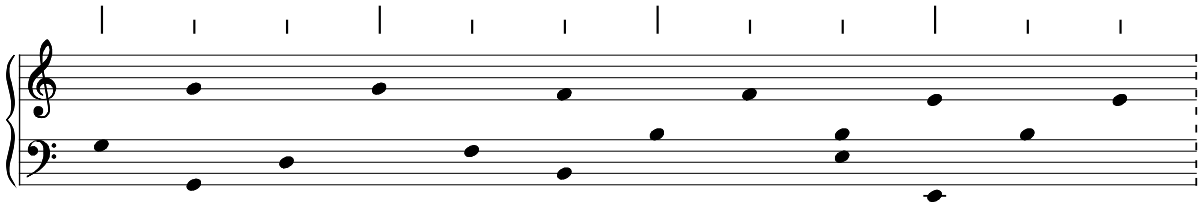
Since these relationships are often hard to track down in verbal discourse, it has proven useful to have musical specialists of the culture indicate the metric system visually through their body movements, either isochronously clapping their hands or nodding their heads regularly in order to communicate the indigenous concept. Another option would be to look at the movements of local dancers in order to pin down metrically heavy points in time.

Interpreting visual behavior in this manner is by no means confined to percussion instruments. I would like to demonstrate this by giving an example from the repertoire of Shona *mbira* music.[7] The playing style of these lamellophones will be discussed in detail in the third section of this paper. Here, I want to draw the reader's attention to melodic patterns which are composed in a regular way, consisting of groups of four notes. The following example is an abstract version of the melodic rhythms of the left and right hand in one version of the traditional piece *Bangiza*, as played by the Shona musician, Chris Mhlanga[8]:

R	.	x	.	x	.	x	.	x
L	x	x	x	.	x	x	x	.

Four-pulse melodic pattern in Shona *mbira* music

The characteristic three-note groups in the bass (left hand) followed by a one-pulse rest combined with a regular alternation of notes and rests in the upper register (right hand) evoke a melodic segmentation into four-note groups. The metric basis of pieces like this, however, is again a ternary subdivision of the beats yielding the following result:



Excerpt from the *mbira* piece *Bangiza*, as played by Chris Mhlanga[9]

Anybody not thoroughly familiar with this musical idiom could only guess where the 4 against 3 cross-rhythm should coincide. Even those members of the culture who are not

[7] I have discussed this music in much more detail elsewhere: G. Grupe, *Die Kunst des mbira-Spiels (The Art of Mbira Playing). Harmonische Struktur und Patternbildung in der Lamellophonmusik der Shona in Zimbabwe,* Tutzing: Schneider, 2004.

[8] Adapted from G. Grupe, *Die Kunst*, p. 302. R and L indicate the right and left hand respectively. The recurring gestalt is marked in gray.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 303.

music specialists are usually unsure of the emically correct relationship between this kind of pattern played on the *mbira* and the underlying meter. [68] From within the tradition there is only one proper way of synchronizing these two layers, and it is by no means accidental. While it is usually difficult to verbally discuss this issue with musicians, they can indicate the temporal position of the beats while playing with absolute certainty, for instance by nodding their heads.

Another case in point where looking at the performer may play an important role is that of Western conductors. Although they act, of course, primarily as the leader of an ensemble, the visual effect of their bodily performance can be compared to the other cases mentioned here because it may provide clues to the appropriate interpretation of the performance. In fact, a conductor's body language will usually include dramatic/theatrical aspects in varying degrees, as well (see also type 2).

2. Idiosyncratic ways of handling a musical instrument

Somewhat less obvious may be the unconventional handling of musical instruments, i.e. idiosyncratic playing styles and techniques, which in some cases form an integral part of a performer's (musical) personality. Physical behavior and sound (music) may be complementary in their deviation from standard practice, but need not necessarily be so. Thus, although non-standardized ways of handling an instrument might go along with a quite usual musical result and could, therefore, be considered more dramatic in nature, i.e. as some kind of acting, there are cases where an unorthodox musical interpretation is underscored by the specific way the human body is employed in these performances. Body percussion as a special case of embodiment, i.e. employing the human body as a percussion instrument, will not, however, be considered here.

Particularly in Western popular music, one can expect to encounter performers striving to stand out against their competitors not only by employing extra-musical means such as showy clothes or hairdos but also by a more or less extravagant handling of their instruments. A well-known case in point was the rock guitar player Jimi Hendrix, who among other things sometimes plucked the strings with his teeth or played the guitar while holding it behind his neck. He was quite capable of integrating these rather awkward ways of playing into his virtuoso performance, thus underscoring his outstanding control of the instrument. In his case these non-standard ways of playing went together rather well with his new and rather unorthodox guitar style, while anybody doing this today would most likely be considered a mere imitator accepted by audiences only in the case of a cover band.

Looking at jazz, we find people like Ornette Coleman, who used to upset audiences and critics of his time not only by playing on a plastic saxophone but also by performing on the violin and trumpet in a most unconventional manner.[10] There have certainly been a number of rather peculiar personalities in jazz, such as Sun Ra and his "cosmic" approach,

[10] E. Jost, *Free Jazz. Stilkritische Untersuchungen zum Jazz der 60er Jahre*, Mainz: Schott, 1975, pp. 52, 73.

culminating in performances where he attempted to use [69] a telescope to look at the stars although the roof of the concert hall was blocking the view.[11] Likewise, the pianist Thelonious Monk is famous for his unconventional way of playing the piano intended to provoke a certain musical (auditory) result and also for his somewhat "quaint" manner at the piano. He sometimes seemed to be almost disgusted by the object in front of him, touching the keys as if they were contaminated or getting on his nerves. Actually, for this and the other examples cited in this paper, it may be helpful to study some video footage in order to see for oneself how music and body go together there.[12]

Although one might not expect it, we find this phenomenon in the domain of Western classical music, as well. Certain idiosyncrasies, like a swaying body or sweeping gestures by a pianist, may be considered acceptable as long as they do not interfere with the quality of the performance but rather underscore the interpretation of a passage or the piece. The performances of the famous pianist Glenn Gould were characterized, among other things, by his sitting on a real chair with a backrest instead of a piano stool. While any piano teacher encountering this in a student would most likely tell him or her to abandon the habit as soon as possible, the undersized height of the chair resulting in a far too low playing posture as compared to the accepted standards, it became something like a trademark for Gould – an odd character in Western classical music, just like Monk in the field of jazz.

It is quite interesting that there are hardly any examples of a similar attitude to be found in non-Western cultures. Is it that we do not know enough about them yet or is it that such idiosyncrasies are simply not customary? Visual information does, of course, play a role in some musical settings. In the case of horn ensemble performers among the Central African Banda people who form a circle when playing,[13] the spatial position, for example, seems particularly important. When, for instance, unorthodox playing styles are employed, like placing xylophone slabs on one's legs[14] or circular breathing when playing double-reed instruments like the Turkish *zurna*, these methods usually turn out to be conventional within the particular tradition.

Such spectacular displays of showmanship as Hendrix's are rarely found in non-Western traditions. Certainly, there are examples like Nigerian *juju* musicians who (used to) throw their tambourine into the air and catch it again in time, i.e. at the rhythmically correct moment,[15] but this approach to music-making seems to be much more common in Western countries. Just think of all the jazz, rock, and marching-band drummers who twirl the drum sticks between their fingers, thus [70] filling musical rests in a flashy way, and have them

[11] *Ibid*., p. 220.
[12] Many examples were found – at the time of writing – on the website www.youtube.com.
[13] S. Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm: Musical Structure and Methodology*, Cambridge: CUP, 1991.
[14] A. Schmidhofer, *Das Xylophonspiel der Mädchen. Zum afrikanischen Erbe in der Musik Madagaskars*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995.
[15] C.A. Waterman, *Jùjú. A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music*, Chicago: UCP, 1990, p. 63.

ready again in playing position just at the right moment. In those instances where a musical instrument is played in a manner which is regarded as unusual within a tradition, this may be due to other reasons, as in the case of some Javanese *gamelan* musicians who – as I can relate from personal experience – can play *gendèr* and other metallophones or also gong chimes like those of the *bonang* family from the "wrong" side of the instrument. Here, the rationale is not to show off, as is the case with certain rock keyboarders like Little Richard or Keith Emerson who used to do this in their performances, but rather to facilitate demonstrating a musical passage on the instrument to a student who watches from the "right" side at the same time.

Generally speaking, a musician's specific use of his/her body can become a trademark, or calling card, of his/her personal style, just like particular musical features, e.g. phrasing and individual "versions" attributed to that musician or markedly different "interpretations" of a given piece. In comparing visual performance and auditory performance, visual aspects can reach a level where they may even interfere with the musical performance, e.g. making it more difficult to play, as has been mentioned in respect to Hendrix's playing of the guitar. Another case in point is the manner of performing of the two famous rock-jazz drummers Billy Cobham and Alphonse Mouzon. The latter was said to have challenged his colleague to play very fast rhythms on the bass drum while wearing the high-heeled "plateau" boots that were popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as opposed to the sneakers Cobham used to wear in order to facilitate quick movements.[16]

3. Introspection or self-reflexivity

Probably the least obvious examples that need to be discussed here come from certain musical idioms in which the playing of musical instruments encompasses the systematic use of either motional patterns or tactile sensations as central features of a musical performance.[17] In both cases, although essential to the idiom, these parts of the performance are perceived only from the musician's perspective, i.e. they cannot be perceived by the audience, except in their audible aspect. Two cases in point are the motional-rhythmic patterns of Shona *mbira* music and tactile aspects of playing the Chinese zither *qin*.

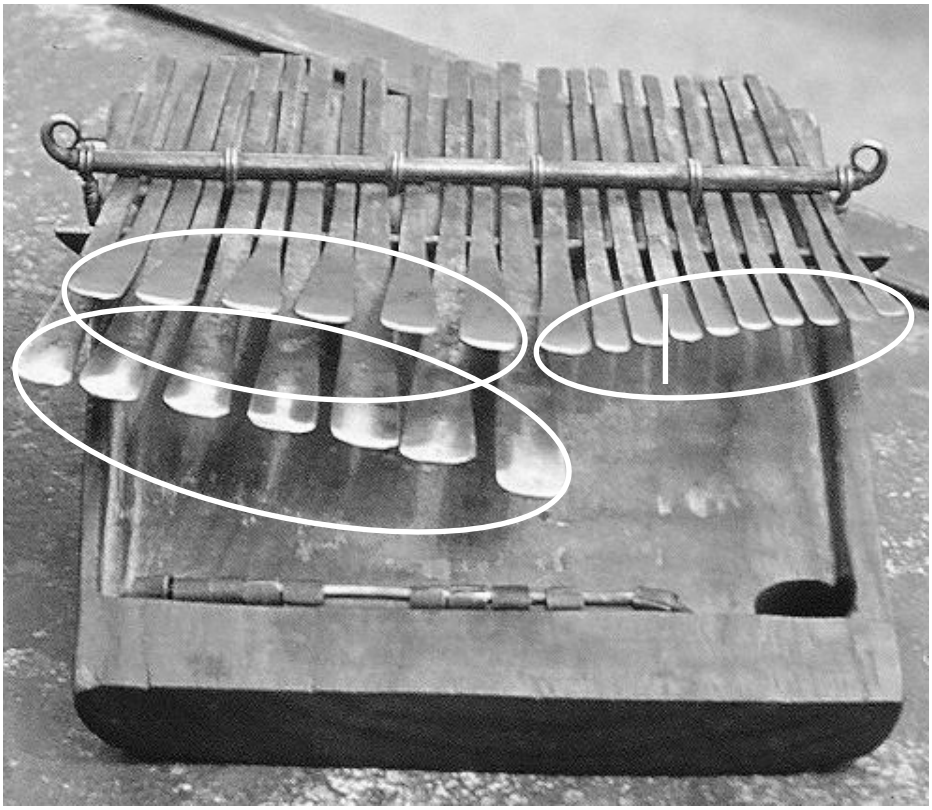
We have already come across the Shona *mbira* in the first section of this paper. Now, I would like to turn to another aspect of this tradition. Regardless of whether [71] the traditional pieces are played for ancestor spirits or for entertainment, a typical sound feature they have in common, produced by an ensemble usually consisting of several *mbira* plus *hosho* rattles, is the loud noise made, not only by the *hosho*, but also by the bottle tops

[16] Unfortunately, at present I am unable to give a written source for this information. It used to be common knowledge among musicians in Berlin during that time and came from an interview given by Mouzon.

[17] This section draws partly on a paper of mine discussing the relationship between music and motion: G. Grupe, "Taktile und motionale Elemente beim Musizieren am Beispiel *qin* und *mbira,*" [in:] *Klang und Bewegung. Beiträge zu einer Grundkonstellation*, eds. C. Brüstle and A. Riethmüller, Aachen: Shaker, 2004, pp. 83–103.

(or metal rings) attached to the lamellophones and their external gourd resonators. As regards tonal structure, *mbira* music is characterized by intricate harmonic progressions, although these are partly masked by the instrument's noise-producing devices. Another aspect of *mbira* performance, namely the systematic use of motional patterns, which in turn produce the auditory result appreciated by listeners, is also particularly interesting for our topic. These patterns outline an additional artistic dimension directly accessible only to the performers themselves. Even if onlookers might catch a glimpse of these fingerings, which is rather unlikely due to the large calabash resonators hiding the lamellophones from their view, the patterns form motional gestalts that can hardly be detected by a non-performer in real time.[18]

An *mbira* consists of at least 22 metal lamellae which cover a range of more than three octaves. Three digits, the left and the right thumb and the right index finger, pluck the keys. These are arranged in three manuals forming four playing areas, as illustrated in the following figure:



The four playing areas of a Shona *mbira* (marked by white circles; photo: Gerd Grupe)

On the left side of the instrument there are the left lower manual (abbreviated LL in the following examples) and the left upper manual (LU), both plucked by the left thumb. On the right side, we find the playing areas of the right thumb (to the left of the vertical line; RT)

[18] For further discussion of *mbira* music, see G. Grupe, *Die Kunst des mbira-Spiels*.

and the right index finger (to the right of the [72] vertical line; RI). These playing areas are often used in a highly regular, cyclical manner, yielding the motional patterns already mentioned. They may be grouped into those which support and those which go against, or mask, the underlying beat of the piece, which, as you may recall, is characterized by its ternary subdivision (see section 1).

Here, I would like to cite two examples illustrating the systematic use of the four playing areas. Since we have already dealt with the second category in section 1, I would like to show two examples that belong to the first type. They both confirm the beat, because their temporal relationship to the underlying meter is always the same (see figs. below).

	'	|	'	'	|	'
RI	x	.	.	x	.	.
RT	.	x	.	.	x	.
LU	.	x	.	.	x	.
LL	.	.	x	.	.	x

A pattern with a three-pulse gestalt supporting the beat

	'	|	'	'	|	'	'	|	'	'	|	'
RI	x	.	x	.	.	.	x	.	x	.	.	.
RT	.	.	.	.	x	.	.	.	.	.	x	.
LU	x	.	.	x	.	.	x	.	.	x	.	.
LL	.	x	.	.	x	.	.	x	.	.	x	.

A pattern with a six-pulse gestalt supporting the beat

While listeners certainly hear the acoustic result of these fingerings as a distinct rhythmic pattern, it is only the performers themselves who can appreciate the bodily dimension of playing an *mbira* in this way.

The Chinese board zither *qin*, or *guqin*, i.e. the "old" *qin*, has a slightly convex soundboard without frets or moveable bridges. The instrument is usually placed on a table and the seven silk strings are plucked without a plectrum by the right hand while the left stops the strings. The *qin* was traditionally regarded as a musical instrument of the literati, and it constituted (even if it just hung on a wall) a typical attribute of a scholar. During the Tang dynasty (approx. 600–900 CE) it was counted among the so-called "three friends" of man, along with wine and poetry, [73] that should always be close at hand.[19] It was not meant to be played for a large audience or with the intention of triggering a significant outward effect. Rather, its low volume and soft nuances of sound production made it a fairly private instru-

[19] M. Dahmer, *Qin. Die klassische chinesische Griffbrettzither und ihre Musik in Geschichte, Geschichten und Gedichten*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1985, p. 6.

ment. Traditional compositions are preserved in a specific form of notation[20] that accounts for the four most important features that define a tone: the plucking finger, the stopping finger, the string, and the stopping mark on the soundboard. Altogether some eighty symbols are used to describe the tone production. As far as performance practice is concerned, portamento and vibrato are used widely and four different types of tones are recognized: "tones of heaven," i.e. flageolet tones; "tones of the earth," i.e. open strings; "tones of humans," i.e. stopped tones; and "empty" or "silent" tones. "Empty" tones especially are of particular importance to an understanding of *qin* music. Manfred Dahmer has described them in the following manner:

> After a stopped tone has been struck on a string, the stopping finger glides to the position of a new tone, which is now sounding without a new attack. The longer such a glissando takes or the more tones are produced without new plucking, the lower the volume of the tones gets. Usually after the third tone, only the sound of the finger gliding over the rough silk string is discernible. But the performer feels the tones with his fingers, follows them mentally and perceives them internally. Thus, these tones exist only in the internal perception of the performer. Therefore, the listener misses these tones and the tactile sensation of the performance. This may be an important reason why the *qin* has never become a musical instrument to be listened to by an audience.[21]

This has been confirmed by Liang Mingyue,[22] a scholar of Chinese music and performer on the *qin*, who explained that the "way of the *qin,*" *qin dao*, is characterized, not only by the art of listening, but also by the art of touching. According to him, "listening with the fingers" is an eminent feature of this tradition. The tactile element thus forms a central part of the aesthetic experience of this music, which should not be reduced to the produced sound alone.

Conclusion

Body-related aspects of musical performances cover a broad range of settings, which may be differentiated on the basis of their visibility and, therefore, their potential impact on the audience. While the perception of some processes remains confined to the person actively involved, i.e. the musician, there are other cases where body language either supplements the personal style of a performer or may [74] help us to gain insights into cognitive musical concepts, particularly where it helps us to identify emically meaningful clues to the correct interpretation of what can be heard. The body obviously has vast potential as a source of information on music that should not be neglected in research.

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[20] B. Yung, *Celestial Airs of Antiquity. Music of the Seven-String Zither of China*, Madison: A-R Editions, 1997.
[21] M. Dahmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–52 (translation G.G.).
[22] Cf. M. Liang, *Music of the Billion: An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture*, New York and Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen, 1985, pp. 208–211.

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