

ROOTS OF BLACK MUSIC

THE VOCAL, INSTRUMENTAL, AND DANCE
HERITAGE OF AFRICA AND BLACK AMERICA

ASHENAFI KEBEDE



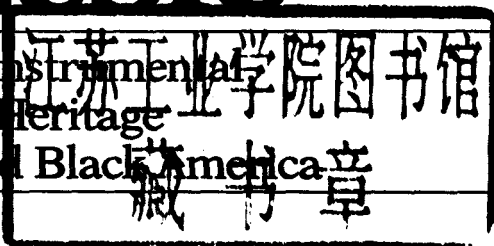
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The Vocal, Instrumental
and Dance Heritage
of Africa and Black America



Ashenafi Kebede
Professor of Music



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Preface

The creation of this book was preceded by several years of lesson planning while teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in ethnomusicology and black studies at the National School of Music, Ethiopia; Queens College; the Ph.D. program in music of the graduate school, City University of New York; Brandeis University; and currently at Florida State University. Hence, it is a result of several successful experiments in the classroom during a span of fifteen years. The continuous discussion of the purposes, goals, and means of black music studies with my students and colleagues was followed by a critical analysis of the results as I have observed them. The consequent urgent need for a new approach to the teaching of an introductory course in the music of African and African-derived peoples led to the development of the materials in this book.

Flexibility and Readability

Roots of Black Music is specially designed to be of value to the student or layman interested in gaining an understanding of music in the context of African and Afro-American cultures. Unlike most other books so far printed on African music, this work deals with both oriental and sub-Saharan cultures. Trade relations between northern and sub-Saharan Africans were maintained from ancient to present times. Merchants crossed the desert in both directions to sell and buy gold, salt, ivory, and cloth. Because the great majority of the people are Moslems, Islam is the unifying lifestyle in North Africa. The majority of the inhabitants are racially Mediterranean (caucasoids) with negroid admixture—including the Berbers and the Tuaregs (who are often classified as Berbers); the eastern Mediterra-

means include the Egyptians, the Beja of Sudan in the Red Sea area, and most Ethiopians—such as the Amhara, Eritrea, Tigré, Galla, Somali, and Bu Nukimas. Consequently, racial classifications become rather complex and unnecessary. The most negroid tribes of sub-Saharan Africa have members with light skins, pale eyes, and caucasian features that are commonly associated with nonnegroid peoples. On the other hand, there are among the most caucasoid groups people with negroid features, such as averted lips, frizzy hair, and large flat noses. Hence, I have made every effort not to divide the peoples of the continent upon unclear racial lines (as almost all books have done in the past).

Organization

The term *lifestyle* is used to designate a distinctive manner or way of existence. In discussions of music, the term *style* alone operates at different levels of specificity. For example, we can be very general and speak of non-European or non-Western music style as opposed to a European or Western style of music. We can talk about an African music style, as distinct from the general non-Western music style. Similarly, we can also deal with a style of music that is black American. We can be specific and discuss the Nigerian style distinct from the African style of music. It is possible to be more specific and describe the minstrel (*azmari*) music style of Ethiopia; we can even specialize and discuss the style of a single performer within the *azmari* tradition. It is possible to describe the jazz style of music, as distinct from the general black American style of music. Still more spe-

cifically, we can describe the style of a single vocalist, such as Leadbelly. Description of a musical style includes its technical and artistic elements, methods of performance, the relationship of the performer(s) and the audience, attitudes toward music, the social role of the music, and its relationship with other branches of art such as dance, poetry, and drama.

The materials of the book are presented in five parts. The first deals with vocal music. Part II is devoted to the study of musical instruments. The mythological and symbolic attributes of music are presented in Part III. Dance is discussed in Part IV. Part V is concerned with urban music and the African roots of black American music.

All the sections on music contain carefully prepared discographies. These lists of recordings will provide the reader with a wide spectrum of musical examples especially chosen for their high degree of authenticity. This book is not just a compilation of secondary sources. It is also based on my own research, travels, and fieldwork in Africa, the Near East, and the United States of America. I have, however, consulted the works of numerous authorities on music in African and Afro-American cultures. Thus, the selected bibliography at the end of each chapter will serve as an excellent source of reference for those people interested in pursuing their studies on a subject at a more advanced level.

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My colleagues Professors Paul Berliner, William Hughes, and William Kennedy were kind enough to read sections of the

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Credits

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I VOCAL MUSIC

1 Song: Its Types, Functions, and Methods of Performance

The voice is the most natural, artistic, and spontaneous way of making music by means of the human body. Consequently, singing is the commonest and the most universal characteristic of all the music languages of the world's people. There is no society in the world that does not have vocal music.

Words and melody are combined in a *song*. Sometimes *vocables*, or linguistically meaningless syllables, are used to accompany a melody. Some songs consist of a repetitive, simple, and relatively short melody set to a long, complex, and continuous text or poem. A song in which a great poem is combined with an equally great melody enhances an artistic feeling in the appreciative listener. Songs, however, vary from culture to culture in their content, purpose, structure, form, text, aesthetics, perform-

ance, and many other socially defined traits. After all, music, like language, is culturally patterned sound. As there are many languages, so there are also many musics. Imagination and active listening will be required in order to understand and appreciate a few of the diverse musical languages of non-European cultures. A good listener is always an informed one. Cultural information and technical knowledge advance a better understanding of the feeling and significance conveyed by the sound of music. Active listening requires discipline and involvement. "Art, like love," Joseph Machlis has said, "is easier to experience than define." The greater our knowledge and involvement, the higher our awareness and the intensity of our experience.

¹Joseph Machlis, *The Enjoyment of Music*, p. 7.

Functions and Types of Songs

Music provides an excellent means for the presentation of words. This is another universal characteristic of music. Throughout the world's cultures, stories, plays, religious psalms and incantations, and emotional outpourings of all types are often presented through music.

Vocal music may be divided into two large categories: *sacred* and *secular songs*. *Sacred songs* in general serve the objectives of religious worship; the human voice is thus used as a medium of communication with the supernatural, with a god or gods, to enhance religious meditation or to advance peace and harmony between a person and his universe. *Chanting*, a recitation of religious texts, is used to appease spirits or deities in both monotheistic and polytheistic religions of the world.

We discover here probably the most important of all the functions of music: a person's constant search or desire for communication with the unknown, the supernatural, or a supreme being through the use of sacred chants and songs.

Secular songs are worldly by the intent and content of their texts. Love songs are the most common of the secular type. Secular song topics generally deal with all human experiences outside

the sphere of religion. There are hunting songs, ballads, drinking songs, insult songs, and bawdy songs. Other secular song types express complaint or social commentary. These songs are concerned with interrelationships between the sexes, the social and political classes, and the individual and the family.

Musical experiences permeate the whole course of human life. Music in Africa and Asia, as in all non-European cultures, is deeply ingrained in the way of life. Thus, songs are performed when a baby is born or given its name or put to sleep. Circumcision songs are popular among people who practice it. Songs are used to educate the young. Some songs teach youth the male and female codes and mores of society; others are sung to correct unruly behavior. West Africans even claim to have songs that attract termites.

Some songs have both secular and sacred characteristics. In West Africa, for example, funerals are accompanied by vocal music and dance. These songs are sung to appease the spirit of the deceased in order to maintain harmony for the living; the dead body is lavishly entertained before it enters its final rest. The difference between sacred and secular is not always easy to define.

Styles of Performance

A song may be sung *solo*, by one person, accompanied or unaccompanied by an instrument. It is a common practice

around the world to find a singer accompanying himself on an instrument; sometimes the same person may be the poet,

composer, and performer. A solo voice may be accompanied by a single instrument or a group of instruments; in this case, the vocal melody is considered more important than the accompanying instrument(s).

A song may also be performed by two people, as a *duet*, or by three, as a *trio*. A *quartet* refers to a performance of music by four; *quintet*, by five; *sextet*, by six; *septet*, by seven; *octet*, by eight; the performance of music by nine persons is called *nonet*. The performers may be made up of any combination of vocalists and/or instrumentalists. A *chorus*, however, is an exclusive organization of more than nine singers. Most African and Asian vocal groups number between ten and twenty-five. Religious music is often

performed a *cappella*, without instrumental accompaniment.

Texts of songs are generally set to melodies in two ways. The syllables of the text are equally distributed among the tones of the melody in a *syllabic song*; in other words, each syllable is sung to a tone. When one syllable is extended over several notes of the accompanying melody, the style of performance becomes *melismatic*. An example of a syllabic song is provided in Figure 1.1.

The versatility of the human voice is interestingly demonstrated in the areas of *voice masking* and imitation of musical instruments. Voice masking is often accomplished by singing or talking through a musical instrument, such as a horn or a flute. In this case, the instru-

Figure 1.1. A syllabic Amhara lullaby, "Ushururu."² Text translation:

Ushururu (vocal) my child, my baby.

1. You are on my back when I grind and when I spin,
come down my baby, my back is sore.

2. I, the baby's mother, will come back to see him.

Mother will bring him bread and milk in her arms.

Ushururu, my child, shururu.

Lento

U - shu - ru - ru - ru - ru, ma - mu - ye shu - ru - ru. U - shu - ru - ru - ru - ru, li - -

djye shu - ru - ru. 1. si - fe - Cim a - zi - ye si - fet - lim a - zi - ye, jer - ba -

2. ye - ma - mu - - ye na - ti to - lo ne yi - le - ti, we - te -

ye te - la - Te na wu - red ma - mu - ye

tun be - gu - ya da - bo yize - shi - le - ti. U - shu - ru - ru - ru ma - mu - ye shu - ru - ru.

²For a version of this and many other lullabies, see Dorothy Berliner Commins, *Lullabies of the World*.

ment is used primarily as a megaphone, and the identity of the person singing will not be recognized by his voice. Wearing masks and voice masking are very common practices, particularly in the magicoreligious ceremonials throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The human voice can also imitate the sounds of nature—

bird calls, mating calls of animals—as well as musical instruments. *Ululation*, a shrill, high sound, is often produced by women in oriental Africa to demonstrate pleasure over a performance or activity; it is used in many ways to express approval, similar to the Euro-American clapping of hands.

Song Structure

The performer communicates ideas to his listeners through music. Purely instrumental music, because of its illusive and intangible nature, may be harder to comprehend than vocal music. Meaning in vocal music is often direct, as long as the text sung is constructed to convey ideas and it is directly integrated with the melody. Sometimes melodies are primarily used to convey the message of the text; in this case, the text is considered more important than the melodies. This applies to the vocal music of oriental Africa. *Vocables* are also set to melodies, in which case the melodies are considered more important than the text. Pygmy vocal music has numerous songs that serve as excellent examples of this usage of vocables.

A *melody* communicates meaning because its constituent tones are patterned with significant relationships. We perceive as a unity the succession of tones in a melody. Some melodies are narrow in range; they may be made of only two or three tones. Other melody types may consist of many tones and have ranges of two or more octaves. Every tone of a melody has four basic

characteristics: *pitch*, its highness or lowness; *duration*, a life span or the length of time it is sounded; *volume*, its loudness or softness; and *timbre*, its quality of tone.

The tones of a melody move in various directions to form a curve or line. Consequently, we describe melodies, according to their curve, as *ascending*, *descending*, *undulating*, and other combinations. *Motion* is another characteristic of a melody; the tones of a melody may be performed in close *stepwise motion*, or in skips and leaps, or a combination of both. *Range* refers to the distance from the lowest to the highest tone of a melody. *Tempo* refers to the rate of speed. As in a spoken language, some melodies consist of smaller units, such as sequences and phrases. Most melodies have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

A song may consist of only one repetitive melody. Another song type may consist of two or many varied melodies. Some songs have repetitive texts set to changing melodies, and vice versa.

When the same melody is repeated with every stanza, or strophe, of the poem, the song structure is in the

strophic form. The *strophic song* is often performed solo, with or without an accompaniment. Sometimes slight variations exist between the verse lines. In other words, the verse lines are not exactly identical. Changing text lines are also set to standard repetitive melodic lines. Short instrumental *interludes* or bridges are popularly used to connect strophes in accompanied songs. Long solo interludes are used to bridge the wide gaps between song cycles. A cycle consists of a group of strophic lines that are rendered meaningfully. Although cycles of four strophes are popular, variations occur in different cultures as well as within song types. The strophic form is widely exploited in cultures where itinerant poet-musicians exist. Consequently, this directly applies to the *esawa* and *gnawa* traditions of Tunisia and Morocco, the *azmari* tradition of Ethiopia, and the *griot* brotherhood of Sudan.

The *responsorial style* of singing is popular in most sub-Saharan cultures of Africa. The style is called *responsorial* when two musicians perform a song as if answering one another, or in a call-and-response manner. The simplest kind of response is performed by two persons; the second singer directly imitates or duplicates the part of the first singer; this is called simple or *imitational response*. The organization of performers varies depending on circumstances, individual or audience preference, type of song, and other social considerations. The *responsorial* approach commonly includes the part of a single leader and a group response.

When two groups of musicians perform in call-and-response, the style is *antiphonal*. The simplest form of anti-

phony includes two performers in each group. More than two large choruses performing independent, often overlapping parts, answering each other, and each chorus singing polyphonically, or in multipart, often creates a complex form and texture.

Briefly, and simply speaking, *texture* refers to the layers of sound heard at once in a music performance. There are three basic types of texture: *monophony*, which literally means "one sound," refers to music with a single melodic line; the *polyphonic* ("many-sounding") texture consists of two or more independent melodic lines performed simultaneously; and the *homophonic* ("same-sounding") texture consists of one main melody and supportive accompaniment which is used to enhance and strengthen the melody. Textures also shift from one to another kind in a musical performance; this is not, however, a common occurrence.

In closing this section on vocal music, we will classify song relationships into the following nine categories:

1. *Solo*: one singer
2. *Alternating solos*: two or more soloists
3. *Social unison*: all the singers singing the same text and melody throughout the song
4. *Responsorial*: leader-chorus alternation
5. *Antiphonal*: chorus-chorus alternation
6. *Overlapping response*: leader-chorus overlapping alternation
7. *Overlapping antiphony*: chorus-chorus overlapping alternation
8. *Hocket*: interlocking; two or more groups rhythmically distinct and melodically complementary

Basic Terms

If you aren't sure what each of the following terms means, look back at the text, where they appear in italic type. Additional information about some of them may also be found by checking the index.

song	ascending
vocables	descending
sacred songs	undulating
secular songs	motion
chanting	stepwise motion
solo	range
duet	tempo
trio	strophic form
quartet	strophic song
quintet	interludes
sextet	responsorial style
septet	imitational response
octet	antiphonal
nonet	texture
chorus	monophony
a capella	polyphonic
syllabic song	homophonic
melismatic	alternating solos
voice masking	social unision
ululation	overlapping
melody	response
pitch	overlapping
duration	antiphony
volume	hocket
timbre	

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