

Negotiating the Music-Theory/African-Music Nexus: A Political Critique of Ethnomusicological Anti-Formalism and a Strategic Analysis of the Harmonic Patterning of the Shona Mbira Song Nyamaropa

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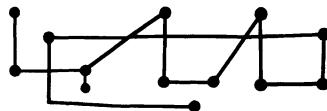
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NEGOTIATING THE MUSIC-THEORY/AFRICAN-MUSIC NEXUS: A POLITICAL CRITIQUE OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL ANTI-FORMALISM AND A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE HARMONIC PATTERNING OF THE SHONA MBIRA SONG *NYAMAROPA*



MARTIN SCHERZINGER

The forms of art reflect the history of man more truthfully than do documents themselves.

—Theodor W. Adorno

Why couldn't the world that concerns us—be a fiction? . . . Shouldn't philosophers be permitted to rise above faith in grammar?

—Friedrich Nietzsche

“Participant observation” serves as a shorthand for a continuous tacking between the “inside” and the “outside” of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts.

—James Clifford

Individuals . . . listening through earphones to the playback of a recorded *bira* dance and sing new parts to the music as if they were present at the live event.

—Paul Berliner

Wosiye ngoma [You are leaving the music].

—Simon Mashoko

Where is the West of the West?

—Chaka Chawasarira

I have often wondered why ethnomusicologists shy away from music theory. Could it be because there are persons in their ranks who cannot read music (in any notation)? We in Africa seek to promote musical literacy rather than discourage it.

—Akin Euba

SECTION 1: A POLITICAL CRITIQUE OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL ANTI-FORMALISM

INTRODUCTION: ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND THE EMERGENCE OF “CONTEXT”

IN THIS PAPER, I want to analyze and think about the fascinating formal richness of a fragment of Shona *mbira dza vadzimu* music known as *Nyamaropa*. This seemingly innocuous task immediately splinters into a range of options. To begin with, how is the object to be fixed? On whose playing is it to be based? Gwanzura Gwenzi, Tute Chigamba, Musekiwa Chingodza, Samuel Mujuru, Stella Chiweshe, Beauler Dyoko, Joan Jeanrenaud, Deborah James? And what angle of vision is implied by this choice? What are the ethical and political stakes involved in each case? Is *Nyamaropa* the improvisatory cycle that evokes and honors certain *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits) at a *bira* (ancestral spirit possession ceremony in rural Zimbabwe), or at a *dandaro* (its urban counterpart)? Is it the tune quoted by the Kronos String Quartet in their rendition of a composition entitled *Hunting: Gathering* in New York City or London? Is it a hunting song played for the *mashave* (animal spirits or wandering spirits of people improperly buried) to bestow various talents on the participants? Or is it (as Alec Pongweni might say) one of the songs that won the liberation war of independence in Zimbabwe in the 1970s? Of

course, *Nyamaropa* is all of these things and more, but such inclusiveness leaves unanswered the basic question, “What sounds, in fact, count as *Nyamaropa*?,” which beckons the general question, “Can it be grasped at all apart from these various social contexts?”

To this last question, most ethnomusicologists would answer that it cannot. For example, Paul Berliner explains that his book *The Soul of Mbira* “tries to analyze mbira music in its broad cultural context and to give the reader a feeling for the significance of the music among the Shona” (Berliner 1981, xvi). Indeed, “it would be difficult to gain insight into the meaning of any music divorced from its culture” (Berliner 1981, xvi). Often the high methodological premium placed on African music’s cultural contexts entails a careful separation of the ethnomusicological study from all Western modes of analysis. For example, Berliner makes an effort to “minimize the kinds of inadvertent distortions that can result when African music has imposed on it Western concepts having little or nothing to do with the way in which Africans view their own art” (Berliner 1981, 53). Likewise, in his *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, for example, John Miller Chernoff asserts that a performance of African music “cannot be judged by . . . an abstracted formal model of ‘musical’ properties or structures as defined by the Western tradition” (Chernoff 1981, 30). Chernoff even extends the reach of African music’s “functional integration” with various contexts to the very “form” of African music: “There are so many ways to recognize and describe what scholars call the ‘functional integration’ of music and culture in Africa that this integration can be considered a formal and general musical characteristic in its own right” (Chernoff 1981, 33). In other words, all African music is irreducibly embedded in its social dimensions and hence all methodological abstractions therefrom constitute a fundamental epistemological breach.

To understand why the study of African music tends to involve an anthropological perspective that foregrounds the constitutive role of indigenous social contexts, it is necessary to attempt to understand Ethnomusicology’s own social context in the academy today. Let me begin by outlining a brief history of definitions of the disciplinary field. In so doing, I hope to appreciate more intensely the rhetorical conventions that guide, if not determine, ethnomusicological writing, and to see them, too, as cultural artifacts influenced and to some extent defined by history. Initially a study of certain kinds of music, namely “non-Western,” “exotic,” or “orally transmitted” music, the discipline then gave way to a processual definition of its aims, focusing on the way in which music was to be studied. These changing intellectual traditions reflected a change in the name of the discipline from “Comparative

Musicology” to “Ethnomusicology” in the 1950s and 1960s. Consider these pre-1950 remarks around the question of definitions. In 1935, for example, Robert Lachmann said, “Non-European music is handed down without the means of writing; its investigation demands, therefore, other methods than those for Western art music” (Lachmann 1935, 1); or, six years later, Glen Haydon, “Non-European musical systems and folk music constitute the chief subjects of study; the songs of birds and phylogenetic-ontogenetic parallels are subordinate topics” (Haydon 1941, 218); or in 1946 Willi Apel, “Comparative musicology [is] the study of exotic music. . . . Exotic music [is comprised of] the musical cultures outside the European tradition” (Apel 1946, 167 and 250). The non-European component is echoed by Herzog (1946), Koole (1955), Nettl (1956), Rhodes (1956), Schneider (1957), Kunst (1959), and Seeger (1961), among others.

But by 1961 the term “Comparative Musicology” had been abandoned except as a historical reference, although it periodically reappeared as applying to a portion of the broader field of ethnomusicology. The anticomparative stance was motivated by the idea that musical meanings may differ from one culture to another and that comparison of these diverse meanings is likely a comparison of unlike things. In 1966 John Blacking expressed the view, “if we accept the view that patterns of music sound in any culture are the product of concepts and behaviors peculiar to that culture, we cannot compare them with similar patterns in another culture unless we know that the latter are derived from similar concepts and behavior” (quoted in Merriam 1977, 193–4). Mantle Hood understood the deployment of comparison to be premature and dangerous: “It seems a bit foolish in retrospect that the pioneers of our field became engrossed in the comparison of different musics before any real understanding of the musics being compared had been achieved” (Hood 1963, 233). In 1969 he felt that “a vast number of musical cultures . . . are yet to be studied systematically . . . before comparative methods can give musicology a truly world-wide perspective” (1969, 299).

The new definitions of ethnomusicology were constructed in terms of a sharp rupture with the past, emphasizing process over form, the orientation of the student over any rigid boundaries of discourse, the context of music over music sound alone and the cultural totality over component parts of culture. Ethnomusicology now became “the study of music in culture” (Merriam 1960, 109), “the study of music as a universal aspect of human behavior” (Nketia 1962, 1), “an approach . . . not only in terms of itself but also in terms of its cultural context” (Hood 1969, 298), or “the study of music as culture” (Merriam 1977, 204). Although, in these views, different musics were regarded as aesthetic

constructs with their own principles and conventions, they were located in specific social contexts—contexts that ultimately grounded their existence. These studies thus focused on the *production* of the musical arts, which was activated by particular people at particular times in accordance with particular conventions. The circumstances, the constraints and the embedded interests served by musical practices were additionally investigated. In this redefinition of the field, the idea that musical expressions were somehow autonomous sounding forms was practically banished.¹

The enthusiasm for context-sensitive reporting on African music has intensified in recent years, particularly in ethnomusicological accounts that endorse the “reflexive” turn in anthropology of the last decades. Disturbed by their own place in the global imperial order, and relinquishing their status as the exclusive providers of knowledge about the non-West, these reformist accounts resist portraying ahistorical and generalized “others” and struggle instead to depict their subjects in terms of, on the one hand, a particular set of complex social circumstances and, on the other, various concrete relationships of power and knowledge that connect them. As Regula Burckhardt Qureshi puts it, “the anti-imperialist critique within anthropology has problematized both grand theory and the subject position of ethnographers” (Qureshi 2000, 19). Michelle Kisliuk’s book *Seize the Dance! BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance* exemplifies this new interest in foregrounding the radically specific context of the ethnographic encounter and the constitutive role of the writer in the text. Kisliuk advances a “performance approach” that is deeply concerned about the “particulars of time and place” and, perhaps most importantly, “the role of the ethnographer” (Kisliuk 1998, 12–3). She argues that this role should be “written into the text”; that the ethnographer “should be as explicit as possible about the conditions that delimit her inquiry” (Kisliuk 1998, 13). Indeed, her text is written in the autobiographical mode. It includes a biographical sketch of the author, and reads like a diary filled with tantalizing details and events. Kisliuk opposes her concern about performatively rendering the concrete social situation of the music with the “academic convention of setting music ‘apart,’ seeing ‘it’ as an object on paper rather than as a social process” (Kisliuk 1998, 12).

Similarly, for Qureshi, a self-conscious anthropological stance better “confronts” the social dimensions of music scholarship (including that of art music) and better contests those aspects of the “Western paradigm” that are “grounded in an assumption of autonomy for cultural idioms” (Qureshi 2000, 17). The argument for this stance turns on a particular epistemological commitment: “For art music *is* itself social,” Qureshi argues, “Even what in French is elegantly glossed ‘l’objet sonore,’ cannot

be separated from processes of production; relationships between creators, performers, and listeners are articulated every time music is performed” (Qureshi 2000, 17, italics mine). Qureshi distrusts analyses that “abstract” musical processes from their “functional contexts,” and privileges “a holistic theoretical position: social theory nurtured on Marxist critical theory in anthropology, particularly mode of production theory, with its focus on the social-political relations that are implicated in high culture and vice versa” (Qureshi 2000, 17). Thus Qureshi, like Kisliuk, vividly separates the principle of abstract musical autonomy from considerations of social, economic, and political relations.

CONTESTING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC “CONTEXT” AS THE LAST INSTANCE OF INQUIRY

I want now to critique this general position from both an epistemological and a political point of view. In particular, I will contest, on the one hand, the stark methodological opposition between music’s formal autonomous aspect and its socio-contextual one, and, on the other, the increasingly prevalent bias towards considerations of the latter. More precisely, I will show how the widespread critique of the ideology of musical autonomy—and its attendant institutional buttress, formal analysis—has limited the *way* in which socio-contextual considerations have been elaborated in ethnomusicology, and thereby immobilized a host of progressive political options for African music. First, I will show that the various social contexts that ostensibly provide the epistemological ground for the music of ethnomusicology are themselves highly contested and variable. Therefore, any commitment to a particular contextual enclosure for the music under investigation is at once partly patterned by an idealizing inscription (that is, as it were, an immanent formal dimension). The methodological stability of a context of inquiry requires independent principles and criteria. In other words, there is a “formalism” lodged in the very choice of the “social context” the ethnomusicologist deems relevant to a particular music. This choice is political. Thus the written result cannot be wholly unfabricated, or free of formalist constraints. Second, I will argue that even the most abstract “formalist” analytic account of African music inevitably brushes up against some aspects of its “social context.” While the formal methodological framework largely determines the nature of the musical object under scrutiny, it cannot wholly exhaust its peculiar social character. Applying set-theoretical principles to a piece of *amadinda* xylophone music from Uganda, for example, produces transformational patterns that are not wholly absorbed by the investigat-

ing model. Indeed, through a close examination of these patterns, various aspects of its uniquely social nature are also revealed. In other words, there is an imprint of the “social context” of the music lodged in the heart of the “formalist” model used to analyze it. The written result cannot be pure fabrication, or wholly mired in a false formalism.

On the one hand then, no amount of context-sensitivity eludes its own formalist tendencies, and, on the other, no amount of formalism eludes its socio-contextual insights. There are bits of both in both cases, and, heeding a lesson from Friedrich Nietzsche, we should not be deceived by their ostensibly antithetical “grammar” (or organizing concept-metaphors) (Nietzsche 1989, 47). Alas, I will argue that many ethnomusicological accounts of African music tend to suppress the dialectical interplay between these two dimensions, and to uncritically favor the claims originating in the “social context” of a musical work. This tendency is deeply problematic. Even if we believe that, say, “thickly describing” the social context of a piece of African music stakes a closer claim on an African reality than does an abstract formal music analysis thereof, our belief does not entail ignoring the socio-political *use* to which a formal analysis, however fictional, might be put in that context. This is a key point. The usefulness of such formalism depends on the political predicament concerning the writer which, in turn, weighs upon the manner in which the music’s social context is elaborated.

What I am saying is that before accepting or rejecting a way of listening to musical things (on the grounds that they are “formalist,” “Eurocentric,” and so on, or not), it is necessary, first, to raise the political difficulty that is disturbing one as prominently as possible—at least behind the scenes of one’s work—and, second, to try to harness a musical attention that may provide a remedy for that difficulty. Sometimes a politically effective method may be based on error (for example, it may have an ethnocentric legacy), or it may contradict other values that one upholds (for example, it may immobilize and reduce a musical interpretation), but this does not nullify its potential use in specific conjunctures. As Gayatri Spivak remarks in connection with the political use of Western philosophy for a post-colonial political praxis, “A deconstructive politics would acknowledge the determination as well as the imperialism [of these philosophical texts] and see if the magisterial texts can now become our servants” (Spivak 1999, 7). Indeed, the imposition of some idealizing inscriptions (or formalisms) on any scholarly account of African music is unavoidable and thus not limited to those analyses that currently go by the name of musical “formalism.” If at all, the extent to which a scholarly account transcends its own formalist inscriptions rests on the effectiveness of the remedy it proposes for a political problem and not on some

institutionalized proper name. In short, there is no inherently progressive or regressive academic method.

In contrast to this methodological sketch, I will argue that the growing disinterest in the musically autonomous side of the (false) dichotomy outlined above, particularly in ethnomusicological work that is ostensibly motivated by political engagement, curtails important socio-political aspirations for African music. Indeed, the contingencies of certain (notably North American) institutional divisions—between, on the one hand, music theory, musicology, and composition, and, on the other hand, ethnomusicology—play a role in containing, and even curbing, various political possibilities for Africans. And these reified practices of the respective musical fields of study are structurally buttressed in the form of institutions. African music is approached via the anthropological tenets of ethnomusicology while Western music is regarded as immanently aesthetic (music theory), *and* as historical (musicology), *and* as living practice (composition), *and*, more recently, as an anthropological object (new or critical musicology). So, while Western music tends to be explored from a range of divergent discursive perspectives, African music tends to be contained within a single discourse (however multifaceted this discourse claims to be in itself). For all the recent critique of the limits of the vexing category “world music,” this kind of institutional configuration, in fact, risks recapitulating these limits within American universities.² Following Georg Lukács, this institutionally sanctioned, but lopsided, dichotomy produces what I will call *the antinomies of reified musicological thought*. No amount of goodwill or correct conscience as such can overcome these antinomies. As institutionalized practices, the different branches of music study acquire what Albrecht Wellmer calls an “opaque potency which, as it were, surpasses questions of moral responsibility” (Wellmer 1991, 78). In other words, not unlike Karl Marx’s notion of a “character mask,” whereby participants in an institution carry out a preordained role, the disciplinary split between ethnomusicology and musicology, and so on (with their attendant epistemological *and* critical tools), amounts to the institutionalization of knowledge production based on false linguistic usage, or on what Nietzsche might consider mere faith in “grammar” (Nietzsche 1989, 47). In short, different methodological considerations are arbitrarily, but *structurally*, grafted onto different musical repertoires.

Still, my argument is not only concerned with the structural inequality that affords Western music multiple institutional perspectives and African music only an ethnomusicological one. More specifically, I want to show that even on its own terms, some of the concerns that structure ethnomusicological discourse (particularly its purported “sensitivity to the Afri-

can point of view,” or more generally its “context sensitivity”), may be dabbling, quite unconsciously, in the knowledge venture of neocolonial imperialism. Sometimes the anxiety to render the peculiar social context of African music more adequately informs the very sound of various commercial recordings of African music. Take, for example, the 1998 release of *Pasi Mupindu (The World is Changing)* by Tute Chigamba’s *Mhembero Mbira Ensemble*. Recorded live in Highfield, Harare, the microphones are held at some distance from the mbiras, perhaps to better capture the whole musical event. However, the aesthetic intricacies of the mbira playing are lost in the process and the resultant music *sounds* like a ritual. Or take Louis Sarno’s 1995 Ellipsis Arts release of *Bayaka: The Extraordinary Music of the Babenzélé Pygmies*. Here, wall-to-wall sounds of the jungle—*insects, birds, monkeys*—provide a smooth sonic segue from track to track. The tracks include the sound of women yodeling and singing in the distance (probably with studio-added echo), *mondumé* (harp zither) music, drumming, and so on. The music *sounds* fascinating, mysteriously veiled by the jungle, and, above all, remote.³ Some recent musicologists endorse music recordings of this sort. In comparing a recording of a piece of Western music with an African-American one (which she self-evidently aligns with an “African genre”), Susan McClary, for example, writes, “The social context of the [latter] performance is not only relevant but indispensable. This recording permits us to hear the ritual enactment of [a] community as though firsthand” (McClary 2000, 25). One way of showing how these gestures of apparent sensitivity to such “indispensable” contexts is implicated in institutional power is to take it to its dialectical extremes. Let me illustrate this problem in two stages.

First, the concept of a “social context” is not free of essences. The anthropological invocation of some context or other is necessarily also an essentializing gesture. For example, how do we fix the contextual enclosure of a musical expression? Music-stylistically? Ethnically? Geographically? Culturally? Linguistically? Politically? Economically (local or global?)? Some combination of these? In short, by what inscription do we isolate music’s salient contextual borders? And what are the political aspirations entailed by these chosen borders? Now, the particular stand an ethnographic account takes to these questions betrays its methodological essentialism, which, in turn, reveals its political commitments. While some ethnomusicology demonstrates a heightened methodological awareness, these commitments cannot be spirited away with a turn to the reflexive mode. Take for example, Kisliuk’s resistance to the “systems”-based approach, called “ethnoesthetics” in her text, in favor of a performative model, called “socioesthetics” (Kisliuk 1998, 12). Ethnoesthetics, Kisliuk argues, is “[t]he ‘aesthetic system’ paradigm . . . which look[s] for

and interpret[s] internally coherent attributes that make up a given cultural system and/or celebrate[s] the expressive ‘genius’ of a circumscribed ‘people,’” while socioesthetics involves the “narrative invocation of interactions and meanings of performance—that is, enacted culture—wherein the role of the ethnographer must be written into the text” (Kisliuk 1998, 12). Thus Kisliuk opposes performative “representations of culture in flux” with the “hermetic and quintessentially . . . reductive representations” of the “systems” approach (1998, 12). The problem is that, however full of flux these representations appear, they still circumscribe their object of investigation in a manner approximating a reductive account. Kisliuk’s account still secures a cultural identity—“BaAka musical life”—complete with its own particular modes of “social organization” and “cosmology” (Kisliuk 1998, 37 and 156). Indeed, the lengthy and trenchant critique of the evangelist missionaries in the area, whose religious views are rhetorically opposed to the “BaAka cosmology,” entails a “systematizing” that *makes possible* the performative dimension of cultural “flux” identified in the text. In other words, a “systems”-based aspect is irreducible; indeed, the condition of possibility for the “performative” aspect. For example, Kisliuk fears that “a wool spun of missionary promises had been pulled over [these BaAka] eyes, while the chance to respond appropriately . . . might have been slipping away” (Kisliuk 1998, 166). Here we see that the text produces its performative flux in the agon between more or less discrete groups of “circumscribed people.” The separateness of these people is secured by the metaphysics of “manipulation.” Thus, Kisliuk’s assigned task of “disrupt[ing] epistemological complacencies and reconfigur[ing] identities,” in fact depends upon certain epistemological complacencies and already-configured identities. And the figuration of these identities reflects an ethico-political commitment. No amount of foregrounding the “subject position” of the ethnographer can fully disclose the dimensions of this irreducible position of epistemological compromise. The political commitments are the necessary accessories or the strategic essentialisms without which an ethnographic account (whether “performative” or “systematic”) cannot emerge. Through these commitments then, we can read, what Gayatri Spivak describes as “the pre-emergence (Raymond Williams’s term) of narrative as ethical instantiation” (Spivak 1999, 4). But the constellation of contextual facts deemed appropriate to the music under investigation necessarily forecloses alternatives. This renders the moment of choice an ethical responsibility. And this responsibility is repressed to the extent that the factual constellations are the result of predetermined institutional modes (instead of pragmatic decisions). In short, to be responsible is to think otherwise.

Second, if we take it for granted that engagement with the contextual is as much of a convention as, say, the formal properties of something—that the context is a negotiable construct; that its horizons can be variously elaborated, and so on—and, if it is true that the context reveals to us what matters about all cultural items and conventions, then the context of elaborating that context should reveal to us what matters about the conventions that guide *it*. In other words, if the epistemological principle of “context sensitivity” is taken to its logical antipodes, the methodological focus returns to those enabling institutional structures (the “context of the context,” to coin a phrase), which, in turn, have their own problematic history of alliances (and nonalliances) with imperialism and global capitalist expansion. Several recent studies are oriented towards acknowledging and describing this kind of history. Veit Erlmann’s recent book *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination*, for example, draws attention to what he calls “anthropological reason and its tense relation with modernity” (Erlmann 1999, 7). Similarly, Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* explores the “relationship between European discursive production and the axiomatics of imperialism,” with a particular interest in the ways various academic narratives are becoming “increasingly . . . powerful operating principles” in the context of the post-Soviet “financialization of the globe” (Spivak 1999, 3–4). But in most cases this metacontext (the “context of the context” that potentially renders our accounts as ethnographically retrieved ventriloquism potentially in service of the new economic order) has the capacity to create a lack of interest in itself. This is because the hyperbolic concern with epistemological correctness, with accurately describing a remote “social context,” divorced from an acknowledgment of the epistemological grounds that condition such a description, necessarily bypasses crucial questions of ethics and politics.

This is not to say that recent ethnomusicology has ignored these issues entirely, but rather, as Kofi Agawu argues, that the ethical-political dimensions of the ethnomusicological enterprise are largely determined by the very conditions of possibility of the discipline. This institutional situation effects a host of controversial dichotomies. In his “Representing African Music,” for instance, Agawu demonstrates the stubborn prevalence of a secure “us/them” dichotomy. Seemingly overturned in recent ethnomusicology, the “us/them” dichotomy disconcertingly resurfaces under the titles “insider/outsider,” “anthropologist/informant,” “-etic/-emic,” and so on. Agawu shows how this distinction is constructed with the aim of acknowledging the differences between what Ali Jairazbhoy calls “those who seek knowledge about other musical traditions and those that impart the knowledge” (Jairazbhoy 1989, 628). But what is at

stake in this acknowledgment; in thus insisting that certain things cannot be understood by anyone but Africans? Agawu argues that generalizing a collective “us” (disembodied, disinterested, ageless, classless, ungendered, free of sexuality, ethnicity, and of any “extraordinary” cultural assumptions) is as problematic as generalizing a collective “them.” Beyond this, he points out how an “us/them” opposition becomes particularly problematic when the work of certain African scholars is assessed.

For instance, in his review of Kwabena Nketia’s book *The Music of Africa*, Alan Jones writes, “the book does not sound like Africa as anyone who has lived there knows it” (Jones 1975, 397). John Blacking too finds Nketia’s work “rather short on information about African concepts of organization” (Blacking 1975–6, 155). By failing sufficiently to engage a distant reality—an epistemological difference—Nketia is criticized for Westernizing/normalizing the African scene. But normalizing what? The exotic/impenetrable Africa? In these reviews, to be truly African necessarily implies another epistemology, necessarily separated from its Western counterpart. I do not think that this is merely an error of fact. Following the African philosopher Paulin Hountondji, Agawu questions the political stakes involved in the desire to “see Africans thinking [only] African thoughts” (Agawu 1992, 261). For one, it evokes an implicit desire to wish away two centuries of colonization and decolonization as if cultural products could be figured apart from this intervention; but, more importantly, it evokes the desire to exclude the African from a broader global debate. The African is capable of only one discursive style and any departure from this style is marked as reductively Western or even ethnocentric. I want to draw attention to the fact that the (in)capacity to speak in Western tongues transmutes too easily into an (im)permission to speak in them.⁴ Moreover, the rigorous invocation of an African context paradoxically sustains the idea that the investigator becomes a more disinterested or estranged mouthpiece and bypasses the problem of such containment. By underscoring the seemingly constitutive role played by the native, our narratives conceal the degree to which our own language carries its own culture and that this culture in nearly all cases assumes dominance over that which it claims to depict, display or even change.

This is not an argument against “difference” per se (can this ever *be* anything anyway?) in the representation of African music, but rather to problematize the assumption that any true indigenous perspective must strictly reaffirm the beliefs of that indigenous social formation. The academic insistence on a politics of difference (i.e., a set of discrete and secure cultural identities, like so many niche markets) fails to register that

these identities are subject to slippage. It may be worth remembering that the very word “Africa” is peculiarly imbricated in imperialism. As Ajit K. Chaudhuri remarks in *Asia Before Europe*, “it is easily seen that the identity and the totality of the ‘excluded set,’ Asia [and, *mutatis mutandis*, Africa], will hold over time only as long as the identity of the ‘set of sets,’ Europe is intact” (in Spivak 1999, 188). Spivak elaborates the point:

Africa, a Roman name for what the Greeks called “Libya,” itself perhaps a latinization of the name of the Berber tribe Aourigha (perhaps pronounced “Afarika”), is a metonym that points to a great indeterminacy: the mysteriousness of the space upon which we are born. *Africa* is only a timebound naming; like all proper names it is a mark with an arbitrary connection to its referent, a catechresis. . . . All longings to the contrary, it cannot provide the absolute guarantee of identity. (Spivak 1999, 188)

Historically then, the word “Africa” has a hybrid origin. So, why can the musical African native do nothing but display his/her own peculiarities in academic parlance today? In such a peculiar discourse, options for debate are potentially foreclosed, the African’s participation is contained in the name of a censorious sensitivity to his/her context. In the case of Western art music an interesting anomaly arises. Whoever insists that an analysis of, say, Wagner’s “Tristan chord” (subject to such an abundance of, frequently contradictory, interpretations) must approximate beliefs held in the “indigenous social context” in which it is/was composed/performed/heard? Certain music seems to be exempt from such an insistence, and this alone should give us pause.

I do not want to argue that all ethnomusicological accounts take no account of the epistemological paradoxes of their own production, or that all ethnomusicological accounts are wholly uncommitted to confronting various specific socio-political problems. Quite the contrary, a number of theoretically sophisticated ethnomusicological accounts, deeply concerned with the politics of musical production in global modernity, have appeared in recent years.⁵ I want to argue, instead, that the general quest for epistemological authority, however much eroded by the reflexive turn, cannot be undone by either foregrounding native voices or by foregrounding the partiality of the ethnographer. In the Preface to *The Soul of Mbira*, Paul Berliner naively asserts, “I had chosen in my presentation of the material to quote musicians frequently, *allowing them to speak for themselves* and acting as their interpreter” (Berliner 1981, xvi, italics mine). Now, while it is true that *The Soul of Mbira* uses

quotation, the nature of this usage is highly problematic. Take the following passage concerning the tempo of mbira performances in general:

Musicians . . . express concern over the tempo with which different performers play the mbira, sometimes criticizing those who play too fast. Excessive speed [when playing the mbira] draws three objections: first, it is not appropriate for the *mbira dza vadzimu* (“Old people won’t like it; they will say you are playing it like a guitar”); second, players do not always have the skill to play consistently well at fast tempos (a performer will make mistakes or play poorly; his fingers “would be short to the keys” or “would jump keys”); and, third, people do not enjoy dancing to the music (“They become tired just from listening”). The appropriate tempo for mbira pieces . . . (Berliner 1981, 158)

Invoking what James Clifford might describe as a kind of fictional and largely static “ethnographic present” (i.e., musicians “express” concern; speed “draws” three objections, and so on), Berliner harnesses a seemingly eclectic range of voices into certain low-level generalizations regarding the “appropriate tempo for mbira pieces.” The elusive tacking between the particular and the general, participation and observation, quotation and description, paradoxically smooths over the radical contingency of the various quotations and unifies them into certain patterns of typical behavior. That is, three factors, buttressed by concrete citation, pattern the normativity of an aspect of Shona musical practice. This fusion of abstract analysis and concrete citation, which attributes to the Shona a fairly stable set of attitudes, is achieved by weaving the words of specific native voices through a consideration of their larger social context. Instead of describing a constructive, and probably quite complex, negotiation and dialogue involving conscious, politically significant subjects, this text rests on a monological ethnographic authority. Indeed, the native informants, appearing under the generalized title “musicians,” are not actually accredited by name at this point in the text.⁶ It is as if their words are more-or-less interchangeable in the context of the social paradigm in which they speak. As Clifford notes, the ideology of “Participant-observation” involves an awkward tacking between “specific occurrences” and their meaning in “wider contexts” (Clifford 1988, 34). Ethnographic formulations of this sort often lose any resemblance to an empirically recognizable African space.

Please note that I am not saying that I necessarily “disagree” with Berliner’s generalizations about mbira musicians’ behavior; nor am I saying that Berliner consistently fails to credit the informants in his text; nor

even that his text fully achieves this condition of monologue. On the contrary, the text is filled with interesting details and insightful analysis. Indeed, within its institutional paradigm *The Soul of Mbira* is an exemplary ethnography. But I want to draw attention to the fact that the homogenizing dimensions of the text find their authority precisely in the epistemological fixation on the African “social context.” In other words, the various radically contingent speaking situations are falsely superseded by overvaluing the idealization that goes as the “broad cultural context . . . [that] gives the reader a feeling for the significance of the music among the Shona” (Berliner 1981, xvi). The meanings of these native utterances are foreclosed by this prior idealization. So, the “broader social context” becomes the framework, indeed the formalism, that contains the radical particularity of various living social subjects. And the over-valuation of the englobing context, the “African cultural reality,” marches in step with a peculiar institutionalized North American disciplinary interest.

Of course this kind of reified practice is never completely a closed circuit. That is, the ethnographer’s control is always imperfect, the repressed particularities are never rendered completely immobile, and the account does not often amount to pure fiction. But registering some of the elusive truths enmeshed in ethnomusicological narrative depends on reading against the grain. Even in ethnographies that regularly and at length quote the words of consistently credited subjects, the homogenizing authority of the ethnographer is only partially fractured.⁷ Quotations are inevitably selected, arranged, and hierarchized into larger narrative forms that usually serve to corroborate theories. It is curious that the recent “crisis of conscience” in anthropology only reconstructs its methodological revisions in the direction of *epistemological* critique. Even the extreme instances of reflexive anthropology engage in an effort to diminish the irreducible ideological component (i.e., the enframing context through which their “facts” emerge) by presenting the interpreted reality *and* problematizing the position of the investigator, laying bare the research process, and so on. But such “hermeneutic suspicion” *alone* remains riveted by an epistemological promise that is really a necessary failure, an impasse. Like a grand funeral celebration, the quest for truth is perpetually given the slip. What such an “anthropology” is doing is taking its epistemological framework with its social and historical limits and, in the words of Georg Lukács, “allow[ing] these to ossify into an ‘eternal’ limit of a . . . pragmatic sort” (Lukács 1971, 188). In other words, instead of inventively *reconfiguring* the contingent practical decision that produces the englobing social context of the inquiry, the hermeneutically suspicious account remains committed to the epistemologically central

place of this context, as if, by marking its own inadequacy, it could somehow come closer to the real socio-cultural reality; as if that real reality could give the account some kind of wink of recognition after all. To be politically useful, an ethnography will need to be less concerned with fictionalizing the general real than with realizing particular fictions. This is a matter of strategy, not “Truth.”

TOWARDS A STRATEGIC SUPPLEMENTARY APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF AFRICAN MUSIC

What I am proposing is that progressive scholarly accounts of the music of Africa should lose some of their interest in this impossible quest for the “African cultural reality” *per se* and instead strategically mobilize the practical decision about a methodologically enframing context in terms of specific political predicaments in Africa. Instead of attempting to shed its complicity with the enabling institutions of power, an account that is harnessed to a political predicament would take on a constructive rather than a disabling complicity. So, instead of sculpting a version of indigenous African practices via a set of accepted epistemological norms, such an account would first identify a particular political difficulty in Africa and then propose an enframing method that attempts to remedy that difficulty. In this way, our accounts of the music of Africa may contribute to political solutions (the devolution of power; the alleviation of inequality; the un-standardization of cultural products, and so on) in various African quarters. This kind of thinking involves, first, a fundamental reconfiguration of the African musical context, and, second, a fundamental reconfiguration of the musicological methods deemed appropriate to study its music. On the first of these points, African music should be considered as nerve and fiber of global modernity and should not be located in some remote and impenetrable terrain. This means expanding the general context of African music in a way that recognizes the workings of finance capital on a global scale and the division of labor in an international frame. Africa today is a living musical world, peopled by historical agents in contemporary experience. Our ethnically oriented academic agenda, benevolently fetishizing identity and sensitively essentializing social contexts, cannot hope to seriously envisage decolonized space as one already stamped with the legacy of imperialism. Second, in light of the determining power of the well-established protocols and conventions of the discourse of ethnomusicology—the usual and proper institutional home for the study of African music—I want to advance the tactical use of methodological frames that, institutionally speaking, are *not* what

Martin Heidegger might call “ready-to-hand.” That is, I want to consider the political potential for using methods for studying African music that, institutionally speaking, are most unguessed-at; least encouraged by our current methodological orientations. Let me explain by way of the questions I raised at the outset of this paper.

Consider, once more, the following: “How is the musical object *Nyamaropa* to be fixed?”; “On whose playing is it to be based?”; and so on. Now, before settling decisively on an answer to these questions, is it possible that the ambiguities about the object under investigation naturally lead us away from it? that the splintered authorship, the lack of notation and the multiple renditions (that leave us, at most, with a floating musical identity) invite us to abandon it as *musical* object? After all, what object? whose? where? when? why? Does the Shona language even have a simple translation for the word “music?” It might seem better then to elaborate the context of its emergence, to be sensitive to cultural differences, and so to keep our preconceptions at arm’s length. We realize that this is no European artwork, that this mbira music is different, and thus we are cautious. But is it possible that by not giving up on these questions, that through this caution, we are, in fact, answering to another need—one that is concealed by the natural moral invitation to context sensitivity? Could it be that along with our preconceptions a certain way of hearing is being held at arm’s length? That our careful attention to surroundings might also stop up our ears? Or at least the drumming of some of its small inner bones? And thus we hear no evil?

What I am suggesting is that the ethnomusicological turn to the African social context as the methodologically determining instance is overdrawn. This turn not only denies African music a host of potentially empowering formal values but, paradoxically, overlooks the very global context that might make these values politically urgent. Therefore, I want now to advance a method for analyzing the mbira song that fits awkwardly within institutionalized North Atlantic habits. This method will be lodged in a descriptive language that is in an obvious friction with the elusive reality under scrutiny. In short, *I am advancing the tactical task of adopting formal analytic methods for the study of African music; of writing African music theory*. Let me point out immediately that by calling for an engagement with the music of cultures that fall outside of the purported Western tradition that is not encouraged by our current methodological orientations, I am not trying to wholly replace other, currently operative approaches. Besides, this is not a matter of theoretical choice. While my argument has been troubled by the way a kind of unreconstructed anthropological description is potentially implicated in the project of cultural containment, the alternative I am proposing is meant

to supplement, not depose, the ethnographic body of research. A formal analytic account of African music is necessarily strategic and selective. But, it is hoped that this imperfect stand can improve upon and supplement an ethnomusicological narrative in at least four ways. The first of these advantages deals with epistemology, the second with ideology, the third with politics, and the fourth with aesthetics (i.e., music alone).

1. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE: SCANNING POSSIBLE WAYS OF HEARING

A close analysis of the music's formal properties better approximates the specifics of its unique and multifaceted musical character. As long as the analysis is framed in terms that suggest possible ways of hearing, instead of actual ones, it can begin to open up new perspectives of what might count *as* an actual hearing of the music.⁸ In other words, the harmonic analysis to follow in section 2 of this paper should be understood not as positing some kind of "hidden harmonic core" of mbira music (still less as some kind of cognitive "archetype" or unconscious African modality), but instead as an illustration of the perceptual complexities that are yielded by this particular sonic staging of the harmonies. Far from objectifying the music in terms of a Western formalism, the harmonic analysis to follow will specify the details of a *variety* of possible ways of hearing *one* of the music's many aspects. In short, it is an effort to wrest the music from its ethnographically objectified representation and return to it some of its genuinely processual dimensions.

But what if this framework has nothing to do with African modes of perception? What if the numerous constructions produced by my notation are not perceivable to indigenous listeners or musicians themselves? What if the process of decoding acoustic information is so influenced by factors outside the signal itself, that researchers are at hazard to the extent they assume indigenous listeners are even *hearing* the same pitches they hear? It might be argued that if we cannot be sure of what an indigenous listener is even perceiving, how can we expect a harmonic structure developed according to an idiom that may be incomprehensible to listeners in another idiom to be relevant to their music? What if it turns out that the buzzy timbre or inharmonicities of mbira music are so important to Shona listeners, that they hardly care what harmonic patterns exist in addition?

Now, as an African, I am radically distrustful of the ability of the field-worker to inhabit indigenous minds in any way at all. Can we, to quote a phrase, "be sure of what an indigenous Western listener is perceiving" in

the experience of, say, a Mozart sonata? Without taking up the debate here, it should be noted that those scholarly accounts that claim to ground such (Western) musical perceptions in epistemological certainties are hotly contested and in doubt.⁹ But, more importantly, perceptions of Western music are not institutionally limited to this kind of “sure”-footed epistemological project. Cognitive studies, for example, do not exhaust the institutional space of these perceptions. In fact, the perceptions, analyses, theories, and interpretations of a Mozart sonata are genuinely multifaceted; its methodological approaches abound. Indeed, this is one way that the music gains its tremendous aesthetic and institutional power. Why discourage an analysis of mbira music on the terrain of harmony? Why are the epistemological stakes—being absolutely “sure,” as it were, of what others “hear”—*raised* on the terrain of African music? Why the insistence on empirical proof, in the robust sense, for the study of African music, when such proof is impossible for any music? Put differently, if we take seriously the claim that we “*can’t* be sure of what an indigenous listener is even hearing,” why does it occur to us that the harmonic dimension does *not* play a role in that perception? How do we know? By what inscription? Could this be a desire to limit native modes of hearing? At the least, *it is irresponsible to avoid a certain kind of engagement with music on the grounds that we think the African does not think certain things.*

It is worth remembering that the hyperbolic attachment to the ostensibly indigenous perceptions of the African native informant is entirely the product of a non-African disciplinary *modus operandi*. In the words of Spivak:

In [ethnography], the native informant, although denied autobiography as it is understood in the Northwestern European tradition (codename “West”), is taken with utmost seriousness. He (and occasionally she) *is* a blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline) could inscribe. The practice of some benevolent cultural nativists can be compared to this, although the cover story there is of a fully self-present self-consciousness. . . . To steer ourselves through the Scylla of cultural relativism and the Charybdis of nativist culturalism . . . we need a commitment not only to narrative and counternarrative, but also to the rendering (im)possible of (another) narrative. (Spivak 1999, 6)

To insist, then, that our studies of African music reflect “what African listeners really hear,” (a phantasmic construct) is to insist on an impossible

task which, in turn, necessarily defeats all efforts to grant such music the institutional sanction of another, more productive, narrative. It is especially disturbing to avoid a new engagement with the music on speculative grounds that “the buzzy timbre or inharmonicities of mbira music are so important to Shona listeners, that they hardly care what harmonic patterns exist in addition.” Given the vexing imperialist legacy of underplaying the role of harmony in African music, this particular projection of what Africans might be privileging in their hearing is not innocent. In fact, my analysis of mbira music from the perspective of harmony comes out of a growing concern that three centuries of harmonic development are frequently enlisted in various musical narratives to distinguish Western forms of music from other forms. To take an extreme example, Arthur Wegelin, cited in the *South African Journal of Musicology* as one of South Africa’s leading ethnomusicological researchers, demonstrates how “Bantu music . . . lacks a particular dimension: its harmony has remained rudimentary: it has remained a tail-stump instead of developing” (quoted in Levy 1992, 7). How a tail-stump, precisely within an evolutionary narrative, is taken as a failure to develop is an irony this quotation is not quite prepared to manage. Nonetheless, the characteristic foregrounding of “rhythm,” “timbre,” and “inharmonicities” in analyses of the music of Africa may resonate more closely than it seems at first sight with this evolutionary position. Moreover, this kind of thinking also takes for granted a simple distinction between harmony and rhythm that is becoming theoretically increasingly naive.¹⁰ In his article “The Invention of African Rhythm,” Kofi Agawu has called for vigilance towards the predominant focus on rhythmic complexity in studies of African music, arguing that a racialized identitarianism is also freighted by this gesture of apparent praise (Agawu 1995b, 380–95). I cannot elaborate on this argument here, except to say that it is my hope that thinking in short-hand musical parameters wanes (and thus becomes impossible to mobilize as a marker of ethnicity), and that African music is granted the institutional leverage to contribute equally to international musicological definitions and debates on the terrain of *all* operative musical parameters. Equality implies an approach that is as vigilant to African musical details as the best music analyses of Western music. Let us not dismiss harmonic analyses on grounds that perhaps Africans “do not really care what harmonic patterns exist.” Because perhaps Africans do.

Finally, the general responsibility to analyze African music closely and from various musical perspectives is not achieved through mere statements of praise about its alleged complexity and depth. In other words, it is perilous to homogenize the native African point of view via bare *assertions* about the music’s social and musical complexity, when these asser-

tions defeatingly refuse to inhabit the music itself by actively speculating in detail about the possible sonic nature of some of those complexities. In his essay “The Music of Sub-Saharan Africa,” for example, Thomas Turino writes, “African music is famous for its rhythmic complexity,” without spelling out the specifics of this complexity. Descriptions of mbira music remain general: “The multiple layering of different rhythmic patterns creates a tension and, at times, an ambiguity such that a listener can hear and feel the same music in a variety of ways depending on which rhythmic part or pattern he or she is focusing on” (Turino 1997, 62). While Turino’s account claims, on the one hand, to avoid the “West[ern]” “reduction of the “sound object” to an “isolated and abstracted . . . thing in itself,” and, on the other hand, to emphasize “music as an interactive process,” his text, in fact, achieves just the reverse. There is no discussion, let alone a demonstration, of the interactive processes of any actual musical examples. Indeed, the asserted musical “processes” have been wholly abstracted into broad claims about rhythmic complexity and the like. In short, the music has been generalized into a “thing in itself.” It is worth remembering that any understanding of the “complex interactive processes” necessarily also involves “abstracting and isolating” the actual musical object at some level. In short, only as a temporary “thing in itself” can the music’s complex undecidability begin to be disclosed.¹¹ It is also worth remembering that the mindset of even the seemingly most simple peasant in the seemingly most remote place is as complex as that of the seemingly most sophisticated urban one. There is no authentic African way of hearing music. It is irreducibly myriad and complex. While it may be true that Violence Mandere, for example, hears the mbira music of John Gondokondo in ways that reflect the social context of that music, it is emphatically not true that Mandere’s hearing is exhausted by that context, and it is still less true that the complexity of these ways of hearing can be accessed through some methodological idealization of that context. It is epistemologically more accurate, therefore, to proliferate specific possibilities about what the music *could be* than to foreclose its complexity by asserting what it *is* in general terms.

2. THE IDEOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE

a. *Elaborating discourses instead of texts.* The ideological advantage of engaging with African music as seriously as anyone engages with the highest art music in the West is paradoxical. To begin with, this involves just the kind of close listening and formalist analysis, routinely associated

with Western music, that is receiving so much general criticism from the musicological left today. But if it is true, as the argument goes, that analytic formalism is an ideological trick designed to support a specific repertoire of music and to construct and uphold a purported continuity in a certain Western tradition, then why, in the wake of this exposure, do we choose to turn away from formal analysis instead of deploying it to strategically reconstellate culture? Why do we merely demystify without re-enchanting? Do we shun analysis in order to remain free of ideology in our methods? If an ideological aspect is methodologically irreducible, what do we think we gain? Why has the response to the ideological charge of formalism in the discipline been to infuse the study of the Western canon with anthropological methods without the reciprocal infusion of formalism and close analysis in our study of any other music?¹² Why is only Western culture given the benefit of a new critical method? Do we forget that the confidence of such self-critique gives life to the tradition; does not (on its own) change the subject, but rather inauguates a still deeper involvement with the “West” as subject? What are we achieving when we refuse to listen closely to music of whatever traditional affiliation? Who does the self-critical distancing from formalism serve?

I realize that by taking formalist methods out of their apparently proper context and drawing out a use in an alien one, we risk absorbing African music in its image. I also realize that these are precisely the methods that suspend a focus on the so-called social and historical context of the music and are, in this sense, risky and dangerous. But I hope it is now clear that this kind of embrace of formalism is thoroughly informed by that context, understood not as an account of other people’s customs and beliefs, but as a variety of living traditions already located within global modernity (understood as a current context that includes a consideration of the flow of transnational capital, and so on). At the very least, this strategy, far from appropriating African music by merely channeling it into a Western methodology, can render more adequately (than the reportorial anthropological document can) the fictional features of its own making. This is its ideological advantage over ethnographic realism. There is no denying that the mbira player Gwanzura Gwenzi, say, was probably not thinking in set-theoretical terms, say, in his particular rendition of *Nyamaropa* in the 1960s, but this is exactly the point: There is a deliberate friction between the language of engagement and the elusive reality it is trying to reveal. By building this friction into the very architecture of such a method, the writing is a persistent reminder of its limited purview. Unmasking alone cannot ensure our writing from getting on with the business of realistic accounting as usual. The weight of acknowledging the enframing limits should be borne throughout the

text; a strategy that replaces the ritual unmasking of our partiality and positionality as investigators at the beginning of our ethnographic accounts.¹³ Let me explain with reference to two extreme tendencies in current ethnographic practice.

In his *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford makes an important distinction between “discourse” and “text” (Clifford 1988, 39). Discourse is a communicative mode in which the speaker is intrinsically enmeshed in an immediate situation; where her/his utterance cannot transcend that immediacy. To become a text, discourse must, to some extent, become “autonomous” (Paul Ricoeur’s term), divorced from an authorial intention and a specific context. For Ricoeur, the text is the site of interpretation. Thus, texts generate sense by patterning specifically experienced discursive events into filtered, simplified and generalized evidences of an “englobing context, a ‘cultural’ reality” (Ricoeur 1988, 39). In the words of Clifford, “Data constituted in discursive, dialogical conditions are appropriated only in textualized forms. Research events become field notes. Experiences become narratives, meaningful occurrences, or examples” (Clifford 1988, 39). To allay the ideological component of textualization, ethnographers usually adopt one of two strategies. The first strategy involves a textual effort to establish a kind of empathy, identification, or connectedness between ethnographer and native. For example, an ethnomusicologist might narrate a kind of “fable of rapport” to dramatize his/her status as a qualified participant-observer (Clifford 1988, 40). This normally takes the form of describing an initial state of ignorance, confusion, and disconnection before passing, often quite suddenly, into a state of knowledge, understanding, and connectedness. Berliner, for example, introduces his ethnography with a description of how, after repeated fieldwork trips to Zimbabwe, he could not make sense of the inconsistencies of naming the various keys of the mbira. Only when Bandambira, the principal informant at this point in the text, acknowledged that Berliner was “serious after all” did he lay out the system of keys “clearly and unambiguously” (Berliner 1981, 7). “Entrusted,” as it were, with access to “privileged information,” this kind of anecdote permits the fieldworker to function as a knowing exegete of the music’s cultural meanings (Berliner 1981, 7). The second kind of strategy adopted to address the inevitable ideological component of text-making about others, involves an experimental and critical stance towards the object of investigation. This model of writing attempts, against all odds, to conjure the concrete discursive contexts of interlocution, by bringing the contradictions of the fieldwork situation and the imperfect control of the writer to rhetorical prominence. Paul Rabinow’s *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, self-consciously elaborating specific

research contexts and interlocutionary situations, is an example of this kind of experimental approach.

While the ideology of the first model of ethnographic practice is by now fairly obvious, the second model is problematic for more subtle reasons than the first. Insofar as it displaces the authority of the ethnographer, and thus gestures towards transforming *text* into *discourse*, the ethnography cannot actually eliminate that authority altogether or render the account wholly discursive. The inevitable ideological *extra* is not a problem as such, but it becomes problematic under various conditions. That is, if the failure of the ethnography to become *discourse* is noted on epistemological grounds alone, then, first, the question of what kinds of *texts* might be useful in specified political conjunctures is left unasked, and, second, what remains of the “non-ideological” claims of the discourse appears in the form of unguarded epistemological claims. That is, the ethnographic text risks inaugurating an internal dichotomy that unmasks ideological dimensions at one level of the argument and remarks them at another. In short, reflexive assessments of concrete contexts of interlocution do not necessarily weigh down the epistemological claims at all levels of the text. For this weight to be sufficiently felt, the methodological framework of reference must remain rhetorically disaligned with the object under scrutiny throughout the text. In contrast then to both of the above models of ethnographic practice, I am advancing an approach that distances itself from commonplace institutional identifications between methods and objects of study. The ideological advantage of unthinking appropriate approaches is that the rupture between, on the one hand, the textualized observations and, on the other, the discursive participation is sustained throughout the narration. Thus, the ideological component cannot be swallowed by unfettered epistemological claims at any level of argument; the temptation (however fleeting) to wish for facts without concepts is discouraged. In short, the *text* has paradoxically become *discourse* once more—an effort, as it were, to nurture a fable of non-rapport.

b. Inhabiting instead of describing an African context. It is possible, of course, to mask these assumptions, and justify the purely formal aesthetic approach to mbira music through an appeal to various contextual factors. That is, it is not hard to illustrate a dimension of mbira music’s monadic self-enclosure at various levels of cultural practice. It is evident, for example, that the Shona regard the musical sounds *as such* produced by the mbira as deeply complex. To one of Berliner’s informants, for example, the mbira “sounds like many instruments being played at once” (Berliner 1981, 23). It is evident, too, that the Shona have cultivated an intricate

art of close listening. The aesthetics of the low, melodic *mahon'era* singing, for instance, involve the singer's active engagement with the emerging polyphonic lines of the various interacting mbira parts. As if to draw forth latently inherent melodies from the *mutinhimira* ("texture" or the total outcome of sound patterns"), *mahon'era* singing is predicated on an intense engagement with the purely musical sound of the instruments (Maraire 1990, 252). Indeed, *mahon'era* singing tends to be syllabic, nonverbal utterance. Dumisani Maraire describes this kind of close listening as "having inside with the mbira" (Berliner 1981, 117). Many musicians accord the music of the mbira with a dimension of aesthetic autonomy. In other words, the music is said to have an independent, self-regulating aspect. According to Maraire, the instrument has the capacity to propose musical options for the player while s/he is playing. In the words of Maraire, "I can say that the mbira is always in front, giving new materials to its player, and the player follows behind, emphasizing these while at the same time asking for more" (Maraire 1971, 6). Perhaps this experience is intensified by the fact that the keys of the mbira tend to produce very prominent overtones and that the inherent melodies and rhythms of many mbira pieces are frequently out of kilter with the actual movements of the fingers.¹⁴

Simon Mashoko corroborates the idea that the mbira has an independent life-force that imposes upon the performer various challenges and even obligations (Berliner 1981, 128). Forward Kwenda emphasizes the autonomous dimension of mbira music thus, "When I pick up my mbira, I don't know what is going to happen . . . because the music just goes by itself" (Kwenda 1997, 5–6). Similarly, Maraire explains that the performer "lets the mbira vary the melodies in a way the voice cannot do" (Maraire 1971, 5). It is as if the mbira's sounding forms have the ability to outstrip the imagination of the performer. Many mbira players suggest that mbira music issues forth a kind deep contemplation that is wordless and profound. Luken Pasipamire, for example, explains, "Sometimes when you are playing mbira nicely, you will cry, for the mbira makes you think too much"—an aesthetic attitude that is dramatized in this line of poetry from a performance by Manhuhwa and Pasipamire: "Thinking hard, without speaking, there followed the falling of tears" (Berliner 1981, 133). Hakurotwi Mude echoes the importance of concentrated attention to mbira music, insisting that aesthetically good mbira music must produce a kind of deep thinking in the listener (Berliner 1981, 134). The power of the abstract sound itself to transport performers and listeners out of the everyday is emphasized by most mbira players. Forward Kwenda reports, "[The music] tak[es] me higher and higher until I end up crying because the music is so much greater than a human

being can understand" (Kwenda 1997, 6). Similarly, Ephat Mujuru describes the high points of an mbira performance in terms of an ecstatic state of "overgladness," while Luken Pasipamire recounts that good mbira music issues forth a sensation of "flying" (Berliner 1981, 134 and 135). As Berliner explains: "Many Shona people informed me that mbira music was 'very deep' in its effect upon the listeners as well as upon performers, and that it required full attention. A traditional line of poetry sung with mbira music which states, 'I cannot plow, my music is playing,' reflects this attitude" (Berliner 1981, 132). For the traditionalist Tute Chigamba, the introspective attitude demanded by mbira music renders it unsuitable as an instrument of mere entertainment (personal communication, 1998). Likewise, Mude asserts, "The *mbira dza vadzimu* is not played for pleasure" (Berliner 1981, 134).¹⁵ Indeed, one of the central roles of mbira music in Shona religious life is to call upon the ancestral spirits during the spirit-possession ceremonies known as *mapira* (singular: *bira*). Despite the existence of *Mwari Musiki* (a conceptual approximation of "God the Almighty"), the Shona believe that *Mwari* "is never conceived as an image, i.e. human, male, female, being or object" (Maraire 1990, 61). *Mwari* is everywhere, like "the concept of rain," but essentially inaccessible (Maraire 1990, 61). Instead, the ancestral spirits, called forth at formal *mapira*, mediate relations between the ordinary and the spiritual world. It is said that during these intense all-night events, various ancestors respond to specific mbira tunes. Mbira players often report that their performances are guided by the ancestors. Samuel Mujuru, for example, describes this moment as "play[ing] as the spirit directs" (personal communication, 1996).

What I want to suggest is that there is an attitude of high seriousness and respect for the mbira that is closely tied to the pure sounding forms produced by the music. In other words, Shona accounts on the terrain of aesthetics respect an autonomous musical moment, which, in turn, is linked to its status as a classical instrument. Not unlike various Western (notably romantic) conceptions of music, mbira music is to some extent conceptually separate from the domain of everyday work ("I cannot plow, my music is playing"), wordless ("thinking hard, without speaking"), self-composing, autonomous ("the music just goes by itself"), beyond ordinary human comprehension ("so much greater than a human can understand"), and capable of producing a state of spiritual transformation when one is correctly disposed to it ("play[ing] as the spirit directs"). The idea that music is a self-regulative process, endowed with a quasi-spiritual agency, is a commonplace in the romantic aesthetics of Johann Gottfried Herder, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Georg W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Robert Schumann, Gustav Schilling, Franz

Liszt, and even Arnold Schoenberg and Anton von Webern, to name a few. Like Kwenda and Mude, Schopenhauer situates music beyond the realm of ordinary comprehension (which the latter describes as the world of *representation*). Schopenhauer argues instead that music forms the closest possible analogy to the elusive *Will*: “Music is . . . in no sense, like the other arts, the image of ideas, but the image of the *Will itself*; . . . and for this very reason the effect of music is far more powerful and penetrates far more deeply than that of the other arts; for they communicate only shadows, whereas it communicates the essence” (quoted in le Huray and Day 1988, 219). And like Maraire, Pasipamire, Mujuru, and Kwenda, Liszt believes that music transforms and transports us to ecstatic heights: “[Music] express[es] all that transcends within us our customary horizons . . . all that relates to the inaccessible depths of imperishable desires and longings for the infinite” (quoted in le Huray and Day 1988, 365). In fact, the high premium placed by romantic and high modernist aesthetics on the ability of music to anagogically transform the listening subject, indeed to facilitate the passage to altered states of consciousness, bears a striking resemblance to the workings of Shona spirit possession. To paraphrase my argument in “Music, Spirit Possession and the Copyright Law: Cross-Cultural Comparisons and Strategic Speculations”: Like the spirit mediums at *mapira* ceremonies in Mashonaland, for example, Schopenhauer’s transfiguration in aesthetic contemplation happens quite suddenly. In both cases, there is no mistaking the moment that the transition from an ordinary into a different reality takes place; and, in both cases, the one caught in the jolt loses her/himself, and becomes painless, timeless *subject of knowledge* (in one case reporting the words of the ancestors); in both cases, s/he will no longer remember this knowledge having reentered normal time (in one case rendering the aesthetic possession as one that cannot be spoken about); and, in both cases the ineffable agent possessing one is not actually a God, but a spirit, like that of a poet in one case, or of an ancestor in the other (Scherzinger 1999, 102–5).

Of course, there are profound differences between these traditions, but I am marking their affinities to dramatize the fact that it is not only Westerners who subscribe to notions of musical autonomy, high seriousness, and mystical transfiguration. Now, the radical ethnomusicological rejection of the romantic ideas that music is self-sufficient and inhabits a privileged social standing, in favor of an all-determining “social context,” is methodologically defeating in this conjuncture. That is, many reflexively conscientious ethnomusicologists simply dismiss the former ideas as ideological myths of a Western romantic and high modernist paradigm (and replace it with an ostensibly more sophisticated postmodern or postcolonial theoretical paradigm). Qureshi, for example, argues against the

general academic practice of “accord[ing] separate treatment to art music . . . as a domain of special status and experience” (Quereshi 2000, 19). Likewise, Kisliuk disagrees with the “academic convention of setting ‘music’ apart, seeing ‘it’ as an object . . . rather than as social process” (Kisliuk 1998, 12). These views closely resemble Turino’s idea that “in Shona villages . . . music is conceptualized as a process linked to specific people and particular moments or contexts,” while music of the “West” is an “object that can be, and is, isolated and abstracted as a thing in itself” (Turino 1997, 168). To my mind, this is a rhetorical trick that cannot not contain African consciousness in the metaphysics of ethno-theory. What, in reality, is no more than a founding anthropological ground-rule (i.e., a particular form of “conceptualization”) has been speculatively projected, through the use of the passive voice, onto the conceptualizations of Shona villagers themselves. Not surprisingly, Turino’s text imagines that Shona verbalizations on musical matters equally reflect a kind of ethnomusicological enthusiasm for “process.” Turino writes, “It is significant that the Shona words for the two basic parts of the mbira piece—*kushaura* and *kutsinhira*—are not nouns, referring to things, but rather are verbs (*‘kushaura’* means literally ‘to lead the piece’), underlining the notion of music as an interactive process” (Turino 1997, 168). This claim is overdrawn. While the word *kushaura* may be a verb, it also refers to a particular identifiable part of the music and, *in this respect*, does not function very differently to, say, the word *Hauptstimme* in Schoenberg’s music. Besides, nouns like *mutinhimira* (“the texture, the total outcome of sound patterns”), and *minhanzi* (“beautiful sounds”) also form part of Shona musical discourse, as do verbs form part of a Western one (Maraire 1990, 252).

Most disturbingly, the fetishized clinging to conceptual oppositions like “Western object” / “African process,” or “Western thing in itself” / “African interaction” denies *mbira music* a certain unmarked play on the terrain of the “thing in itself.” In other words, its essentialized “interactive” identity leaves it formally excluded from the freeplay of any “formal” interactions. Mbira music has thus become objectified and abstracted away from some of the very values upheld by its finest musical and intellectual practitioners. So, while various mbira performers may have an interest in “isolat[ing] and abstract[ing] [mbira music] as a thing in itself” in order to let “the music just go[] by itself” (Kwenda), or to “play as the spirit directs” (S. Mujuru), or to “let[] the mbira vary the melodies in a way the voice cannot do” (Maraire), or to facilitate “[t]hinking hard, without speaking” (Manhuhwa and Pasipamire), Turino’s ethnographic stance can display no such interest (Turino 1997, 168). Or, while Mude, Maraire, Mashoko, Chigamba, Pasipamire, E.

Mujuru, S. Mujuru, Manhuhwa, and Kwenda seem to uphold mbira music's "domain of special status and experience," Qureshi's anthropological narrative generally hopes to undermine it (Qureshi 2000, 19). Hence, even where so-called native voices make a concerted effort to speak, the significance of their utterances is trapped by the discursive net of anthropological values. Western methods of musical interpretation that may, in fact, have a close affinity to this African tradition are ruled out via ethnographically invented "African" ways of "conceptualization." The potential, precisely, for listening to African voices interactively, dialogically, processually, et cetera is foreclosed by an institutionalized formula. It is as if aspects of what Shona performers might be communicating does not catch in the elite discourse of the north. Simply put, another case of not listening closely.

Of course, this way of situating the African context differs from the usual anthropological model insofar as it reads that context as a living one to be inhabited instead of as a distant one to be described. In other words, this approach actively seeks out avenues of inquiry and intervention from that context instead of passively reporting on it. Like those Shona who, on hearing a playback of a recorded *bira*, respond by "danc[ing] and sing[ing] new parts to the music," this orientation allows the social context of the music to impose itself upon patterns of methodological behavior (Berliner 1981, 191). Thus, by inhabiting that context responsively, a strategic formal analysis, for all its entailed idealizations, also interacts with it in a politically relevant way. When I argue for a move towards a supplementary approach to the study of African music I mean this in two senses of the word. First, *supplementary* in the ordinary sense—an *additional* approach to such a study, and second, *supplementary* in the deconstructive sense—marking the inadequacy (the deafspot) that paradoxically makes possible the currently authorized mode for the study of African music. Still, I am not saying that *all* aspects of mbira music are foreclosed in the grip of anthropological narrativization. Quite the contrary, its framework enables a host of valuable insights—hence, the first sense of *supplementary* as well. I simply want to stress the point that no single method can exhaust the subject at hand, and, therefore, that it is punitive and harmful to censoriously banish an investigation of the autonomous formal dimensions of African music to methodological oblivion. An ideology becomes particularly insidious when this banishing is effected under benevolent signs like "interaction," and "social process." Bertolt Brecht reminds us that "actors may not use make-up—or hardly any—and claim to be 'absolutely natural' and yet the whole thing can be a swindle; and they can wear masks of a grotesque kind and present the truth" (Brecht 1977, 83). Like the old Shona man's warning

about the elephant's head (Berliner 1981, 160), or, once again, Nietzsche's warning about the seductions of grammar (Nietzsche 1989, 47), we should neither confuse, say, the word "process" with its happening, nor, say, the happening of "abstraction" with its word. As Simon Mashoko might sing to a swindler: "*Wosiye ngoma*" (You are leaving the music) (Mashoko 1981, 184 and 253).

3. THE POLITICAL ADVANTAGE: EXCURSIONS OUT OF WORLD MUSIC

I have demonstrated above that all academic accounts of musical practices, whether they go by the name "formal," "structural," "aesthetic," "ethnographic," "anthropological," "performative," and so on, inevitably blend certain formal idealizations (essentialisms) with their terrain of facts and findings. This is probably a basic condition of writing. Specific idealizations at once open up and foreclose the emergence of facts as they appear in textualized form. There is no account of "African music," then, that gets it completely right. "Getting it right" is a situation that dissolves the writing in the clarity of wordless participation. (Perhaps what is present, clear, and obvious has no need to be written down.) But there is also no account that gets it completely wrong. There is a certain inevitable mixing of fact and fiction, wherein the truths, by which we live and understand various musical realities, lie. But it is not, therefore, a matter of "anything goes." Just because the facts we notice are political, does not mean that they are not facts. As Breyten Breytenbach writes, "All talk in this sad bitter motley-funeral-land [of Africa] is politics—whether it is whispering talk, talking shit, spitting into the wind, or speaking in the master's voice" (Breytenbach 1980, 152). Speaking *apolitically* is not a matter of choice. What distinguishes a politically constructive account from a disabling one is not that the former is inherently more (or less) "political" than the other, but the extent to which the account manages to relieve a specific political difficulty. In other words, while some or other political constellations are an inherent property of all ethnographic writing, being their *general* condition of possibility, a strategic mobilization of a *particular* political commitment does not accrue equally to all such writing. In this section I want to identify the specific African political predicaments by which I am disturbed, and also the ways in which the harmonic analysis of an mbira song to follow attempts to engage these predicaments.

By way of introduction, consider the, admittedly simplified, argument made by various new critical musicologists: Music theory and analysis, a fully fledged academic practice in its own right today, the argument goes,

is a manufactured discipline that produces certain effects. By virtue of its somewhere centralized position and institutional support, this discipline has some of the power to determine the limits of musical value. Thus, music analysis is one device whereby favored repertoires of listening are constructed and transmitted. In other words, there is an interplay between the canon of music generally and the manner in which it is spoken about. Lawrence Kramer, for instance, writes, “The new direction of musicology . . . chafes at the scholastic isolation of music, equally impatient whether heaps of facts or arcane technical anatomies furnish the scholar’s frigid cell” (Kramer 1995, 1). Kramer’s aversion to positivist empiricism and formal technical analysis is linked to an aversion to the reactionary way institutionalized musicology “cling[s] to an exceptionally static core repertoire” (Kramer 1995, 3–4). In the final analysis, “[Classical music’s] claim to occupy a sphere of autonomous artistic greatness is largely a means of veiling, and thus perpetuating, a narrow set of interests” (Kramer 1995, 4). Now consider the fact that African music today tends to be approached from an anthropological perspective, even as Western music, despite this critique, is regarded as immanently aesthetic in its academic formulation. If this argument is plausible, then, by applying Western models of analysis to African music, and by deriving results as formally compelling as those for “great Western works,” one may be shedding a critical light on the arbitrary nature of the musical works that are inserted into the canon, and/or, demanding recognition for music that is so-called “culturally different” within this discourse. Strategically analyzing African music in terms of Western interpretative criteria from the music-theoretical discourse is an attempt to stake a political claim on the very “set of interests” to which Kramer alludes (Kramer 1995, 4). It is an attempt, as it were, to equally “veil” the cultural body of African music, the better to grant it the power of autonomous value. It is an attempt, without mastery, to *Africanize* the musicological canon which, in turn, must become reconfigured as a genuinely global canon.

The question immediately arises: Why canonize African music in the image of the West? Does this not merely provide an impetus for a flagging musicology scene in the North Atlantic? No doubt it does do this. As Kramer’s text tellingly observes, “[Classical music] is in trouble . . . and it squanders its capacities for self-renewal by clinging to an exceptionally static core repertoire” (Kramer 1995, 4). But the project of canonizing African music does not *only* provide an impetus for Western musicology. First, any project that is not foreclosed by the subservient metaphorics of “outreach” and that is strategically aimed to uplift the status of music and musicians in Africa with resources from the West, must appeal to the highest levels of Western musical discourse. Second, both

the critical new exploration of Western music, as well as African music's entry into the canon are already practically underway in the U.S. today. This has two consequences for the argument. On the one hand, Kramer's thoughtful wishing notwithstanding, the methodological modes that buttress the "core repertoire" will not disappear because of the new musicological critique of it. Quite the contrary, this critique, in fact, consolidates the centrality of the Western canon (if not by adding to it still another dimension of inquiry, then at least by locating it as a central referent). On the other hand, in an era of American-style "multiculturalism," the increasing presence of African and other music in musicological curricula seems all but inevitable. So, instead of asking whether or not to canonize African music in the West, the question becomes *in what way* can African music be incorporated into this curriculum that best addresses the predicament of Africans? And, as I have repeatedly shown, the current curricular space for Africa is lamentably foreclosed in the category of "world music." Securely policed at the borders of Western music, the African-instance-of-world-music becomes a temporary musicological *frisson* that ultimately must secure the centrality of Western music's "core repertoire." In contrast, if we are serious about the social upliftment of African music, it is perilous and self-defeating to deny African music a stake in that core. And it is therefore perilous and self-defeating to deny it a stake in the autonomous formal values that constitute and uphold the core.¹⁶

In a discursive terrain that is riddled with Orientalist (a.k.a. Africanist) assumptions and categories, it is time to risk deliberate methodological perversions and radical interdisciplinary ventures. It is time to grope in the dark for approaches that are apparently infelicitous, inappropriate, improper, inadequate to the task at hand. After all, knowing the appropriate methods and tools necessarily depends on a prior idealization of the very world view we claim to get to know through those methods. Thus a cause is substituted for an effect without notice. To my way of thinking, *that* is in act of appropriation. [O.E.D. on the word *appropriate*: that which is suitable or proper to/for; or to take to oneself without authority.] It is the methods that immediately make sense to us, those that we deem suitable without preparation, that I am trying, against many odds, to actively forget. Instead, I negotiate inappropriate and inadequate terms, the better to be adequate to the task at hand. But, more importantly, in so doing, I want to draw attention to a social context that witnesses cultural items ostensibly not indigenous to it that are reconstellated in their assigned function within it. This involves elaborating the modern African context as one already permeated with the experience of colonialism. And I want my critique to be more adequate to

these reconstellations, and less methodologically outside of them. Thus, I inhabit the two abstractions—the “formal” and the “social”—precisely in order to wrench them from their assigned discursive functions (of maintaining a cultural cohesiveness via a canon of great works, on the one hand, and of describing someone else’s aboriginal epistemology, on the other) and acknowledge, instead, a contemporary global context of musical thought and musical activity.

The project of canonization is pertinent not only in the U.S. but also in Africa today. In most recently decolonized African nations, the music curriculum is being intensely debated. At Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, for example, the Music Department (currently chaired by Christine Lucia), is forging links with the International Library of African Music (I.L.A.M.) in an effort to incorporate the study of African music into its general curriculum. One of the ongoing drawbacks in this effort has been the almost total lack of music-theoretical studies of African music or of ear-training textbooks that use musical examples from Africa. Likewise, Chaka Chawasarira, leader of the Zengea Children’s Mbira Ensemble and headmaster of the Zengea Primary School in the Korekore region of Zimbabwe, has voiced a strong concern about the lack of teaching materials for mbira music. In his address to students at Smith College, Northampton, on 18 October 1999, Chawasarira explained that new strategies are needed to preserve African music. Noting that the younger generation in Zimbabwe are increasingly drawn to Western music, Chawasarira argued that these new strategies entailed an interaction with the West. Some possibilities for interaction include organizing concert tours overseas (to bolster the image of mbira music in Zimbabwe) and writing text books (for teaching the music in a modern classroom setting). While Zimbabwe has a culturally compromising “West,” Chawasarira remarked, “where is the West of the West?” (spoken address, 1999).

The problem is not particular to Zimbabwe and South Africa. As Meki Nzewi, co-founder and director of the Ama Dialogue Foundation in Nigeria, puts it, “The pedagogical approach to music in Africa is not Africa-sensitive. Traditional pedagogical systems need to be re-oriented for relevance in modern education. Adequate text books are of the gravest concern” (Nzewi 2000, 1). Thus, to be “Africa-sensitive,” for Nzewi, entails a commitment to “re-orienting” various modes of music education to meet new needs in a modern conjuncture. In short, Africa needs music-theory textbooks on African music, not ethnomusicological descriptions of it. Likewise, Akin Euba, Professor of Music at the University of Pittsburgh, questions the relevance of ethnomusicology in Africa, and argues instead for a creative music-theoretical approach to the study

of African music. In the words of Euba, “The current philosophy of ethnomusicology stresses music as culture, music in culture, music in society and other issues surrounding music rather than music itself. The theory of music (which is the core element of music-making) receives little or no attention from ethnomusicologists. I would even venture to say that, judging from the current attitudes of ethnomusicologists, the theory of music is at variance with the philosophy of ethnomusicology. A field of study that avoids the central core of music making (i.e. creativity) *is of no use to Africans*” (Euba 2000, 2, italics mine). The crucial point is that any serious study of African music, in the long run, necessarily involves a sustained attention to the formal dimensions of the music itself. In other words, musical formalism, as it were, is a crucial political need in Africa. Instead of joining the ranks of those “ethnomusicologists [that] shy away from music theory,” Euba writes, “[w]e in Africa should seek to promote musical literacy rather than discourage it” (Euba 2000, 2). Likewise Zabana Kongo, who teaches music in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana-Legon, explains, “We should not be confused about our enemies, some apparently ‘Western’ skills are in fact universal” (spoken response at a symposium on Africanist musicology held at the University of Michigan, April 2000).

African scholars are increasingly coupling this kind of engaged interest in contemporary African musical realities with a critique of the limits of ethnomusicological practice. In a recent paper, Kofi Agawu explains, “Ethnomusicological knowledge may be defined as knowledge produced by scholars from the metropolis (Europe or America) about the musical practices of less privileged others (in Africa, Asia, or Australia) often (but not always) on the basis of (brief) periods of so-called fieldwork” (Agawu 1999). Resisting the “will to difference,” which produces a host of false binaries that distinguish African musics from Western music—“functional as opposed to contemplative; communal rather than individualistic; spontaneous rather than calculated;” and so on—Agawu concludes, “There is no more hostile force to advancing the African cause than the construction of such ethnographies. This . . . discourse slows down the drive towards empowerment by clinging to what Africa is (including its ostensible difference from the West) rather than what Africa could be if global resources were more equitably distributed” (Agawu 2000, spoken presentation). For Agawu, then, an engagement with African music that seeks to advance its cause should seek to actively inhabit and transform its currently compromised place in an international frame. Thus, an authentic African musicology is a musicology still to come. In his *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective*, Agawu analyzes African music from a perspective that includes the use of Western theoretical models. Simi-

larly, Akin Euba figures an ideal approach to musical studies in Africa in terms of a transformative praxis that should also engage music theory. Euba asks, “Given that ethnomusicology does not exist in Africa, the question is, do we need it?” (Euba 2000, 1). Euba explains that “African scholars are interested in the study of African music whereas ethnomusicology is the study of the ‘other.’ It is claimed that this situation has changed but in reality it has not” (Euba 2000, 1). Euba locates the problem of ethnomusicology in its over-valuation of anthropological tenets:

The current practice of ethnomusicology is weighted heavily towards anthropology and a number of Ph.D. dissertations (at least in America) purported to be in music are really in anthropology. I find it baffling that anthropological dissertations that have little or no musical content continue to be presented to departments of music. This is a position that is unsuitable for Africa. . . . We do not need in Africa a field that is called ethnomusicology if it is really a branch of anthropology. We do not need in Africa a field in which music has been literally squeezed out. Take the music out of ethnomusicology and what you have is ethno—ology. (Euba 2000, 3)

The ethnomusicological idea that Western models of music analysis are somehow inherently opposed to the social cause of African music is mistaken. Not only do indigenous forms of music-theoretical thinking exist in Africa, but the practice of borrowing ostensibly “foreign” resources to creatively transform society has a lengthy tradition in most parts of Africa. In fact, such strategizing constitutes the general political background of anti-colonial struggle in Africa.

In Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa, for example, the most urgent political claims in recent years have centered around questions of constitutionality, democracy, nationhood, citizenship, and so on. To save time, I will limit this part of my argument to the recent drawing up of a new constitution in South Africa. Far from merely asserting some peculiarly African political procedure, the post-apartheid constitution has effectively reclaimed the above series of regulative political concepts (ostensibly derived in the West) to define a new political scenario. It would be hopelessly off the mark to link this with simply another Western imposition on African communal life. The new South African bill of rights does not so much depart from than extend that of the U.S. by including, for example, a clause protecting the rights of individuals regardless of sex, sexual orientation, or disability. Are these principles more African or more Western (than Western)?¹⁷ Even if the final wording is homegrown, the making of the new constitution consciously

involved looking to foreign jurisprudence for inspiration, particularly to Canada, Namibia and India.

Is the concept of human rights an export imposing one sector's views onto others? Was colonialism really a moment in which "human rights" can be said to have flourished? Can Africa not make a contribution to international jurisprudence? Does the West have a monopoly on the construction of humanitarian principles? Or are these principles also statements of need, developed by people from many quarters, and directed against oppression and towards living in dignity, decency and respect? Why should values be tied to continental exceptionalism? Using the "African way" as a consensus argument has historically had as much to do with justifying the suppression of the rights of individuals than with liberation of whatever other kind. Without wishing to either engage the complexities of Nigerian politics in general or his often paradoxical position within it, Wole Soyinka's insistence on the centrality of the human agent as the initiator and beneficiary of development activities in Africa is worth hearing in this regard:

In addressing the issues of nationhood and development . . . the immediate question with which we are confronted is this: How is the collectivity of such a unit best organized? Or to begin with what we know . . . how do such identities presently fare, those present groupings of that lowest common denominator, the human unit? Are they working? Or do they work against the constituent units, the humanity? In short, does the superimposed idea "nation" harmonize or conflict with our given a priori, humanity? (Soyinka 1996, 117–8)

To return to the case of South Africa, this focus does not mean that local cultural values do not play a part in the new constitution, but to recognize that the focus on the human is not an exclusively Western idea: *Ubuntu*, a local concept on the ethics of reciprocity, for example, means that a person is a person through other people. And where the newly constituted principles seem to have no adequate historical correlate in indigenous culture (however conceived), they function less as Western impositions and more as reconstellations of ideas to draw out their constructive use in a postcolonial context. Such rewritings may precisely be a case of apparently inappropriate terms that at the same time have been given the attention of scrutiny so rigorous so as to improve on their use, to extend the purview of their logical operations, within postcolonial space.¹⁸

Analogously, by expanding the contemporary context of African music studies in a way that grants it a dignified and equal place in the academic canon (and thus rejecting its flagrant foreclosure in the category “world music,” which necessarily reduces entire civilizations into static summaries), I am attempting to gesture towards a curriculum still to come into being. This curriculum should be global in nature and usable in both the North Atlantic and at home. In step with Euba’s idea of a “creative” musicology, the analysis to follow must be given the full imaginative play associated with classical aesthetic autonomy, even if it remains simultaneously reined back by the project of social upliftment in Africa. As Veit Erlmann explains in another context, such a strategy does not only amount to a validation of the analytic method at work, but reflects instead “a conscious and deliberate choice . . . to channel Western education along selected lines” (Erlmann 1999, 64)—a case of what Spivak might call a “magisterial” text “becoming our servant” (Spivak 1999, 7). In short, this analysis is an effort to advance ways of hearing a fragment of African music that, in the long run, might be politically beneficial. Thus we might move towards a future history of African music.

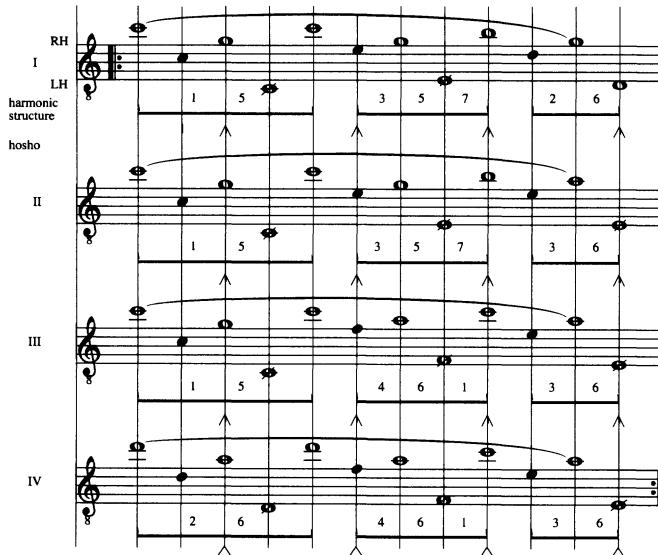
4. THE AESTHETIC ADVANTAGE: EXPANDING THE REALM OF MUSICAL POSSIBILITY

It is often argued that, while ethnomusicology casts a wider methodological net than traditional musicology or music theory, it does not ignore aspects of musical structure altogether. No doubt, this is true. But, what *kind* of formal analysis does ethnomusicology tend to elaborate? In this section, I will argue that even ethnographies that place a high premium on the music itself are fantastically limited, music-theoretically speaking. For example, Paul Berliner’s *The Soul of Mbira*, considered by many ethnomusicologists as an exemplary ethnographic engagement with mbira music’s social context as well as with the music itself, does not analyze mbira music in nearly the same detail that we associate with an analysis of Western music. The discussion of harmony in Berliner’s text, for instance, rarely goes beyond the practice of basic chord labeling.¹⁹ Berliner notes a host of facts about the harmonic structure—that it is one of the factors distinguishing different mbira pieces (Berliner 1981, 74); that some mbira pieces share harmonic schemes, albeit with distinct “harmonic rhythm[s]” (Berliner 1981, 77); or (paraphrasing Andrew Tracey) that the harmonic schemes elaborate “tonal centers,” most commonly on “the lowest pitch of the instrument and the pitch a fourth above this” (Berliner 1981, 78)—but these facts tend to

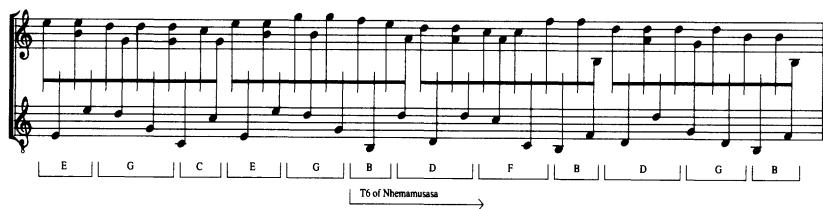
cohere around various socio-contextual motifs (how mbira players “identify” pieces, etc.) or they remain at the basic level of the music’s general character.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the most distinctly musical of these facts, the point about mbira music’s “tonal centers,” is factually incorrect. The pieces *Mutamba* and *Mudande*, to name two of many possible examples, in fact, elaborate the property Berliner calls a “tonal center” a *third* and a *sixth* above the lowest pitch of the instrument, respectively. Let me explain. As Berliner notes, the basic dyad sequence for *Nhemamusasa* comprises fifths built on C, E, G, C, E, A, C, F, A, D, F, and A. Now, if C is the tonal center of *Nhemamusasa*, as Berliner maintains (see Example 1), then the tonal center of *Mutamba* is probably B and that for *Mudande* E (see Examples 2 and 3). While it is not completely clear *why* C in *Nhemamusasa* is invested with tonal centricity, it probably involves one or both of the following factors: (1) The harmonic pattern produced by the dyad sequence, with its gradual transformation away from C and back, or, (2) the “starting point” of the sequence.²⁰ Now consider Example 2, which illustrates a version of *Mutamba* and its likely dyad sequence below the staff. If, on the one hand, hearing the tonal center of this sequence is produced by the above-mentioned pattern, then the tonal center of *Mutamba* is B, in this context sounded on the last group of pulses of the second, third, and fourth quarters. In other words, starting on the B dyad in the second quarter, we have the same basic dyad sequence as *Nhemamusasa* transposed up a seventh. This is marked as T6 below the dyad sequence. On the other hand, if hearing the tonal center is simply a question of where the sequence begins, then its center is E. In neither case is this tonal center, in Berliner’s terms, found on “the lowest pitch of the instrument [or] the pitch a fourth above this” (Berliner 1981, 78). Likewise, the tonal center(s) of the piece *Mudande* are either E or C (see Example 3). And there are numerous examples of other arrangements of this property.²¹ Of course, it is open to debate whether this non-Shona property is relevant to the music at all.

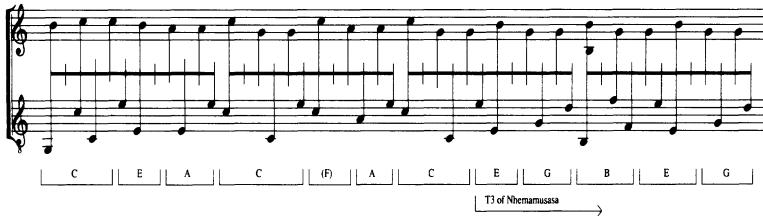
The problem with getting this musical fact wrong has less to do with the use of an alien concept (“tonal center”) to describe the music and more to do with the way the text harnesses native support for its mistaken facts. After making the claim about the most common tonal centers in mbira music, Berliner writes, “Bandambira emphasized the importance of these pitches . . . , describing the [lowest pitch on the instrument] as the pitch ‘which settles the mbira and holds the piece together’ and the [pitch a fourth above this] as ‘one of the most important pitches’; the mother of mbira.” (Berliner 1981, 78) Berliner is referring to his discussion with Bandambira about the naming of mbira keys. As I have men-



EXAMPLE 1: PAUL BERLINER'S REPRESENTATION OF *NHEMAMUSASA*
(BERLINER 1981, 80)



EXAMPLE 2: THE “TONAL CENTER” OF *MUTAMBA*, PERFORMED
(ACCORDING TO EPHAT MUJURU) BY MUCHARETA MUJURU, 1960s
(TRANSCRIPTION: ANDREW TRACEY, PRIVATE COLLECTION)



EXAMPLE 3: THE “TONAL CENTER” OF MUDANDE, PERFORMED BY GWANZURA GWENZI, 1960S (TRANSCRIPTION: TRACEY 1970, 21)

tioned, Berliner’s conversation with Bandambira about this aspect of the mbira (which had eluded the former for many years) plays a central rhetorical role in establishing the fieldworker’s authority in this text. Bandambira describes the lowest pitch on the instrument [“*Gadzanga* (from *kugadza*, ‘to put in a stable position.’)’] in the following terms: “[It] [c]ontrols the excited feeling of the benzi, the high pitch; controls the high pitches, cools the feeling down to normal; settles the piece and holds it together; without this there can be no mbira music” (Berliner 1981, 57). But according to the metaphors employed, Bandambira seems more concerned with its characteristic lowness than with its tonal centricity. In fact, if tonal centricity is at issue one might expect Bandambira’s description of the keys that are *gadzanga*’s octave equivalent to exhibit similar properties. Indeed, Bandambira describes *all* of the other keys in terms that take for granted their octave equivalence. But *gadzanga*’s octave equivalent, “*Benzi* (mad person)” is, in fact, described in almost opposite terms. Far from “settl[ing] down the piece,” *benzi* “[f]rightens you or makes you start; makes you feel awake; makes the heart feel wild or excited like a mad person; makes you dance wildly; has a sharp voice that leads the mbira” (Berliner 1981, 57).²² In light of this discrepancy then, it seems unlikely that Bandambira is trying to talk about a phenomenon like “tonal centers” at all. And yet, his voice is rhetorically recited much later in the text to speak as if it was. In short, the so-called “speaking” native informant smoothly fortifies the anthropologist’s error.

It is important to note that Berliner does spend more time with the rhythmic and melodic relationships of mbira music than with the harmonic ones. These relationships he analyzes primarily in terms of Gerhard Kubik’s concept of “inherent rhythms” (Berliner 1981, 88). While most of this discussion is accurate and insightful, it too lapses into

abstract general claims about the music's complex rhythmic character at various points. On the role of the *makwa* (handclapping) patterns, for instance, Berliner writes, "During a performance . . . the *makwa* parts continually change with respect to one another, producing a steady flow of varied rhythmic patterns in the background of the mbira music. These patterns in relation to the mbira parts demonstrate a cardinal principle of African music which has been called the 'clash of rhythms'" (Berliner 1981, 114–5). The possible relationships between *makwa* variations and the mbira and *hosho* parts is not explored in any depth. Instead, the alleged complexity of the musical polyrhythmic whole is simply stated. It is this kind of commonplace assertion, which blithely attributes the music of the entire continent of Africa with certain "cardinal rule[s]," that is the object of Kofi Agawu's critique of the Western invention of African rhythm (Agawu 1995b, 380–95). The point is that an analysis of another sort, one that does not tire of the minutest details, is less likely to recapitulate this kind of general *topos*.

By strategically limiting the music-theoretical orientation in order to grasp its potential multiplicity, a music analysis stakes a more diminished claim (than does the ethnographic one) on what the African—if one can speak of the "African" as a unified proper name in these times—hears or thinks he hears. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that music is not only a context-bound carrier of meaning and function and that, however exactly the ethnographer in fact comprehends what his/her informants are saying, musical perceptions, meanings, flows, dances, riddles, cognitions, and becomings cannot be exhausted by a semilingualistic methodological model. This is probably especially pertinent for music that is identified with spirit-possession. An analysis that aims to speculate on some of the musical dimensions of this phenomenon can only hope to approximate it via a rigorous determination of as many of the cross-referential properties that might produce such time-transcending experiences as possible. The suspension of mbira music's "social context" in the analysis to follow is thus a foundational ruse crafted to unleash the imagination of musical possibility. A Nietzschean case of killing some birds to make others sing more beautifully. An effort to free the flying bird of fancy.

Perhaps the experimental dimension of this case also unleashes the temptation to think its results somehow less accurate than those produced by ethnography. To my mind, this amounts to a vaguely tutored/reconstructed version of the idea that social contexts yield truth and formal analyses yield lies, after all.²³ Social contexts are inherently negotiable. *The Soul of Mbira*, for example, based on fieldwork conducted at the height of the guerrilla war in Zimbabwe in the 1970s, scarcely mentions

either the war or the role that mbira music played within it.²⁴ As David Lan demonstrates in *Guns and Rain*, there was a complex and delicate relationship between guerrillas and spirit mediums during the war. Given the waning authority of many local *indunas* (chiefs) because of their connections to the Smith regime, spirit mediums were invested with increased influence in political matters. One form of resistance in Zimbabwe, then, took the form of a negotiated cooperation between ancestors and their descendants, mediums and guerrillas, which, in turn, intimately involved the music of the mbira. Not surprisingly, as John Kaemmer has shown, the mbira's status as a symbol of new African nationalism increased during this period (Kaemmer 1981, 31–45). In fact, a new genre of musical songs, known as *chimurenga*, emerged to express African defiance. While these songs were played by electronic bands (such as Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited), the music itself was often inspired by the sound of the mbira. Alec Pongweni notes that *chimurenga* songs were played in various guerrilla camps and were used for maintaining the morale of the fighters (Pongweni 1982, preface). Of course, the relationship between mbira players, spirit mediums, the Rhodesian army, and guerrillas of the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU) in the freedom struggle is a more complicated one than Pongweni suggests, as the deaths, for example, of Muchatera Mujuru and John Kunaka attest. Mujuru was killed at the hands of guerrillas ostensibly for preaching peace (and thus yielding to cooperation with government). The full history of these relationships has still to be written. I draw attention to these events only because I want to show that there is no overarching “social context” of mbira music. Its cultural setting is radically variable, multidimensional, even contradictory. The question is: What kind of social context is beneficial for Africans today?

Let me therefore advance the idea that the kind of creative experimental analytical approach to African music that I am recommending is also an *African* case of musical thinking. First, the war today is different: Capitalist expansion in the last two decades has created two new worlds of development and underdevelopment. The transnationalization of production, through what Arif Dirlik calls a “new international division of labor,” has created new configurations of center and periphery (Dirlik 1994, 62). I cannot elaborate on this point here except to note that when institutions of the arts, research, and education reflect this division on the terrain of culture, they often effectively march in step with the ideology of post-Soviet capitalism. I am not suggesting that Zimbabwe should strive to occupy some kind of imagined extra-capitalist space. Such an option is not open for theoretical choice anyway. Quite the contrary, then, I am suggesting one way in which studies of African music

might better negotiate a dignified place in the New World Order. Behaving *as if* the music occupied an autonomous realm—a stance that, in fact, reflects the provocative side of the Western formulation of aesthetic autonomy—opens a space for provocation of a quite different sort. Like a Heideggerian *Holzweg* (blind alley), this approach pursues a narrow line of thought to provoke another. After all, there is a well-established Shona tradition of saying one thing and meaning another. According to Dumisani Maraire, Shona is rich with “secret language or obscure allusions (*chibhende*)” (Maraire 1981, 178). As Berliner reports, “A sentence or phrase which in one context has a commonly understood meaning can in another context have the opposite meaning. For instance, the expression, *zvakakunakira wena* meaning literally, ‘it is good for you,’ can also, in some contexts, mean ‘mocking you, laughing at you, making fun of you, fooling you’” (Berliner 1981, 178). This practice of embedding multiple meanings in song texts is particularly effective in times of war. Pongweni points out, “The texts of [*chimurenga*] songs abound in deliberate ambiguities, elusive metaphor designed to hoodwink the ubiquitous enemy” (Pongweni 1982, 1). For example, Kaemmer notes that Africans did not need to be reminded that the words of the traditional piece “Torai kapadza muchirima” (“Take your little hoe and begin farming”) was a reference to the liberation struggle (Kaemmer 1989, 37).

This is why I am advocating an analysis that takes a music-theoretical tool that is on hand and begins to explore musical alternatives, without giving up the space for (provisional) determination. By suspending a commitment provoked by the anthropological “sensitivity” to the imagined “African way of hearing music,” I am advancing a music analysis that provisionally traces the multidimensional character exhibited by one piece of African music within an overt frame of reference. It is a theoretical method, then, that is committed to specifying the music’s undecidable moments. Like the multilayered meanings of Shona poetry, this approach aims to expand the textual meanings of mbira music. But such methodological indecision does not lapse into relativistic freeplay because it entails characterizing the complex array of possibilities and impossibilities that identifies it *as Nyamaropa*—an identity that paradoxically emerges by insisting on its ever incomplete context. Put another way, this method is less a case of interpretative relativism and more a case of strictly and rigorously determining various figures of undecidability on the terrain of harmony. For it is in multiple responses (to responses) that I locate the responsibility to the singular beauty of this piece of Shona music. Not claiming to know then, in the robust sense, how the music sounds to anyone else, the analysis paws at possibilities. Without denying that a little formalism on the terrain of African art may take us out of

Africa's history and context, a lot of formalism, paradoxically, may put us into an intimate acquaintance with it. *Zvakakunakira wena*—The doing good is/in fooling.

SECTION 2: A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE HARMONIC PATTERNING OF THE SHONA MBIRA SONG *NYAMAROPA*

THE SOUND OF THE MBIRA

Striking one of the metal mbira keys (*lamella*) with the thumb or the right index finger produces many sounds: there is a high vibration or overtone (which Dumisani Maraire calls *maungira*), usually not a pure fifth and sometimes more prominent than the basic pitch (which Maraire calls *dziro*); there is the covibration of other keys (depending on the tuning of the instrument); and there is the buzzing of the snail or sea shells or bottle tops mounted on a metal plate (or of the metal beads strung on a wire) immediately following the strike. If the instrument is played in a gourd resonator or calabash (*deze* or *dende*) the sound is amplified and extended in time, while the added vibrators lining the outer edge of the gourd effect another layer of buzzing. Then there is the sound of the other twenty-three keys, already passed and not yet there, in times that span various pulses; and in times that span various musical histories. These are the sounds that weave the one that has been struck into one that can be identified with the making of what many mbira players call a “big tune.” To tell us what quality of echo this sound is. A texture. Perhaps the tune of an ancestor. The patterning of the time about it will tell.

When two mbiras are played together, the different paths they take (sometimes referred to as *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* parts) are in an interlocking relationship with one another, one player sounding in the silence of the other, thus forming figures of intricacy and variety exceeding the movements of the fingers alone. The yield is greater than the sum of its parts: Rhythmic groupings cross, hidden melodies are drawn forth, harmonies are blurred at the edges. The buzzing, variously attenuated by the different keys, sometimes vibrating in sympathy and sometimes not, is heard together with (or just after) the striking that elicits it, thus producing a kind of resounding snare-like smudge, rustling along with (or behind) one or another of the musical figures or phrases inherent in the patterns, while the sustained hocketing is offset by a *hosho* gourd rattle pattern sounded in repeating three-pulse groups. Sometimes performers give a “voice” to their dancing by attaching *maghavu* (gourds filled with

seeds) to their legs, thus adding rhythmic complexity to the hosho's beating. Usually cycling in twelve-, thirty-six- or forty-eight-pulse patterns, mbira songs elaborate a seemingly endless number of variations around a basic harmonic shape, shifting rhythms and melodies at ever-changing places in the cycle. Like the mythical history of the instrument itself, the cycle has no logical beginning (or end) point, even while new and different phrases constantly emerge in the shifting weave.

Often one or both players sing patterns to the music; sometimes these are embedded inherent melodies, sometimes not; sometimes with verbal meaning, other times without. Those with meaning can range from lengthy poems to personal comments, from ancient metaphoric wisdom and social commentary to funny stories and sounds, from criticism to nonsense: Forward Kwenda's 1997 rendition of *Mahororo* tells of the sounds of baboons playing and shouting as well as of the state of ease following struggle, while Hakurotwi Mude's *Nyamaropa*, recorded in 1971, elucidates the diminishing power of the mbira in modern times as well as an aesthetic of mbira performance. "For one who can play it," he sings, "it sounds like a flute" (Berliner 1978, 260).²⁵

The tuning of the mbira is not fixed across time and space, and so the relationship between the intervals in any sequence of keys is variable. Some of these tuning systems are given a general formal designation (such as *gandanga*, *nyamaropa*, or *dambatsoko* tunings); others are idiosyncratic, like Forward Kwenda's *nemakonde* tuning, while still others have no name. Even those that ostensibly share systems vary. Using the upwardly ascending right-hand keys of the mbira as a reference point, Fraderick Mujuru's *gandanga* tuning, for example, follows the interval pattern (measured in cents) 131, 216, 164, 246, 140, 197, 193; while Tute Chigamba's *gandanga* tuning follows the pattern 130, 188, 170, 210, 133, 188, 189. (The absolute pitch range of the two mbira tunings also differs by the interval of approximately a major third.)²⁶ It is not that these mbira builders are from different areas or traditions—on many occasions I saw Mujuru at Chigamba's house in Zororo, Highfields, or speaking with him at the bookfair in midtown Harare—but that players seem to delight in performing in approximately different tuning systems. Entire songs change when the player switches instrument and, very often, so does his/her style of playing within the other tuning. The tuning can even vary between registers on the same instrument, producing melodies in different regions that dance within a pitch area instead of on a fixed pitch. This can bring the overtones of the lower register into alignment with the upper pitches. For example, the fourth key from the left of Fraderick Mujuru's *dambatsoko* tuning is a flatter sixth (from the lowest note on the instrument) than is the fourth key from the right,

which, in turn, perfectly duplicates the most prominent overtone of the lowest note. If we attend to the inherent overtone patterns—the sounds of Mude's flute line?—such resonance can be helpful.

Berliner has tabulated some different tunings (Berliner 1981, 67–8) and Andrew Tracey has surmised that, for all the variability, the tuning tends towards an equi-heptatonic system (i.e., seven equal steps in the octave) (Tracey 1970, 10–1). In relation to the major scale, in Tracey's view, all intervals, barring the fourth, are flat—most notably the seventh and the third. As a general view, the theory of seven equally spaced notes has the advantage of explaining why the same dyad sequences are elaborated at different pitch heights in different songs, such as *Nyamaropa*, *Mudande*, or *Nhemamusasa*. But this theory seems to be empirically false. *Nyamaropa*, *gandanga*, and *dambatsoko* tunings, while internally variable to some degree, have a unique and identifiable character that is probably not reducible to an overarching system. There may exist, in the words of John Kaemmer, “greater flexibility in the acceptable norms of pitch” for tuning the mbira than for tuning a Western instrument (Kaemmer 1998, 746). This view is suggested by the fact that pitches (approximately) an octave apart are considered equivalent (Kaemmer 1998, 747).²⁷ While not fixed in the empirically robust sense, the different tuning systems still result in a unique and basic arrangement of interval classes (whose exact sizes are somewhat variable). For all their differences, the pattern of intervals in Chigamba's and Mujuru's *gandanga* tunings (mentioned above), for example, also share characteristics. More specifically, their differences are less discernible than their affinities when they are compared to other tuning types. In other words, *gandanga* tuning has a general and distinct character (faintly “phrygian,” to use a reductive shorthand) that differs from that of both *dambatsoko* and *nyamaropa* tuning. Fraderick Mujuru's *dambatsoko* tuning, for example, follows the interval pattern 178, 147, 157, 219, 199, 184, 129, while his *nyamaropa* tuning follows the interval pattern 160, 198, 115, 230, 128, 161, 219. For all their variability, these tuning patterns are more-or-less approximated in other instruments of the same general tuning type.

It should also be noted that the seeming “instability” of the tuning systems does not entail a perceptually unmarked harmonic system. While he does not examine the overall similarities of alike tunings by different builders, Berliner reaches a similar conclusion. For Berliner, “mbira music really concerns a class of particular intervals rather than fixed ratios (in other words, a perfect fifth on one instrument can be so different as to be a tritone on another). What is important to note is that the corresponding intervals within a class have the same relative functions within the piece, even when played on instruments with different tunings”

(Berliner 1981, 75). In fact, the harmonic patterning, which is the primary focus of my analysis to follow, articulates many layers of ambiguity which are less easily given in the diatonic scale with its myriad of interval classes. Indeed, it is just the tuning, undoing the possibility of orienting one's hearing to various prominent points of repose, initiation and so on, that brings the sometimes beriddling harmonic movements to full expression. Failure to "position-find" oneself in the pitch collection (as Richmond Browne might say) is thus matched by a failure to harness a decisive boundary in the harmonic flow.²⁸ Thus the listener chooses any of many paths.

Here are some transcriptions of the tune *Nyamaropa*. The first two (Example 4) are based on the playing of Samuel Mujuru of Glen Norah "A," Harare, in August 1996, while the second two (Example 5) are taken from Gwanzura Gwenzi of Chivero, Mhondoro, near Harare, in the 1960s, as transcribed and published by Andrew Tracey (Tracey 1970, 16–7). In some ways the Western staff notation is paradoxically more suited to mbira music than to Western music because the approximately equally spaced interval structure is very accurately reflected by the equal spacing of notes on the staff! On the other hand, these transcriptions reflect only a fleeting aspect of the actual music played and even contradict the spirit of constant variation. In fact, for my transcriptions, I had to ask Mujuru to slow down considerably before I could follow and I think that, to facilitate me, he simplified things. For Mujuru, at any rate, the elevated music begins only when you "play as the spirit directs," when "something happens and you don't know why," when the sounds of the basic tune are taken elsewhere (personal communication, 1996). It is my hope therefore that you consider these transcriptions, at best, as an inadequate and incomplete document in progress.

Immediately apparent is the polymetric rhythmic relationship (I deliberately muddle these theoretical ideas) in each hand. In the first two transcriptions (I and II), the right-hand figures seem to be periodic in groups of three notes with durations of two pulses, while the left hand seems to be periodic in groups of four notes with durations of three pulses. Broadly speaking, the second two transcriptions (III and IV) sound the opposite pacing pattern: groups of three-pulse figures in the right hand (with an inner line in twos in IV) and groups of two-pulse figures in the left. Various implied "downbeats" are thus sustained throughout. If I or II is combined with III or IV, a polyrhythmic interaction emerges in all registers. But notice, in cycles III and IV, how even where a left-hand configuration shares a grouping pattern (in this case in twos), these patterns differently occupy the respective registers of the two left-hand manuals. Thus, with the implied contours in mind, in III these figures are grouped



**EXAMPLE 4: TWO FRAGMENTS OF *NYAMAROPA*,
PERFORMED BY SAMUEL MUJURU, AUGUST 1996
(TRANSCRIPTION: M. SCHERZINGER)**



**EXAMPLE 5: TWO FRAGMENTS OF *NYAMAROPA*,
PERFORMED BY GWANZURA GWENZI, 1960s
(TRANSCRIPTION: A. TRACEY 1970, 16–7)**

in threes (two bass notes alternating with a middle-register note) while in IV they are grouped in twos (middle, low, middle, low, and so on). While sharing the two-pulse structure in a certain layer of detail then, the groupings are out of phase in another. And the polyrhythm resulting

from their interaction is not a simple two-against-three because the two patterns never touch; instead they fall in each other's spaces. Recall that these two parts would not be played simultaneously (as notated) but interlocking. That is, the second player's part would follow one pulse behind the first player's part. If we combine the patterns and emphasize the low notes in III and IV, the resulting bass pattern will be: *xx..xx.xx..xxxx..xx.xx..xxxx..xx* and so on. (An *x* marks a relatively stronger beat and a period a relatively weaker one.) This pattern can be heard in various ways: as an irregular grouping (if an underlying regularity is projected), as an additive rhythm (groups of 3+4+5 pulses beginning on the fourth pulse of each quarter: *xx.xx..xxx..xx.xx..xxx..*) or as an overlapped palindrome (pivoting on the first or the sixth pulses of each quarter: *.xx..xxxx..xx.xx..xxxx..xx.*).

One of the interesting things about this kind of polyrhythm in general is that it always yields durational mirror images of half of itself. These reflecting duration patterns contribute to a perceptual ambiguity and also, because they involve a pivotal point that borders both reflecting patterns at opposite ends, can mean different things at once. While it is by no means automatic, listening in this way can cycle the music in a startling and invigorating manner. Take the extracted bass pattern above and listen to it as a palindrome. This is easily done because the patterns in this case are just about the same (even when they run in the same direction): *.xx..xx* and *xx..xx*.—sharing a silence on one end and a sound on the other. Unlike the first hearing of this pattern, where the irregular grouping preconceives a periodic background (whether grouped in twos as suggested by the bass lines or in threes with the *hosho*), this last hearing preconceives a *symmetrical* foreground which then sounds beautifully syncopated no matter how we invest the background periodicity. Many of the standard *hosho* rattle patterns, such as *xx.x.xx.xxx.*, cycle similarly, so that in this textural layer too, our hearing can shuttle between periodic asymmetry and aperiodic symmetry (or, of course, something else).

Alternately, an inner combinational voice happens in the spaces of the bass pattern produced by III and IV together. As the (order position) complement of the aforementioned rhythm it is also a palindrome, about which no more need be said, especially because it can also be freely combined with the lower notes of the right hand parts of III and IV to form a melody that need not be symmetric. The inherent patterns in this middle register, albeit submerged, are potentially the most complex because of the duplicated notes on the left and right side of the instrument. Example 6 is an instance of such a freely combined inherent pattern emerging from the inner voices of the four hands in III and IV. These are the

kinds of patterns that are frequently elaborated in the *mahon'era* singing style discussed above.

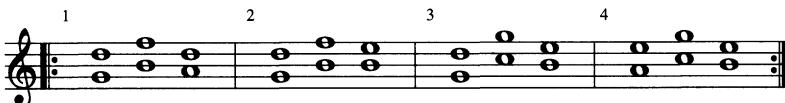


EXAMPLE 6: INHERENT PATTERN COMBINING III AND IV

While most of the rhythmic details discussed so far are readily apparent already within one quarter of a cycle, the timing and the spacing of the harmonic movements, which also elicit an analogously sustained ambiguity in the music, are less immediate. The analysis to follow will explore some aspects of the harmonic patterning in *Nyamaropa*.

ANALYTIC RESTRICTION AS OPPORTUNITY

Assume that the musical cycles depicted above are somehow beholden to the dyad sequence figured in Example 7 (where a whole note represents approximately four eighth notes in the transcriptions); not that the music reduces essentially to it, but that this series of dyads somewhere guides the musical passages quoted above, or that the dyads lay out a harmonic framework for hearing the details—melodic, rhythmic, and so on. Of course, in reality, these harmonies are muddied with various other tones—ninthths, sixths, thirds—sometimes expressible as delayed tones, anticipations, neighboring tones, and passing tones, and sometimes not. Simply added tones. Perhaps these have been struck to facilitate a rhythmic movement in the fingers, or perhaps they have been struck to approximate pitches not found on the mbira. Nonetheless, as a tentative idealization, such a hearing would be one of “variations,” albeit (strictly speaking) theme-less and with other invariants as well. I could have asked you to make other assumptions: to render the cycles as a function, say, of a general network of polyrhythmic and hocketing principles; or as a function of a different set of harmonies—fewer dyads, for example, and more elaboration. Undoubtedly the patterns would sound different every time. Different frames animate different details. Perhaps then, we should first regard these assumptions as restrictions, as partial listening, still incomplete.



EXAMPLE 7: A DYAD SEQUENCE OF NYAMAROPA

But there is the opposite point to be made as well. For what exactly sounds different every time? Hearing in terms of the specific harmonic background that I suggest, or in terms of “variations” in general, simultaneously also gestures beyond itself, for it unmarks the sound of the harmony itself, and notices instead the specifics of its rhythmic-melodic elaboration. Harmony is now less a matter of simultaneously sounding notes than a behavior of, also successive, notes that harness into an identifiable combination. As conceptually prior, the harmonic progression thus also curiously recedes from earshot while the manner of its unfolding comes forward. Thus we posit one thing and then discover another. Restriction now as opportunity—an unanticipated opportunity.

I could have asked you to make still other assumptions: to render the cycles as a function of a social ritual, an ancestral spirit worship ceremony (*bira*) in Mashonaland East, for example, or a music lesson on a dusty day in Harare. What kind of hearing does this yield? How do such realities approach the music? Or how does the music approach such a reality? (1) Does positing the social ritual lead us to an unexpected place; a peripheral discovery? And does this discovery hammer the small sound-bones at all? Can we hear it? (2) Or does the musical sound realize the ritual that was posited, and thus disappear in a circle? Is the sound silenced in service of the ritual? (3) Or are there bits of both circularity and discovery in both cases; an irreducible mixing of properties either way? All this remains to be discovered. But, at the outset it might at least be said that the harmonic sequence that I ask you to assume as a framework for hearing is restricted not only by ignoring other possibilities for disposing our hearing and then by receding from earshot as it does so, but also by suspending a consideration of the “social context” that may be its *raison d'être*.

Now consider that the analysis of the progression, caught in this double restriction, might also be (if we are vigilant towards the opposite movement) engaged in an unexpected peripheral discovery. And, because restriction can be opportunity (when we are thus vigilant), perhaps we could add a further restriction to our hearing. Let us ignore the rhythmic-melodic specifics to which we are pointed when we assume the harmonic progression as a basis. Let us therefore perform the ritual of

abstraction again, first by banishing the social context from our analysis, then by banishing all but one mode of hearing, and then by banishing the patterns of sound to which we are pointed by that one mode. What then can these abstract harmonies tell us? This carcass? *Nothing.* Remains. And yet—

To hear the comingings and goings of these changing groups of pitches (henceforth, “dyads”), their goings into comingings and their comingings into goings; to confine ourselves to so little and attend to it; to place ourselves in this condition as perceivers; a condition of classical aesthetic distancing; to cut off the music from use and be occupied by its internal harmonic design; to heed the way the various small bones, which are thrown into motion by their sounding, arrange themselves in certain ways; to do all this might one day catapult us back to that ritual in Mashonaland East; to the strange and unrestrained movements punctuated by convulsions of the one who is caught in a kind of dancing; unknowingly; surprisingly; not as before; with enchantment. Like a Shona mode of becoming engaged with music; of discovering something in the experience of something else; or like a Shona proverb that says one thing to point to another; that fools to do good, such restricted close listening discloses something unthought-about in its open regions. To be socially and morally transfigured in the face of an aesthetic experience, s/he has the gods like a star in the world’s sky.

PATTERNING HARMONIES IN *NYAMAROPA*

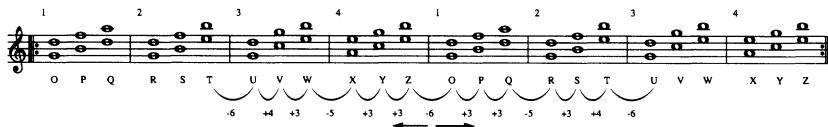
Even with so little in hand it is hard to just listen to these harmonies. How do they sound in themselves? What is just listening? It is a commonplace, for example, that the “G dyad” in measure 1 of Example 7 does not sound the same as the “G dyad” in measure 2 and in measure 3. Nor does the “B dyad” sound like any other, not even the one that falls in the same place when the pattern is repeated. Now we hear the dyads as tracking a particular projection, as signs of a movement from one place to another; as connecting and disconnecting; as transforming. Is this a just hearing? With blindfolded ears? As an instantiation of a process given by its environment each dyad is multicapillaried, not only itself in itself. So what can they be, these associated dyads? What are some of the movements, senses, signs, connections they can make; what patterns, what habits, what beliefs?

In the first measure of Example 7 there are three dyads ascending in pitch-class thirds (G-D, B-F, D-A). Possibly a subtle upward melodic tendency can be felt if it is heard as a harmonic arc shape, the third dyad as

an altered, inflected return to the first. Measure 2 repeats measure 1 except for the raised third dyad (as if it were responding to that tendency?), while measure 3 repeats 2 except for the raised second dyad (an anticipation of that move?) and measure 4's first dyad (an anticipation of *that?*) is raised. Thus in each measure, or partial progression, some things are held still and something changes. Then as the progression begins again all things change in measure 1. All things change as it repeats without change the harmonic shape of measure 4 one step down (as if the aim was to transpose the harmonic shape of measure 1 gradually up a tone and then to jolt it back down). Andrew Tracey, in a private conversation, wondered about this twitching at the end of the progression, the seeming seam in a music that seems otherwise so essentially cyclical; a circle with no end; like seamlessness.²⁹ But to me (and, given his wondering, probably to Tracey as well) the repeat sounds harmonically "necessary," the fissure sounds smooth. Why? At least because, from the other angle, it is a simple "repetition" of measure 4, now patterned like a sequence. Depending then on what modality of hearing is at work, the repeat can seem to jolt or flow. But, to keep it smooth throughout, say, we must switch our attention to different features at different points in the cycle. And everything else shifts along the angle of such attention. (Like the experience I have with some of Morton Feldman's music; how listening to one of the many repeating elements *as* repetition makes the other repeating elements sound more irregular than they are in real [clock] time.)

There is still another sense in which the repeat sounds smooth: Imagine a progression that moves down a fifth, then up a third, down another fifth, and then up a third twice. Then beginning another third up (and thus back on your starting point) imagine another progression that does exactly the same thing in the opposite order (beginning with a movement up a third twice, and so on). If you begin on measure 3, Example 8 represents the resulting progression as a whole. Here two cycles are represented with the "end" and the "beginning" of the *Nyamaropa* cycle at the center. The numbers below represent the intervallic distance between the lower notes, counting within an equi-heptatonic scale. Plus and minus symbols indicate whether these intervals are rising or falling although, harmonically speaking, this does not mean "lower" or "higher" pitches as such.

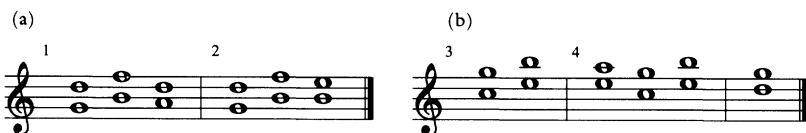
This series of intervals, measuring harmonic moves, pivots on dyads *Z* and *O* to form a palindrome. Because of this retrograde inversion relation, proceeding from left to right mirrors the procedure from right to left (when this interval is taken as a starting point). Of course, the interval 6 between *T* and *U* is as pivotal in this mirror structure as the other.



What does it mean to “hear” a mirror? I am not sure. Without taking up the polemic that hearing things upside down or back to front seems to provoke, let me explain at least that I am not asserting that we hear this passage backwards to make the connection, but that if we hear the five (or six) harmonic moves I outline at the beginning of the paragraph as a group of some kind, we can follow the remaining progression as if it were making each move again in the reverse sequence. Perhaps this is why the repeat sounds harmonically “necessary” to me; part of why, to my way of hearing, the repeat gives the music its tremendous power. Two strangely identical harmonic maneuvers are elaborated in a kind of ongoing back and forth—a kind of oscillation that disconcerts our hearing unambiguously; that produces instead a kind of harmonic mirroring (identically strange) that puts to question any chosen starting point. Beginnings and endings are already passages elsewhere. It is as if this sequence of harmonic moves is somehow a model for the music, best approached by cycling through endless mirrorings. Perhaps this is one reason why Mujuru can begin playing *Nyamaropa* in the third measure while Gwenzi begins in the first. Other performers begin elsewhere still.

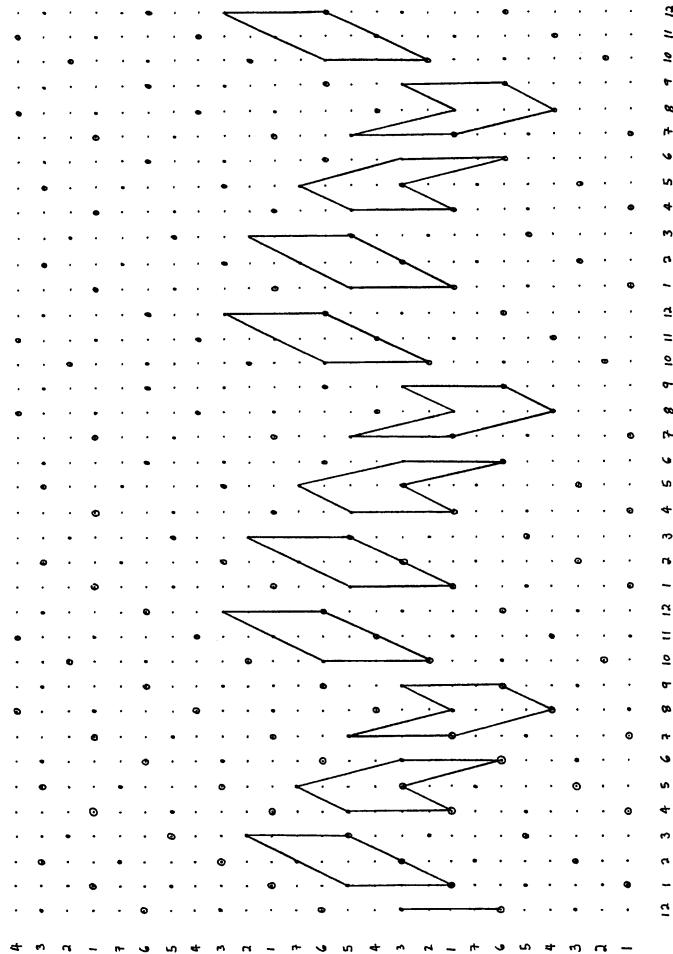
One interesting thing about this kind of reflection is that, even as they unfold in the same direction of time, each group is somewhere identical as well. Consider the six dyads in measures 1 to 2 and then the six dyads beginning on the second dyad in measures 3 and ending on the first dyad in measure 1 as two discrete units respectively. Take the first (Example 9a): This is the basic dyad sequence that A. Tracey has identified as characteristic in the karimba repertoire south of the Zambezi (Tracey 1970, 46). How can we hear this partial progression? Let us hear it as elaborating a kind of gravitation around G with the dyads built on D and E as oscillating upbeats to it. (I am not saying that G is a tonic, not even that it necessarily gravitates thus, but just that we assume such provisionally.) Now take the second progression (Example 9b): This is the same basic karimba progression beginning one beat later and a fourth higher. The point is that if we invested in G as a gravitational center of Example 9a, we would invest in C as the same in Example 9b with G now as one of

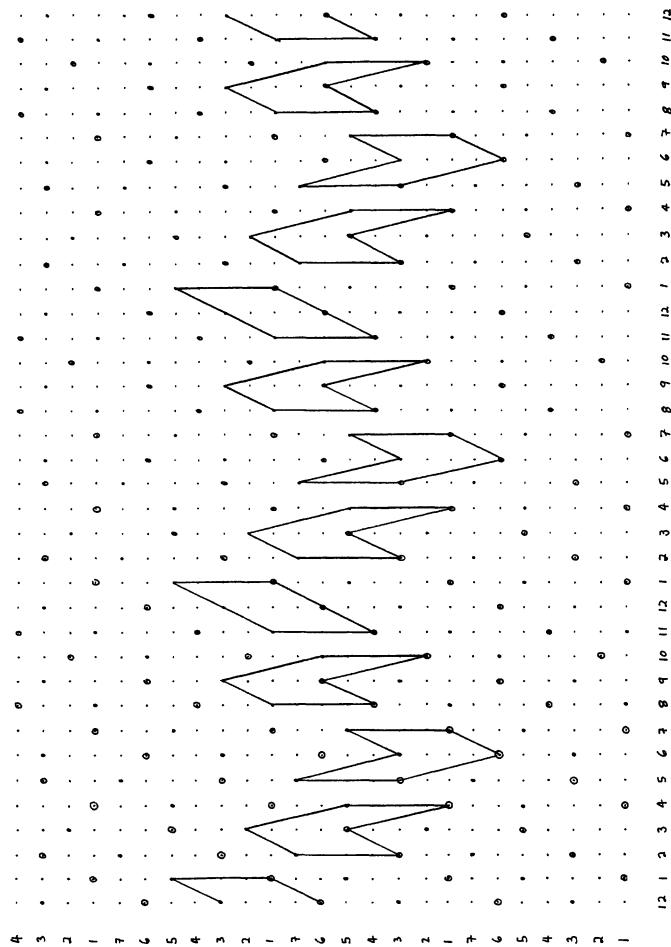
the oscillating dyads. This may contribute to the often bewildering directional pulls of the harmonies when the two progressions are combined, by undoing, under this hearing, an overriding center. (Interestingly, this shifting center is not between two harmonies that appear statistically as often. If recurrence were a criterion for perceiving a pull towards such a harmony, the dyads on both E and G would equally apply. Of course, in each case, the surrounding progression is differently composed.) Hearing the music in terms of two quasi-identical progressions separated by a fourth cycles the music in a way that resembles the rhythmic unfolding of the pattern of the inherent bass pattern discussed above. Similar to this hearing, the harmonic rhythm here shares an unmarked dyad on one end (the first beat of measure 3) and a shared dyad on the other (the first beat of measure 1), and an analogously “syncopated” harmonic rhythm results.



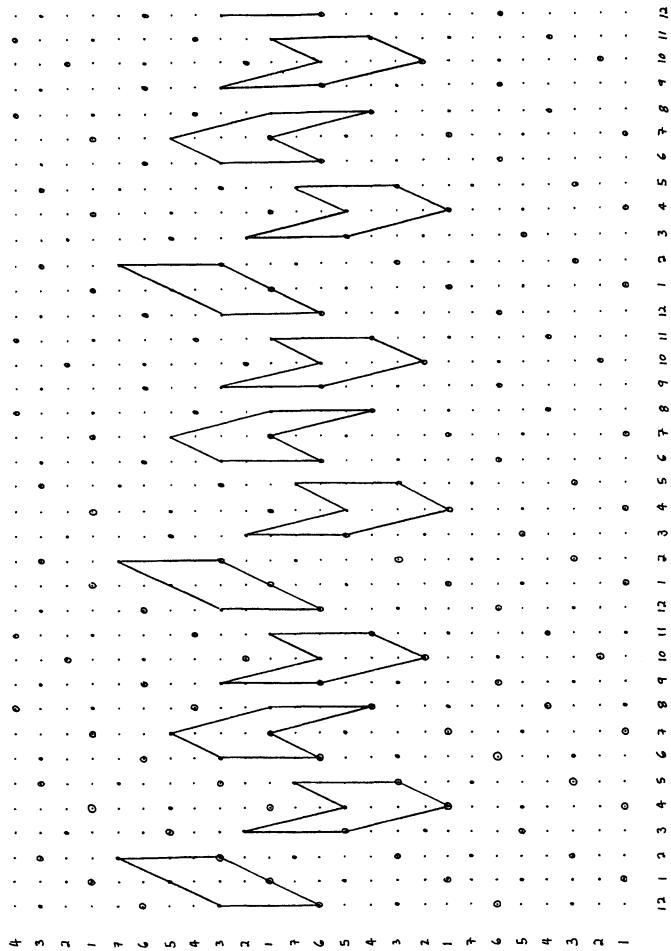
EXAMPLE 9: TWO QUASI-IDENTICAL PARTIAL PROGRESSIONS
MAKING UP NYAMAROPA

By harnessing harmonic motion in various ways and then noticing various affinities and differences within the groups, we can therefore listen to the same music in different ways. There are many more possibilities. Example 10 illustrates the kinds of hearing that emerge when the progression is differently grouped. In order better to demonstrate that these shapes elaborate a *movement*, I have represented them on a grid with two axes. The vertical axis represents equi-heptatonic scale steps and the horizontal axis represents a time line of equidistant time-spans (four pulses per time-span). Scale step 1 is pitch-class G in the notated progression; scale step 2 is A, and so on. Circled points represent the low note of the fifth dyad, while darkened points represent the fifth above/fourth below. Each of these hearings has a different, yet interestingly related, character. An experience of Example 10b, for instance, involves a different arrangement of repetitions, tendencies, anticipations, and so on, than, say, Example 10a. The shape beginning at time-span 2 (henceforth t.2, etc.), for example, is repeated by the shape at t.5 except for the raised middle dyad (t.6), while the shape at t.8 raises both outer dyads, and thus





EXAMPLE 10B



EXAMPLE 10C

replicates the initial shape (t.2) a tone higher. At t.11, only the last dyad of the shape is lowered, introducing the progression of consecutive thirds, while at t.2 again the first two dyads are lowered. Thus, in this hearing, we oscillate between hearing one thing change (and two things holding still) and then hearing two things change (and one holding still). The transpositions up and then down a tone are thus effected equally in this case; there is no jolt in the rocking between scale degree 3 (henceforth p.3, etc.) and p.4. Of course there is more to be said about hearing the progression grouped in this way: that the shapes at t's 5 and 8 mirror each other around dyad 6, for example; that this mirror is a kind of mutated echo of the mirror between the shapes at t's 2 and 5 which share a starting dyad (instead of an axis dyad), and so on. So too does the hearing represented by the grouping in Example 10c have different stories to tell, but I leave these to the imaginative listener.

Just because these hearings are different from one another does not suggest that we are locked into one at the expense of another; that we cannot shift our attention from one grouping to another. In fact, there are affinities between hearings that encourage just such perceptual adjustment. Moreover, mbira performances frequently involve shifting a sense of grouping by retaining notes of a dyad for a longer or shorter number of pulses, or by inflecting the harmonies with more or less nonharmonic tones, or by accentuating pulses differently. In S. Mujuru's rendition (Example 11), for example, the harmonic rhythm fluctuates thus: 7+2+3, 6+3+3, 4+4+4, and 4+3+5 pulses. Thus, Mujuru prolongs the dyad on G over more than half of the quarter and thus situates a salient harmonic starting point. Also, by prolonging the dyad on A almost as long as the previous G, he establishes a grouping in three dyad units (as depicted in Example 10a). He then decreases the duration of the first dyads of each unit in the remaining two quarters (and increases the duration of the last dyads respectively) as if to shift the grouping established in the first two quarters (towards that depicted in Example 10c).

7 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 5 |

G | C | E | A | C | E | G | B | D | G | B | E |

EXAMPLE 11: S. MUJURU'S HARMONIC RHYTHM

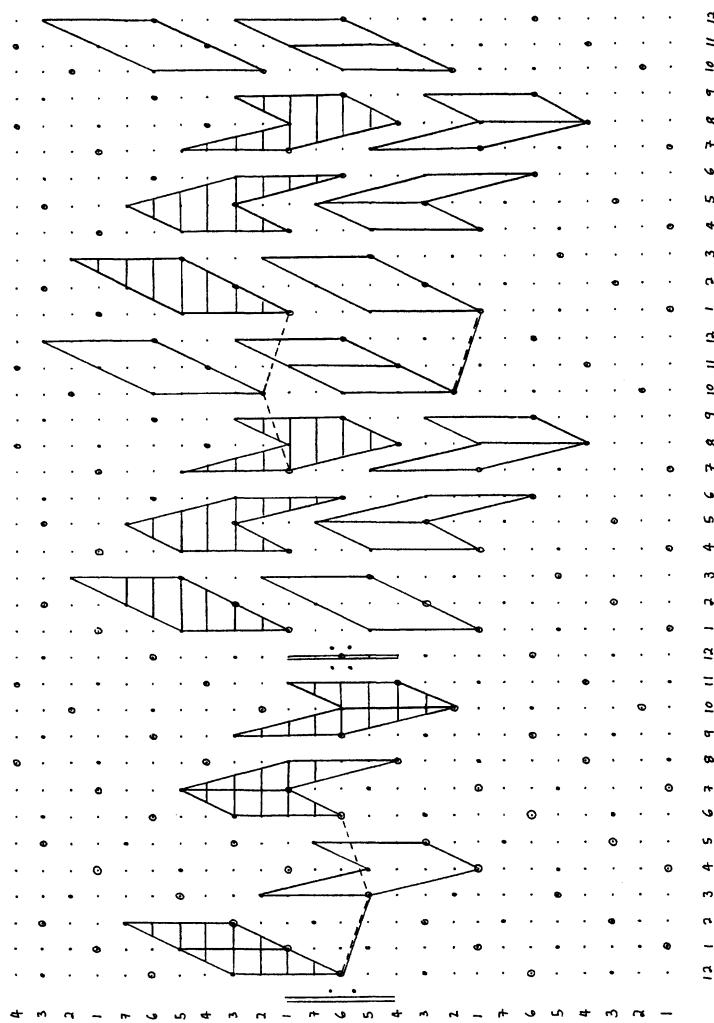
In Gwenzi's rendition (Example 12), on the other hand, while the bass voices seem to elaborate a more equally distributed harmonic rhythm, he draws attention to a starting point by adding more nonharmonic tones later in the cycle (circled in the diagram). Thus the points of emphasis and their suggested grouping can slide throughout the performance, especially as the music wanders through different variations and hocketing combinations with a second instrument.



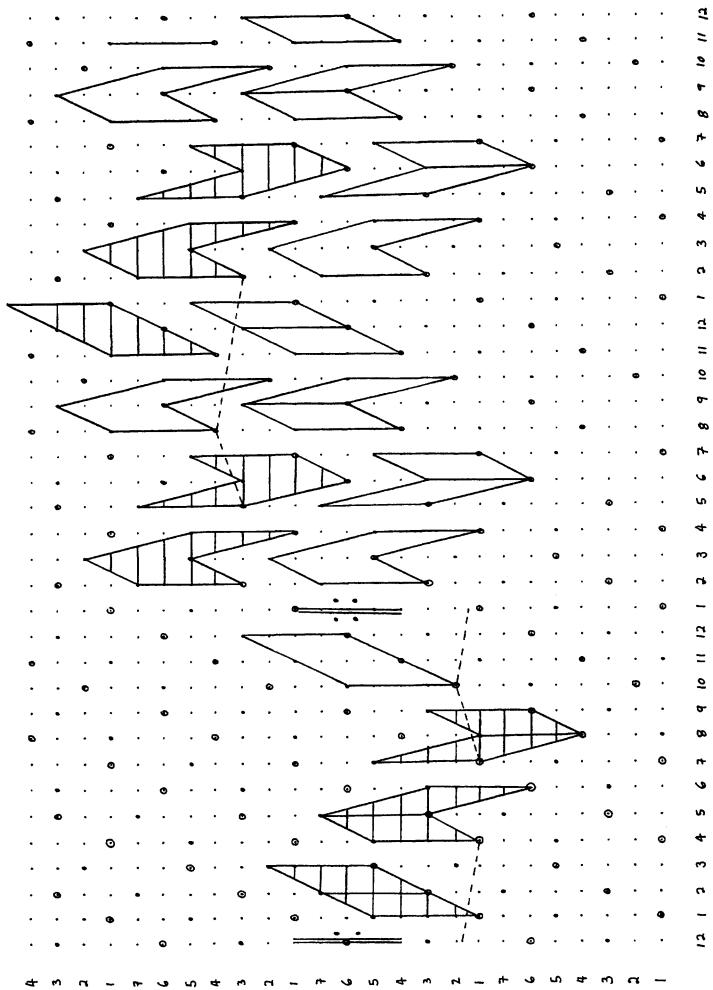
EXAMPLE 12: GWENZI'S NONHARMONIC TONES

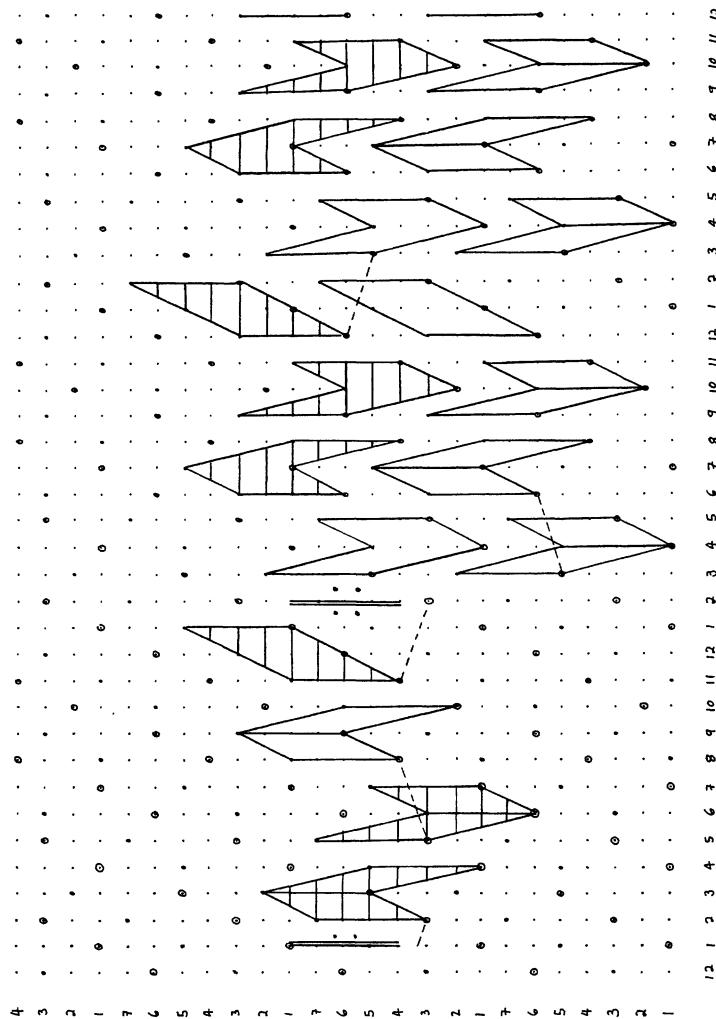
Even if the performances were not thus inflected (and felicitously elaborated one unmixed harmony every four pulses instead), certain features of the logic patterning the harmonies would still invite the adjustment of one's angle of hearing at various points. Compare, for example, the grouping of Example 10c with Example 10a as it is depicted in Example 13a. If we provisionally foreground the shaded harmonic shapes in the grouping on the left-hand side of the figure, and hear the unshaded area more vaguely (perhaps merely as a general step down and back, as denoted by the dotted lines), we can listen to the other grouping on the right-hand side of the figure in a striking way. For the second grouping presents the same three shapes as the first (transposed up a third), only their temporal placement is juggled around. This is depicted by shaded horizontal lines. Thus, the vaguely heard shape (articulating, this time, a general step *up* and back) happens at a relatively different time, or, stated differently, separates the three consecutive shapes differently in the second grouping. Thus, by beginning a third higher and one time span later, we can hear the second progression in terms that are more similar than they are different to the first, and thus produce a kind of (free) harmonic canon at the third, the *comes* of which is a syncopated version of the first harmonic passage (*dux*). Note how the "strong" rhythmic accents in one are rendered as "weak" accents in the other, which again disconcerts an overarching hierarchy of rhythmic accents (this time by virtue of the harmonic flow)—a harmonic *Canon per Arsin et Thesin*?

Let me illustrate the point with two possible basic variations of *Nyamaropa*. In Example 14 I have labeled the three dyad groups that are shared by both variations as I, II, and III respectively. To emphasize their



EXAMPLE 13A



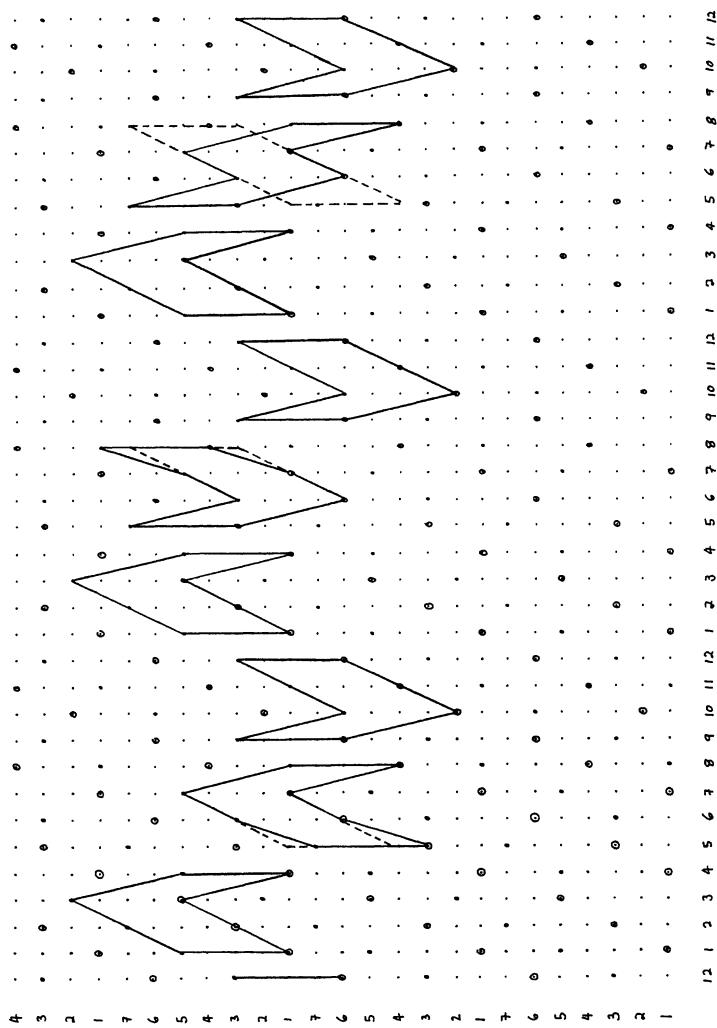


EXAMPLE 13C

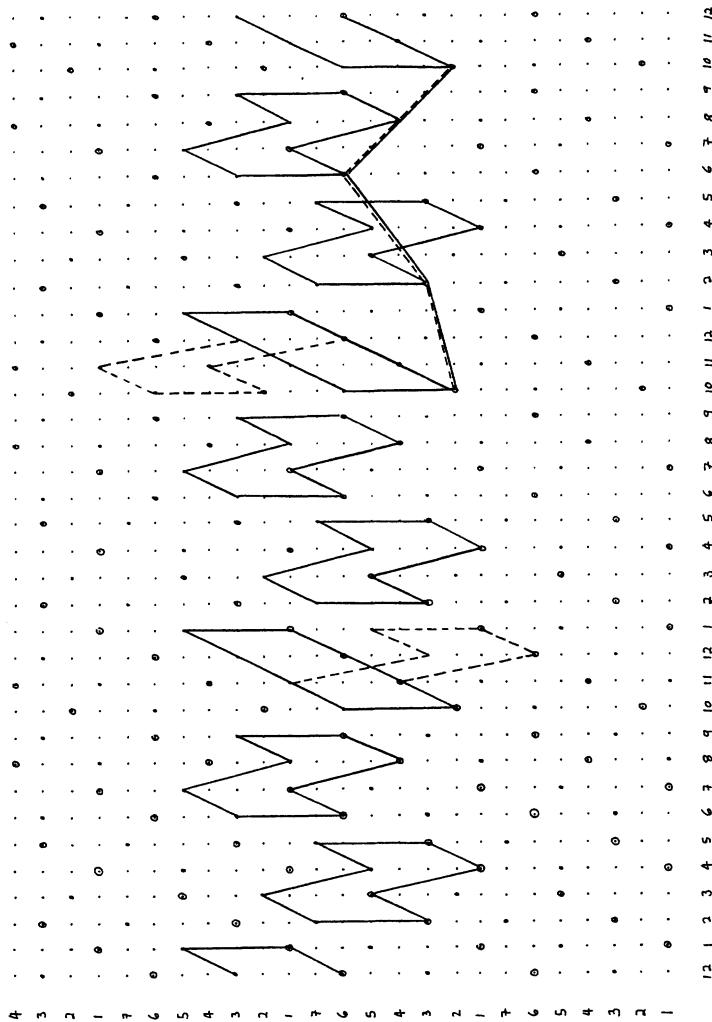
potential as canons, these shared dyad groups are elaborated by the same melodic patterns in both hands. While it is unusual to repeat pitches in the manner of these variations (especially in the bass), it is not unidiomatic. Ephat Mujuru, for example, frequently articulates harmonic groupings this way, while Musekiwa Chingodza has made these kinds of note repetitions a characteristic signature of his style. His version of the song *Serevende* on the CD *Hungwe-Tsunga* is a good example of this. It is possible that Chingodza's approach is somewhat "untraditional"; note repetitions such as these are sometimes associated with an amateur *majimba* style. Still, to hear the harmonies in the manner I am suggesting does not entail such literal note repetitions. I have included them for the sake of dramatizing a point.

EXAMPLE 14: "SYNCOPATED" CANONIC
RELATIONSHIPS IN *NYAMAROPA*

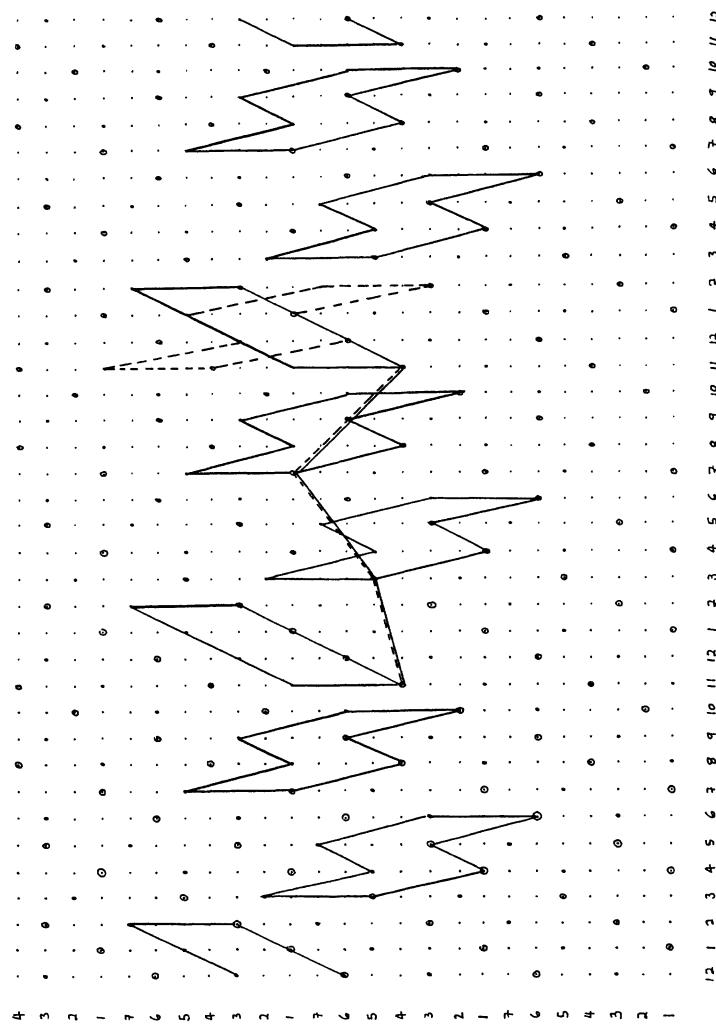
Alternatively, if we choose to preserve the timing of events, and are more flexible on hearing the pitch height of the harmonic shapes, we can hear the shaded areas of the first grouping replicated exactly in the second one. This hearing is depicted by shaded vertical lines in Example 13A. Now the shape beginning at t.10 has shifted a tone higher (in relation to its surroundings) than its analog at t.1. Although the vaguely heard shape at t.1 is different to the parallel one at t.3, the general step downwards is preserved in this hearing (denoted by the parallel solid and dotted lines). Again, we have a kind of (free) harmonic canon at the third. Unlike a melodic canon, however, both harmonic strands are comprised of the same material and therefore depend on a shift in our perception of the material; or, more accurately, on sustaining multiple hearings

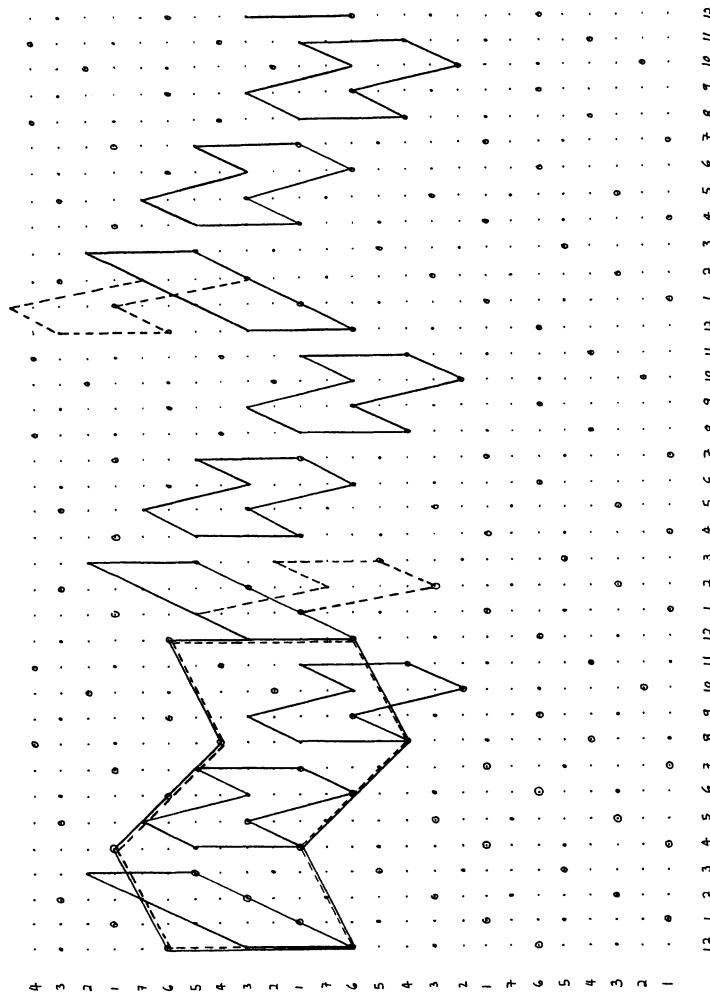


EXAMPLE 15A



EXAMPLE 15B





EXAMPLE 15D

of that material. While both harmonic strands are thus to a great extent the same, their differences can also provide a kind of commentary on one another. For example, the vaguely heard shape at t.1 is, in fact, a repeat of t.10 a tone lower, as if to “correct” its pitch height before imitating the rest of the harmonic passage.

Examples 13b and 13c present the relationships that emerge when different harmonic groups are compared. In Example 13b, for instance, the pattern of shapes on the upper right-hand side similarly replicates the pattern on the left except for the unshaded shape and the shape at t.11 (which is transposed up a tone). However, a different kind of general up/down movement (depicted by dotted lines) is preserved in the second hearing. The focus in the lower left-hand-side grouping is on hearing the same shapes in reverse order; in effect hearing a different shape more vaguely. In Example 13c still different possibilities are shown. This way of hearing a second order of harmonic movement that is near-identical to another unsettles a sense of hearing either as perceptually prior. The ambiguity in the construction of these patterns thus promotes listening to the harmonies “contrapuntally”; as elaborating two things at once comprehensibly; as versions of, or commentaries on, one another.

So far I have only discussed some of the effects of hearing *Nyamaropa* in units of three (and thus also six) dyads. There are other hearings. For instance, Example 15 outlines the four possible ways of hearing the progression when we group the harmonic shapes according to shapes of four dyads. Indeed, mbira performers sometimes suggest such a grouping in various ways. Examples 16 and 17 notate two examples of different tunes



EXAMPLE 16: A FRAGMENT OF *NHEMAMUSASA*,
PERFORMED BY JOHN GONDOKONDO, AUGUST 1996
(TRANSCRIPTION: M. SCHERZINGER)

in which different groupings are suggested by the span covered by descending movement in the bass.

Returning to the *Nyamaropa* progression in Example 15a, we notice how the shape at t.1 mirrors the shape at t.9 horizontally at p.7, and



EXAMPLE 17: A FRAGMENT OF *MUTAMBA*,
PERFORMED (ACCORDING TO EPHAT MUJURU)
BY MUCHATERA MUJURU, 1960s
(TRANSCRIPTION: ANDREW TRACEY, PRIVATE COLLECTION)

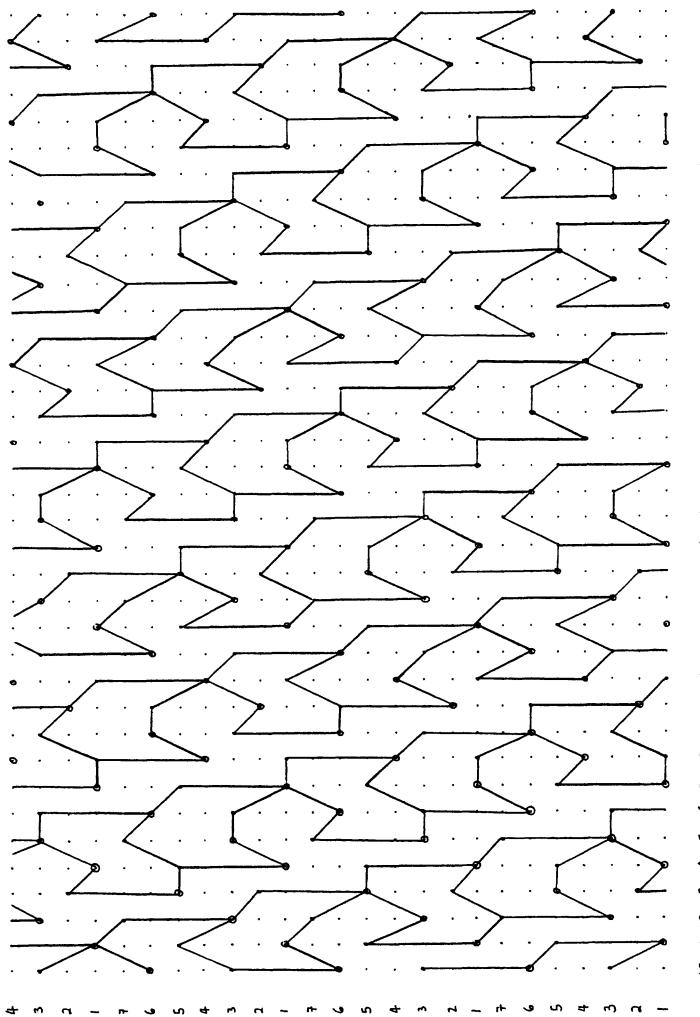
vertically between t's 12 and 1. Thus the shapes harmonically sound inverted cancrizans of one another at transposition(s) 2 (or 5 respectively). The third shape (inflected with dotted lines) is not a pure reflection of either, but a partial or mutated inverted cancrizans form of both. The dotted lines show what dyad it would take to complete the symmetry in both cases. But in each case the mutated dyad is a different one—in one case the first dyad, in another the last. It is as if the lopsidedness of this third shape is the result precisely of the force of these contradictory criteria. It can thus count as either, both or neither of the surrounding shapes. At any rate, hearing this way seems to sway between oppositely elaborated passages in p.1 and p.6 (with an intervening “passing” or perhaps “modulating” movement from p.3 to p.4).

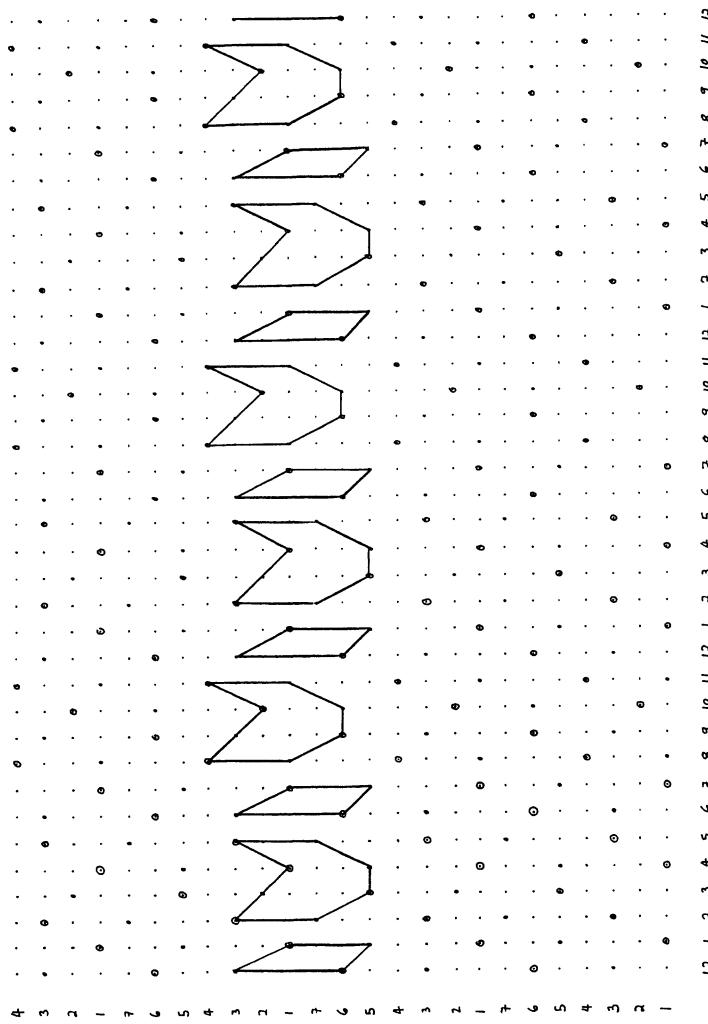
In Example 15b the shapes at t.2 and t.6 are imitations of each other a fourth (or fifth) apart. They could sound like sequences. As these shapes are harmonic palindromes, they are also inversions and/or cancrizans of one another at the same transposition. Again, the third shape (three rising thirds) at t.10 approximates both of these at either end (marked in dotted lines) and can thus be similarly considered as a mutation of the other two, once again effecting a passing motion or modulation via p.5 and p.4. But it need not progress thus, for the root movement between the first dyads of each shape can also outline an extended I-IV-V motion (at t.6, t.10 and t.2 respectively) in E. This progression is marked by the parallel solid and dotted lines in the example. In some of the hybrid forms involving mbira music, this potential is sometimes brought to the fore. For instance, the parts sung by the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir on Dumisani Maraire's String Quartet *Kutambarara* (“Spreading”), recorded by the Kronos Quartet on their 1992 CD release *Pieces of Africa*, elaborate this kind of “tonal” progression over mbira music that alone sounds like a version of the indigenous pattern known as *Dande*.

Example 15c is interesting because it exhibits parallel features of Example 15b: two replicated shapes (also inversions and/or cancrizans forms of one another), with an anomalous third shape (possibly approximating the former again), that are separated by a potential I-IV-V motion. This time, however, the shapes themselves elaborate a different movement and the “tonal” progression is heard in G. Example 15d, on the other hand, cannot support a tonal hearing. Still, this progression of harmonic groups resembles Example 15b in different ways. We hear exactly the same series of shapes except at different p’s respectively. Following the pattern of those p’s we can now hear an extended progression that is a kind of motivic expansion of the two repeating shapes (t.4 and t.8)—a motif it shares with Example 15a. Like a geometric fractal, this shape is an identical motif that repeats these shapes on an enlarged scale. It is represented by the parallel solid and dotted lines. To my way of hearing, the “deformation” of the shape at t.12 takes on an upbeat character as p.5 at t.3 is marked for attention, not only by its singularity, but as one of the odd dyads out in the shaping of these harmonic groups. In other words, the shape at t.12 did not end where it “should” have, and that is rhythmically significant.

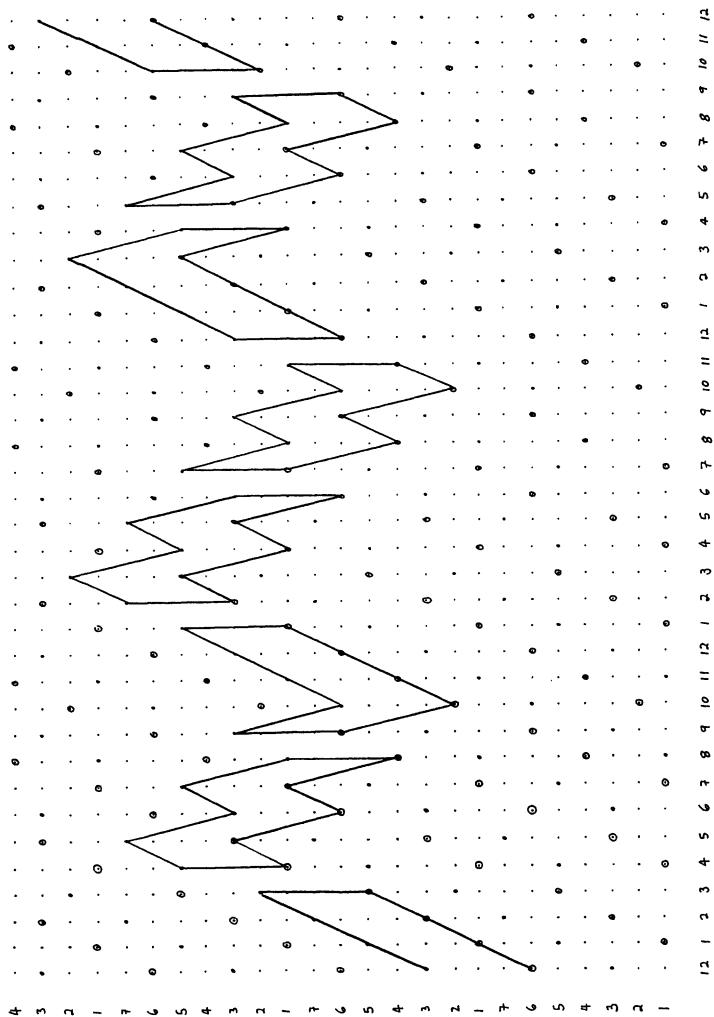
It should go without reminding that, once again, we need not remain concentrated on one hearing at the expense of another, and that, once again, there are affinities between hearings that invite a perpetual adjustment of perception. Example 18 lays out all of the groupings represented in Example 15 in a single diagram and in shapes that depict the closest possible harmonic movement from one dyad to another. The similar-but-not-quite-the-same character of the various possible paths through the harmonies is visible here. It is up to the performer (and listener) to bring to the fore any one or more of these hearings at every point. This diagram does not mean to suggest that, once focused on grouping harmonies in four t’s, we are thus obliged to remain in that general space. We could, for instance, shuttle from fours to threes and back again as often and as ir/regularly as we choose. Nor are we restricted to groupings in three and four; we could group in five or six or two; and we could mix the groupings in any number of ways. Example 19, for instance, oscillates between two identical four-dyad shapes a tone apart, while two exactly identical two-dyad shapes pivot the move from one four-dyad shape to the other, producing a kind of center around which the four-dyad units wheel; another kind of harmonic swaying.

Example 20 depicts a grouping of dyads into units of five. This is interesting if only because, at a certain point, the shapes will reflect themselves around two mirrors and thus yield a series of shapes that is its own retrograde inversion. These mirrors are located horizontally at p.7 and





EXAMPLE 19

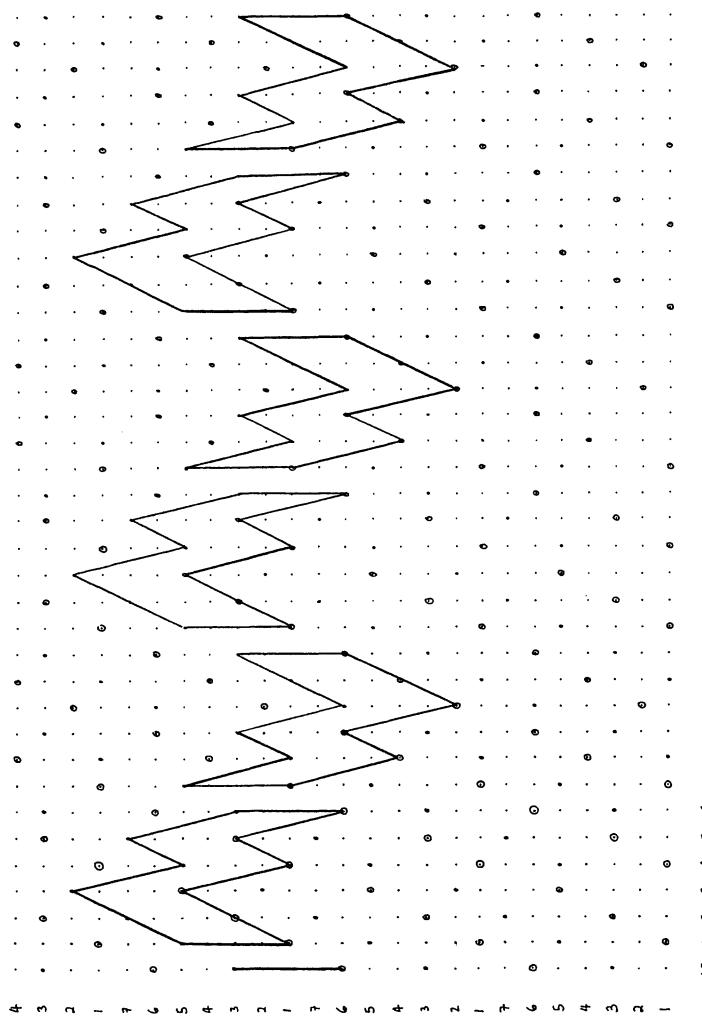


EXAMPLE 20

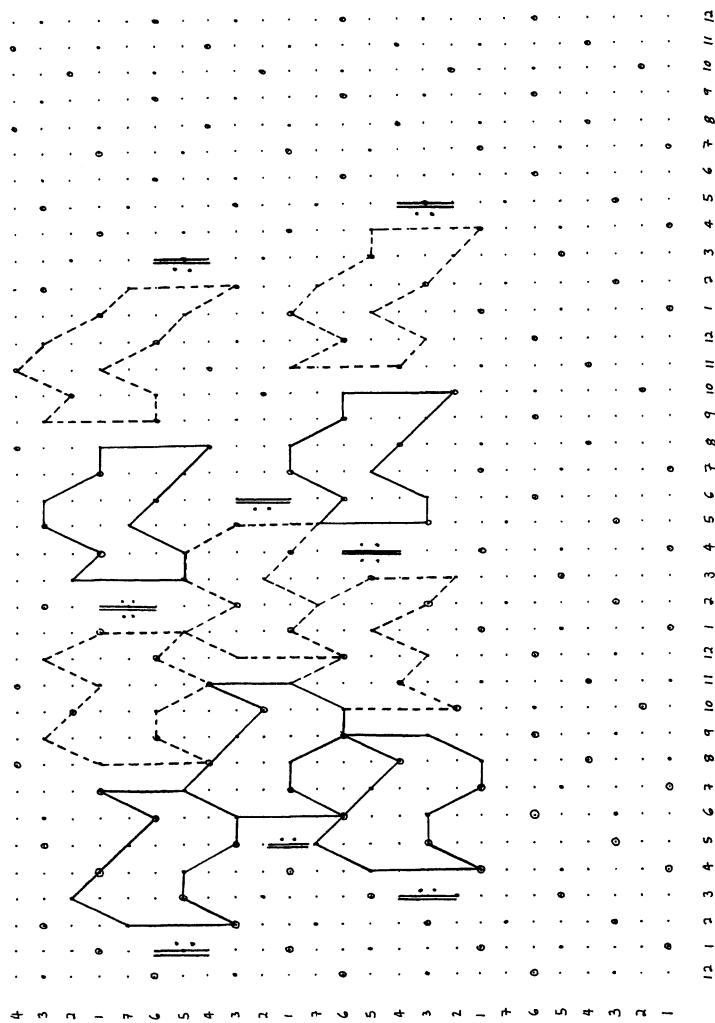
vertically between t's 6 and 7 approximately at the center of the example. In Example 21 two shapes grouped in six dyads are illustrated. These are the only six-dyad shapes that are inverted cancrizans versions of one another, the harmonic pattern that reflects the intervallic palindrome mentioned above. While the remaining possible six-dyad shapes, depicted in Example 22, do not reflect themselves in this kind of symmetry, they bear strange and beautiful relationships to one another. For example, the shapes at t.2, t.4 and t.6 (in solid lines) are replicas of one another, while their continuations (in dotted lines) at t.8, t.10 and t.12 are more loosely alike. Again, a harmonic canon in which the paths increasingly diverge from one another as they proceed is thus suggested. Similarly, the shapes at t.3 and t.5 also replicate each other and are followed by freer likenesses. For me, the intriguing part of the experience is given in tracking the dissimilar shapes that follow the replicas. The first of these at t.8, for example, approximates the shape at t.2. For four t's it seems to be the same progression transposed up a tone, but then it reiterates the last two dyads of the first shape at pitch and breaks, or mutates, the sequential hearing. On the other hand, the shape at t.12, following the identical initial shape (at a staggered time interval) begins by seemingly repeating the first shape at pitch, but then, at t.2 (its third dyad), it mutates this path by lowering everything that follows by a tone. So, this time a sequential hearing *follows* an initial iteration. The point is this: when we follow these identical shapes at different times, different things become of that trajectory, they mutate in different senses; and yet, once they have happened, they seem to have produced the same thing—in this case a partial (four dyad) sequence a tone apart and a partial (two dyad) iteration at pitch—as if the mutations were some kind of trick promising dissimilarity and then remaining the same in another way. Ambiguity. Remaining. Ambiguity.

While we were grouping harmonies in threes, it became apparent that a polyrhythmic interaction between the rate of harmonic change and the grouping of the partial progressions was effected. Where the progressions are comprised of three adjacent dyads, the harmonic changes from one group to another occur at every second dyad, resulting in a harmonic rhythm that superimposes two in the time of three. A kind of harmonic hemiola results. In Example 23, the delta refers to the moment of harmonic change, while the measures indicate the grouping (as asserted in Example 11).

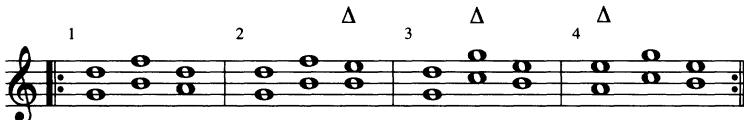
If we are vigilant towards the grouping in twos suggested by the hemiola, we can begin to hear many more interesting harmonic movements. In fact, under this hearing, at nearly every point of the progression harmonic shapes constitute and resemble their own likeness elsewhere in the



EXAMPLE 21



EXAMPLE 22

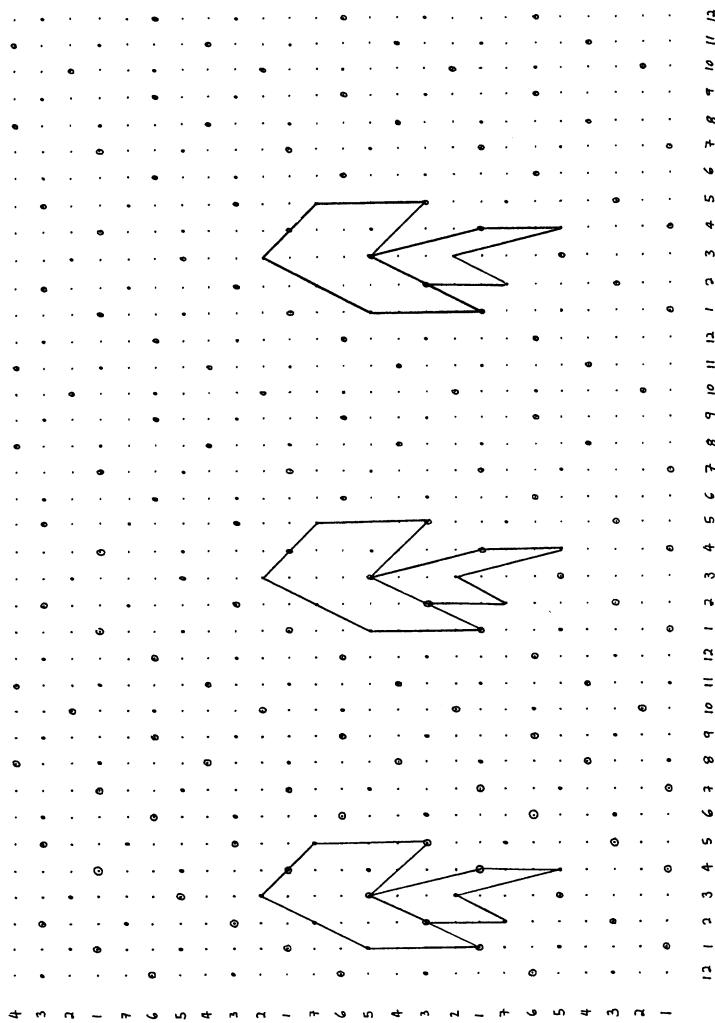


EXAMPLE 23: THE HARMONIC HEMIOLA
IN THE DYAD SEQUENCE OF NYAMAROPA

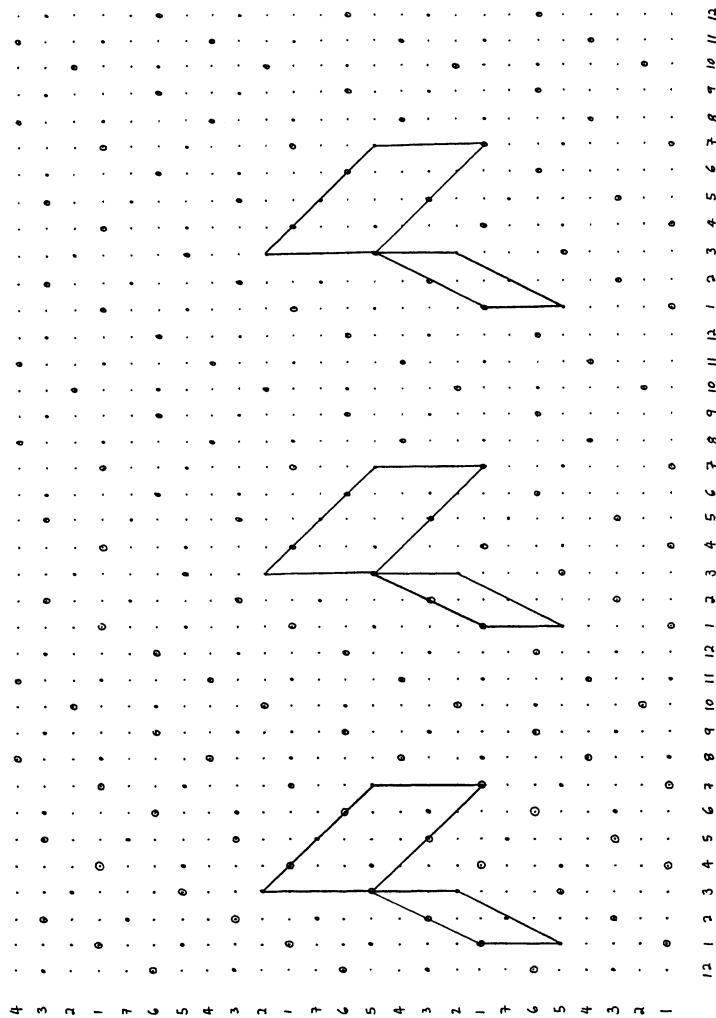
cycle on a diminished scale. Examples 24 and 25 illustrate the twelve possible three-dyad harmonic shapes in the cycle which are constituted when every second dyad is harnessed into a three-dyad unit (as if they somehow extended over the intervening dyads) and contrasts these units with the consecutive three-dyad groups already discussed. The examples assert identity to harmonic shapes that share an order of common dyads (p values). In other words, these are untransposed reflections, on two t scales. The three-dyad units which employ every second dyad are designated with fifths above the root note while the fourths below the root note designate the identical shape constituted consecutively. Additional identical shapes, employing every second dyad, are illustrated with dotted lines.

Notice how in Example 24a the harmonic shape given by combining every second dyad of the progression into a three-dyad unit is duplicated as a retrograde diminution within it. That is, the move from the first dyad (fifth on p.1), third dyad (fifth on p.5), and fifth dyad (fifth on p.3), indicated by the fifths above, is mirrored by the dyads proceeding from the second to the third to the fourth dyads in the progression, indicated by the fourths below. The fifth on p.5 is shared by both progressions. Thus an identical harmonic shape is thus expressed in cancrizans motion in diminution. This reference occurs within the very “spaces” of the initial harmonic shape. Example 24 illustrates the six possible duplications of harmonic form for odd numbered t values, and Example 25 does the same for even-numbered t values. Notice how the reflected shape occurs at every odd numbered t value except for t.11 (Example 24f) and at every even-numbered t value except for t.10 (Example 25f). The trailing dotted lines represent two ways of locating this (partial) absence.

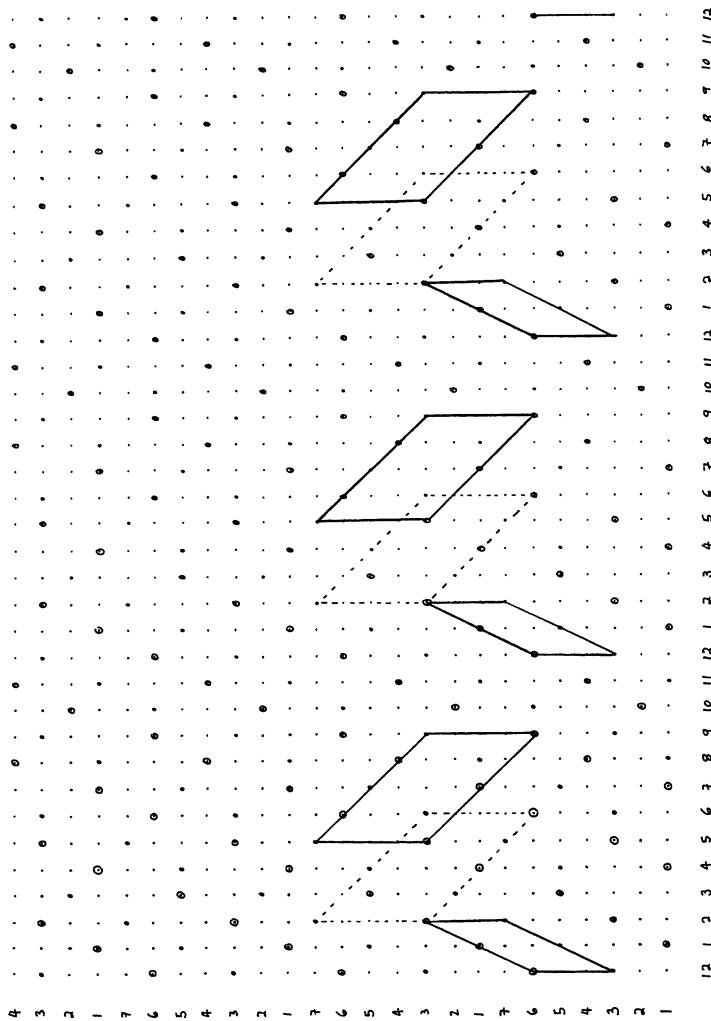
Much more enigmatically, notice how another dynamic seems to distribute the timing of these harmonic reflections. Although the cancrizans forms in diminution always occur at different points (relative to the larger shapes they iterate), this difference itself follows an almost consistent trajectory. In Example 24, for every movement to the right by the large



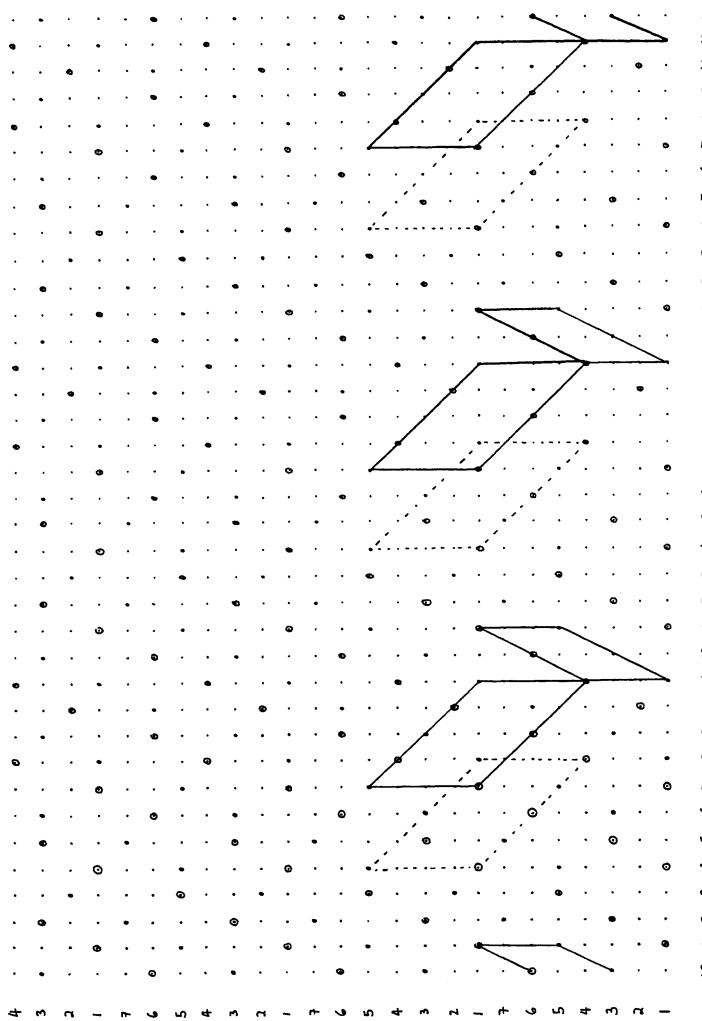
EXAMPLE 24A



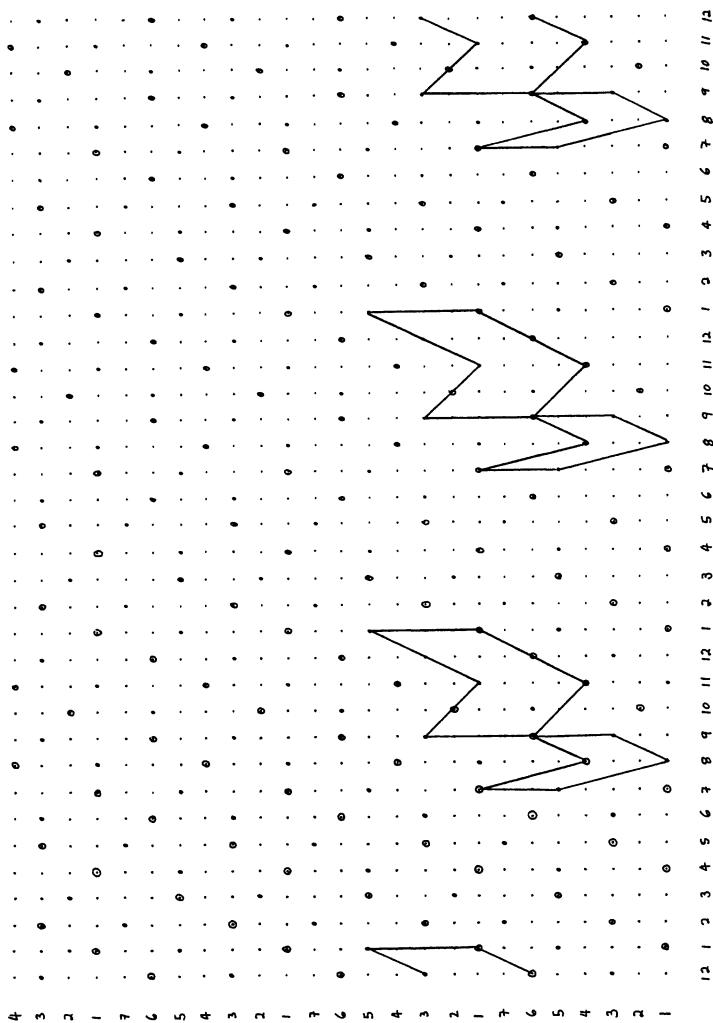
EXAMPLE 24B



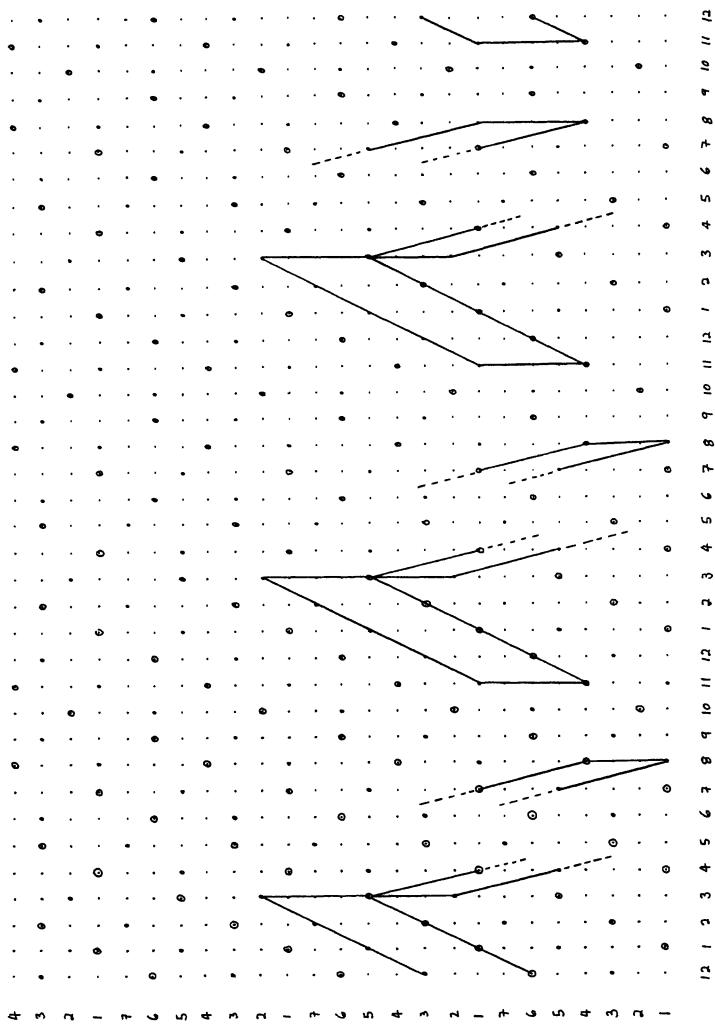
EXAMPLE 24C



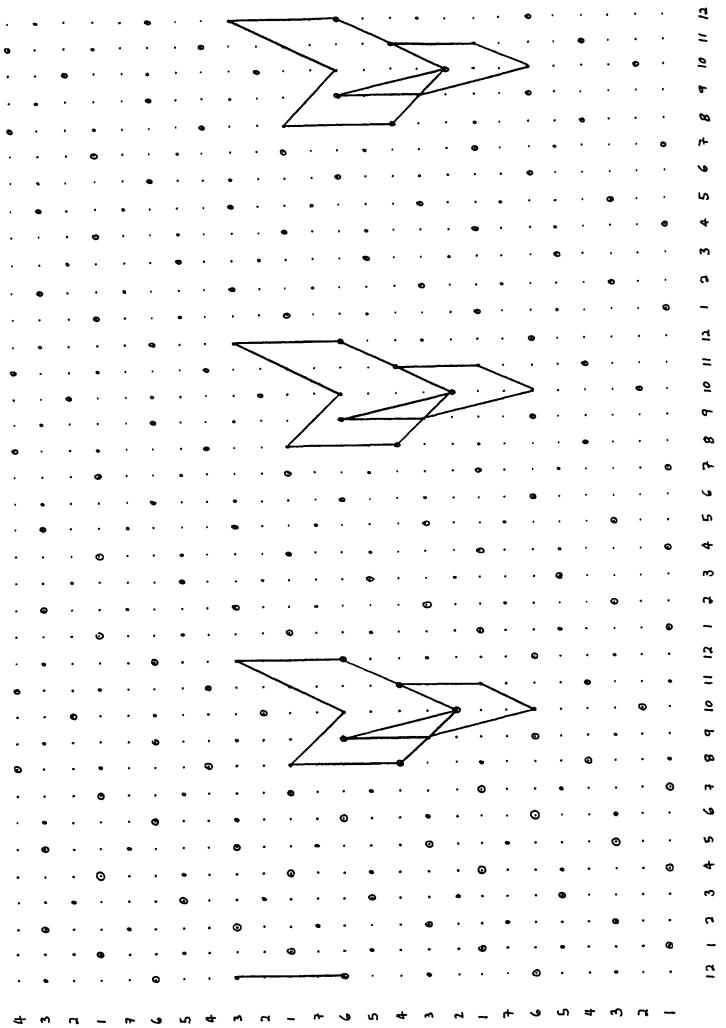
EXAMPLE 24D



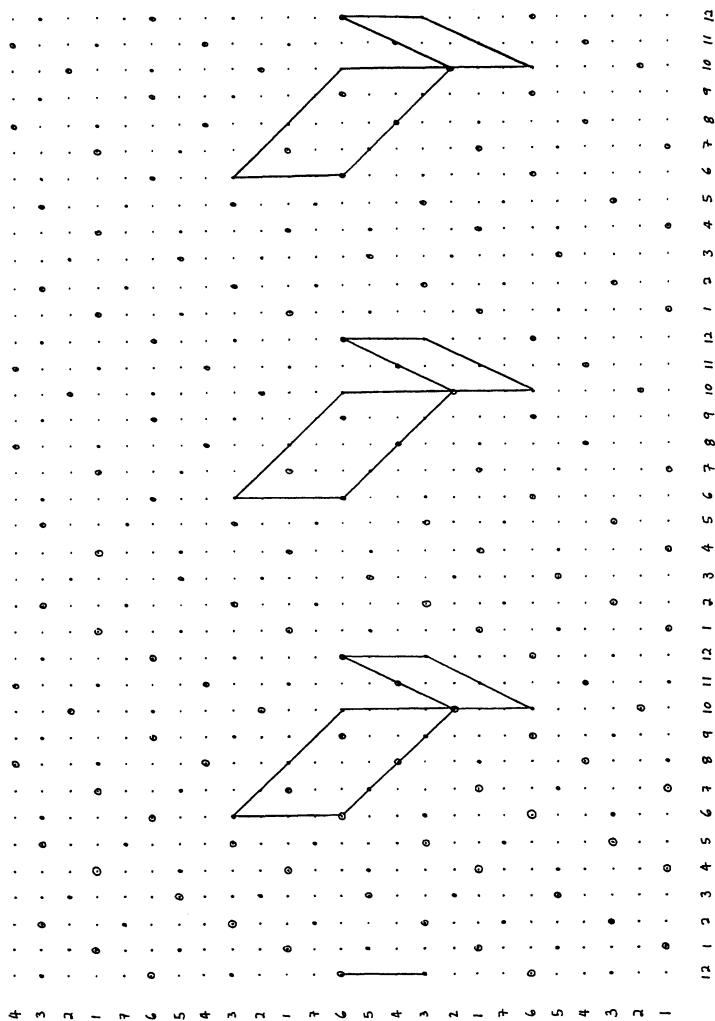
EXAMPLE 24E



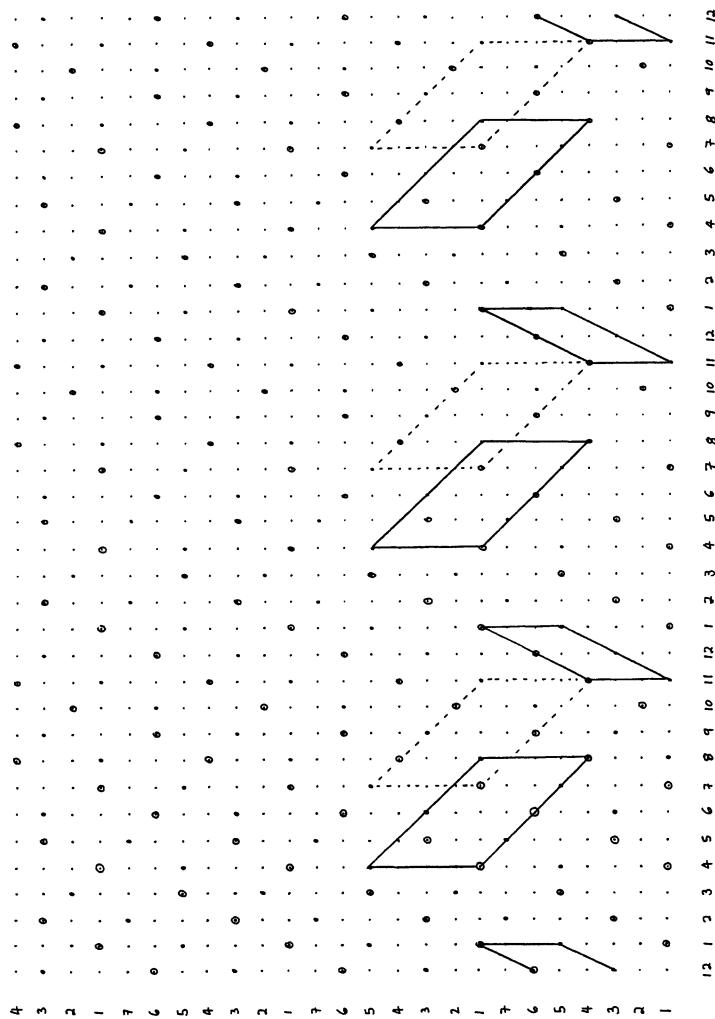
EXAMPLE 24F



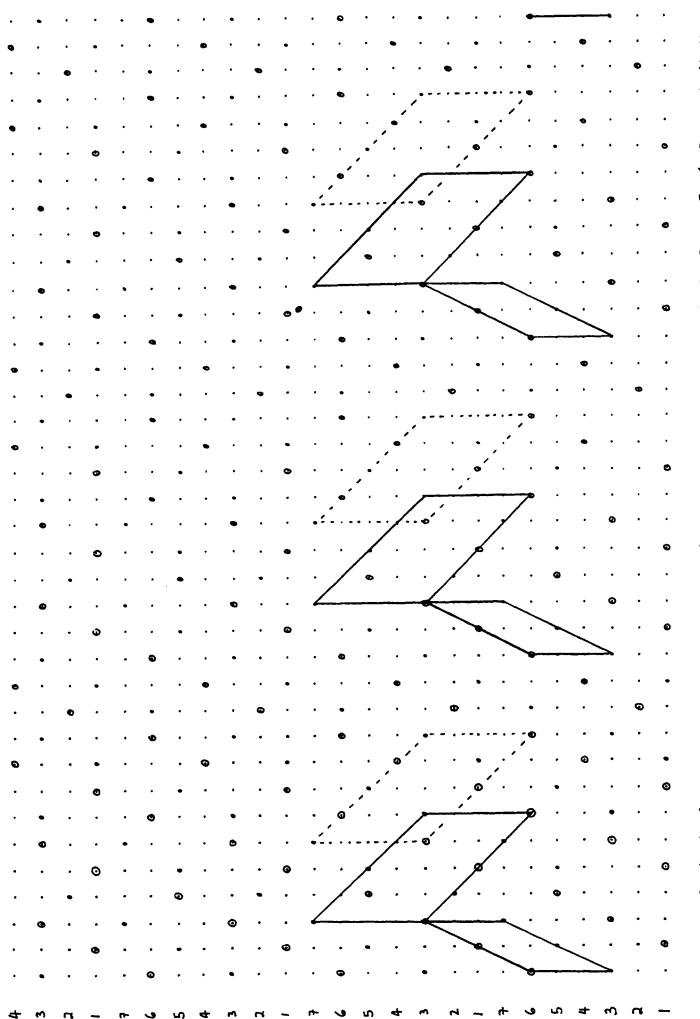
EXAMPLE 25A



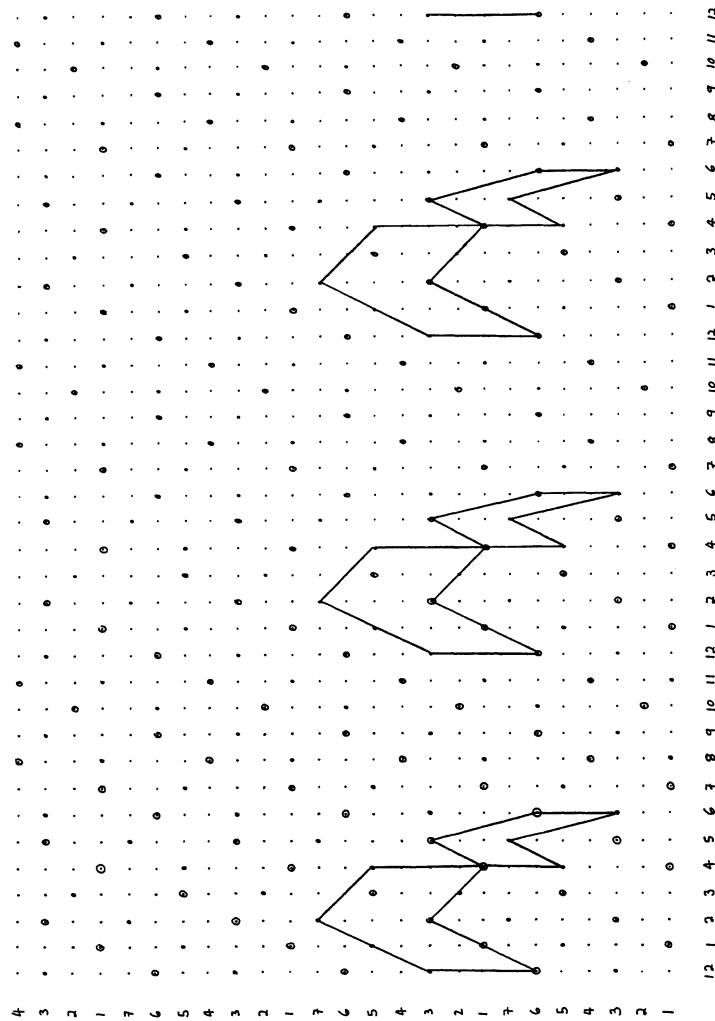
EXAMPLE 25B



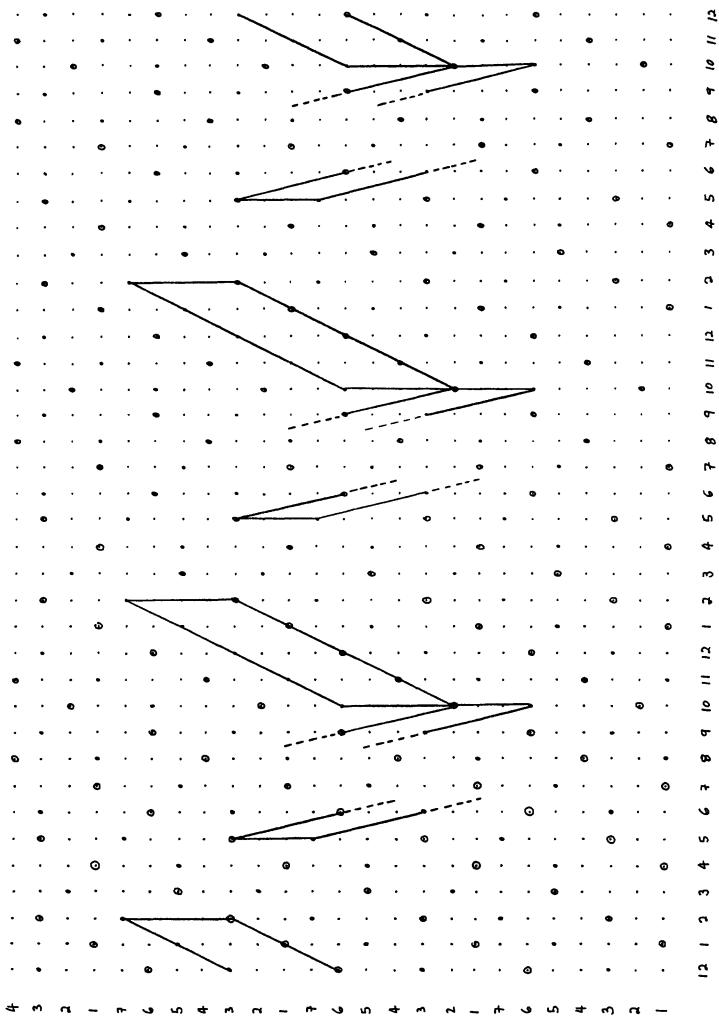
EXAMPLE 25C



EXAMPLE 25D



EXAMPLE 25E



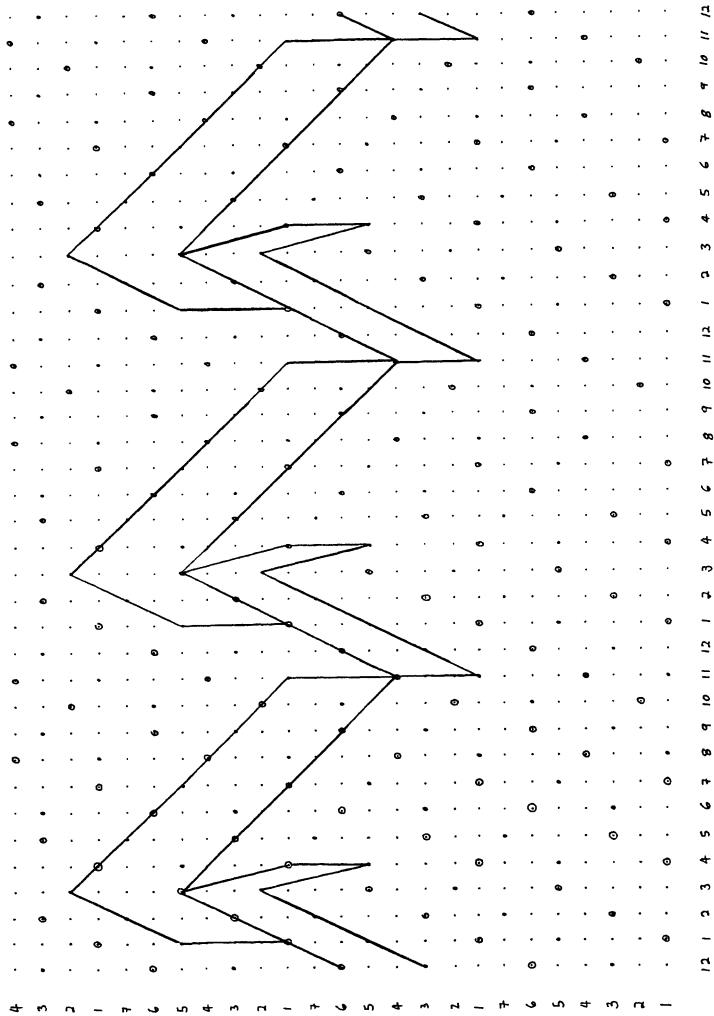
EXAMPLE 25F

harmonic shapes (denoted by fifths), the cancrizans forms in diminution (denoted by fourths) move one step to the left. Hence the relationship between the harmonic semblances is in a perpetual steady shift; harmonic references are going out of phase with each other in an even flow, and thus touching (or sharing a dyad with) their reflections in consistently different ways. And so, every dyad in the pattern is pulled into two different series of shapes that flow along different processes in relation to one another. At the fifth stage of the process (Example 24e) the flow is interrupted, the smaller shape leaps three t values to the left, while at the last stage (Example 24f) the process dissolves altogether—another jolt in the system.

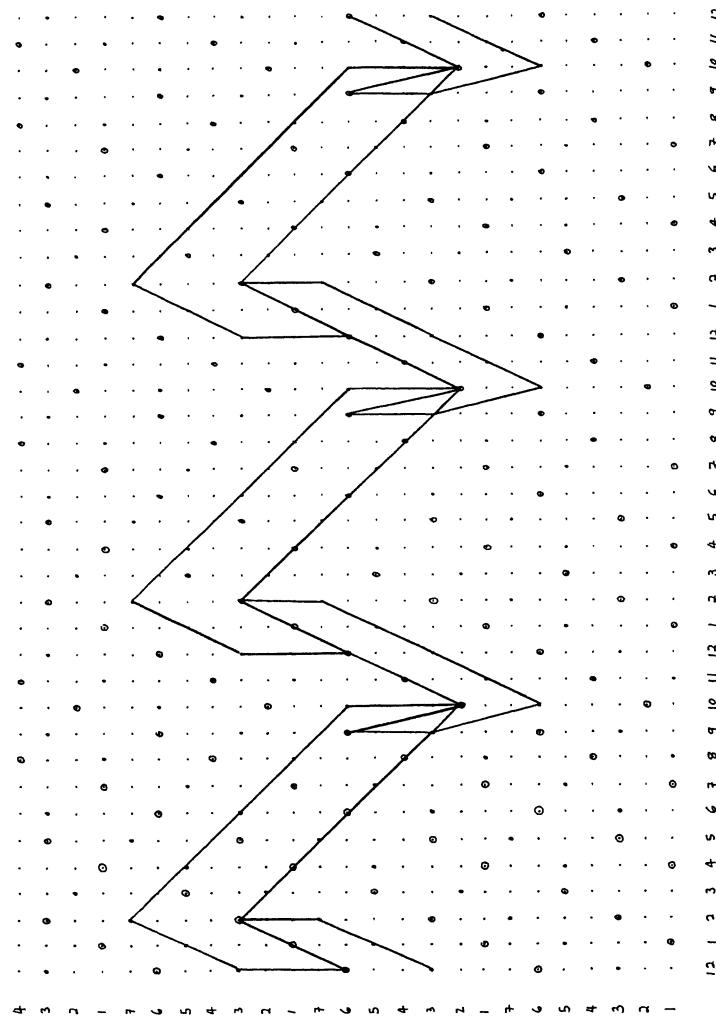
Now this entire process—the mostly even flow, the sudden jolt, the dissolution—is a mirror replica of the one that emerges for the shapes produced by even-numbered t values. Beginning with t.8 (Example 25a), an inverted cancrizans of t.1 (Example 24a), and proceeding, for every movement to the *left* by the large harmonic shapes (denoted by fifths), the cancrizans forms in diminution (denoted by fourths) move one step to the *right*. These movements mirror those of the odd numbered t values. Hence the harmonic references that are steadily going out of phase with each other are caught in an equal but opposite flow; touching *their* reflections in diametrically different ways.

Again, we need not restrict ourselves to shapes that are constituted in three-dyad units in this procedure. Example 26 illustrates two possibilities for six-dyad units and their reflections on a diminished t scale. Notice how the reflection in Example 26a is a cancrizans form at reduced t values, while that in Example 26b is an inverted cancrizans form at the same value. The large shapes in both diagrams also show how this kind of harmonic pattern tends to yield more downward than upward stepwise motion in the music. Descending melodic motion is characteristic of mbira patterns (on a still further-reduced t scale), as if these foreground melodies motivically reflected this larger melodic/harmonic descent. For example, consider a variation of *Nhemamusasa* in the terms shown in Example 27.

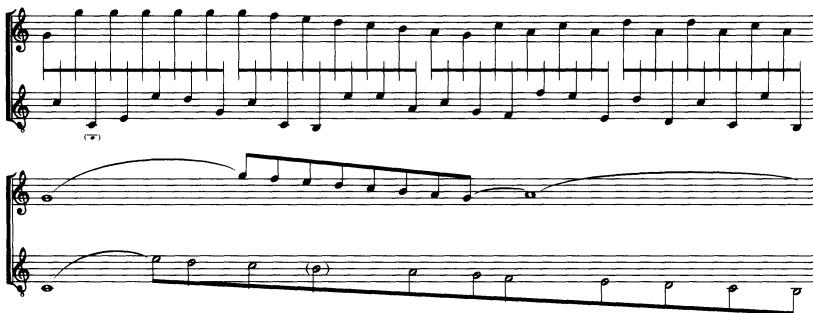
Thus we hear a stepwise “background” descent over the octave resounding motivically in a characteristic “foreground” cascade. This is not some sort of diminution (as the figuration implies) but an associative or parallel link between the music’s dimensions. These descending melodies are frequently elaborated by mbira players at almost any point in the cycling; it is almost, one might say, a melodic signature. Especially when they are combined with more interlocking parts, these melodies can sound like endless tumbling in endless time.



EXAMPLE 26A



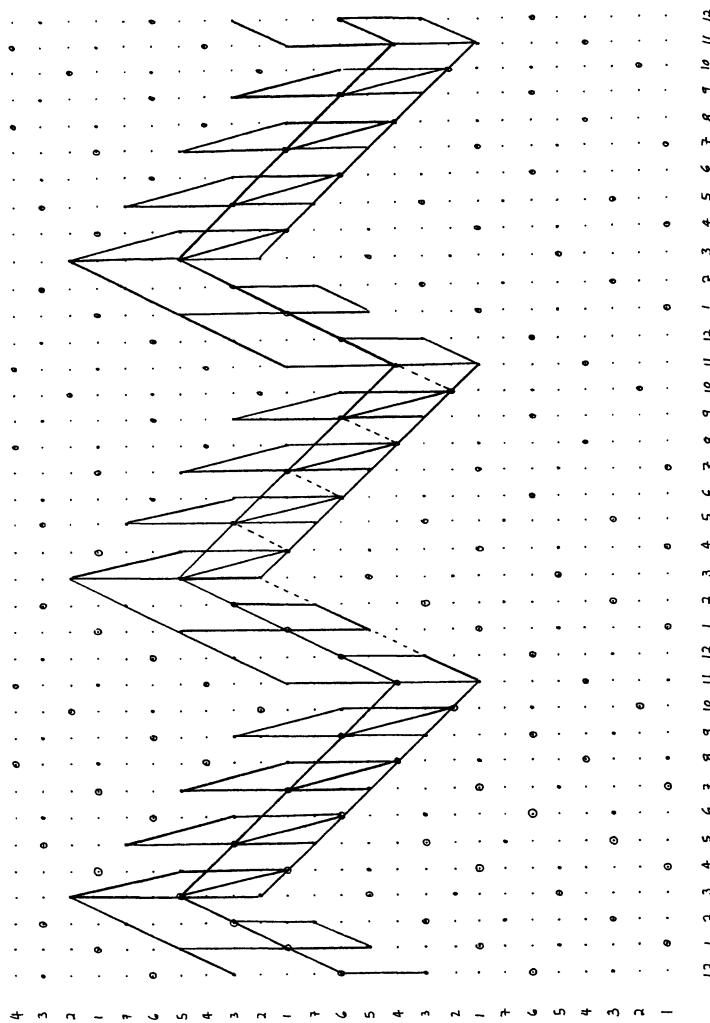
EXAMPLE 26B



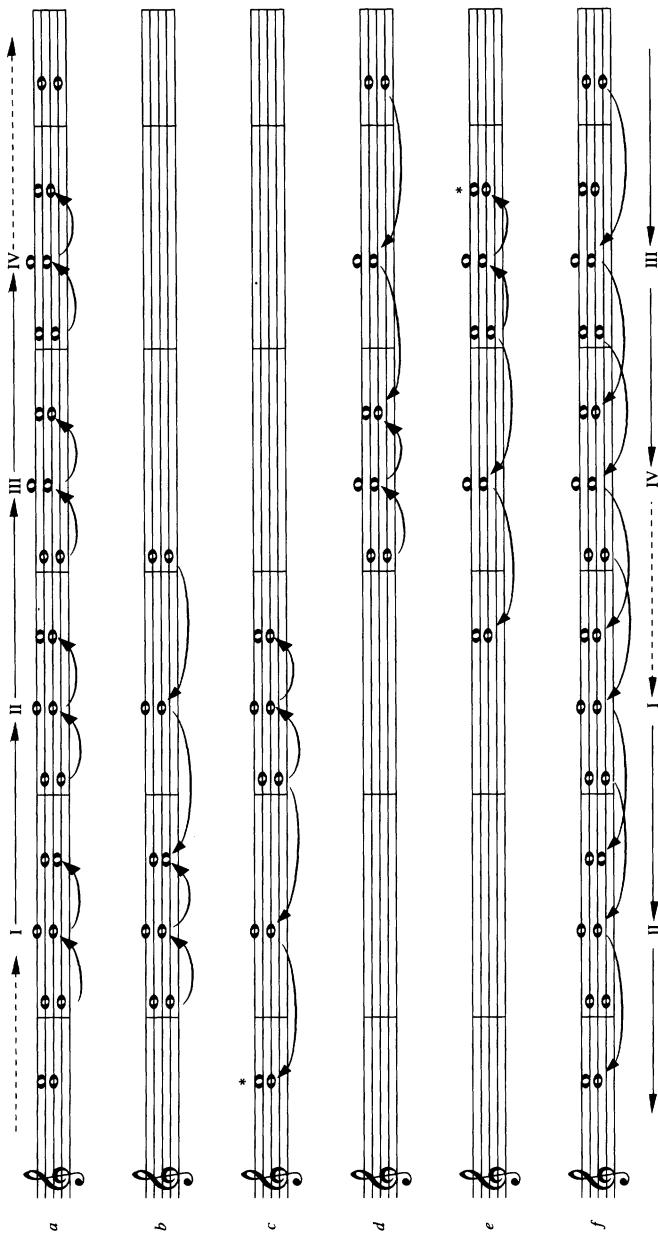
EXAMPLE 27: VARIATION OF *NHEMAMUSASA*,
PERFORMED BY DEBORAH JAMES, 1993
(TRANSCRIPTION: M. SCHERZINGER)

Without wanting to reduce the many extraordinary and often puzzling ways of hearing the harmonic progression of *Nyamaropa* to an essential property, Example 28 illustrates a way of constructing the series of dyads. Here the progression can be considered as both two ascending fifths followed by four descending thirds (when the time-spans are taken as eight pulses—or two *t* values) or as two ascending thirds and four descending fifths separated by thirds (when the time-spans are taken as four pulses—or consecutive *t* values). For example, the “descending” portion of the diagram (t.3 to t.11) is built of four falling thirds or four falling fifths (separated by rising thirds) depending on how the shapes are constituted. It is as if four slowly descending thirds are woven into four quickly descending fifths followed/preceded by two slowly ascending fifths that are woven into two quickly ascending thirds. Perhaps the *Nyamaropa* series emerges thus—the yield in a crossroads between two interlocking patterns of oddly similar harmonic movements.

Finally, consider the four adjacent harmonic shapes, labeled I to IV in Example 29. Once again, identical harmonic patterns repeat on different *t* scales as cancrizans of one another. In Example 29b, for instance, the harmonic shape (I) has an adjacent counterpart to it, which is an augmented retrograde of it. This is shown in the example by the interlocking dyads joined by the arrows below in the staff. The “upward” progression is thus reiterated in a “downward” form immediately after its initial statement; the last dyad of progression I is the first dyad of its augmented retrograde. Analogous duplications of harmonic shapes in augmented



EXAMPLE 28



EXAMPLE 29: THREE-DYAD HARMONIC SHAPES AND THEIR AUGMENTED CANCRIZANS IN NYAMAROPA'S DYAD SEQUENCE

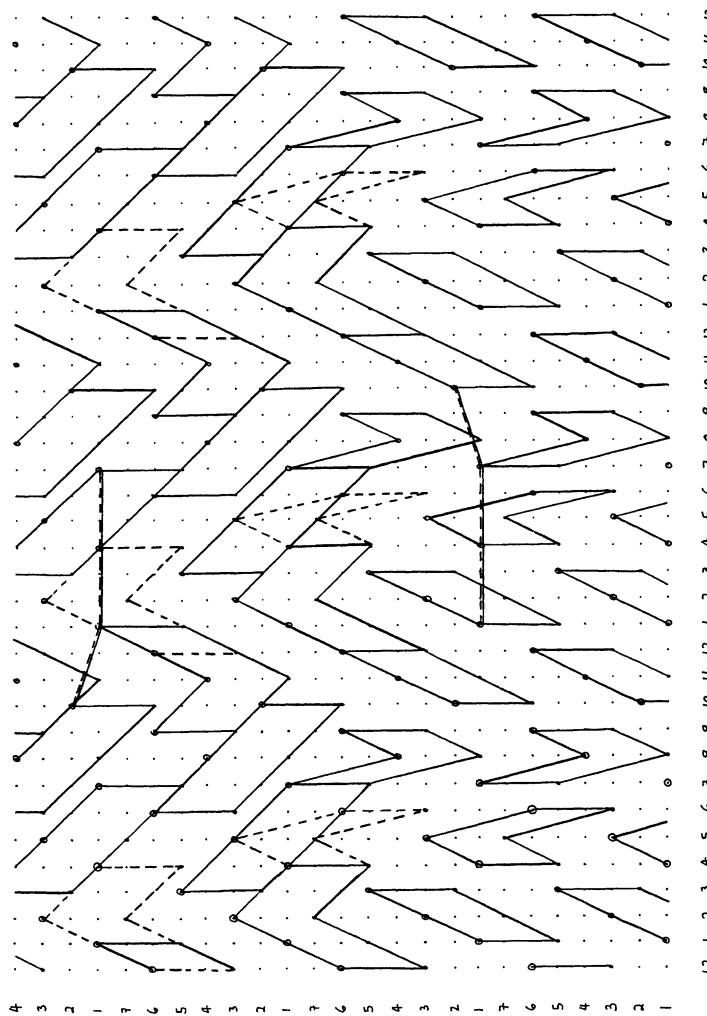
retrograde can be traced in all four progressions. They are labeled (a) to (e) in Example 29.

If these augmented cancrizans forms are combined into a single progression something striking happens. Consider staff *f* as a projection of the cancrizans shown on staves *b* to *e*. Now the harmonic shapes (represented by arrows below the staff) in Example 29*f* outline the same four shapes at *a* in a new way: a series of augmented cancrizans canons appearing interlocked with one another in reverse order. Hence two diametrically opposed harmonic paths are woven into the same material. Remarkably, the two paths are differently projected versions of one another expressed by the same dyads. Perhaps the perceptual priority of the initial progression is undermined by its own likeness (the series of augmented cancrizans) when we are attentive to this double patterning.

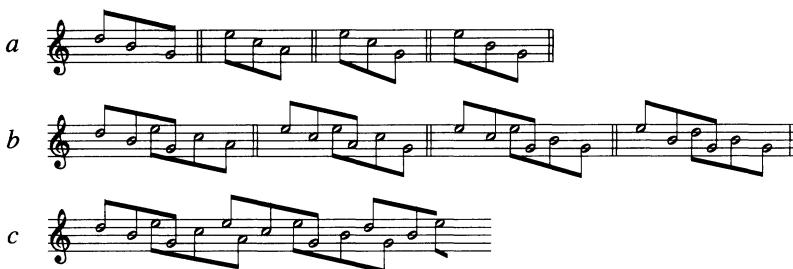
Under this reading, every dyad is concurrently implicated in two identical-but-opposite processes. At the least this gives rise to an ambiguity about an appropriate starting or stopping point. Since the cancrizans series of dyads begins at the central point of the initial progression it is hard to attribute to any dyad an identical significance in both series. The last dyad of the “last” shape in the initial progression (fourth on B), for example, is also the last dyad of the “second” shape in the cancrizans version. These dyads are marked with asterisks in Example 29. At the center of the cancrizans version, therefore, it cannot suitably conclude. Example 30 illustrates the parallel coexistence of these two strands in geometric form: the initial series of shapes is, broadly speaking, indicated below, the interlocking cancrizans series above; the parallel dotted and solid lines indicate the “low note” movement of the respective series.

But what does it mean to hear an augmented harmonic cancrizans form; to listen to those fractal-like geometric shapes? Can we focus our ears towards such a hearing? I can recommend a few simple initial steps that I have taken: Sing, say, the “low note” of each three-dyad shape of the initial progression in some mode or other at some slow tempo. Then take twice as long to sing the same root shapes in reverse order. At first, sing these reversals consecutively (as in Example 31a). Then sing them in partially interlocking groups (as in Example 31b). Finally, link these four groups into one chain of notes (as in Example 31c). Initially it may help to mentally “let go of,” or partially “forget,” the last note of each shape as the first note of the next shape is announced. This can be counterbalanced by repeating the exercise but mentally letting go of the first note in each shape instead of the last. Finally, hear in every note the “extension” of the previous note as well as the dyad of which it is the root.

Hearing this way can be a startling experience that seems to dissolve a harmonic goal, or end point, by continually beginning a new thing



EXAMPLE 30


EXAMPLE 31: EXERCISE FOR HEARING INTERLOCKING CANCRIZANS

before the previous one is done. Also, because the two quasi-identical harmonic paths (in Examples 29 and 30) are patterned by the same dyads at mostly different t values, and to the extent that they have a function at all, the dyads have a dual function at any one time, or the same function at different times. If these are to emerge perceptually, it is necessary to attend to different musical time-spans. Thus it may be said that repetition is already entailed in this progression even before it is played again. In short, the ambiguity about where to stop and where to start is a formal property of the music's harmonic shapes.

Indeed, like listening to the sound that, in Mude's words, "makes you shake but not in the sense of dancing"—i.e., the swaying of one becoming possessed (1981, 57)—the swaying between harmonic events that are no longer just sounds in themselves and not yet wholly connected may afford a presentiment of the true dimensions of *Nyamaropa*.

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NOTES

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1. It is important to point out that the ethnomusicological definitions surveyed above are taken to share certain rhetorical tropes and strategies and that I thus inevitably engage in a kind of idealism that claims that these tropes have determining power and bear the same charge in different historical settings. It is obviously not to say that all ethnomusicology exhibits these traits, but that, taken as a foundational hypothesis, rather than as a historical fact, this idealization may problematize a range of other questions to the extent that it does.
2. For an account of the politics and the aesthetics of “world music,” see Erlmann, 1994.
3. In her pioneering doctoral dissertation, Louise Meintjies (1996) outlines some of the invented “African” sounds that go into the making of music in a South African recording studio.
4. For example, it is perhaps more than coincidental that the kalimba specialist Dumisani Maraire, a born Christian who did not believe in the mbira’s capacity to call up spirits before writing his Ph.D. dissertation (Maraire 1990), changed his mind following his research into the “importance and place of *mudzimu* . . . in the context of the family in Shona society” (Maraire 1990, 1). Could it be that a particular American context encouraged a particular African one in this document?
5. In addition to accounts such as Erlmann 1999, and Kisliuk 1998, some representative examples include Waterman 1990, Turino 1993, and Manuel 1993.

6. For all its aspirations to allowing musicians to “speak for themselves,” Berliner’s text is riddled with generalized and disembodied statements that go as self-representative quotations. Consider the opening of the chapter entitled “The Poetry of Mbira”: “Amid the flickering candlelight and the shadows, a dignified old man sat back against the wall of the thatched-roof brick round-house and watched the goings-on of the *bira* . . .” (Berliner 1981, 160). While this old man is never dignified with a name, he is granted a quotation further down the page: “‘You have killed the elephant, but the head is mine,’ he sang,” writes Berliner. In this way we are introduced to the importance of song texts in Shona mbira music. Berliner continues his pattern of quotations thus, “As one mbira player reported to me, ‘Mbira music without singing is like *sadza* without *muriwo* (grain porridge without vegetables).’ One Shona gas station attendant who often listened to the radio while working described the impact of a performance of mbira music on himself and his fellow workers: ‘When Hakurotwi Mude is singing, we stop everything we are doing and listen to his words’” (Berliner 1981, 160–1). The old man is never identified. In fact, we are never told in whose house he was sitting, in which village the *bira* took place, where the “one mbira player” came from; whether s/he took part in the same *bira*; or who the “one gas station attendant” is. It is as if anyone identified as felicitously “Shona” (itself an invented assignation by the southern Ndebele in the *mfecane* wars of the nineteenth century) counts as a token of a generalized type. Occasionally Berliner describes differences of opinion in his book, but usually, like here, different quotations support the same general thesis—in this case, the mundane, almost meaningless, fact that “poetic song texts are a central feature of Shona mbira music” (Berliner 1981, 160). These cannot possibly count as moments of natives speaking for themselves. Simply put, all living political subjects are primarily effaced in this text. Ironically, in later pages Berliner decodes the meaning of the old man’s text thus: “While singing in the first person, he was exposing the point of view of Europeans. In his statement the singer distinguished between those who have done all the work (the hunters) and those who walk away with all the profit (those who claim the head with the tusks have the most valuable part of the elephant)” (Berliner 1981, 179). Perhaps we should heed the words of the faceless old man—take stock of how ethnography can walk away with the elephant’s head; or perhaps we should heed the words of that nameless mbira player—take stock of how a quotation without a living subject is like *sadza* without *muriwo*; or perhaps we should even heed the words of

the disembodied garage attendant—take stock of how listening carefully to the poetry of mbira music might induce us to stop what we are doing. What I am suggesting is that there may be more to learn from our African colleagues than a certain anthropological gaze permits.

7. Nash 1979 is an interesting example of an account that endorses the collaborative dimensions of ethnography via extensive quotation.
8. I would like to thank Joseph Dubiel for inspiring this direction of inquiry.
9. For examples of theories that claim to ground the perceptions in various preformed cognitive structures and intuitions, see Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983, Serafine 1987, and Brown 1981. Ironically, theories oriented in this way largely attempt to describe *fundamental* structures of *general* human perceptions, a position that necessarily entails structures and perceptions of Africans.
10. See, for example, Boretz 1971.
11. This is not a critique of Turino as much as a critique of the discourse his article inhabits. As a chapter of a book called *Excursions in World Music*, Turino's account necessarily generalizes and simplifies. But my argument is directed at precisely the disturbing proliferation of scholarly discourse that coheres around the lamentable category "World Music," and the almost total lack of in-depth studies of African music's formal dimensions. (For a brilliant essay on the relationship between the mbira and various global processes, see Turino 1998.)
12. For anthropological approaches to Western musical institutions, see Kingsbury 1988, Nettl 1995, and Born 1995.
13. Paradoxically, the vivid exhibition of the informing music-theoretical assumptions is likely to elicit accusations of Eurocentrism from various quarters. In other words, the ideological advantage of *displaying* the irreducible formalisms that condition the possibility of *any* representation of African (or any other) music is so easily read as a wholesale epistemological failure; an ethnocentric imposition from the outside; as (neocolonial) ideology through and through. This perspective would probably encourage limiting scholarly articles on African music to the context of ethnomusicological and world-music journals alone.

14. The classical character of mbira music is underscored by its historical importance in Zimbabwe. During the period of the *Mutapa* dynasty, partly derived from a branch of the Zimbabwe culture (which flourished between 1300 and 1450), mbira music was prevalent in the Shona courts. Some European explorers and missionaries documented the character of the mbira in strikingly complimentary terms. In 1589, for example, the missionary Father José Dos Santos described mbira music with reference to the music of the harpsichord and emphasized its status in Shona culture: "Quiteve [the then-current ruler of the *Mutapa*] . . . makes use of another class of [Africans], great musicians and dancers, who have no other office than to sit in the first room of the king's palace, at the outer door, and round his dwelling, playing many different musical instruments, and singing to them a great variety of songs and discourses in praise of the king, in very high and sonorous voices. . . . [The Africans] play upon [the mbira] by striking the loose ends of the rods with their thumbnails . . . and they strike the keys as lightly as a good player strikes those of a harpsichord. Thus the iron rods are shaken and the blows resounding after the fashion of a jew's harp, they produce an altogether sweet and gentle harmony of accordant sounds" (quoted in Theal 1901, 203). It is likely that the musical tradition of the mbira precedes these first European accounts of it by several centuries. The Zimbabwe culture, for example, founded on the trade route between the Leopard's Kopje culture to the west and the Sofala Coast to the east became very prosperous during the fourteenth century. By increasing its grip on the gold trade (via taxation), the rulers of the Zimbabwe state were able to finance skilled builders for the purpose of cutting, dressing, transporting, and laying of stone for massive stone enclosures and conical towers. The life-style of the rulers became increasingly elaborate as conditions in the valley became urbanized. Rulers imported cloth, silks, embroidered materials, beads, and iron gongs from Sofala, while a proportion of gold en route to Sofala was not exported but forged into ornaments by local goldsmiths instead. Various "functionless" objects, such as carved soapstone birds, stone monoliths, female figurines, and phalli, or "functionless" designs, such as the chevron patterns in the outer wall of the great building complex, indicate the considerable luxury and wealth of the city of Zimbabwe. In light of the capacity of the rulers of Zimbabwe to employ independent builders as well as a military, it is hard to believe that quasi-professional music-making did not play a role in the courts of Zimbabwe at this time. Iron ore nodules have been found in a cave on the hill which may indicate the use of iron

- for instrument building. For a detailed account of the Shona before 1450, see Beach 1980.
15. Of course, *mbira dza vadzimu* is also played for pleasure in various contexts and Mude readily acknowledges this other context for the mbira (personal communication, 1999). But Mude makes a distinction between such music for entertainment (music “for playing in the beer halls”) and authentic mbira music, which can “make you think deeply” (Berliner 1981, 134). The point is that this critical distinction turns on an aesthetic evaluation of the music’s formal properties.
 16. The effort to canonize African music is deeply problematic. Many critics will surely doubt the importance of the endeavor, perhaps even argue that this is a symptom of, not a solution to, the very problems I address. But it is naive to think that, just because the canon’s exclusions make it “problematic,” the canon’s continued existence and influence can be spirited away somehow. (On the most banal level, *what* would a musicologist teach in a canon-free world?) This kind of thinking recapitulates the denial of African music’s access to formalist analysis just because the latter is regarded as ideological, as if *that* could be spirited away somehow. Denials of this sort are imagined solutions to a real problem. At any rate, the arguments against canonizing African music, like arguments that wish Africa into some noncapitalist utopian space, are more problematic than those advanced in favor of canonizing it.
 17. It is worth noting that these additional constitutional rights were not made possible by those in South Africa who identify as strictly European (or even Western), but by the more embracing African political forces. The inclusion of the sexual orientation clause, for example, was supported by the African National Congress, while it was actively opposed by the National Party, the former all-white ruling party. At the same time, however, the very notion of “homosexuality” is recognized as belonging to Western culture.
 18. Gayatri Spivak and Jacques Derrida associate this kind of transformative praxis with deconstruction. Although Derridean deconstruction is frequently berated by postcolonial critics on grounds that its purported advocacy of a state of suspended ignorance encourages a regressive freeplay of signification, an infinite recourse into undecidability with no political weight, Derrida and Spivak insist on the political aspirations of deconstruction. For Derrida the project of deconstruction does not eliminate hierarchies and structures from

the outside. In fact, to be effective, its articulations necessarily inhabit these structures. But they do so in a particular way, by strategically borrowing the resources of subversion from the old structure. Far from celebrating mere undecidability at this level of argument, the movement of deconstruction necessarily engages a specific, frozen metaphysical moment. For example, Spivak 1988 shows how the theoretically unsustainable term “*subaltern*,” is used by the group as a strategy—a mobilizing slogan signifying both trickery and artifice and implying the presence of an enemy. The structural positioning of the critique and its suitability to a situation are crucial in differentiating “strategy” from “theory.” In this sense, the risk of essentialism, if mobilized strategically, may be worth taking. For Spivak, the Subaltern Studies Group retheorizes the history of colonial India as confrontations in a context of domination and exploitation. The Group theorizes change in terms of a functional transformation in sign systems: “*bondsman*” becomes “*worker*,” “*criminal*” becomes “*insurgent*” and “*insurgent*” becomes “*agent of change*.” While this functional transformation is necessarily violent, operated by the force of crisis, implicit in the prior sign system there was some space for such change. So, the necessary “cognitive failure” (the failure, for instance, to access the “pure consciousness” of the *subaltern*) does not thereby automatically entail the impossibility of rewriting the history of India from another perspective. What does this political trafficking have to do with the study of music? If, in our musicological work, we sense this predicament in some form or other, what options might be suggested by the Subalternists? If we consider our musing to be part of a history in the making, what strategies might we employ? What is the equivalent of a musical “*bondsman*” anyway, and how does s/he become a “*worker*”? My analysis to follow offers one possibility that pushes to a certain limit the workings of Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.” My musical bondsman is a repertoire of songs that, like the serf, is subject to certain constraints and obligations imposed from elsewhere; my worker, the same songs expending energy in a different circuit—converting craft into art. In short, instead of retrieving ethnographic data, I will search for “purely musical” structures. A worker of art. The customary objection to such a practice centers around a purported insensitivity to indigenous perceptions (as if feeling the burden of context was sufficiently extra-textual and had not itself become a reified mode of representation). My approach is not explicitly endorsed by Spivak either. For Spivak, the eighteenth-century break of aesthetics from ethics has rendered aesthetics, as autonomous, politically

ineffective. Without taking up this view (which I would contest on many grounds), let me suggest that to limit the questions asked of a musical moment should be questioned for epistemological and political reasons.

19. In light of the fact that dyad labeling is largely a non-Shona practice, the banal level of harmonic analysis is not innocent. In other words, the analyst is prepared to use an alien model, but only in half-measures. Surely, this is inadequate to the task of describing the “nature,” let alone the “soul,” of mbira (Berliner 1981, 52).
20. Given Berliner’s claim that “[i]n Shona terms, . . . an mbira piece such as ‘Nhemamusasa’ is not a single fixed structure with a well-defined beginning and ending” (Berliner 1981, 111), it is unlikely that he subscribes to the second factor that I outline above. I entertain this possibility only because I think it might have occupied his hearing unwittingly. Why, for example, does Berliner not invest “A” as the tonal center of *Nhemamusasa*? Like the C dyad, the A dyad also appears three times in the cycle and is offset in the remaining cycle by a move to a dyad one step away, namely G.
21. For example, the tonal center of *Nyamamusango* is either a second or fifth above the lowest note of the instrument.
22. Berliner (1981, 57) notes that the second of *benzi*’s octave equivalents sometimes goes by the name *whindingwi*, which further confuses the point about tonal centricity.
23. It seems odd that an exploration of multiple possible modes of hearing counts as fictional and reductive (in this view), while a generalized statement about the music’s “polyrhythmic complexity” or its “kaleidophonic harmonies” is figured as nonfictional, dynamic and open-ended.
24. In light of the Marxist socialist aspirations of the *Zimbabwean African National Union* (ZANU), this relative silence may unwittingly reflect an American political stance in the context of the Cold War as much as it does any Zimbabwean reality. On the other hand, Berliner 1977 examines the political aspects of various Shona texts and exposes various stereotypical European views about Shona people.
25. Kwenda’s *Mahororo* can be heard on his CD (Kwenda 1997), and Mude’s *Nyamaropa* can be heard on the CD accompanying Berliner 1981.

26. The analysis of the mbira tuning patterns was made in the following way: I digitally recorded differently tuned mbiras in a recording studio at Columbia University, New York. The samples were edited using a Silicon Graphics workstation. After making a sonogram analysis of each key, the partials were tracked using Audiosculpt. The results of the partial tracking were averaged giving a single frequency in Herz for the fundamental and the prominent harmonics of each key. The data was then converted from Herz to “octave point pitch class” notation using a Silicon Graphics station running CMIX. This data format gives both the pitch and the deviation therefrom in cents. Finally, the distances between keys were measured in cents. I would like to thank Matthew Suttor for his assistance.
27. The harmonic structures of mbira pieces underscore the notion of octave equivalence. That is, even though their keys are physically dispersed on the instrument, various approximately pitch-class equivalent notes tend to cohere within a given musical time span. Moreover, as Berliner observes, Bandambira notes that several near octave-equivalent keys “took the same name from each other” (Berliner 1981, 56). Berliner tabulates the varying nature of octaves on various mbira instruments in Berliner 1981, 69–70.
28. See Richmond Browne, “Implications of the Diatonic Set,” in *Music Theory Only*, Volumes 5 and 6, 1981, 3–21.
29. For Berliner, in contrast, the most dramatic jolt in the system is when the last of the stepwise transpositions takes place (Berliner 1981, 78). He writes, “The most radical transformation takes place at the beginning of the fourth phrase, at which point the first motive moves up one scale degree” (Berliner 1981, 75).