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Music - The Concept Defined

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Abstract

This article is a synthesis of ideas from different sources. Ideas are drawn from part of my research on multicultural music education and from various readings on music as a concept. In the article I make a very simple conceptual analysis of music the sound and music as a phenomena of social construction. Music as a product of social construction is discussed in view of the role of the community in the development of a music tradition within a culture. Towards the end of the article I propose a comprehensive definition of music so as educators in Zimbabwe may develop a strong philosophical base for music education.

Introduction

All subjects in the curriculum have been defined and philosophical foundations have been created to justify their existence in the classroom. While music has been defined by many of the Grove dictionaries, such definitions have been limited to western art music and musicians. Music education in Zimbabwe and in Africa as whole, has been centered on the western perspective which tends to treat music as an object of beauty which is appreciated by the elite group in the society (Stone, 1988). In order for us to be able to teach music within our cultural perspective, we need to understand music the sound, and music as a phenomena of social construction. Thus the conceptual definition of music becomes vital for us to have a wider understanding of it, both from a musicological and an ethnomusicological perspective.

Music the sound

Music deals with sound whether pitched or non-pitched. We therefore cannot discuss music without mentioning sound because music in itself is sound. However, not all sound is music. For a sound to be called music there are a number of factors to be considered. There should be some accepted systematic way of producing that sound in order for it to be music and that system should be acceptable by the society in which the music is performed

(Blacking, 1990) The aspects of sound production should include both rhythm and pitch.

Rhythm is an important aspect of music. As music educators in Africa we need to understand rhythm from both the Western and African perspective. Music in these two worlds is perceived differently. Rhythm deals with the tempo and sound duration aspect of music. This means the flow of sound in relation to time in a musical performance. Both the African and Western musicians and music educators agree on that. In his discussion on rhythm Goldin (1997: 17) states that;

Rhythm deals with the temporal aspect of music, or how time passes in musical compositions. When we listen to a piece, we tend to "keep time" to its rhythm marking off evenly spaced pulses. This regular pulsation, commonly called **beat**, becomes the basis for various other rhythmic durations. The speed of the beat, called **tempo** is customarily indicated in approximate terms usually written in Italian: *Adagio* (slow), *Andante* (moderate), *Allegro* (fast) and so on.

Thus the sound production should have that systematic flow in order for it to have that musical effect, that is in terms of rhythm.

In the western literature, the different duration of sound is shown by symbols called notes. Each of the note values has a different length in terms of duration of sound. See the example below.

- Full note = 1  also known as the semibreve is equal to four beats and when we clap to it we say taa-aa-aa-aa
- Half note = $\frac{1}{2}$  also known as the minim is equal to two beats and when we clap to it we say taa- aa
- Quarter note = $\frac{1}{4}$  also known as the crotchet is equal to one beat and when we clap to it we say taa
- Eighth note = $\frac{1}{8}$  also known as a the quaver is equal to half a beat. this is usually grouped in the twos or fours and when we clap to the series we say ta-te
- sixteenth note = $\frac{1}{16}$  also known as the semiquaver and is equal to a quarter of a beat. it is usually grouped in fors and when we clap to the series we say ta-fa-te-fe.

Note from the example above that, the quarter note (crotchet) is the standard measuring note and all the counting for the rest of the notes is done in relation to it. The concept of beat, also known as meter is well explained by Goldin. When we sing any western tune we tend to feel the strong and weak beats and therefore some songs are in two, three, and four beats per bar. Examples below show rhythmic patterns which are metered to show the different number of beats in a bar. These are only basics of rhythm in Western perspective Note that a rhythmic pattern consists of different note values and that does not affect the number of beats in each bar or measure.

2/4 ta a ta a ta - te ta - te ta a ta - te ta a -- aa - -

3/4 ta - te - ta - te ta a ta a ta a ta a ta - te ta - fa - te - fe ta a ta a - aa

4/4 ta a ta a ta - te ta a ta - te ta - fa - te - fe ta - te ta a ta a ta a - aa ta a - aa aa - aa

From the above example we note that meter is the basis of rhythmic performance in Western Art Music and music educators in many parts of the world have adopted this even in transcribing the indigenous music. We should, however, as Africans understand the complexity of our own rhythms as we try to teach music to our children. Western music is superimposed on meter, while African music is superimposed on a timeline. A timeline is an ostinatic pattern which is continuous throughout a musical performance. In discussing the epic performance in Liberia Stone (1988) observed a continuous pattern played on a beer bottle which becomes the basis of rhythmic creativity in the whole performance. In discussing multicultural music education Matiure (1999) further presents an analogy that the so called timeline is not only prevalent in West African music but also in Southern African music, particularly in Zimbabwe. Matiure (2002) further argues that a timeline may or may not be physically performed but can be an underlying feeling that is understood by people in a particular culture and within the perspective of a given music style. Thus what we call the *Shangara* beat is determined by the timeline which makes us identify the style. *Mhande* therefore becomes different from *shangara*, *dandanda*, and so on. This is because of the different timelines which determines the nature of creativity in each style. The related dances will differ accordingly. The example that

follows show part of a Shona folk song in *shangara* style and a folk story song in *mhande* style. The two are shown with their different timelines.

Cham'tengure

Shona folk song
Arranged and transcribed by:
S Matiure (2001)

Lead

Resp 1

Cham' te - ngu-re cham' te - ngu-re, Cham' te - ngu-re cham'

Resp 2

Cham' te - ngu-re cham'

5 Hiya ha ho - hiya ha ho - , Hiya ha - ho - , hiya ha

5 te - ngure. Chavachamu - tengurevhi sirengoro cham' te - ngu-re Wandi-ti-mu tya-i-ri-wandio-ne-i cham'

5 te ngure cham-te - ngu-re - - - - - cham'

ho - , Hiya ha ho - hiya - ha - ho - , Hiya - ha - ho - , hiya - ha -

Timeline

follows show part of a Shona folk song in *shangara* style and a folk story song in *mhande* style. The two are shown with their different timelines.

Cham'tengure

Shona folk song
Arranged and transcribed by:
S Maturi (2001)

Lead

Resp 1

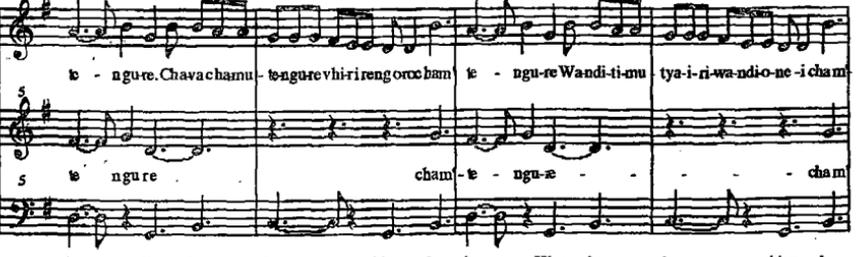
Resp 2



Cham' te - ngu-re cham' te - ngu-re, Cham' te - ngu-re cham'

Cham' te - ngu-re cham'

5 Hiya ha ho - hiya ha ho - , Hiya ha - ho - , hiya ha

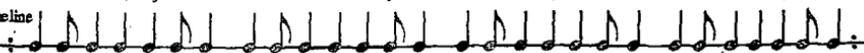


te - ngu-re. Chava chamu - tengure vhi-ri-rengorocham' te - ngu-re Wanditi-mu tya-i-ri-wa-ndio-ne-i-cham

5 te ngure cham-te - ngu-re - - - cham

5 ho - , Hiya ha ho - hiya - ha - ho - , Hiya - ha - ho - , hiya - ha -

Timeline



referring to the dance or the drumming pattern or the song. Thus the whole performance is viewed as one.

Pitch refers to the different levels of sound in terms of high or low. Taylor (1989) and Goldin (1997) agree on this definition. Their works on music theory discuss the combination of intervals in a given melody to denote how pitch functions in music. Melody becomes a combination of rhythm and pitch well arranged to become part of what we call music. Other elements like harmony become an extension or accompaniment to the main melody in a particular composition. The example of the National Anthem below shows how a single melody is developed into harmony to make a four-part harmony song, which is common in our Zimbabwean choral works. Note that two systems of notation are used, that is, tonic solfa and staff notation.

Ngaikomborerwe Nyika yeZimbabwe

Words by Dr. S Musvairo
Music by RChangandega

The musical score is presented in four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. Each staff contains a line of music with lyrics underneath. Above the lyrics, tonic solfa notation is used to indicate pitch intervals. The Soprano part is the main melody, while the other parts provide harmonic support. The lyrics are: 'Si-mu dza - i mu re za we - du we - Zi - mb - mbwe'. The solfa notation for the Soprano part is: s s d r r m m s f m m d r r d. The Alto part has solfa: s s s t t d d d s s s f m. The Tenor part has solfa: s s m s s s s d d d t t d. The Bass part has solfa: s s d s s d d m r d d m s s d.

If one looks at the soprano line, which is the main melody, one sees a combination of melodic intervals which form up a tune. Thus the melodic intervals are recognized when you read the music horizontally and the intervals are noticeable on each of the parts. Harmony is created when we read the music vertically. One notices the vertical intervals between parts

and when the respective notes are sung together we hear a chord progression which forms what we refer to as harmony.

Timbre is a term that is used to describe the quality of sound. This quality of sound is determined by the sound-producing device. Timbre is therefore that different sound quality which comes from the different sound producing devices found in different musical instruments. It is also a term that is used to describe even the voice quality as it also differs from individual to individual. The other issue is that of structure and expression. All music must be structured for the stylistic identification. That is why we talk of many music styles being determined by structure and beat as in the performance by those who are the specialist in them. Expression in a musical performance becomes one of the prime factors that differentiate ordinary sound from music. Music must be expressive and must have meaning to both the performer and the audience (Stone, 1988)

Music as the product of social construction

The discussion above is all about music the sound and the related elements that make music what it is. There are however some other definitions coming from such disciplines as ethnomusicology and social anthropology. In this case music is not only defined in terms of sound but also in terms of those who make it. Music is therefore a human product without which the society would not fulfill its spiritual, emotional, and other form of expression. Blacking (1990) defines music as the "humanly organized sound". Music is that organized sound of which the patterns are appreciated by the community. Thus music is product of social construction and is inherited from one generation to the other through either oral or literal means. New patterns are created and these are governed by the social environment and surrounding activities of the community. It is therefore true that one community's music could be another's noise. Musical conception will differ from community to community. Thus the notion that music is a universal language is, in this case, subject to debate. Blacking (1990) emphasizes the role of the community in the development of a musical tradition for a particular culture. In discussing the music of the Venda people of South Africa, Blacking (1990) explains how musicians create music within the accepted patterns of the Venda people themselves and this would be different from the Nyanja of

Malawi or even Xosa from the Transkai within South Africa itself. He however acknowledges common patterns among Africans of the Sub-Saharan region.

Music as an element of culture and music as culture.

Music can also be defined in terms of music the behavior. Music the behavior has two dimensions. These are music as an element of culture and music as culture.

In music as an element of culture, we see the behavioral side of music as we examine the way it functions in society and the way the musicians work in the same society. The functional side is how music the sound affects the behavior of people as it is performed by the musicians in any given society. This brings us to the notion of music as an element of culture. This is how music enhances other elements of culture. Scholars in ethnomusicology have, for example, gone out into different cultures of the world in search of meaning of music to mankind. Blacking (1990), Berliner (1981), Chernoff (1979), Waterman (1995) and others have studied music of Africa and its functions in different communities. Berliner (1981) discussed Shona music of Zimbabwe and how it creates a devotional frame when performed in the religious rituals like Bira. Waterman (1995) expresses the same notion when he describes Juju ceremonies in Nigeria. In Zimbabwe it is common knowledge that we have several work, wedding, funeral and other songs with respective functions as needed by the communities and in specific times. Thus music as an element of culture becomes something that every music educator should understand.

Music as culture is another dimension that needs to be looked at closely. This is another aspect of music the behavior. In discussing music of the world Slobin and Titon (1992) described the notion of music the behavior as music-culture. Music as culture simply means the behavior of musicians as they create the music, make musical instruments, learn the music and perform it. Thus musicians behave in a certain way that makes them different from the rest of the community yet what they do should be a product of the aspirations of the same community they live in (Blacking 1990). We have different styles of music in Zimbabwe ranging from traditional to popular music. The behavior of performers in these different styles is as diverse as

the styles themselves. The interaction of musicians during and after performance differs according to the style of music performed. *Mbira* performers are for example different in the way they interact during a performance event from *mhande* performers. The accepted sound patterns in these two styles governs the way they teach and learn the music, the way they handle the instruments and the way they interact during a performance. There is however the general behavior expected of musicians and this is governed by the society as a whole.

Music as an element of culture and music as culture are two concepts that music educators have to understand in order to design and implement a music education program within the cultural perspectives of any given nation with Zimbabwe being no exception. We should understand the role of music in our culture and how our musicians create and perform the music that become part and parcel of our daily lives.

Proposed comprehensive definition of music.

After defining the various aspects of music, we see a complex concept which cannot be taken for granted even by those who claim to be the educators in the field. A comprehensive definition of music can only be realized when all aspects of it are taken into consideration. The Oxford Dictionary defines music as; "... the art and science of combining vocal and instrumental harmonies, rhythm and timbre especially so as to form a structurally complete and emotionally expressive composition". In view of all aspects of music discussed in this article I propose the following points as those that make up a comprehensive definition of music.

- 1 Music is "humanly organized sound" (Blacking 1995)
- 2 It is a product of social construction.
- 3 Music is articulated by the human voice and other objects called musical instruments.
- 4 It consists of rhythm, pitch, harmony, and timbre.
- 5 Music is an expressive element of culture that enhances other cultural traits.
- 6 It is a vehicle for education and information transmission.
- 7 Music is a culture on its own and is transmitted from one generation to another through oral and literal means.

- 8 Music is a performing art. The different combinations of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic sounds make music a science emanating from the physics of sound and organology.

The above points are part of the many ways one can describe music. This gives us a comprehensive understanding of music as an expressive art and a science that mankind cannot do without.

Conclusion.

This article gives us the conceptual framework of what music is about. It opens doors to further discussion of music as a subject of study. It is important for us to understand our subject in order to teach it in a more effective way. This implies that music educators at various levels need to take music seriously and embark on intensive research to come up with meaningful curriculum. A curriculum that is based on the music from the community it serves. Teacher education in Zimbabwe should be more focused in preparing teachers on how to teach music from the cultural background of the child. There is need for the entire music education system in Zimbabwe to be transformed. While song repertoire from the western world can still be used, there is need to create a deliberate bias on the music from the cultural background of the child. In this case African music and song repertoire should be our prime source of content bearing in mind that music is a product of social construction. Our children can learn musical concepts better from music of their own culture than from foreign ones. The cultural aspects of any subject are very important to understand. They give us the operational base from which stability and continuity is certain. We should be able to distinguish between the communal aspect of our music and the music makers as part of the same community. Out of this knowledge, we will be able to draw our philosophy for teaching and learning music within our formal education system.

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