

Polyrhythms and Life Lessons – a message from ethnomusicologist at Rhythms of the Village

By Judy Tran, MTAC Pasadena Member

Life is full of conflicts and challenges. As music teachers, not only do we have the opportunity to teach the mechanics of music, but also the mental and emotional pathways that music shows us to navigate life challenges. Having grown up in a traditional Chinese household with seven brothers, with an emphasis on education, honor and humility being held as the highest virtues; West African culture, with its emphasis on family, community, and a deep respect for its elders instantly resonated with me.

In 2016, I met Onochie Chukwurah and his son, Emeka, at the Rhythms of the Village shop and cultural center on 2279 Lake Street. Onochie quickly took me under his wing, and before I knew it, I became the Rhythms of the Village ethnomusicologist, putting traditional West African music in writing, and studying its patterns and cultural significance.

Amazingly, I always felt better after working at Rhythms of the Village, unlike my experiences at school in which I couldn't wait for my day to be over, or after my private piano lessons in which I often came out crying. In pondering over this phenomenon, I've come to believe that it is West African music itself that created this positive, even therapeutic effect.

In every type of music, there is melody, harmony, and rhythm, but in West African music, rhythm is king. Rhythm creates the backbone of the piece, carries its personality, signifies certain dances, functions as themes that return and develop, and even functions as Leitmotifs. One of the things that makes West African rhythm so complex is the common use of polyrhythm. Most classical approaches to music education avoid the topic of polyrhythms until the advanced levels, as in our MTAC's Certificate of Merit program. In contrast, polyrhythms are an integral part of traditional West African music, and it is difficult to even get started without having some understanding of polyrhythms right away.

Not only does West African music feature voices with different subdivisions of the beat at the same time, but it also commonly layers different time signatures over each other. The easiest example of this to understand is 3/4 against 6/8. If you divide each of the three quarter notes in 3/4 time into two eighth notes each, you get six eighth notes in total. This matches up with the six eighth notes that make up a 6/8 measure. When you play them simultaneously, you get the same number of eighth notes, but the voice in 3/4 time will have accents every two eighth notes, whereas the voice in 6/8 will have accents every three eighth notes.

As if that doesn't sound tricky enough, one of the most common time signature layerings in West Africa is 4/4 against 6/4. It all comes down to the least common multiple. The least common multiple of 4 and 6 is 12. If I subdivide the 4 into triplets, I get 12 eighth notes in total, or 12/8. Then, I subdivide each quarter note of 6/4 into two eighth notes each and get 12 as well. Now, I

simply need to play the two meters simultaneously, lining up the eighth notes. The combination creates a rich mesh between the different accents in the 4/4 rhythm and the 6/4 rhythm, and it is easy to lose track of where you are. The trick to keeping the two parts together is to make sure the ensemble lands together on every beat 1. That means for this polyrhythm, the landmark beat is 1. If you want to hear a demonstration of this, I explain this in detail and more on my YouTube channel.

In order to learn this type of music, one must learn one basic thing – how to hold one’s own part but at the same time, listen to and learn the other person’s part so that between the seeming chaos, we can land the landmark beats together. I think this is the most important lesson taught to me by West African music. There are always differences and disagreements between people, but ultimately, we need to listen to each other and find the common ground between us to make peace. Rather than submit to the chaos, or on the flip side of that, dismiss our own individuality, we need to strive to find where our parts fit together and accept where the parts don’t.

As music teachers, we have the opportunity to teach our students these invaluable lessons. Never dismiss your power as a music teacher. We do have the power to make this world a better place.

<https://www.youtube.com/c/PianoPurposePeace>

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