

Are there Traces of West African Music in Steve Reich's Compositions?

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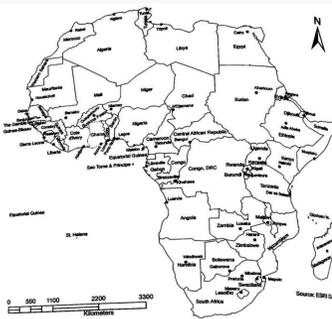
Steve Reich

Introduction

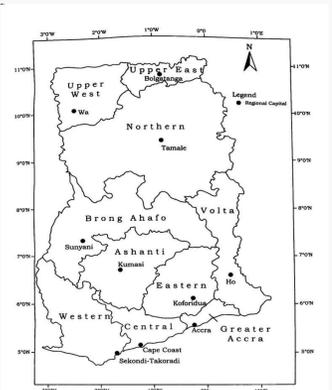
Steve Reich is an American composer most known for his contributions to the Minimalist music movement. Born into a musical family, he was encouraged to take piano lessons, but later switched to learning percussion. At age 17, he took a general music history course where his professor stressed the connections between rhythms and polyphony. This influenced Reich as both a percussionist and composer. These characteristics of music led him to develop an interest in Jazz music, and African music. In 1962, he discovered the book "Studies in African Music," by A.M. Jones to learn more about the music and how it was structured. In 1965, he began to experiment with a technique that he is widely known for, phasing. He first composed *It's Gonna Rain*, and in 1966 he composed *Piano Phase*. In 1970, he discovered that there was an African drummer at Columbia University, Alfred Ladzepko. He traveled there to meet him, and Alfred encouraged Reich to travel to the University of Ghana in Accra if he truly wanted to learn more about African drumming. In Accra, Reich studied with master drummer Gideon Alorworye who was in residence with the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Reich took daily lessons with Gideon, recording every pattern he was taught. After each lesson, he would play along with his recordings and even transcribe some to better understand the rhythmic relationships. Here his ideas of repetition, polyrhythms, and clearly changing processes were reinforced. Shortly after his trip, he composed his longest piece, *Drumming*.

Steve Reich's Music

Steve Reich is known for his contributions to the Minimalist movement, that is music characterized by repetition, subtle changes, and a focus on limited pitch material. One feature he experimented with was a process known as phasing. One day, he recorded a preacher delivering a sermon and began playing duplicate tape loops on two separate players. He noticed that the imperfections in the tapes led to the duplicate audio separating, creating a slight change of phase to happen. He realized he could use this as a compositional technique as "a way of going through a number of different relationships with the same thing, without ever having any transition" (Reich 1964). He experimented with phasing in two of his most notable phasing pieces, *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*. Reich explained his interesting perceptible processes, "I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music" (Reich 1968). After his trip to Ghana, Reich composed *Drumming* explaining that it is "the final expansion and refinement of the phasing process, as well as the first use of four new techniques: (1) the process of gradually substituting beats for rests (or rests for beats); (2) the gradual changing of timbre while rhythm and pitch remain constant; (3) the simultaneous combination of instruments of different timbre; and (4) the use of the human voice to become part of the musical ensemble by imitating the exact sound of the instruments" (Reich 1971).



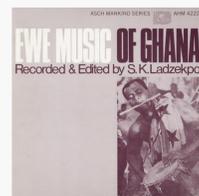
Map of Africa



Map of Ghana

Ewe Music

West African music varies greatly from region to region and is also dependent on the people who live there. In the Volta Region of the South, as well as the southern parts of Togo and Benin, there is a group of people known as the Anlo Ewe. Ewe music is composed primarily of percussion instruments and is made up of overlapping rhythmic ideas and dense rhythmic textures. Another important detail of Ghanaian music is that the name of the music will also be the name of the dance performed to the music. Music and dance almost always goes hand in hand in Ewe music. The best known Ewe Social dance is known as Agbadza. In Ewe drumming, each instrument plays a specific role with their rhythm, with certain drums maintaining the same rhythm or beat while others emphasize different polyrhythms that may pop-out. When players practice, there are a series of nonsense syllables to remember their rhythm and a literal meaning. If a player does not have access to an instrument at a given time, they may sing these syllables to practice rhythms and stockings.



Ewe Music of Ghana - Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



Steve Reich's Drumming

Reich in Ghana

At the University of Ghana, under the teachings of Gideon Alorworye, Reich was first introduced to Ewe drumming by learning the pattern of Agbadza. With this base, Alorworye taught him the patterns of Agahu with Reich's ear being especially attracted to the Hatsiatsia section. Reich gained the understanding that African music's rhythmic structure, in his own words, is "several repeating patterns of the same or related lengths and each with its own separate downbeat." He also stated "This trip to Africa was very instructive, not really for new information, but as confirmation and encouragement" (Reich 1995).



Example 7-3. Agbadza.

Steve Reich's Drumming vs. Agahu

Different Timbres and Sounds

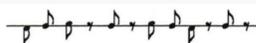
Within both Ewe music and Steve Reich's *Drumming*, there is a use and exploration of different timbres and sounds heard from the type of percussion used, as well as voices.

Polyrhythms

With Agahu, instruments have their own role and combined, create the overall melody, often a combination of complex polyrhythms. Reich also manages to accomplish this in his pieces, assigning players different rhythms with open repeats to emphasize this web of overlapping ideas.

Dialogues

Reich was drawn to the *Hatsiatsia* section in Agahu which contains a high level of dialogue. It is no surprise that within *Drumming*, dialogue plays a huge role.



Steve Reich's basic rhythmic pattern for all of *Drumming*

Agahu

One style of music and dance from the Ewe people is known as Agahu, often mistakenly referred to as Gahu. Agahu is a circle dance performed by both men and women that can be performed whenever or wherever. Agahu instrumentation included the agbodza, sogo, kidi, and kaganu. As previously mentioned, instruments have a specific role in Ewe drumming. In Agahu, they are split up into categories: The time - Gangkogui, Atoke, Axatse; The Response - Sogo, Kidi, Kadanu; and the Call - Gboba. Instruments responsible for time will typically play the same rhythm for most of a song, while other instruments may have more free range to improvise, especially the call. Improvisation is another important aspect of Ewe drumming, often reserved for more advanced players who understand the structure of the songs they are playing. Within Agahu, there is a section devoted to the use of iron bells known as the *Hatsiatsia*. These sections often include a high degree of dialogue and are meant to express certain song texts.

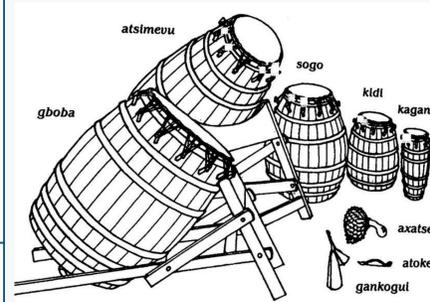
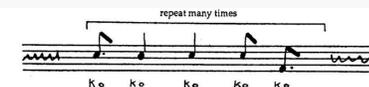


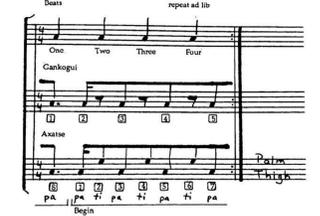
Fig. 1.1 The drum ensemble.



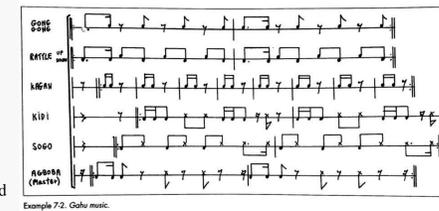
Ex. 2.1 Gankogui phrase by itself.



Ex. 2.20 Kaganu part.



Ex. 2.16 Axatse and gankogui parts and beats.



Example 7-2. Gahu music.



Example 7-1. Hatsiatsia bell patterns.

Results

I initially set out to show Steve Reich had essentially copied ideas from West African music into his compositions. Upon completing my research, I instead discovered that he used what he learned to expand upon his own ideas on the relationships of rhythms. I, also, originally thought there would be more influence on Reich's compositions overall, but I learned that he is the type of composer who prefers to expand upon a technique and then move on. Thus I came to the conclusion that most components of West African music would be in his piece *Drumming*. I learned that Reich did not really try to hide where his inspiration came from, and instead explicitly used techniques and ideas from his trip to tweak his current method. Even before his trip, his pieces shared similar characteristics with African music, as does Minimalist music, so it made sense he would want to go to the source to learn exactly the techniques he was already beginning to explore.



Steve Reich Early Phase of *Drumming*

"Well, I'm as guilty as Picasso was when he looked at African sculpture" (Reich 1995)

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Conclusion

When done in respect to the origins of the music, composers can gain a unique set of wisdom by immersing themselves in a different cultural sound. By removing themselves from the sounds they have grown up in and around, they can learn new techniques and sounds to explore in their own compositions. Of course, a composer should never copy and paste an idea, but when thought carefully, a new appreciation of music and its structure is found.