Rhythms of Power: Interaction in Musical Performance

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Gestures and things, voices and sounds, are caught up in the same "opera," swept away by the same shifting effects of stammering, vibrato, tremolo, and overspilling.

Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

This paper applies methods of interactional analysis to the video recording of a musical performance in Fez, Morocco, with the understanding that performance is most essentially a communicative phenomenon (Bauman, 1984). Music and interaction are the subject of Monson's (1996) groundbreaking work on improvisation and interaction in jazz. Monson demonstrates that "jazz can be seen as a musical language, improvisation as musical conversation, and good improvisation as talking or 'saying something'" (1996, p. 73). Much of her analysis examines social context at the expense of sequential context, particularly the openings and closings that are so ripe for analysis. One chapter in her book, however, takes on the formal concerns of interactional analysis, and in it Monson sets forth a model for future research.

Perhaps one of the reasons interaction is so obscure in Monson is because fluency in the language of interactional analysis is esoteric to the group of analysts who conduct conversation analysis and doesn't easily lend itself to such interdisciplinary projects as Monson's or my own. Further, the practice of interactional analysis is a method slowly learned and easily misconstrued. As a result, Monson's transcriptions are not interactional but rather musicological, while mine are narrative. The reception of such interdisciplinary approaches as this one depends on careful, critical, and empathetic responses to them.

1 Social and Sequential Context

Sociolinguistic analysis has tended to focus on the distinction between sociocultural contexts *contra* sequential contexts, what Gumperz (1994) terms the difference between external and discourse contexts. In the introduction to their edited volume, Duranti and Goodwin borrow the terms "figure" and "ground" from art criticism. In a portrait, for example, the figure is the person's face, while the ground is the background, the wall or sky behind the person. In sociolinguistics, the figure is the "focal event" and ground is the "context or field of action within which that event is embedded" (Duranti & Goodwin,1994, p. 1). Context has also been considered the "frame" (Goffman, 1974), a

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"socially constituted, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon" (Duranti & Goodwin, 1994, p. 6). However, Duranti and Goodwin reject the essential givenness of this conclusion and instead focus on social construction. In doing so they, they conclude that defining the context is a creative act, one that results in the creation of the focal event itself. Thus the old maxim that meaning is created *within* contexts is upended, and we can see that meaning is actually created *by* its contexts. This act of creation operates in three dimensions: setting, behavioral environment, and language itself (Duranti & Goodwin 1994:7). The first, setting, is the place where the interaction is taking place as well as the social framework in which the talk is situated. This is classic sociocultural context. The second, the behavioral environment, refers to spatial orientation and bodily posture. The third dimension, language itself, includes both speech genres and the work of the talk itself to cue contextualization. In a musical performance, (at least) these three contexts obtain: (1) setting can be seen as the song's music, its lyrics, and the cultural patterns that enabled both to exist in that place; (2) music's body and space can be interpreted as the "accompaniment" to the "solo," the roles played by the various sounds in giving rise to a focal event; while (3) the language of music can be understood as the sequence (tempo and rhythm) in which the sounds (volume, tone, timbre, attacks) occur.

It is in the interaction between these two final contexts—soloist/accompaniment and the sequential work of the interaction itself to cue contextualization—where we find in this project the greatest fruit for analysis of power plays. Who is playing the backing music, and who is playing the solo? How are these positions determined and enacted? The soloist tends to "lead" the other musicians, with their permission and that of the group leader. In the actual performance, however, the soloist can negotiate on stage for leeway beyond that allotted to him or her. Additionally, backing musicians can directly challenge the leading of the soloist. The "work" of the "talk"—the work of the onstage interaction—is thus itself a context in which the struggle for control and, often, domination takes place.

Defining power as the ability to control someone else, Brown and Gilman (1960) contrast the use of pronouns to point out or assert assymmetrical relationships to the use of pronouns to point out or assert symmetrical relationships. The authors determine that use of the two personal pronouns of T (in French, *tu*) and V (*vous*) can be made to show the symmetry or assymmetry that structures the interaction. The authors chart the various permutations of this "two-dimensional semantic in equilibrium and under tension" (p. 259), complicating the overly simple conclusion that language use codes or orders social status between "high" and "low." The chart is nonetheless still constructed of dyads involving binary opposites.

In the spatial-hierarchical society of Pohnpei, Micronesia, Keating (1995) confirms that, notwithstanding Brown and Gilman's complications, verbal symbols ordering hierarchy tend to "be most powerful when ordered in terms of polar opposites" (p. 474). In contrast, Keating argues, nonverbal symbols such as proxemics and gestures are able to order far more complicated hierarchies, particularly in dialogue with verbal symbols.

As in all dialogues, within the ones treated in this paper sequential power is deployed to change the outcome of the utterance or turn, even as this deployment is often instantiated or validated by social power. When I mention social power I have in mind, following Duranti and Goodwin (1994), all three of the contexts: setting, behavioral environment, and language. Thus I am concerned not only with the local—the interaction between participants in the speech act—but also the global, the structural and phenomenological elements that impinge and color the interaction. Conversely, to

paraphrase Spivak, if the subaltern cannot speak, her silence is due not only to sociopolitical conditions of subalternity (i.e., perhaps, the economic and ontological demands of late modernity) but also to the sequential interruptions and implicit conversational structures by local hegemons that have rendered her voiceless.

2 Social Context: Gnawa

The Gnawa are descended from sub-Saharan Africans who were enslaved by the sultan and brought to Morocco to work as soldiers and entertainers, beginning in the 15th century. Many Gnawa songs recall the time of the crossing, when they were forced to walk from what are now Senegal, Mali, and Niger to Marrakech and Meknes in Morocco. This heritage is perceived in their racial otherness—they tend to have darker skin than many other Moroccans—as well as in features of Gnawa music, which is largely pentatonic and incorporates instruments and rhythms from sub-Saharan music.

Research exclusively devoted to the Gnawa is sparse; most often, evidence of the history and sociology of this minority group is found in more general works on North Africa or West Africa. Sources on Gnawa include Paques (1978), Hell (1999), and Chlyeh (1998, 1999) on cosmology; and Diouri (1979), Kapchan (2002a, 2002b), Hell (2002), and Goodman-Singh (2002) on music and culture. Details concerning more general historical and cultural dimensions of the North African experiences of formerly enslaved West Africans can be found in Segal (2001), El Hamel (2002), and Wright (2002).

The West African history of the Gnawa is evident not only in their music but also in their possession trances. Gnawa believe that people are either born with an alien spirit or that this spirit can come upon people and afflict them. The outward evidence of this affliction can take numerous forms, such as mental or emotional trouble, financial difficulties, physical illness, or social problems, such as the bad behavior of a child or conflict with a neighbor. Appeasing the spirit demands a ceremony in which the afflicted person trades his or her identity for that of the spirit. These beliefs undergird to a great extent the interest in Gnawa performances not only in Morocco but also in Europe and the United States, even though Moroccan audiences typically maintain a more rigid distinction between the two types of performance, the ceremony and the concert. Within any performance, the *m'allim*, the "teacher" and bandleader, is often able to exert a great deal of social, spatial, and sequential power.

Gnawa ritual performances typically show two types of music, the *fraja* and *lila*. The fraja includes the introductory songs played while people are arriving at the lila, an all-night ceremony. During the lila ceremonies the afflicted person temporarily incarnates the identity of a *milk*, a spirit or saint (pl. *mluk*) and trance-dances until the spirit is satisfied. Lila songs are powerful, since they have the ability to provoke the mluk to take possession of listeners. In contrast, the fraja songs do not have that power. These are the songs most commonly played in tourist performances, whether in concerts or on the street. Often in groups of two or three but occasionally on their own, Gnawa musicians go door-to-door dispensing blessings to people. The blessing involves playing the tbel (large, double-headed drum) and invoking a saint on behalf of the person requesting the blessing. In a smooth elision, the boundary disappears between this practice and street performance for tourists in cafes and restaurants.

The performance I analyze here was given July 18, 2001, at the dormitory for the Arabic Language Institute in Fez. The dormitory is not far from a major tourist hotel,

where the troupe was booked to perform later that evening. In a sense, this performance can thus be considered something of a "warm-up" exercise. It was given before an audience of mostly American and European students of Arabic.

The genre of the music, Gnawa, is distinctive for the interplay between double rhythms, based on two beats, and triple rhythms, based on three beats. The principal instruments are the *ginbri*, a three-stringed lute, the *qaraqib* (sing. *qarqaba*), large metal castanets, and the *tbel*, large round drums. The tbel are usually played in a double rhythm, the qaraqib in a triple rhythm, and the ginbri alternates between the two. It is important to note that the ginbri is an instrument of both tone and rhythm. Often the ginbri player plucks the double rhythm on the strings while tapping the triple rhythm on the skin of the instrument. Further instrumentation is offered by the musicians's voices, hand-clapping, and stomping of their feet.

3 Sequential Context: Rhythms of Power

I am interested in determining some ways hierarchies and power relations (Keating 1995) can be imposed, reinforced, and challenged nonverbally within the frame of the musical performance. I focus on relevant "participatory discrepancies," slightly off-tempo rhythms that serve to communicate with other players (Keil 1994), as the specific places at which participants initiate openings, closings, or repair. None of the verbal interactions between the musicians can be discerned on the video recording, so I restrict my analysis to gesture and rhythm. Streeck and Haartge note that "gesticulation is coordinated with the *rhythm* of speech" (1992, p. 137, emphasis in original). This musical metaphor becomes particularly apt when we consider rhythm itself to be a kind of speech, and rhythms in dialogue to be conversation. In communication, then, it is necessary to distinguish relevant gestures from irrelevant ones, and I adapt Goodwin's (1986) method. Following Streeck and Hartge, I argue that these gestures appear to come at transition places—"high-definition" environments in the conversation in which a speaker transition becomes possible (1992, p. 138).

The video recording shows typical conversation elements of a sort: openings and closings, in which the communication is considered successful if the musicians successfully achieve a change in rhythm or the end of one song and the beginning of another. Repair can be seen after the rhythm breaks down, when the musicians miss the m'allim's cue. Nevertheless, there is also the deviant case—the "exception"—at which the musicians fail to follow the m'allim's cue. One of them begins a new, unsanctioned, rhythm through extremely subtle discrepancies. Through analysis of deviant cases at these transition places, I intend to show the contestation of power and the re-imposition of hierarchy.

Although she does not explicitly identify it as such, Monson notes repair in her analysis of "Bass-ment Blues," a 1965 jazz performance by the Jaki Byard Quartet. Monson illustrates here what she means by interaction; while she does not employ the language of conversation analysis, she accomplishes the same task. The three key players are Jaki Byard on piano, Alan Dawson on drums, and George Tucker on bass. Monson traces the dynamics of the piece and notes that the musicians "get on by getting off" of the time cycles (1996, p. 152). She chooses to focus on two mistakes in the piece, of which the first is the most complicated and directly related to my concerns. Monson confirms her conclusions through interviews with Byard, but she draws her data from a recording of the concert. In contrast, my data includes video, and as a result I have the additional

perspective of visual cues that doubtless existed in the original “Bass-ment Blues” concert but were not available to Monson.

The sequence begins when, in measure 37, it has become clear that Tucker is out of phase from the 12-bar blues structure being maintained by Byard and Dawson (Monson, 1996, p. 156). Somehow, Tucker managed not only to add two beats in measure 32, but also to be, by measure 47, six beats ahead of where he would have been had he followed the twelve-bar structure (p. 157). In measure 37, Byard snaps his fingers to show that he has noted the divergence between the rhythm he has been keeping and that kept by Tucker. Monson argues that the task of the musicians then becomes to reconcile the two divergent rhythms, but she notes that the discrepancy is inaudible to the casual listener—indeed, the audience’s responses on the recording show that they did not discern the error, and Monson herself became aware of the problem only after she began to transcribe this section (p. 157). Monson’s inability to distinguish the discrepancy at its occurrence indicates to me that this is a participatory discrepancy as described by Keil (1994), a discrepancy so slight that it is almost inaudible.

A typical mistake of this sort by a soloist, Monson points out, usually results in a clearer articulation of the rhythm by the accompanying players. But when the soloist fails to acknowledge and correct the error, “a sensitive band will adjust to the soloist, even if he or she is technically incorrect with the context of the original time cycle” (1996, p. 161-162). Monson notes that it is considered the mark of musicianship for an accompanying musician to change the rhythm to match the errant soloist in order to keep the band together. In this case, Byard switches to a simpler rhythm in measure 48, and Tucker becomes aware of his error by measure 59. After completing that section, Tucker turns his rhythm over measures 71 and 72. “Byard and Dawson respond to the musical signal by adjusting to Tucker; they add two beats to the twelfth measure of their sixth chorus, and the three musicians establish the top of the seventh chorus together” in measure 73 (p. 170).

The ability of the performance to recover from errors, to repair, is “an interactive and collaborative affair” (Monson, 1996, p. 176). Monson notes that ties of sociality determine this success. Repair is often the context for “taking the music to another level” (p. 176), but the musicians are not singularly responsible for this—it occurs only as the result of the leader guiding the rest of the players through a process such as the one above, in which Byard introduced the simpler rhythm, Dawson followed, and Tucker became aware of his error. Then Tucker acknowledged their gesture, cued a shift in rhythm, Byard and Dawson anticipated it, and the three completed a transition, not only in the piece but also in “taking the music to another level,” hitting a groove. Miscommunication and repair are vital to producing good music and hitting the groove. Monson explains that “‘mistakes’ in jazz improvisation not infrequently have as their consequence extraordinarily positive, spontaneous musical events” (p. 153). Keil (1994, p. 96) takes it a step further: “Music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be out of time, and out of tune.” In other words, in terms of conversation analysis, the “groove” that Keil and Feld (1994) discuss is repair.

It is impossible to know now whether Tucker’s error was intentional or unintentional; he tragically collapsed and died of a brain aneurysm six months later, during another performance. It would be instructive to be able to explain this case—what was Tucker thinking when he departed from the rhythm? Why did he do it? I am faced with a similar conundrum in this paper, one only further ethnographic research will be able to resolve.

The data for this paper come from four short segments from a video recording of a single performance. Clip 2, Clip 3, and Clip 4 are in sequence. The first comes from around twenty minutes into the performance, the second after around 45 minutes into, and the last one comes after the performers have been on stage around an hour. (Clip 1, a series of close-up shots, comes from around one and a half hours into the performance.)

4 Gnawa Rhythms and Deixis

As is the case with rhythm, the relevance of gestures is determined sequentially. Further, gestures can be divided along lines similar to those introduced by Brown and Gilman—gestures can encode power as well as solidarity. Goodwin's (1986) mutual orientation—how one participant gains the attention of another—can in a sense be considered a sequential perspective on the solidary use of gesture. Goodwin's contrasting body care includes gestures such as self-grooms that "rupture the framework of mutual orientation" (p. 42). These are not turn-ending devices; they provide for exiting from the turn's organizational structure itself, and enable an entirely new framework of mutual orientation.

Gesture is important more widely in the emergent anthropology of the body, because it is through gesture that language is enacted and embodied. If we take it that the relevance of gesture is to provoke action, then the question is not whether or not power (at the local level) is exercised, but rather *how* it is exercised. In other words, the power to attract attention (the typical gesture) is a different kind of power than that exercised to collapse the existing framework of mutual orientation and demand the construction of another.

Gesture is not only visual, as Goodwin points out:

> Acoustic as well as visual properties of a gesture are used to secure the gaze of a nongazing recipient. … On the one hand, [sound] functions to attract the recipient's gaze, and on the other it acts as a display of appreciation about the talk in progress. (1986, pp. 37-38)

In the case of the Gnawa, the handclap serves as a visual and acoustic means to synchronize performers, much as a drummer in a rock band will click her drumsticks together above the level of her head, for a full measure prior to a song beginning, so that all the band members can see the tempo.

Finally, Goodwin notes that relevant gestures in talk tend to keep attention on the talk. Through the use of gestures, the speaker "animates" the activity of his or her talk, resulting in the speaker's body becoming "a locus for recipient attention, a thing that can be legitimately seen, while maintaining the orientation of the participants not on himself, but on his talk" (Goodwin, 1986, p. 39).

As "deliberately used contextualization devices" (Streeck & Haartge, 1992, p. 137), pre-positioned gestures create a "projection space … a span in the which some element of talk in 'in play' before being produced" (Schegloff, 1984, p. 267; cited in Streeck & Hartge, 1992, p. 137). In musical performance, their service is particularly useful, since adequate cuing of a change in rhythm on stage determines to a large extent whether the performance will be successful. The rhythmic complexity introduces the opportunity for communicatively relevant shifts in rhythm.

4.1 *Clip One: Bandleader*

Clip One introduces the people and the patterns that we will be following. Presented are the qaraqib, the gimbri, and the m'allim. Monson (1996, p. 153) notes the responsibilities of the bandleader. To point out Byard's spontaneous arrangement, Monson cites the liner notes of Ira Gitler:

> You can hear Byard living his role of bandleader to the hilt: calling out for one musician to play here; another to come in there; and routing the path of each number spontaneously. Jaki is an imaginative arranger, and here Byard the bandleader calls forth the services and talent of Byard the instant arranger. (Gitler, 1965; cited in Monson, 1996, p. 153)

Monson points out that Gitler neglects the role of the other musicians, who are required to be flexible and responsive in such situation. What Gitler does not mention is that this band-leading style requires great flexibility and responsiveness from the other musicians. In this clip, the m'allim can be seen turning back and forth to the musicians with nods and gazes.

4.2 *Clip Two: Successful Gestures*

Here we see a successfully accomplished communicative effort. We can see that the m'allim and Mohammad have communicated successfully with each other and the dancers because the steps and changes come off without a hitch. The m'allim is playing the tbel while Mohammad is leading the circle in a dance. Mohammad gestures, drops to a squat, and the drumming speeds up. Muhammad leads the other dancers in a series of high steps. The m'allim begins drumming in duple time, on the upbeat as well as the downbeat, with an occasional triple. Anticipating the m'allim's lead, or perhaps cuing him, Muhammad leaps on these occasional triples after cuing the other dancers himself with a nod. He begins a back-and-forth movement, then twirls and slows again.

4.3 *Clip Three: Interruption Management*

At this point, around 45 minutes into the performance, the organizer of the event (perhaps feeling the audience needs a break) attempts to stop the performance. Azuz is dancing alone when a man delivers a table. The m'allim ignores him, refusing to wind down. A band member gives the signal to remove the table. The m'allim slows and then stops the musicians. After the applause, the m'allim starts the ginbri player. He claps to correct the duple rhythm, and further to begin audience participation. The m'allim steps faster, and begins a call-and-response sequence with high cries. The m'allim turns to stop the high cries and responds to audience clapping by dancing in double time.

During the interruption, as the m'allim is dancing, it does not appear that he is in control of the performance. He does not respond to the interruption at all. After he finishes his dance, however, he returns to reimpose his authority with a series of very clear cues, nods and other gestures (and perhaps some verbal indications). Goodwin notes that often, the recipient might not be positioned to understand a particular item of talk. Nevertheless, the talk, gesture, or in this case, absence of a gesture, can still work. It can still "induce action on the part of the recipient to bring about a state of affairs where understanding becomes possible" (Goodwin, 1986, p. 33). We don't need to know that the m'allim is in

control. He refrains from directing the table away and relies on the other musicians to communicate for him, which shows his concentration and dedication to his performance.

Further, the m‘allim reimposes the hierarchy when he cues the closing and opening, and during the opening, especially when he cuts short the call-and-response. Call and response is a music structure whose origins in African musics are not largely disputed. Berliner (1999, p. 194ff.) specifically points out the dialogic nature of call-and-response sequences in jazz. Here, I would also like to mention the discussion by Sacks (1995, p. 521ff.) of adjacency pairs. Sacks notes that adjency pairs—hello/goodbye, thank you/you’re welcome—illustrate the structured nature of turn-taking in conversation. The m‘allim in this case is in control of the turn. He calls for a response, but the last call is itself a closing, or at least he intends for it to be. When Ahmad, the musician on the far right, fails to recognize that the final call is actually a closing, the m‘allim turns to hush him up. This might be a deviant case. We could simply say, “One can’t go on with the high cries forever,” or we could try to understand the structure of the correction. This situation demands further analysis.

4.4 *Clip Four: Breakdown*

Four dancers are in a line at stage right. The m‘allim is on the far right (stage left), and the three supporting dancers are arrayed to his right. The m‘allim keeps a careful watch on the other three dancers, attempting to make eye contact. After a minute, the three respond by looking back at the m‘allim. He ignores them. Finally, he looks back, meets their gaze, and holds it. The four dancers are coordinated for a short time. The m‘allim also keeps checking back with Mohammad (on tbel) and the other musician, directing both the musicians and the dancers. Mohammad anticipates all the changes and switches perfectly, even as he looks away. The m‘allim smiles and communicates with the first dancer on his right. Mohammad switches his gaze back as the m‘allim enters the finale. At this point, the m‘allim is completely abandoned by his dancers, particularly Ahmad, the one farthest away from him. The m‘allim jerks his head and says something to get their attention. The rhythm falls apart.

5 **Interaction and Ethnomusicology**

This sort of ethnomusicology demands ethnography, or the recursive re-analysis of metapragmatics. We need to show these sorts of data to our consultants and ask them, What went on here? Did the m‘allim really lose his dancers? Did Ahmad misunderstand the cue, or was he indirectly challenging the authority of the m‘allim? Was this challenge made on the basis of age? These are the questions I am asking in my continuing research, and I hope to satisfy the curiosity of all of us in my dissertation.

Tentatively, I conclude that interactional analysis provokes questions concerning what sorts of regimes of power come to play in musical performance. The language of interactional analysis can be used fruitfully to describe and even explain ethnomusicological concerns, and the emphasis on microanalysis of interaction maintains methodological rigor that can be of great benefit to ethnomusicology and other disciplines in the analysis of performance. Finally, sequential musical discourse does a particular and crucial work in constructing social context.

References

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