

The relation between speech and song in the vocal music of New Guinea

The data object of study is the music of some of the ballads and epic songs collected by J. C. Anceaux (1954-61). In particular, we study the songs listed in table (1). They belong to the gender of ritual vocal music and are performed at ceremonies with dances. The songs have a dramatic structure and use a responsorial singing style. A vocal male leader introduces the main motive or phrase of the song. Then, the choir joins the leader from the the second phrase onwards, doubling his voice at the unison. The voices are accompanied by drums, and the scenes narrated are represented by a choreography of dancers. We contrast the melodic and rhythmic structure of the music with the intonation contour and the rhythm of the text of those narrative songs. In the songs we study, the melodic and rhythmic structure of the music seem to depend on the intonation and rhythm of the lyrics.

Musical features

Each song has a nuclear pitch, which usually appears as the first and last note.

Intervals. The most frequent interval is the unison. The repetition of a note is used to articulate the syllables. Also frequent are intervals of 2 tones (minor 3rd), 2 1/2 tones (Major 3rd) and of 1 tone (Major 2nd). Although less frequent, perfect 4 and perfect 5 may also be used.

Structural groups of intervals. Some groups of intervals are used at a crucial structural points in the song and shape the contour of the melody:

(1): B #D #E #C B; (3): #C E #C A #F E; (4): E #F E D #E D B A; (5): C D F D C G F D

Motives and phrases. The structure of motives and phrase are dependent on the text. Phrases usually end with a descending contour.

Ornaments. The basic intervals used in the motives and the phrases are embellished by the following ornaments: 2 up/down; 2 down; a microtonal descending glissando over an interval of 1 tone (M2nd); microtonal vibrato. Falsetto.

Improvisatory style. The rich microtonal fluctuations of the ornaments gives an impression of being improvisatory songs. However, the main phrase is sung with no variations at the successive repetitions of the phrases with each new sentence or phrase.

Difficulties. The main difficulties for performers seem to arouse from the microtonal fluctuations of the ornaments. Also, the range of the voice of the leader (3 octaves) and the falsetto singing may required a gifted singer.

Rhythmic features. There is no imposed beat or musical rhythm upon the rhythm of the text. The musical rhythm follows the rhythm of the phrases and sentences. Prominence is expressed by agogic and intensity marking.

Table 1

| number | title | language | singers | theme |
|--------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | An old song from Demta | Demta or Muris | male lead vocal + male choir + drums | The journey of the Demta people to their present home |
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| 2 | Song of Skou | Skou | male lead vocal + male choir + drums | The origin of the people of Skou |
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| 3 | Muo remé | Nimboran | male lead vocal + male choir + drums | The Nimboran story of the creation of the world |
| | | | | |
| 4 | Me | Yako | male lead vocal + male choir + drums | The origin and history of their village |
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| 5 | Kajob | Biak | male lead vocal + male choir + drums | About ancestors |
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References

Muo remé. Dance of the cassowary. The Anceaux collection 1954-61. Anthology of music from West Papua #1. PAN records. Royal Tropical Institute. 2002.