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Speech and Melodic Contour Interdependence in Burmese Music

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THERE ARE A NUMBER OF ELEMENTS in Burmese music which indicate strong and generic links with the music of Thailand and with other Southeast Asian cultures. It is possible to argue with equal persuasiveness for the case made by the existence of strong ties with the music of India. Both positions have strong evidence in their support and yet should not lead to an assumption that Burmese music is a link between two different cultural spheres. It is rather a unique and highly integrated system in itself, which historically has drawn many of its fundamentals from a period during which the music of India and Southeast Asia had considerably more in common than they appear to have today.

Music and language in any society are closely intertwined. The patterns of spoken stress and tone do not usually make themselves felt strongly in music unless they are also linked to fixed tones or pitch contours. This is not to imply that stress and duration in language do not have important effects on music, but only that the existence of specific links between tone and meaning bring this element more sharply to our attention than the parallels between the rhythm of a spoken language and the rhythmic pattern of the music of that culture. Although the Burmese language in its modern spoken form has evolved a pattern of stress and duration which has gradually supplanted pitch, the classical methods of teaching Burmese still stress the importance of pitch. Particularly in music this delineation of pitch seems important.

While the use of pitch in a musical setting of a text must, as a matter of course, play a much more important role, it is also significant that in the process of setting a text to music much of the correct or fundamental tonal contour of the words of the text is sublimated in some measure to the

prevailing contour of the melodic line. Thus in the musical setting of a text there exists a conflicting pull of forces, one for precise tonal contour which would conform to the basic rules of pronunciation and thus ensure greater intelligibility, and one which would allow the powerful attraction of a melodic line to follow its own logical course. Although at this particular juncture I find it impossible to give absolute proportions as to the degree of sway either text or melody may have at any particular instance in a Burmese composition, I shall not allow the burden of scientific thoroughness to allow me to be dissuaded from sharing some of my perceptions at this time.

Before proceeding to the subject of text and tone there is another closely related subject in Burmese music which merits discussion. Throughout Asia and Africa there exist countless examples of the use of meaningless syllables to convey sounds. These can be used to indicate abstract pitches, or for the imitation of natural sounds including those produced on musical instruments. In the popular usage the meaningless musical syllables are simplified and adopted into everyday speech in the same manner as man has found in the structure of his own language the means to reproduce other sounds about him: the barking of dogs, the crowing of roosters, the sound of thunder, and so forth. But this is another fascinating and little studied subject.

The syllabification of the sounds of instruments and of pitches has also served for professional musicians in Asia as a vitally important means for transmitting accurate descriptions or reproductions of the music without the use of instruments. For the professional musician in Asia these vocalized imitations have evolved into specific systems for the accurate preservation of both the contours of a composition and the specific instrumental technique required for performing it. This method has served as an accurate means of transmitting the important qualities of each tradition both as an aid to teaching and as an accurate vehicle for memorization.

Since there is no exact parallel in Western music, it is important to specify the preciseness of these systems as teaching and memory aids. For the Japanese shakuhachi, an end-blown flute, there is a syllable for each fingering on the instrument and a vowel modification for each microtonal or chromatic adjustment of the basic pitch. It is an amazing fact that in this particular case the individual syllables not only match the sounds of the flute, but in combination truly reconstruct a logical imitation of the sound of the flute playing a melodic line. Indonesian musicians can, with appropriate syllables, reconstruct the sounds of an entire orchestra, even to the entrance of specific gongs and the sound of drums. In both North and South India a system of syllables is employed to correspond to the entire

vocabulary of strokes possible on the drums. When an Indian drummer recites the *bols* or *solkatus*, he is not merely imitating the sounds of the drums but giving a highly detailed formula for the correct strokes required to play the pattern, even to the precise indication by means of a single syllable of the type of stroke required by each hand when left and right hands play simultaneously.

One of the unique characteristics of Burmese music, and one which clearly sets it apart both from the music of India and the music of Thailand, is that the basic structure of every composition consists of two synchronous tonal lines. These are not quite the same as two independent melodies nor are they simple, dependent and predictable amplications of a single melodic line. That the second part is indeed dependent is indicated by the fact that the human voice, and the wind and bowed string instruments make use of this upper "main" melody exclusively. The secondary part appears only in support of the first or main melodic line and never independently of it. The use of both of these lines forms the essential characteristic of the playing style of the harp, the *patala*, the gongs and drums of the Hsaing ensemble and even the playing of the guitar and piano in Burmese style. I would like to emphasize here the fact that the two-part structure of Burmese music is a vital component, and thus one which cannot be disregarded without severely changing a quality of the music which the Burmese have come to regard as essential. Burmese musicians were thus faced with the challenge of devising or evolving a system of syllabification of the instrumental parts which would not only preserve rhythm, melody and the correct strokes—all these elements were already in use in other parts of Asia—but also include not only indications of separate and simultaneous strokes but the pitches of these strokes as well.

As we move in circles of increasing complexity from the syllabification of a single melody, to two simultaneous strokes with each hand and finally to two simultaneous melodies or melodic lines, we have identified a practice which is unique to Burma. It has evolved from a more general Asian practice out of the need to preserve what was considered essential to Burmese music. Such a system in the abstract seems almost inconceivable because of its necessary complexity. Even more impressive is the fact that this system has managed to retain the natural verbal flow of all such Asian systems of musical onomatopoeia, in spite of the requirements of transmitting so much information. In fact the practice in Burmese becomes simplified because the secondary part does not always have a separate pitch on each note of the main melody. On some beats it plays in octaves with the upper or "vocal" melody and at other times it alternates with the upper line, therefore not requiring any indication of different simultaneous tones. The basic premise of the Burmese system is that there

are syllables which are equivalent to certain pitches, others for certain strokes, and others for certain simultaneously sounded intervals.

To illustrate something of the use of this system it may be more useful to take a simple example rather than to give an encyclopedia of possible sounds. At this point I shall put aside the temptation to expound on the amazing common sense and profound understanding of musical pedagogy manifested in the structure of the very first piece learned by almost all Burmese musicians *Tan taya tei hsin*. There simply is no such reasonable or efficient music teaching parallel in common use in the West. The opening syllables, *si ne wa*, literally "Bell and Bamboo" are a substitution for the usual *akan* or introductory instrumental section which would be used for any of the *Co*: songs. The *si ne wa* does not fit under the descriptions of syllables given above. It is instead a basic lesson fixing rhythmically the strokes of the bell and clapper. Not only does it establish in this first lesson the basic rhythmic pattern of the *Co*: song, but with the beginning of the first words of the song itself, *tan taya*, the student in this very first song learns graphically that the words of the song proper intersect the words of rhythmic pattern in order to begin precisely on the strong or clapper beat.

It is the first words of the song proper that we find the use of the musical onomatopoeia. The first phrase of the song is based on the pitches One and Seven, or in the Burmese system of counting pitches One and Two, or *Tham hman* and *Hnipauk*. These pitches are given the specific names, *taya* and *teyi* and form part of the fundamental descending sequence *taya, teyi, tayo*. These three pitches serve in each Burmese mode as a point of reference within the music. Here once again we have no direct parallel in European music except to say that this phrase serves in some way just as a singer in the West may run over a few notes to get his musical bearings before launching directly into a song.

In the particular composition being discussed here, the first syllable of the song text is *tan* which means the sound of the interval of a ninth built on the fundamental of the mode.

Ex. 1 Tan



The second unit of the text is *taya* which indicates the pitch *taya* or pitch One or the mode.

Ex. 2 Taya



This is followed by the word and pitch *teyi*, and an extension of it, *Hsin*, which sung on the same pitch as *teyi* but harmonized in the accompaniment.

Ex. 3 Teyi hsin



This four-note phrase is then repeated.

Ex. 4 Tan taya tei hsin



The next syllable of the text is *Dyan* which is onomapoetic for a short descending pattern going between the pitches *Thoun bauk* and *Nga bauk*. The playing of this figure on the Drum Circle, *Patt Waing*, or on the *Patala* requires beginning with *Thoun bauk* and *Lei bauk* on the first beat with the left hand moving immediately down to *Nga bauk*.

Ex. 5 Dyan



The song *Tan Taya* is set in the mode *Hnyin Loun* or *Than you*. It is interesting to note that in the first phrase of the song, *Thoun bauk*, not a primary tone in this mode, has already been introduced in a prominent position.

Dyan is repeated and then the *tan taya* is reintroduced to terminate the first phrase. The second melodic phrase of *Tan taya* continues to make use of onomapoia, *Da Lu*, for a phrase beginning after the clapper beat

yet basic instrumental form of the composition. In actual performance the player would amplify this pattern freely by substituting other figures or notes while being careful not to destroy the overall melodic and harmonic structure of the original. This is clearly illustrated in the Hsaing Ensemble, where frequently each Bai' is first sung then on repetition played as an instrumental variation by the ensemble.

It is this basic pattern which everyone first learns, and such a basic pattern exists for every piece in the repertoire even though most of the pieces are never heard in this form played by anyone but beginners. However, contained in these basic settings of each composition are all of the characteristic melodic lines as well as consonants of the piece. This basic form serves both as a teaching device and as a reference point for the performer's memory as he strays off in solo improvisation or in creating an interesting accompaniment for the voice. I emphasize here that in this basic form of the composition the Burmese musicians have retained what is considered essential to the character of the music and to the text as well.

The character of each Burmese mode type, its preferred melodic form, preferred consonances, strong and weak tones, are all contained in the basic form. It is particularly intriguing, therefore, that one clear and regular musical practice is regularly used to emphasize a particular linguistic element in the text. This is tone two, the short falling tone. When tone two appears in the text of a song, it is accompanied by the playing of *dyan* in the instrumental part and then usually on the notes *Thoun bauk* and *Nga bauk*, or *Thoun bauk* and *Lei bauk* regardless of the contour of the melody up until the point at which the short falling tone appeared. That no such special regular treatment is given to the other tones of Burmese speech must mean that context or phonemic structure ensure their intelligibility but that with the added element of musical duration, tone two words might otherwise become confused with tone three words, high long falling, and thus become impaired in intelligibility.