

Lecture 2.1 The Musical Human

MUS 20 Exploring the Musical Mind

Summer Session II 2025

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The Musical Human

A History of Life on Earth by Michael Spitzer

- *Music's power over your brain*, [YouTube video](#) by Michael Spitzer
- The book takes a unique perspective on music, blurring the lines between musical theory, anthropology, biology, and history.
- My personal take on this book is that it's illuminating, thought-provoking, heuristic but not factual-based. It's more of a popular science book rather than a rigorous academic work.
- That being said, many of the ideas presented in this book are well-contemplated and thoughtful. Not being scientifically testified doesn't affect the depth of these arguments.

Evolution: Tribe → Village → City State

- **Portability principle:** As surviving instruments get heavier and heavier to carry, they tell a story of how early sapiens settled down into increasingly stable societies, culminating in the city state.
- **Technology and musical instruments:** Paleolithic flint knapping (banging rocks) → Neolithic cattle herding (plucking gut strings) → Bronze Age metal forging (striking bells and gongs)
- **In social terms:** egalitarian → hierarchical and centralised communities
- **Modes of thinking:** immediacy, autonomy, and sharing/ oriented forever in the present → planned and future-oriented, in harmony with the cycle of the seasons (sedentary minds)
- **Musical structure:** egalitarian playfulness → sheer repetition (obsession with ritual)

Hunter-Gatherers' Music

BaYaka Pygmies' life has a rhythm of aggregation and dispersal. They have no sense of hierarchy or personal property, sharing all food and items, and the playfulness of their social interactions animates their music, which they believe comes from their ancestors in dreams. This playfulness informs the most famous aspect of Pygmy music, BaYaka included: its **polyphony**. A Pygmy song comprises several melodies sung simultaneously in counterpoint and in different metres. Pygmy polyphony is an inconvenient truth for music historians who believe that music evolves from the simple to the complex; that is, from simple one-voiced texture to complex counterpoint such as Bach fugues. Because of course there is nothing simple about Pygmy music, just as there is nothing 'primitive' about Pygmy society.

Why Polyphony for Hunter-Gatherers?

- In dance, Pygmies ‘mix themselves together’ both physically, by intertwining their arms and legs, and musically, by interlocking their melodies. The musical polyphony emanates from the counterpoint of bodies.
- Pygmies’ distributed sense of self, distinct from the individual, bounded self of the modern West. Pygmies *think collectively, without hierarchy*.
- The interwoven melodies are like the crisscrossing animal trails in the undergrowth. It is simply more efficient to hunt a different trail from your neighbour, just as it is to sing a different melody, since this distributes risk.
- The rainforest's hubbub of animal cries and bird calls also constitutes a kind of polyphony.

Music Adapted to Ecological Niches

- Pygmy counterpoint and dawn choruses are examples of *convergent evolution adapting to an ecological niche*. When the ecological niche changes, so does the music.
- No longer pressed down by a hostile, noisy and opaque jungle, hunter-gatherers could spread out over vast distances.
- Australian songlines (all-encompassing linearity): *The melodic contour of the song describes the land over which the song passes ... certain phrases, certain combinations of musical notes, are thought to describe the actions of the ancestors' feet. An expert song man ... would count how many times he has crossed a river or scaled a ridge – and be able to calculate where, and how far along, the songline he was ... A musical phrase is a map reference. Music is a memory bank for finding one's way about the world.*

Sedentary Music

- If you settle a large number of people together, this is what happens: they watch each other carefully, and over time group observation establishes a cultural niche, which eventually feeds back to change people's behaviour. Through tradition, both memory and behaviour become much more collective. And arching over tradition is religious ritual. What brings all these elements together – religious ritual, the seasonal calendar and everyday village life – is the idea of the circle.
- Hunter-gatherer music tends to be made up not of fixed melodies, but of musical atoms, assembled like a game on the move, so that the music is different each time it is performed. Neolithic people (sedentary) would have repeated music and handed it down to their children. If you repeat bits of melody in the same order, you essentially create a tune.

Sedentary Music

- The cycle of life is conveyed in sound by the cyclical form of the music they play. The music of the Gaijatra 'stick dance' (as it is called) is not freely improvised like the hunter-gatherer music. It is as fixed and ritualised as the social conventions that support a farming settlement.

Lomax's *Cantometric* work

Universals in song (1977); Factors of Musical Style (1980)

- Lomax reduced the 148 cultures to 10 families that could be further reduced to two roots for their highly contrastive structure. One is thought to have emerged in Arctic hunters and fishers and the other, among African gatherers.
- The first is characterized by male-dominated solos or rough **unison singing**, and by free or irregular rhythms. The second, in contrast, is feminized, **polyvoiced**, regular in rhythm, repetitious, melodically brief, cohesive, and well integrated.
- The proposed universals are more tightly connected to social functions, rooted in sex role and team organization, than to melody, scale or meter.

Why would vocal polyphony not thrive in a cold climate?

When people are singing several melodies at once, the words get garbled. This doesn't matter for Pygmies and Aboriginal people, because their belief systems value the acoustic sound of music far higher than its words. But it might be inferred that words become a matter of life and death in extreme weather conditions, where people shelter in cramped spaces such as igloos, and the imperative is to avoid conflict. Not just words, but playfulness and humour, to defuse tension.