

Thinking about Structuring



The topic of musical structure has arisen several times in earlier chapters: from the perspective of instruments in chapter 2, in the section “Ideas about Ensemble”; from the perspective of the organization of time in the second half of chapter 3; and from the perspective of texture in Chapter 4, in the section “Thinking Horizontally and Vertically.” In this chapter I shall present several additional ideas about structures that musicians have found useful and meaningful.

Ethnomusicologists are interested in exploring not only *how* music is structured but also *why* it is structured the way it is. Accordingly, in this chapter, I consider a selection of structuring processes in composing and musicking that result in musical forms. It may help to think of musical form as architectural design in sonic form.

IMPROVISING AND COMPOSING

Pertinent to thinking about structuring as a process is the ongoing lively discussion regarding what is encompassed by the two terms “improvisation” and “composition.” That discussion has been particularly crucial in ethnomusicological study for several reasons. Much of the music discussed in this book involves the process of interweaving musical material that is given with material that is being newly created even as one listens. That process is generally called “improvising”; ethnomusicologists understand it also as “composing.”

There are two misconceptions about improvisation that we in ethnomusicology have to counter regularly. One is that improvisation is inevitably completely “free,” implying that music being newly created during performance is not based on anything preexisting. Ethnomusicological research has not confirmed that idea. Rather, we usually see musicians using something musical that already exists—an idea about ensemble relationships, a rhythm pattern, the pitch selection in a mode, or something else—as the basis for new music.

The other misconception is that improvisation is not composition—or, put another way, that the process of creating music during performance is intrinsically different from the process of creating music before a performance. This distinction involves a bundle of assumptions. First is the idea that the timing of the creative activity is crucial—that composing necessarily precedes performing. However, it is widely recognized now that composing is a cognitive process that can be taking place in the mind at any time—including while performing.

The idea that composing must precede performing accompanies the supposition that composing means writing something down (or, conversely, that if music is not written, it must be improvised). This interpretation does not take us far when we consider that much music is created in the world, but relatively few people are interested in notating it. For example, writing is not required for Indonesian musicians to remember enormously complex, lengthy compositions. (See Brinner 1995.) In addition, notation systems are invented to suit the purposes of a particular musical tradition and may have little to do with what happens to the notated item when it is performed. (See “Transmission,” in chapter 1.)

It is also sometimes assumed that the result of the compositional process is an item, a thing—a *piece*—which can be performed again and again in a relatively intact form. This idea about “a piece” is viable for a good deal of music, particularly if the modifier “relatively” is kept in mind: pieces in the European classical tradition, songs in the South Indian classical tradition, Irish dance tunes, Mexican American *corridos*, and many other repertoires are transmitted in a relatively intact form. However, the corollary—that composing has not taken place if the process of creating music does not result in a relatively fixed product—is an assumption that ethnomusicologists do not find viable. Improviser/composer Myra Melford suggests that we think of a continuum of ideals from thoroughly composed to thoroughly improvised—or, in reality, as free as possible (personal communication, 2007).

Beverley Diamond found a somewhat similar continuum among the Inuit. “In Nunavut, the songs are most often carefully composed and privately rehearsed before they are presented at a drum dance. The line between “composition,” “song reception,” and “improvisation,” however, is not rigid. One singer whom I recorded in the 1970s improvised a verse about the visiting woman who was collecting songs. Some songs are received in dreams or in that half-awake state that one is in early in the morning after a night’s sleep. Some songs may remain static, or composers may add to a song when new experiences warrant a new verse” (Diamond 2007: 39).



The Ugandan musician Centurio Balikoua, cited in Greg Barz's volume on East African music in this *Global Music Series*: "In most African musics we have this idea of the expectation and anticipation of the music always being developed within a performance. There is that idea that listening would be boring if we didn't continue to add things into the performance. When we have an ensemble of three endingidi, two will play in contrasting keys, while the third player will be expected to improvise and put in something different so that they don't play the same thing."



More meaningful than defining in systematic ways what is "composed" and "improvvised" is exploring the wide range of musical flexibility that exists in music around the world. The amount of flexibility and the nature of the flexibility that is exercised in the performance of given material varies widely from music to music. When an Irish dance tune (CD track 1-4, 1-26) or a Mexican American *corrido* (CD track 1-6) is performed, the community expects some degree of change—but not too much—to occur in each performance; this results in recognizable variants and is known as "the folk process of re-creation." Some flexibility—variations in phrasing, in speed, in dynamics perhaps—is expected in the performance of a good deal of notated music in the European classical tradition as well; this is called "interpretation." In a Middle Eastern ensemble performance, repetitions of precomposed music in the course of a performance are anticipated moments for variation, when the musicians are likely to add their own melodic ornaments or heterophonic realizations of the composed passages (CD track 2-1). In much music of Africa and the African diaspora, one primary structural principle assumes a particular form of flexibility—the contrast of something that varies with the more or less "fixed" patterns that make up a polyrhythmic texture (CD track 1-5).

Urged to define the term "improvisation," I suggest this. **Improvisation** is a compositional process in which a musician exercises relatively great flexibility with given material during a performance. The "given material" might be a tune, a chord progression, or a rhythm (twelve-bar blues or a drumming pattern), for example.

ACTIVITY 5.1 Search your personal collection for recordings of two versions of one popular tune. Use those performances to analyze the degree of flexibility in the particular style of your selections. Think about the expectation for flexibility and the musical results. How would you define "composed music" in this context? Would you be tempted to call anything in the selection "improvisation"?

Consider, too, where the ideas of "an arrangement" and "a cover" fit in here.

When I assigned Activity 5.1 to a class, I added to it an invitation to critique in writing my suggested definition of improvisation. Student Kirk Danielson responded to the assignment from his experience playing and listening to jazz, as follows:

I think this is a pretty accurate representation of improvisation. However, I think there might need to be a clause about how improvisation is already somewhat pre-thought, or previously constructed or practiced. Usually there is some kind of structure or arrangement or organization to the song, especially when many players are involved. Often in jazz, which is generally characterized by improvisation, there is a set of chord changes, a melody or "head," and a form, usually AABA or ABAB2 or twelve bar blues. The players will interpret the melody by playing in their own characteristic way, and then "solo" or "improvise" over the changes by playing lines, riffs, and appoggios. These are part of the player's vocabulary, and it is just as if he were speaking. It is not as if he is reinventing the wheel, or discovering something new every time he plays, but it is as if he or she were to speak and the scales and riffs were his or her alphabet. Perhaps the definition should be: Improvisation is the compositional process in which a musician exercises relatively great flexibility with given material during a performance, but often with a pre-construction notion of the structure or arrangement of the song, particularly when other players are involved. (2007)

Responding to the question about covers in Activity 5.1, student Max Ghemis chose to focus the assignment on the Beatle's song "Norwegian Wood," which he had experienced in an arrangement for a marching band.

I choose this piece in awe of the value of instrumental covers, and as an advocate for the cover band as a unique and valuable musical category. Arrangements as intricate as Buddy Rich's "Norwegian Wood" show the extent to which covered material can be as original as any other music form. The reality is, cover bands and arrangers do the same thing all other musicians and composers do; they're just more overt about citing their sources. (2007)

Student Natasha Dags made the point that different types of flexibility are expected in different contexts of performance of the same song. Her example was two versions of the song "When You Believe" on the soundtrack to the motion picture *The Prince of Egypt*. The first version was sung by the (cartoon) characters in the course of the movie, while the second plays during the credits sung by pop singers Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey.

In the movie version of the song, the performance is more structured and sung similarly to an actor saying his lines; it follows strict cues, and the vocalists appear to be singing exactly what is written on a score. The pop version, however, exemplifies a more flexible style that begins very structured yet includes an improvised (or ad lib) section. The vocalists express emotion as well as showcase their vocal skills through variations in phrasing, timbre, and pitch. In this context, this type of flexibility is expected, since the attention is on the singers themselves, unlike the movie version, where the focus is on the lyrics and how they relate to the plot. (2007)

Composing Persons. Thinking about the process of structuring music also brings up the matter of who is doing the composing. The question arises of just who a "composer" is in the eyes of a community. Is "a composer" necessarily a different person from "a performer"? In many musical traditions, composer-performers are commonplace. In Japanese music for traditional instruments, for instance, the practice of composers who are not *koto* and *shamisen* and *shakuhachi* players writing for those instruments was introduced along with other Western practices, so most of the traditional repertoire is by composer-performers. The composer of "Yaegoromo" on CD track 2-33 was a *shamisen* player, writing in 1804 for voice and *shamisen*; the other parts were probably added later by other composer-players. Recently, a new second *koto* part for the solo instrumental section was composed by Keiko Nosaka, a contemporary *koto* artist. (See Wade 2005.)

I have often wondered if it is the prevalence in most European music since the eighteenth century of the custom of the composing person

being a separate person from the performing person that has contributed to thinking about composing and improvising as different processes. Think, for instance, of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), who was a master improviser even of complex polyphony, and of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), who improvised cadenzas within compositions and entire compositions on the spot.

Think, too, about the number of composers at work on one musical selection; it is not always a single individual. The example of jazz presents a quintessential case of groups of persons composing "a selection" together. Tom Turino observed a different sort of communal compositional process in the Peruvian Andes (CD track 1-33):

The night before most festivals in Conima, the core musicians of a given indigenous community ensemble come together to compose between one and three new tunes for that year's event. They do so within the established characteristics of a given genre which limit, and thus guide, the compositional process. . . . Pieces are composed collectively in a kind of "brainstorming" session. Sitting in a circle, the core [pampe] musicians softly blow motives or sections of pieces simultaneously as they think of them. Musical ideas that do not seem promising are simply ignored. If someone comes up with an interesting musical idea others will listen and gradually join in playing it. At this point, if the original idea does not seem to have promise, individuals gradually stop playing it and go back to square one riffing new ideas. If the motive or section still seems promising the group will then brainstorm the next section of the AABBC form based on this germinal idea. After an entire tune has been roughed out—by adding the additional sections bit by bit, playing them together, deciding whether they work, and brainstorming new ideas for portions not deemed attractive—group members will then fine tune the piece by suggesting small changes here and there and then playing through the piece with the new alterations. What was miraculous to me was that this whole process took place with hardly any discussion or even words being said. . . . By the end of the composition process the input of a number of people is combined into a finished piece and "the community" is considered the composer. Interestingly, group consensus decision making proceeds in much the same manner: verbal ideas are either simply ignored or are repeated by new speakers, perhaps with modifications or additions, until the contributions of a number of people are combined into a finished decision that the community fashions together. (2007)

Ben Brinner describes another sort of collaborative compositional endeavor in the Central Javanese gamelan tradition (CD track 1-9).

There are certainly individual composers. However, when a Javanese musician composes a new piece, he or she does not determine every detail or expect to have others replicate the piece precisely. Musical compositions are frameworks for playing that can be worked out in different ways depending on the context and musicians' desires. "Astonishingly little of this music is truly fixed, only to be performed in one way. This does not mean that anything goes—far from it—but a Javanese musician is constantly adapting both to the circumstances at hand and to fellow performers. Audiences are aware of this at some level and appreciate the smoothness with which musicians work things out" (Brinner 2008:22). Understanding the flexible ways of making music, then, is how one needs to understand what constitutes TML—the music itself.

Now I turn to discussion of a selection of principles by which music has been structured. Priority is still given to why music may be structured the way it is, that is, structuring as a process in music making.

PUTTING SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT FIRST

Easing gradually into a musical selection is a formal strategy that is preferred in a number of Asian musical genres. In North Indian classical music, a vocalist or instrumentalist will start a major selection in a formal concert by introducing the characteristics of the melodic mode (*rāga*) and establishing the mood through nonmetrical, carefully shaped improvisation called *ālāp* (CD tracks 1-14). The drummer in the ensemble, not yet playing, sits onstage listening; he is like a member of the audience, responding with a shake of the head or a quiet exclamation to particularly creative moments in the *ālāp* (figure 3.2). The *rāga* provides the given melodic material for an entire performance selection.

At the opposite extreme of easing into a piece of music is the clear announcement of an important motive right at the beginning.

ACTIVITY 5.2 In European classical music, that opening motive is often the primary theme or subject matter of the entire piece. Try to identify two of the best-known beginnings in European classical music on CD tracks 2-18 and 2-38. If you recognize them, assist a classmate who does not.

Though those two ways of beginning a selection are entirely different, they share a musical purpose crucial to the shaping of the whole selection: the most significant musical material is put first.

ACTIVITY 5.3 Listen to the beginning of several selections by your favorite performing group or artist. Is there a consistent style for beginnings? If so, why, do you suppose? If not, why not, do you suppose?

North Indian Instrumental Form. The beginning of *ālāp* section asserts the primacy of melody in the hierarchy of music elements in the Hindustani tradition. In the most expansive musical form that comprises a performance selection of North Indian instrumental music (*ālāp-jor-jhālā-gat-jhālā*), however, a gradual sequence occurs that systematically shifts focus to other elements of music (figure 5.1). Following the *ālāp*, the instrumentalist begins to add pulsating rhythm to the melodic improvisation (*jor*). Then, creating interesting rhythms with a combination of melody and drone pitches (*jhālā*), he or she accelerates the speed of the playing. The first real break in the sequence occurs as the drummer enters the selection; at that point a composition (*gat*) is presented, adding a metric cycle (*tālā*) and a tune in the *rāga* to the "given materials" that form the basis of further improvisation. The

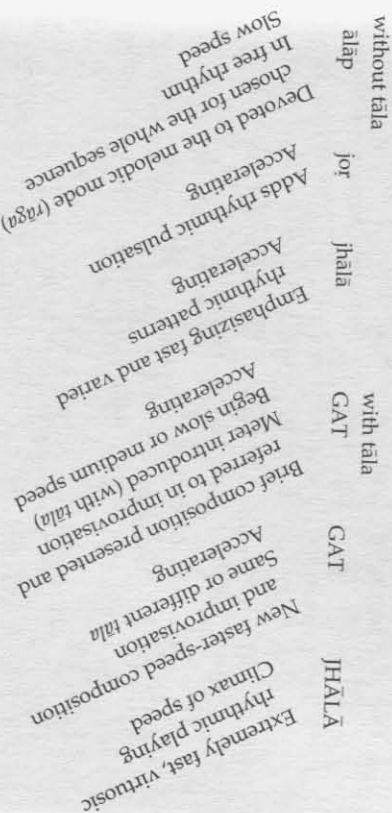


FIGURE 5.1 Hindustani instrumental sequence.