ABSTRACT

Background

Despite an important ethnic mixing between the populations (native Indians, slaves, settlers), the analysis of Afro-Brazilian music reveals the presence of musical paradigms, also called ‘characteristic devices’ (Pressing, 2002), similar to those observed in numerous Sub-Saharan music performances, in particular in West Africa. Kubik (1979) is convinced that these paradigms, and especially ‘time-line patterns’ (N’Ketia, 1961), are a stable element in African music history, already present in the 16th century, and earlier. A good example is given about a Ghanaian war dance, where ‘every act of drumming, singing, and dancing is timed in accordance with the recurring musical phrase played on an iron bell or gong’ (Locke, 1984, 114).

A similar principle seems to be present in a lot of Afro-Brazilian music and dance traditions (Mukuna, 1979, Kubik, 1979, Sandroni, 1997; Fonseca, 2002), called here ‘non-isochronous meter’ (London, 2004) or ‘anisochronous meter’ (Guillot, 2016) which can be explicitly materialized or appear by emergence. For example, in the candomble, the loas (praises) are learnt by singing the lyrics, and by simultaneously playing the time-line pattern on a bell called gã or agogô. In the samba, the major part of the performance follows, more or less, at least one specific pattern (Sandroni, 1997).

Aims and repertoire studied

This study focuses on a corpus of 3 widespread Afro-Brazilian music traditions: samba, maracatu de baque virado and coco. A dense description of each tradition, if indeed such a thing is possible, is out of the focus of this paper.

This study puts forth the hypothesis that these anisochronous meters, in coexistence with isochronous meters, form a polymetric network (Fig 1.), a statement that induces analytic and didactic issues:

From an analytical point of view, although Agawu (2003) denies the existence of polymer for African and Afro-Diasporic music, Waterman (1952, 79) already defined the concept of polymer in African music as ‘the interplay of two or more metrical frameworks’. A similar idea is expressed as ‘simultaneous multidimensionality’ (Locke, 2009). Based on these proposals and inspired by my 25 years’ experience of playing and teaching several Afro-Brazilian music styles, I argue that most, perhaps all, of Afro-Brazilian music is organized as a polymeter.

On their side, didactic issues emerge when some Afro-Brazilian music is taught to Western students: on an extended view, it questions the cultural specificity of metric organizations and their ‘communicability’, a problem which could potentially shed a new light on the domain of interculturality in music education.

Methods & results

The proposed method brings together views from ethnomusicology, cognitive psychology and music education. It is divided into several steps: firstly, each Agawu’s (2003, 79) criterion is analyzed in front of recent literature:

1. ‘Each functional component of the texture, […], is said to expose a distinct rhythmic pattern within its own metric frame’. Naveda et al. (2009) show that 3 levels of metric layers are embodied by a samba dancer.

2. ‘Constituent meters […] persist in the background, creating a kind of metric dissonance’, a concept today theorized (Krebs, 1999; Berger et al, 2014) and fully applicable to Afro-Brazilian Music.

3. ‘Philosophically, polymeter indexes coexistence’, a fact now verified (Naveda et al., 2009; Graeff, 2014).

Secondly, the applicability of the related concept of ‘polycentrism’ (Günther, 1969; Welsh-Asante, 2001) coming from the dance analysis domain, at least, to some kinds of samba (Graeff, 2014) is discussed.

Thirdly, a circular diagram inspired by previous works (Toussaint, 2002) is designed to model such a metric organization for a given piece of music, or a music style (Fig 2). The meters share the same subdivisions and are synchronized between themselves.

Fig. 1. Diagram showing how some instruments of samba are ‘linked’ to anisochronous and isochronous meters. Each musical part is a standard pattern, generally varied in music performance. Meters are notated with Kubik’s (1999) technique.
Moving History/ Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader,
Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 144–51