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African research in Hungary, ethnomusicological fieldwork in Ethiopia (June and July 1965), a collection of 350 melodies (Amhara, Galla, Tigrái, Kaffichos, Somali), dominance of the pentatonic characteristics, musical transcriptions

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THE MUSIC OF ETHIOPIAN PEOPLES*

Bálint Sárosi
Budapest

The following statements about the territory of Ethiopia are quoted from the work of E. Ullendorff entitled the Ethiopians:

"Ethiopia, including the northern territory of Eritrea federated under the Ethiopian Crown, covers an area of about 400,000 square miles, that is more than four times the size of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Its most southerly point reaches within 200 miles of the Equator, while its northern extremity lies within the same distance from Mecca. In its long history the country has always formed a bridge between Africa and Asia, and many of its inhabitants were immigrants from South Arabia from which it is separated only by the narrow straits of the Bab-el-Mandeb, a distance of less than twenty miles. With its ancestry astride two continents and its position in the horn of Africa, Ethiopia has always occupied a favoured place at a cross-road of civilizations and a meeting point of many races."¹

According to approximate estimation the number of the population is around 22 millions.

Comparatively little is known about the folk music of this interesting land with its variety of peoples even in African respect.² Larger collections recorded on tape date only from the last three years.³ The scientific evaluation of these collections is yet at its very beginning. The material which I shall show in my present paper contains about 350 melodies which I recorded in June and July 1965; at the same time my colleague Dr. György Martin filmed the dances. Together with members of the staff of the Addis-Ababa Radio we surveyed a comparatively large territory within six weeks:

* Paper read at the International Folk Music Council Conference held in Legon (Ghana), July 26 to August 4, 1966.

¹ Ullendorff, E.: *The Ethiopians*, New York – Toronto, 1965, 23. p.

² It is to make mention of the study of Reinhard, K.: *Die Musik der Borana* (see: Haberland, E.: *Galla Sud-Athiopiens*, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1963, 721–761. pp.).

³ The collection of *Halim el Dhab* (1964), the collection of *Jean Jenkins* (1965 and 1966), the collection of *Bálint Sárosi* (1965).

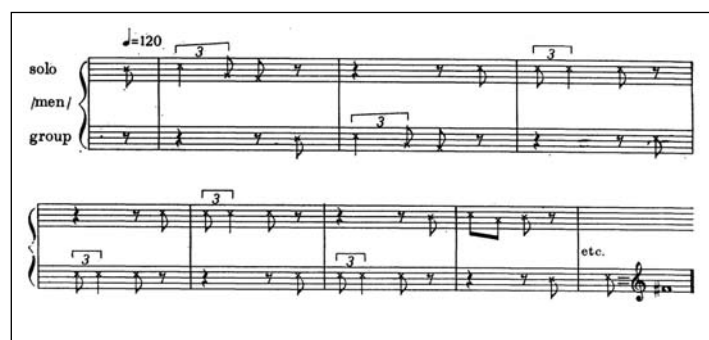
in the North up to Axum, in the West to Gondar and Lekemti, in the South to Jimma, in the East till Harrar and Dire-Dawa.

More than one third of the recorded melodies derive from the presently ruling people, the *Amhara*; the rest from the western and eastern *Galla*, the *Tigrai*, *Kafficchos* and *Somali* peoples.

At present we do not yet understand the meaning of the text of the melodies and we have only vague ideas of the function which this music plays in the life of the society. Further detailed analysis will still tell us a great deal about the material in our hands; yet please allow me, instead of attempting a theoretical examination of details to introduce you – rather sketchily – into the material itself. I am convinced that at the present stage of our knowledge of the Ethiopian folk music, it is such a general survey, that helps the further research most of all.

If we should have to characterize with one word musically those – rather civilized – territories of Ethiopia, where we were able to go, then that one word would be: *pentatony*. Our material, however, makes it possible to illustrate with many examples the phases leading to the road of pentatonics. Within pentatonics there are many variations and in certain territories, especially in the surrounding of the Somali peninsula, already diatonics may be found.

I shall begin the demonstration of the melodies with a few fragments of prepentatonics. The first fragment is not even a melody, but rhythmically recited prose. It is performed by western Galla men from Lekemti. I have recorded similar recited prose in Dire-Dawa from Issa women too.⁴



⁴ These musical notes are only sketchy putting down of fragments of the sounding examples presented in the IFMC Conference. For lack of workmanlike writing down, I am sorry to renounce – for the time being – to publish the texts as well. The first example is rhythmic prose, put down with the approximate pitch of (prosaic-) intonation.

In the next fragment the two fixed melodic tones of a major second distance can be clearly distinguished. It was recorded in Jimma from *Khullo* men. Here we can already hear the accompaniment of clapping and drum – characteristic all over Ethiopia.

Of the great diversity of melodies built on three notes I am only demonstrating two details. One can be counted among the type well known in the Mediterranean, the so called "psalmodizing type"; the other belongs to the category of "Fanfarenmelodik". Both derive from the *Galla* of Lekemti.

solo $\text{♩} = 138$

/men/

group

etc. (T. f.)

With the examples illustrating the tetrachord tunes I wish to show the rather frequent phenomenon in Ethiopia: the tendency towards chromatics. In the first fragment the second grade of the la-prepentaton – the *do* – is altered half a note higher. It was performed by an Amhara man in Gondar, who accompanied his song with a one-string violin named *masenko*.⁵

Poco rubato $\text{♩} = \text{cca } 88$

solo

man with

masenko

⁵ The tones of the ground scale of the *masenko* glide often over to the flageolet-octave – characteristic generally for this instrument. That is the reason of the frequency of the octave-alternation in the transcription.



The next fragment recorded from Galla young girls of Lekemti testifies no community with the anhemitonic pentatonics or its predecessors. The relationship of such tunes point towards the Somali peninsula and towards the Arabic peoples.

Poco rubato $\text{♩} = \text{cca } 76$

group
/girls/
group

Closing the row of prepentatonic examples may we state that pre-pentatonic melodies may be found in great numbers all over Ethiopia; the most characteristic ones, however, are those found among the peoples of the southern south-western territories: by the western *Gallas*, the *Kafficchos*, the *Khullos*, etc.

Every modi of the anhemitonic-pentatonic may be found. Most general of all is the la-pentaton; among the Amhara the do-pentaton is also frequent. The next tune is performed by three men on openended flutes without finger-holes. The players – Tigrai men from Enda Selsasse in North Ethiopia – play the successive melody-tones alternatively, but with such routine that the listener may easily have the impression as if a single flutist would be playing on a single instrument. This divided way of playing a melody is not only a characteristic feature of the Tigrai people. It may be found among other peoples of Ethiopia, and the number of flutist may be not only three, but up to six.



It is characteristic in Ethiopia, that neither the tuning of the musical instruments, nor the traditional technique of playing them does require wider tonal system, than that of the pentatonic. The flute of the Amharas, the *washint*, has only four holes, just enough to sound the pentatonic scale. The one-stringed violin, the *masenko* is played only in the basic shift and only with four fingers, just as many are necessary for the sounding of the pentatonic scale. The next example derives from Addis Ababa played by Amhara flutist.

Libero ♩ = cca 72

man with washint

(T. f.)

With the next fragment of epic song, performed by an Amhara man from Gondar, I should like to draw your attention to a characteristic form of melody among the Amhara. It may be observed not only in the famous war-song, the *shillala*, but also in other categories, that the man starts singing with a high recitative descending tune – so to say a shout. In connection with this I should like to remark that men-singers, especially when singing in forced high voice, put their finger into one of their ears. Such a way of singing may be traced back as far as the murals of ancient Egypt and is known today not only in Africa, but also in Europe, in the Balkans. If we have already mentioned the Balkan, that the accompaniment of epic songs on one instrument - just on one-stringed violin called there "gusle", "lahuta" – is to be found there too.

Poco rubato ♩ = cca 108

solo
man with
masenko



The chromatic colouring of the pentatonics is mainly possible at the third and fifth grade of the scale. The minor third and seventh widen to be neutral or major. This is illustrated with the next melody too – recorded from Amhara performers in Gondar. It is to be noted that women singers do not accompany themselves on an instrument, except a few rhythm-instruments, e.g. tambourine. (Note the large ambitus of melody which is also a distinctive feature of the Amhara.)⁶

⁶ The examples number 10 and 11 are also accompanied by *masenko*, leaved out now for the sake of simplicity. The signs \sharp and \flat in the ex. 10 mean an alteration of a quarter-tone.



With the proximity and the continuous influence of the Arabic world it may be easily supposed that such change in pentatonics came into being through the effect of the Arabian chromatics. In Ethiopia there were many possibilities that the Arabic chromatics coming from the North should meet and mingle, since long ago, with the more ancient and more simple pentatonic and prepentatonic musical world. The scale of the next melody is rather frequent and favoured among the Amhara.



This type of Amhara lyrical songs has a name of its own: *ambasel* – originally the name of a place in the Worlo province, to the North-East of

Addis Ababa. Its pentatonic scale may be solmized as follows: *mi fa la ti do*. Listen now to a more easily comprehensible example of the same *ambasel*. The accompanying instrument which the singer uses is the lyre Ol' called *krar* in Amhara, and according to Ethiopian tradition the direct descendant of the *kinnor* of the Old Testament, the instrument of King David.

♩ = cca 56

man

with

krar

The musical score is written for a voice part (man) and a krar (lyre). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked as cca 56. The score consists of six systems of music. The voice part is written in a single staff, and the krar part is written in a single staff. The krar part features various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. The voice part includes lyrics in Amharic script. The score ends with a final chord marked (T.f.).

In our material there are comparatively few examples for polyphony. Now I shall present two fragments of it. The first – sung by Kullo men from Jimma – is a second parallel.

This musical score is for a piece by Kullo men from Jimma. It features three staves: 'solo men', 'group', and 'drum'. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 126. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The 'solo men' part is in the treble clef, and the 'group' part is in the bass clef. The 'drum' part is in the bass clef. The score shows a second parallel motion between the solo and group parts. The 'drum' part provides a steady accompaniment. The score ends with 'etc.' and a final note.

The simultaneous sounding of intervals of fourth and third, to be heard in the following example, may be noticed fairly frequently in the collective song of Aderé women from Harrar. In the accompaniment there is drum and clapping.

This musical score is for a piece by Aderé women from Harrar. It features four staves: 'solo', 'girls', 'group', and 'drum'. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 116. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The 'solo' part is in the treble clef, and the 'girls', 'group', and 'drum' parts are in the bass clef. The 'solo' part features triplets. The 'girls' part also features triplets. The 'group' part features triplets. The 'drum' part features a steady accompaniment. The score ends with 'etc.' and a final note marked '(T. f.)'.

The most eastern points of Ethiopia where we managed to go last year are Harrar and Dire Dawa. To the song, with which I am to conclude my reading, young 188a girls of Dire Dawa danced a graceful twist. That means: this sort of melodies are fashionable in Dire Dawa. Descending tendencies of melody construction are met with everywhere among Amharas and Tigras too, but there we face such a "quint-changing" character, which is habitual not in Mrica, but among Chinese, Middle Asia or even old Hungarian folk music with its roots reaching into Asia.

girls $\text{♩} = 208$

drum $\left(\frac{4}{4}\right)$

(T.f.)