

20th Century Music: 3

If Functional Tonality represents mankind's greatest artistic achievement, the Blues can be seen as one of the most most significant consequences of mankind's development.

In the Blues we see a miraculous coming together of two apparently incompatible and technically irreconcilable languages and traditions : those of Western Art Music and African Music. The post Greek world of Western artifice merged with the naturalistic world of Africa to bring us a musical language which is now, in its many manifestations, the completely dominant language in today's musical world

What and how this happened is something we can never know with exact historical precision! The particular timetable of the wheres and the whens must by definition remain speculative. All we know for certain, is that it did happen, and that it happened before the turn of the century.

Why this coming together happened though, is easy to understand. Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, it was as inevitable as $1 + 1 = 2!$

HOW THE BLUES CAME TO BE

(OUT OF THE "MELTING POT")

When the Europeans colonised North America they took with them two significant pieces of cultural luggage : Functional Tonality and Christianity.

Functional Tonality when combined with Christianity came in the form of Hymns. These Hymns though simpler and less chromatically complex than the Chorales of Bach, were firmly rooted in the typical triadic forms of 18th Century tonality.

The need for massive amounts of labour to service the economies and sustain the growth of the new colonies, gave rise to the Slave Trade. These slaves were drawn, predominantly, from West Africa.

These men and women from Africa, in their turn, brought their own musical forms and cultural luggage.

It is worth noting that culturally and musically, much of this part of Africa was itself an amalgam of two traditions : Native African and Islamic. The musical language which the slaves brought with them was, therefore, also rather more complex in form than one would at first think. Ornate melodic and rhythmic processes were typical of an extremely rich and varied tradition.

For their own good (sic) the slaves were converted to Christianity and were exposed, in the form of hymns, to Functional Tonality "in the raw". Thus, along with their conversion to Christianity, they were also converted to the three primary triads.

The notion of "harmonising", or singing simultaneous parallel lines, was not an alien concept to these uprooted people. (It is worth noting that, even today, in Africa, traditional choirs sing in a recognisably harmonic way, without necessarily following the "rules" of harmony.) The Africans, therefore, took the three chords which form the basis of Western Music easily into their own music.

Assimilating the major/minor key system from the melodic stand point, with its leading note and inbuilt heirarchical structure, was quite another matter!

The notion of the leading note and its directly felt consequences (that is : by Europeans), was completely alien to the African musical psyche. Their pitch systems were not "fixed". Indeed having a flexible sense of pitch is, in some ways, the "whole point" in African Music. Sharpness and flatness are part of the expressive nature of this language. In Functional Tonality being "out of tune", is seen as bad, wrong and a sign of incompetence - something you do not do! The relationship between scale and harmony is likewise fixed. In African music there is no fixed/technical relationship between melody and harmony. Therefore, unable to assimilate the Western scale and its leading note, the slaves' exposure to the major/minor scale resulted in an amalgam of their own, natural, pentatonic scale and the western scale system.

Recipe : major/minor mixed with pentatonic = The Blues Scale.

All of the above resulted in a melodic scale that could be accompanied by chords that contained different notes, and because these chords were tonal the bar line with its regular, arithmetically simple pulse made an appearance.

Eureka : A Miracle. West + Africa = The Blues. At a stroke (over a couple of hundred years or so), the Western, African and Islamic Traditions were welded together, later to be joined by Euro/Islamic(Arabic) Spanish music via Mexico and The Carribean (but that's another story.)

"NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL WORLD MUSIC!"

TECHNICAL BIT : A looks at the notes.

Note : The typical text book pentatonic scale is a quite arbitrary choice of notes, based on the major or minor scales. 5 into 12 doesn't go!

My Pentatonic is : (from C - C,Eb,F,G,Bb,C)Insert D and A, and you end up with the Blues Scale.

THUS:

Major - C,D,E,F,G,A,B,C + Pentatonic - C,Eb,F,G,Bb,C = Blues - C,D,Eb,F,G,A,Bb,C

TWO OBSERVATIONS

Q? - Why are the Blues so called, and why are they, wrongly, perceived as sad?

A - The minor melodic intervals which are a part of the Blues scale are to Western Ears associated with sadness. This, plus the sentimentalized, collective sense of guilt which pricked the conscience of an ashamed white people, caused Europeans to project their western sensibilities onto this music. In so doing, they missed the point!

If God was white, The Blues really was "The Devil's Music", red in tooth and claw. No one who listens to the Blues with any sense of objectivity can call them sad. This music is always an assertion of life, its pains and its pleasures. When Blind Willie Johnson sings about The Titanic (God Moves), it is from his perspective as a commentator on the vagaries and uncertainties of life.

THE LINGUISTIC PROCEDURES THAT TYPIFY AFRICAN MUSIC

It is still possible to track down some recorded examples of African music, which has not been adulterated by exposure to Western music. Happy Hunting!

What the reader will find is a language that contains many of the elements that are now fundamental to present day African American music.

These elements are:-

- * Call and Response - Here, the lead voice (voices) prompts the "chorus" to a response with a lead line. There is not necessarily any melodic connection between the two.
- * Layering - African music proceeds on several layers. (This is NOT counterpoint in the European sense).
- * Repetition - Each layer is built up of a repeated pattern. Patterns can be of varying lengths, and are not necessarily related to the patterns that occur in other layers.
- * Soloing - At various points in the music, a singer, drummer or whatever shows off a particular skill or musical trick.
- * Ululation - This is a kind of vocal howling and wailing, used to simulate and stimulate great emotion.

As with all languages the fundamental principals on which they are built are simple.

THE MANIFESTATION OF THESE ATTRIBUTES IN THE BLUES

Listen to any Blues, R&B or Gospel recording, and you will notice (All now contained within bar lines):

- * Call and Response - Singer sings lead line and the guitar responds.
- * Layering - depends on the number of musicians and elements involved, but is obvious. Each element has its own place.
- * Repetition - Everywhere. The simultaneous cyclic nature is there for all to hear : The 12 bar cycle, the riffs (1 or 2 bar usually), the rhythm section.
- * Ululation - Is also found everywhere. In both the vocal and instrumental layers non specific pitches, sounds for made their own sake are part of the very essence of this music.

LINGUISTIC AND FORMAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE BLUES

These attributes are what typify the language of the Blues. You will be able to recognise what follows in all the examples of this music that you come across. Naturally, different regional, personal and historical styles will differ from each other,

as they do in other musical languages, but the fundamental attributes and procedures remain constant. Indeed, it is this very fact that defines the Blues as the progenitor of the African American musical language that is, in its numerous manifestations, the dominant force in today's world.

The first and most important formal attribute is that The Blues are cyclic. The aforementioned layers are in themselves cyclic structures, that move in parallel, are synchronous, but which are harmonically and melodically independent.

A cycle is, of course, just a repeated pattern. What you get in The Blues are repeating patterns layered upon repeating patterns. Patterns can be, and are, of various lengths. Some elements may occur sporadically and seemingly appear to be random, but on repeated listenings you will discover that this music is highly organised from a structural perspective. The improvisatory elements work because of this organisation.

These patterns/cycles are as follows :

- * The harmonic 12 bar cycle : using the Western Primary Triads.
- * The explicit rhythmic cycles that express the pulse and reinforce the bar lines.
 1. Each drum/percussion sound has its own individually constructed pattern or group of patterns.
 2. The "rhythm guitar" and "boogie woogie" elements are, again, independently structured.
 3. Then there is the bass line's "riffing" element.
 4. The lead instrument also "riffs".
 5. The chorus' hooks are also, effectively, rhythmic cycles.

In addition to these regular, rhythmic and harmonic cycles, there are the independent and more flexible melodic patterns.

- * The lead vocal, though flexible and varied, is essentially cyclic.
- * The vocal and instrumental "responses" are also cyclic and pattern based.
- * The solos, built, either by varying the melody or on developing the scales, chords and riffs, is also a part of a cyclic scheme.

In the case of solo performers, most of the above are compressed into a more compacted, though no less sophisticated, series of layers.