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Music Analysis

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Integration of Western Classical and Hip Hop Music

Despite the differences in cultures with their own practices and schemas, similarities can be found within many types of music if one studies it with an open mind. In the article *Integrating Music*, Michael Tenzer contests a statement another author writes that “music is incommensurable” by comparing Balinese gamelan music with a Schumann piece. However, Tenzer compares the music of Bali using Western analysis, which illuminates the problem that he may not be able to fully explain the intricacies that Balinese musicians can. For this paper, I will be analyzing two works that utilize Western musical features (tonal centers, form, harmony) but come from very different cultures, “Who Shot Ya” by Notorious B.I.G. and “The Lark Ascending” by Ralph Vaughan Williams, in order to prove that music can be similar despite differences in culture and aesthetics.

Not many people consider the integration and similarities between classical music and hip hop. The parallels between hip hop and jazz are much more apparent and commonly found in many musical groups such as The Roots and The RH factor. Occasionally, one can find classical music being used as a sample for a hip hop track- Trinity by Jedi Mind Tricks for example- but rarely are they compared in terms of musical analysis. However, when looking through an analytic lens, hip hop presents many of the same musical qualities that makes classical music so admired. After extensively analyzing “Who Shot Ya” and “The Lark Ascending”, a surprising amount of similarities exist between the two: their repetition of thematic material consisting of diatonic melodies with occasional skips, similar rhythmic values, rhythmic and metrical freedom, as well as the function of the soloist.

Instrumental samples are an essential feature in rap music; they are often repetitive so that the aural focus can be on the rhythms and lyrics of the rapper. Biggie uses a short sample taken from a piece called “I’m Afraid the Masquerade is Over” by Daniel Porter that frames the tonal center of g minor and is the foundation for the melodic line. The melody descends diatonically by whole steps from D to Bb and then skips to G followed by the two note sample from Porter’s song; this melodic ostinato occurs throughout the entire song. During the breaks between the second verse and the spoken outro, a vocalist is heard quietly improvising diatonic melodies in g minor. Not only does Biggie use diatonic melodies in his work, but Vaughan Williams does as well. “The Lark Ascending” has two main themes that are varied and permeate throughout the piece, expressed in many instrumental voices. The first theme which is featured at both the beginning and end of the piece begins with ascending diatonic steps from E to G leaping to the high D followed by a descending third. The melody then steps down to A, leaping one last time to F with subsequent descending stepwise motion to D. This theme is varied by changing rhythm and notes, but the diatonic and small skips are felt each time it is performed; at rehearsal number 10, the melody can be heard distinctly by the soloist and each woodwind instrument in a round. This occurs again, but with the second theme at rehearsal 18. The second theme also utilizes a diatonic melody in which a third on notes C to Eb is followed by diatonic motion for two bars. Both “Who Shot Ya” and "The Lark Ascending" contain diatonic motion in their themes and these themes are prevalent throughout the piece.

Rhythm may possibly be the most important quality in rap music- it is the foundation that holds the message. In classical music, and in “The Lark Ascending” particularly, rhythmic value drives the piece. Interestingly, the same rhythmic values in “The Lark Ascending” can be found in the rap verses of “Who Shot Ya.” Although the meter for both pieces are different, their use of triplets, dotted eighth and sixteenth notes, and repetitive sixteenth notes are frequent throughout both. In measures 3 and 4 in “Who Shot Ya,” Biggie utilizes triplets when expressing gerunds such as “bick-er-ing” and “trick-el-ing” in his lyrics. In “The Lark Ascending”, Vaughan Williams expresses triplets as a part of the thematic material. In addition to triplets, both works employ the rhythmic combination of dotted eighth note with a sixteenth note. From the second measure of “Who Shot Ya” on, dotted eighth and sixteenth notes can be heard throughout Biggie’s rapping on short one syllable words such as “foil the” in measure 7, and “burn like” in measure 12. This dotted eighth and sixteenth note rhythm can also be heard in the first theme in “The Lark Ascending,” preceding the triplets. And as said prior, this theme is passed between all of the instruments, so the dotted eighth and sixteenth note is a very strong feature of this piece. Another similarity in rhythmic value is the repetitive and successive sixteenth notes. Biggie uses sixteenth notes in his rapping to express words with multiple syllables, while the violin soloist in “The Lark Ascending” constantly plays sixteenth notes during most of the piece. For such wildly different musical composers and genres, Biggie and Vaughan Williams apply many of the same rhythmic values that are essential elements for each piece.

Although the pieces share similar rhythmic values, they do not use them in the same way; there is a rhythmic freedom that both pieces take liberties with. In “Who Shot Ya,” for instance, because the piece is not written, there is some swing to the rhythms due to slight pauses or drawn out note values when Biggie raps. The violin soloist in “The Lark Ascending” also has a lot of freedom in this particular classical work. The violinist is given a cadenza without any bar lines at both the beginning and end of the piece and without much direction in regard to tempo. So although the rhythmic values are being played, they are often held out longer or played even faster than they appear in the score. Vaughan Williams even writes “senza misura” so that the violinist knows to play freely and without regard to bar lines. “Who Shot Ya” has a similar senza misura moment during the vocal outro: Biggie is heard creating a moment where he is admonishing a foe and yelling expletives without meter or rhythm. This rhythmic and metrical freedom is such a connecting factor between “Who Shot Ya” and “The Lark Ascending” because this musical feature is an important characteristic of these two works.

However, this rhythmic freedom that makes “Who Shot Ya” and “The Lark Ascending” so extraordinary would not be possible if it were not for the instrumentation of the piece. The rhythmic freedom was birthed from this common instrumentation that both pieces share in that a soloist is supported by the other instruments and musical material, while their presence is the central focus of the piece. The soloist and orchestra dynamic is common in classical music through concertos, likewise in hip hop music, rappers take the center stage and the instrumentals merely fill the musical space. It could be said that rap music is the concerto of hip hop music. The instrumentation seems to be the factor that connects these works the most, because if it were not the case, many of the other similarities would be lost. For instance, without a violin soloist, Vaughan Williams may not have written those repetitive sixteenth notes, or may not have used them as a main musical line in the work. Vaughan Williams would also not write such rhythmic freedom for an entire ensemble, the senza misura is written especially for a soloist and would not work otherwise. In “Who Shot Ya”, lacking the soloist, Biggie, would change the entire genre; his intricate rhythms would not exist nor would the rhythmic freedom which is such a precise art and necessary musicality in rap music. This specific instrumentation found in both “Who Shot Ya” and “The Lark Ascending” allows for these works to be compatible.

By comparing “Who Shot Ya” by Notorious B.I.G. and “The Lark Ascending” by Ralph Vaughan Williams, it is evident that although they come from different cultures, they share musical qualities. We can see the compatibility of these two works through their shared use of diatonic melodies in repeated thematic material, similar rhythmic values of triplets, dotted eighth and sixteenth notes, and successive sixteenth notes, their rhythmic and metrical freedom, as well as the function of the soloist apparent in the instrumentation of both works. Many people who listen to classical do not listen to hip hop and vice versa; however, by comparing these works, it is obvious that they share musical qualities and are compelling in their own way. People sometimes cling to the differences between cultures and we do not often make comparisons, but it is such a beautiful experience to connect music of two different cultures. Not only to see what music has in common aesthetically and theoretically, but what people have in common, and that is, our love of music. Whether it’s classical or rap, jazz or Middle Eastern music, African drumming or music of China, the universal thread is that music connects humans with one another and it is inspiring to see these musical connections through analysis.