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Metric Dissonance in Hip-Hop Music: An Exploration of Interpretive Multiplicity

ABSTRACT

Background

This paper investigates the perception of metric displacement dissonance between hip-hop music's main textural layers: the *flow layer* — the rapped vocals — and the *beat layer* — the instrumental track. Metric displacement dissonance involves the association of multiple textural layers of equivalent length that occur in a nonaligned manner (Krebs 1999, 33). The layer that functions as the metric reference is known as the *primary metric layer*, while the layer that is nonaligned with it is called the *anti-metric layer*. In hip-hop music, dissonance between such layers can occur when metric units of flow and beat — usually defined by lyrical syntax and musical repetition, respectively — exhibit nonaligned patterning.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The analyses put forward in this paper suggest that the perception of metric displacement dissonance in hip-hop music can be complicated by stylistic features such as repetition, lyrical structure, repurposed sampled material, and frequent textural shifts. This complication can occur in two ways. First, while the displacement dissonance is often easy to identify by ear, it is not always clear which textural layer is primary and which is anti-metric, leading to perceptual ambiguity. Second, the displacement dissonances can remain indefinitely unresolved or display inconsistent resolution behaviour.

In contrast with notated music — where metric structure can at least be partially ascertained by surveying the score for time signatures, metrical groupings, or harmonic rhythm — the task of determining metre in hip-hop music must be done by ear. In addition, the formal structure of most hip-hop music involves repetition in quantities atypical of other popular music genres. Repeated iterations in hip-hop song forms are usually characterized by texture and lyrics, and less often by melody and harmony. It thus follows that aurally salient textural and lyrical features will play a role in the perception of metric dissonance.

Four stylistic features common to hip-hop music play a role in listeners' aural apprehension of metre. The first of these features involves textural shifts in the beat layer. These shifts can be small, such as the addition or removal of an instrument or sound effect, or large, such as the total removal of the drums. Small textural shifts normally mark the boundary between metric or hypermetric groups, while large textural shifts tend to occur toward the beginning or end of such groups. Listeners stylistically familiar with hip-hop might perceive the metre of a song based in part by the metric location of these shifts. For example, in the song *The World is Yours* (Nas 2004), textural shifts occur in such a way that the beat and flow layers — which are metrically dissonant in the third verse of this song — can each be construed as the primary metric layer at different time points.

The second feature concerns hip-hop's culture of musical borrowing. This borrowing is rooted in the practice of sampling and repurposing previously recorded material. In repurposing a musical sample, producers can alter its metric structure by dissecting it or combining it with other material. Even if the repurposed material expresses a different metre than the original, listeners familiar with the original might still hear traces of its metric structure.

The third feature involves a perceptual reorientation of metre at the beginning of a song, also known as a 'metric fakeout', a term coined by Justin London (unpublished spreadsheet). Metric fakeouts occur when listeners aurally entrain to a song's metre only to have this entrained metre subverted when new textures enter. The subsequent metre usually remains stable for the remainder of the song. The opening of the song *Buggin' Out* (A Tribe Called Quest 1991) exemplifies this phenomenon, when the metre established by the sampled string bass is subverted by the entry of the drums and vocals.

The fourth feature concerns poetic enjambment in the lyrics. Enjambment occurs when the syntax of a line of text remains incomplete at the end of a metric unit and continues uninterrupted into the next metric unit. Kyle Adams (2009) has shown how enjambment can destabilize listeners' sense of metre in hip-hop music. Enjambment occurs frequently in this genre, but normally in an inconsistent manner that leaves little doubt regarding the metric structure, as the metric length of the beat layer typically remains consistent. In the case of the song *Livin' Astro* (Kool Keith 1999), the enjambment exhibited by the lyrics is more consistent, complicating the identification of primary metric and anti-metric layers.

Methods

Songs by Nas, A Tribe Called Quest, and Kool Keith provide examples where ambiguous metric displacement dissonance can be heard between the flow and beat. In the case of electronic dance music (EDM), Mark Butler (2006) writes that such ambiguity proposes an 'interpretive multiplicity' to listeners. I situate interpretive multiplicity by modelling metric hearings of the aforementioned songs depending on which of the four stylistic features — textural shifts, repurposing, metric fakeouts, and enjambment — are present.

Implications

These hearings demonstrate how metric displacement dissonance can produce inconsistent resolution patterns and ambiguity regarding which textural layer is primary and which is anti-metric. To be sure, metric dissonance does not in itself imply a resolution akin to those that might occur in pitch-based dissonant structures. But in hip-hop music, with its repetitive

structures and general lack of directional harmony, the metric displacement dissonance has arguably fewer factors dictating its resolution than most other types of music. This is true too of EDM, and in this genre Butler finds a so-called 'emancipation of metric dissonance', suggesting that metric dissonance is better described as coexisting layers that 'sound apart' (Butler 2006, 170). By showing how displacement dissonance between hip-hop music's textural layers can introduce metrically ambiguous situations that do not resolve in a consistent manner, this paper exemplifies the continued appeal of studying musical metre by situating the listening experience as the object of analysis.

Keywords

Musical Time, Metre, Musical Perception, Afro-American Music, Popular Music.

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