

# Powwow Music and its Polymetric Construction

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*Abstract: In this article the author examines approaches to the notation of powwow music. Many researchers relegate the drum part to a secondary role as they study the vocal part in all its complexity and liveliness. The custom of giving perfunctory attention to the powwow drum line has a long history in the corpus of powwow music studies. An alternative approach offered in this article has the vocal part keyed to the drum part in an exact manner, basing all notational decisions on the primacy of the drum. The resulting notation creates the possibility of other insights into powwow music, and opens new doors for dialogue with First Nations musicians.*

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In my experiences with powwow music, both live and recorded, I have been intrigued by the relationship of the melodies with the percussion of the drum. To say the least, the alignment of these two musical forces is not obvious. I later discovered that the academic literature also seems to have struggled with this same conundrum, as evidenced by powwow music transcriptions, in particular. Transcriptions would be the most obvious site for a clear description of the relationship, and yet one is hard pressed to find examples in recent literature. In this paper, I review a selection of examples in which we can observe varying approaches to rendering the melodic (sung) and rhythmic (drum) aspects of powwow music.

The relationship of the drumming to the melody in Powwow music has been the source of interest for non-Native listeners for over a century. Alexander Cringan, an astute and much lauded music educator active in Toronto in the early 1900s and one of Canada's first ethnomusicologists, declared that "the rhythmic accompaniment (of an Iroquoian dance melody) has absolutely no connection with the rhythm of the melody" (Cringan 1898:145; Levine 2002:36-37). Nearly a century later, the distinguished ethnomusicologist David McAllester (1984: 16) agreed with Cringan when he wrote, "Another difficulty... is that the song meter does not seem to coincide with that of the

drum. It is very difficult to see how they relate to each other.” These observations recall William Malm’s 1972 expression “disphony,” which was coined to describe just such a musical arrangement.

The question about the relationship of the sung melody to the drum in aboriginal music first attracted my attention when I was employed by Dr. Ida Halpern as a research assistant investigating Kwakwaka’wakw (“Kwakiutl”) music. Dr. Halpern took the position that “the melody and the simultaneous percussive beating of sticks, rattles etc., represented two separate musical events which flow independently in parallel course... It must be stressed that the rhythm of the sung melodic part is in no way subjugated or influenced by the rhythmic patterns presented in the beat” (Halpern 1981: 6). Her particular musicological interest resided in the formal composition of the melodies which were indeed a marvel to behold, whereas her description of the accompanying drum beat (when it occurred, which was not always) was relegated to a peripheral list of characteristics in the analysis of each song.<sup>1</sup>

The many studies of powwow music written since the 1960s also relegate the drum part to a diacritical indication (Nettl 1968; Vennum 1980; McAllester 1984; Hatton 1986; Brown 2000, 2002a) or an ancillary annotation (Stock 1996; Browner 2000, 2002a, 2002b). The choice to annotate, rather than notate, the drum part goes as far back as Hornbostel and Abrahams in their 1906 transcriptions of aboriginal songs from British Columbia (Ellingson 1992:126-27).

Stock and Browner provide the drum part as an ancillary annotation in duet form, but are reluctant to draw an exact relationship between the two, as evidenced by the lack of bar lines. Time signatures and bar lines are avoided in favour of a strict presentation of the melody without the taint of Western musical bias that a time signature and bar lines would engender. Further, it seems,

at least for some scholars, that the structure of the phrases would be unduly compromised by the compartmentalization that occurs with regular time signatures and bar lines.

The theoretical interest in powwow music is largely concerned with the constituent parts and structure of the melodies and their texts. Although melodic elements such as scale, mode, and rhythmic values of



Figure 1: Diacritical (above) and annotated (below) drum beats

individual notes and motifs have received their due attention, the major focus of analysis has been the form that governs the structure of powwow melodies (Nettl 1954; Vennum 1980; Browner 2000). Although the details of the form have been debated, the basic structure of AABCBC, labelled by Nettl in 1954 as “incomplete repetition,” has been generally accepted.

It seems to me that the supporting drum part has often been relegated to a minor role because of its apparent simplistic musical structure. This designation is exactly opposite to the drum’s symbolism in aboriginal culture. North American First Nations people have made it abundantly clear that the construction, the sound, and even the presence of the drum is sacred (Ash 2002; Johnston, 2003; Torrie 2004). Also, the dynamics of the performance practices associated with the drum are rich with the interactions and aspirations of the players, bound together by pride, as in a sports team. Ray Thunderchild, the pre-eminent powwow consultant in Metro Vancouver, describes the roles and responsibilities of drum participants as a solemn duty (Johnston 2003:107-109).

It is my contention that the drum beat is central to the performance and spiritual power of powwow because of its direct note-to-note relationship with the complex rhythms of the powwow melodic part, which is typically in a high tessitura. The relationship is exact and not casual, as is sometimes implied by annotations and diacritics. Further, the precise relationship is best served by using score form and prescriptive notation (as defined by Charles Seeger, 1958) in a traditional Western representation that resembles a duet performance score, with bar lines extending across both the drum line staff and the vocal line staff, binding them together in complete synchronicity.

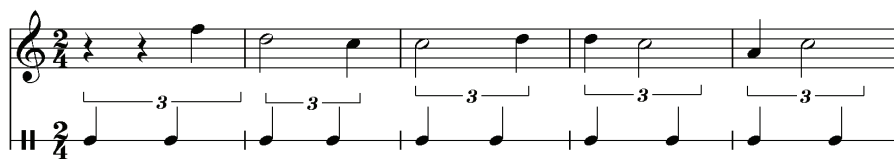


Figure 2: Prescriptive score

Although some may say that this Western notational format harkens back to the “tyranny of the bar line” by discounting flexibility of phrasing, I believe it helps to reinforce the relationship between the two part. William Russo, writing about the same question with respect to jazz, says:

A great deal of nonsense is written these days about the tyranny of the barline, under which censorious headings are assembled a

number of assertions, some of which are not compatible with others: (1) that meter and rhythm go together, but should not; (2) that melodic rhythm can and does cross the barline, but that the barline impedes its tendency to do so; (3) that we should use speech rhythm more than we do, perhaps replacing measured rhythm altogether; (4) that we should have pulse without meter, as composers of sacred music did in the fifteenth century; (5) that each part or voice should have a separate metre, or that some should have speech rhythms while others have diverse rhythms; (6) that the use of less usual time signatures should be encouraged; since only in this way can the bar line coincide with the melodic rhythm; (7) that when the melodic rhythm does work against the meter, either in respect to length or stress; (8) that a badly trained performer will falsely acknowledge the bar and thus destroy the true rhythm of the melody; and (9) that if the melody crosses over the bar; and the performer will cut it into little pieces because of the bad training alluded to in 8. “Regular pulse and regular meter are very exciting – almost (but not quite) in themselves. They are intrinsic to jazz and part of its beauty. Their use in tandem does not prohibit irregular melodic rhythm or harmonic rhythm.” (Russo 1975:56)

Prescriptive notation also stands in opposition to the detail that is engendered by descriptive notation and its record of minutiae and analytical insights at the expense of the musical template and the spontaneous quality of an inspired or mediocre performance.

Basic prescriptive scores are seen in musical surveys created for the purposes of secondary and even primary school educators. One of the most interesting books of this genre is written by Bryan Burton for World Press, *Moving Within the Circle*, but its simplicity may have also been its downfall; for example, it did not even rate a mention in the excellent survey of music notations of indigenous music compiled by Victoria Levine (2002).<sup>2</sup>

A characteristic of prescriptive notation in traditional Western format is that it is formless. The music begins at the top left hand side of the page, and ends at the bottom right hand side, or some such variant. This mechanical (and digital) reproduction is so common in Western art music that its inherent formlessness seems to be rarely commented upon. If music notation was written in the same manner as the English language, with paragraph form and subject headings, the basic structure of most music with its repetitions, contrasts and variations would be immediately apparent. What may be lost in

### Figure 3a Raven Song, Billy Assu - Ida Halpern

1st verse

2nd verse

### Figure 3b Raven Song, Billy Assu - Norman Stanfield

1st Verse      2nd Verse

A.

B.

Figure 3: Billy Assu, Raven Song, transcribed in two different formats

terms of physical space on the page would be more than compensated by the clarity that such a format would bring to the music form.

In the domain of the notation of indigenous music, Natalie Curtis showed the way in 1907 by combining traditional Western music notation with graphic presentation in order to visually present the formal structures of various pieces of indigenous music (Levine 2002:58-59). No doubt deeper analysis would require more abstract forms of notation, but those levels would be beyond the basic understanding provided by the surface form (for example, the AABCBC structure of powwow music). I created somewhat the same notation for Ida Halpern for a song sung by Billy Assu which she chose to contrast with her own transcription. My aim was to illustrate the almost exact repetition of verse one and two, and in the process, making sense of a somewhat bewildering song form (Halpern 1981:18).

The high vocal part in the powwow “duet” is comprised of melodies that are either in triple or duple metre. The lower drum part is always in duple metre in powwow songs. (The drum has different rhythms in other genres common at powwows, such as Round Dances.) I use these terms advisedly, knowing only too well that they are not common to the musical language of indigenous performers, and may even represent a form of neo-colonialism. As I explain later, I think this terminology is a first step to a new dialogue where we translate the theory presented here into language and concepts that may (or may not be) akin to concepts familiar to indigenous musicians. Browner gives us a sense of optimism when she states that “powwow music uses a primarily Western musical vocabulary” (Browner, 2002a:74). On the contrary side, Powers offers us a fascinating glimpse into indigenous music vocabulary (from the Lakota Sioux) founded on indigenous conceptual thinking that only occasionally matches Western concepts (Powers, 1980). Obviously researchers must carefully pick their way between these two points of view.<sup>3</sup> As an aside, it is worth noting that the concept of powwow polymeter that I am introducing here is not described by Powers in his review of Oglala music terminology. On the other hand, Browner presents the possibility of triple time and duple time powwow melodies in the form of transcriptions, but without comment. (2002a:75-78). Before I illustrate the nature of the three-against-two duet structure, further subtleties in the drum part and the vocal part need to be clarified.

## Powwow Drum Beat

The literature written by Natives and non-Natives alike clearly states that drumming is understood by the drummers and dancers to be in duple metre

(Hatton 1986; Whitehorse 1988:26; Browner 2002a:212; Laubin 1977:99). However, the duple beats of the powwow drum in performance (as opposed to descriptions in the literature) are usually not performed in a manner that is understood in the West. Rather than a series of weak and strong beats in pairs, the performance sound of drum beats are equally consistent (except for the exceptional difference of the Honour Beats, discussed below). Consequently, the non-Native listener might assume that the drum line is a series of single beats. It is as if the duple nature of the drum beat exists only in pure theory, occurring internally in the mind's ear of each dancer and drummer-singer.

The existence of the duple nature of the drumming is supported by other musical and choreographic factors. The dancing is coordinated with the drum beats, and at its most simplistic level, the choreography consists of touching one foot, then planting the same foot, first one foot, then the other, essentially outlining a duple metre (Whitehorse 1988: 27-28, Browner 2002b: 212). Interestingly, the heavy emphasis of the planted foot is on what would be called the off-beat in Western music. During the course of Powwow songs, four or five Honour Beats are performed in specific locations within the music form, and these "hard" beats would be duplicated by the action of the planted (as opposed to touching) foot (Browner 2002a:86-87). Presumably these special musical moments are understood by the dancers to be an opportunity to align their stepping.

In Flag Songs, used to accompany the dancers as they process at the beginning of the Powwow, the second beat of each pair of beats is omitted.<sup>4</sup> The full length of a time that normally comprises two beats of a duple measure of time unit played by the drum is made abundantly clear. The musicians will say that this music is "slow" in keeping with the solemn nature of the occasion, but in fact the stepping exactly reproduces the duple nature of the duple drum line. The planted foot steps on a silent beat. The tempo is only moderately slower, as the stepping is performed in a subdued and stately manner.

## Powwow Voice Rhythm

Further to this discussion of the implicit (duple beat) and explicit (single beat) structure of the drum part, I turn now to describe the rhythms of the vocal line. Powwow melodies are best served if they are notated in the metre of two because of the central role and symbolism of the drum. Syncopations, hemiolas, and irregular phrase lengths are more obvious when they are juxtaposed against the regularity of the beat. This polymetric experience would be felt by the dancers, musicians, and the listeners. Almost all transcriptions in the

literature avoid the use of a time signature altogether.

The rhythmic nature of the powwow melodies is enhanced by the use of vocables, syllables without semantic content, and words atomized into distinct syllables, acting like vocables. In this manner, vocables and syllables are reminiscent of scat singing in jazz and melismas in European Art Music, particularly in the late Renaissance and Baroque periods where the vocalizing of long strings of step-wise “vocables” was considered a high art. The inherent or associative meaning of powwow syllables, or the lack of semantic meaning in powwow vocables, becomes irrelevant in this context. What is admired is the ability of the singer to mimic a music instrument, often at top speed. In the case of powwow music (and a profuse repertoire of examples in Western art music, such as the Hallelujah chorus in Handel’s *Messiah*) the vocables reinforce the rhythmic vitality of the melodic line because the interest in their production consists of melodic quasi-instrumental virtuosity, not because they heighten denotation and connotation.

Another prominent feature of powwow melody is syncopation. The singers consciously avoid singing on the beat (Powers 1990:117; Hatton 1974:130-31; 1986:204). Reginald and Gladys Laubin may have been the first to identify this trait in powwow music (Laubin 1977 92). Many First Nations musicians proscribe singing on the beat, as if the practice was a sign of incompetence and lack of imagination. For example, Kwakwaka’wakw song-maker Chief Mungo Martin “emphasized that the beat must begin before the singing or after the singing, but never, absolutely never, simultaneously with the start of the singing. To do so was forbidden” (Halpern 1981). Tara Browner says that “Good (powwow) singers place the beginnings of vocables or words between drumbeats as often as possible. That technique, which makes a voice more audible, is called “singing off the beat” and is one of the elements that create rhythmic complexity in pow-wow music” (Browner 2003:73). Hatton observed that “this technique is probably the non-Indian’s greatest obstacle in trying to learn Indian songs” (Hatton

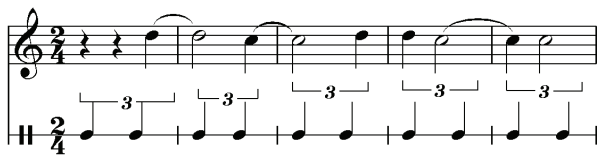


Figure 4: Syncopation

1974:131).

The most frequent syncopation resembles a trochaic figure, sometimes omitting the first, short beat (Deloria 2004:192). When the trochaic pattern with its missing first note follows an iambic pattern, the result can be heard



as a hemiola (Nettl 1968 III, 14), as seen in bars 3 and 4 of figure 4. Hemiolas were first identified by Nettle in 1968 (Nettl 1968:III, 14; Hatton).

The resulting notation of the syncopations caused by trochaic and iambic triplet patterns over a bed-rock of unvarying duple metre illustrates and realizes the dynamic listening tension inherent in the play of complex vocal

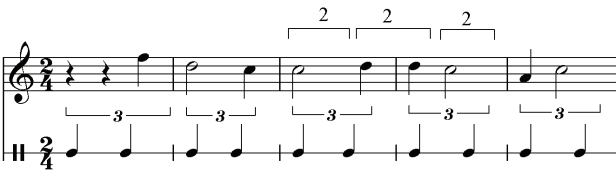


Figure 5: Trochees and iambs as hemiolas

rhythmic patterns that never quite align with the beat in a manner that is similar to the experience in jazz and popular music where the beat is subsumed to the more pronounced

off-beat. The resulting powwow music-making is indeed complex and even dizzying (Hatton 1974: 130-31; 1986: 204). I believe that the most appropriate terminology for the complex nature of this duet music is polyrhythmic or polymetric (Agawu 2003).

There is one interesting factor that complicates the obvious nature of the Powwow polymetre I have just described. The ideal vocal quality of the unison singers is an extreme wavering of the voices throughout the songs, especially in the first moments of each push-up or repeat when the pitch is highest. This wavering can blur the rhythm of the opening notes, and to a lesser degree, the rhythms of the rest of the song. However, this performance practice does not have to appear as a notation feature in a transcription that is purely prescriptive, just as vibrato is never indicated in Western Art Music songs and instrumental compositions played by instruments that regularly use vibrato.

### Triple Time Powwow Melodies

Powwow music that features melodic vocal lines in triplet rhythm seems to be the most complex expression of powwow polymetre. They also seem to have come to the attention of almost all powwow commentators. For example, Gloria Young states unequivocally in her entry on Powwow music (“Music,” in *Handbook of North American Indians: Plains, Part 2*) that the metre of the (powwow) melodies is in 6/8 (i.e., triplet) time (Young 2001:1037). However, each attempt at illustrating triple time powwow melodies has generated difficulties.

In 1968 Bruno Nettl acknowledged the possibility of the ratio of two to three, although he did not overtly show this relationship in his transcriptions (Nettl 1968b:14). Instead he chose to indicate the rhythms of the vocal and drum parts in a complex and somewhat baffling arrangement. The vocal part has triplet figures with eighth notes tied to quarter notes topped by two dots to indicate eighth note pulses in the vocal part, and the annotated drum part consists of paired dotted eighth-notes joined by beams.



Figure 6: Bruno Nettl excerpt (“Studies in Blackfoot Indian Musical Culture,” Part III, p.25)

He repeated the axiom of two against three rhythms in 1989, although he went on to suggest that the relationship may be more complex than he had previously thought (Nettl 1989:157). Nettl’s seeds of doubt may have been planted in 1985 by Hewitt Pantaleoni when the latter described in bewildering (and debatable) detail a complex web of rhythmic variables using an account of a single performance recorded by a melograph.<sup>5</sup>

Although Browner (2002a:76-78) clearly shows triplet figures in her transcription of a triple time powwow song in her music transcription labelled “example 2” she does not illustrate a clear relationship between the

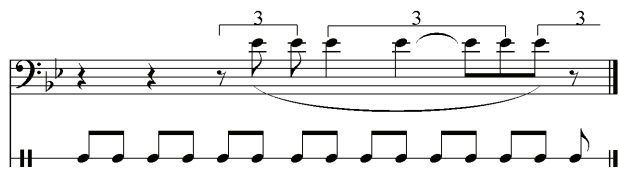


Figure 7: Tara Browner excerpt (Heartbeat of the People, p.77)

drum beats and the melody, preferring both lines to occupy separate staves without any score bar lines for reference. It would appear on first glance that the time of the powwow melodies and the time of the drum are in alignment, but the coordination is not made explicit.

Finally, Vennum makes the most curious decision of all the various transcribers just described. For his *Love Song belonging to John Livingstone*, he indicates triplet patterns in the vocal part throughout, but for the drum part, he simply indicates two beamed eighth notes in a diacritical note, as the “beat accompaniment.” It is likely only the most experienced musicians would be

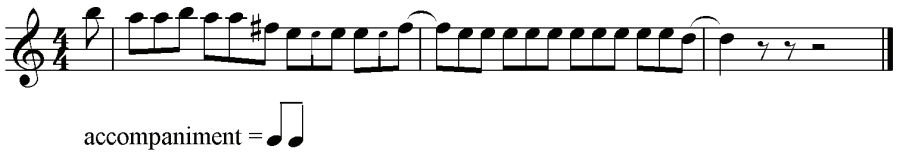


Figure 8: Thomas Vennum excerpt (“A History of Ojibwa Song Form,” p.60)

able to interpret the notation. Certainly the play of two against three is not obvious (Vennum1980: 60).

In 2004 Philip Deloria, professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan and the son of the famous Native American outspoken academic Vine Deloria, stated unequivocally that a strict relationship of two-against-three metres existed in powwow music, and that he found a transcription that provided clear evidence of the polymetre (Deloria, 2006:192). In his excellent essay, “The Hills are alive... with the sound of Indian Music,” he criticized past transcriptions and interpretations of First Nations music by recent non-native Powwow music scholars. However, he departs from his criticisms to praise the transcriptions of Alice Fletcher, dating from 1892.<sup>6</sup>

The transcription example, provided by Philip Deloria, entitled *Hae-Thu-Ska Wa-An*, contains anachronisms like a harmonisation supplied by the Indianist John Lee Comfort (cf., Fletcher and LaFlesche, 1904, p.94), but



Figure 9: “Hae-Thu-Ska-Wa’an” (Deloira, p.192)

the simple transcription clearly shows strict polymetre of two against three in every second of the music. The notation is elegant and eloquent, with a time signature and bar lines extending across both duet voices, making the relationship crystal clear. Alice Fletcher struggled with the problem of notating the polymetre by writing the melody line in 3/8 and the bottom line in 2/8, with tempo markings that would keep the quarter notes in each line synchronized.<sup>7</sup> The more obvious solution is to notate each bar in the top voice line in triplet patterns while writing duple time signatures in both parts.

Figure 9 is a re-transcription of the famous song, *Hae-Thu-Ska Wa-An*, singled out by Professor Deloria. Although it does not exactly conform to the form of a powwow song because it is rather simpler in construction than others, it easily illustrates the use of hemiola (e.g., bar 3 and 4) and trochee (e.g., bar 1) rhythms.

## Conclusion

I believe that if we describe the polymetric nature of Powwow music in a simple and elegant prescriptive notation, we can explore new dialogues with First Nations musicians. A new, properly framed question about metre has tremendous potential for receiving fresh, insightful answers about compositional procedures and the transmission and diffusion of musical ideas. For example, a casual conversation with a powwow drum master at the Wanuskewin Interpretation Centre (on the outskirts of Saskatoon) turned to an intriguing thought about rhythmic melodic cells that resemble defining elements in tune families.<sup>8</sup> He suggested that the cells freely circulate on the Powwow Trail (i.e., the yearly summer schedule of powwow events) and that their diffusion may be amenable to mapping. Powers alludes to the same process in his study of Lakota music vocabulary (Powers, 1980:34-35). An even more interesting question would be to interrogate the simultaneous drummer-singers to discover how they are able to maintain such an extended awareness of the syncopation functioning between the two time signatures and within the melodic time signature of the melodies with their own complex syncopation, unique profile, lyrical content, and phrase lengths.

My hope with this essay is to break new ground for the kind of dialogic process described by Professor Browner (2000:216) that needs to function between First Nations musicians and researchers such as myself. 🌻

## Notes

1. Despite her seemingly offhand attitude towards rhythm and metre in relationship to melody, Dr. Halpern was attentive to each element separately. For example, she confirmed the existence of the metre of five (Kwakwala, *Tlemsalood*), first identified by Franz Boas (1888:59), in her remarkable sonographic analysis of a Hamatsa song MM73 by Mungo Martin (Halpern 1981:10-11).

2. The Bryan Burton that she lists in her index and features in her survey (xxxiv, 242-43) is a different person.

3. It may also be that the music theory cannot be translated successfully. There have been many examples of Western music theory that make sense of a given piece of music to the music theorist while being unintelligible to the casual listener. The danger in such a theoretical stance is allowing a theory of a music event to be privileged over the lived experience and other competing theoretical models.

4. For an example of a Flag Song, listen to the Sioux Flag Song in Disc 2, Track 24 in the CDs that accompany *World Sound Matters: An Anthology of Music From Around the World* (Schott, 1996).

5. For the latest word on this device and its problems, see David Cooper and Ian Sapiro's "Ethnomusicology in the Laboratory: From the Tonometer to the Digital Melograph" in *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15 ( 2), 2006, pp. 301–313.

6. See Alice C. Fletcher's "Hae-thu-ska Society of the Omaha Tribe" in *The Journal of American Folklore* 5 (17), 1892.

7. McAllester (1984) did somewhat the same arrangement of multiple speeds in his transcription of a Sioux Grass Dance Song (cf., Ex. 2-1, p.16).

8. Following the theories of Samuel Bayard, Bruno Nettl explored the topic of melodic cells vis-à-vis tune families very extensively in his 1968 study "Studies In Blackfoot Indian Musical Culture, Part 4: Notes on Composition, Text Settings, and Performance," in *Ethnomusicology* 12(/2). See "Tune Relationships," pp. 192-96.

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