

# Danceability

## Catherine Fellows

As the members of Hewale Sounds assembled with their instruments under the trees of a particularly leafy stretch of Legon University campus in Accra, I was growing more and more excited. The musicians had been summoned by one of Africa's greatest musicologists, Professor Kwabena Nketia, to demonstrate something which I had suspected, and which he has beautifully articulated in many of his writings: that dance is inherent in the structure of African music.

Professor Nketia is now 80 years old, but the day before, had painstakingly explained how his many years of study of Western classical music and traditional African dances – for that is what most pieces of African music are called – had led him to understand a fundamental difference.

"Whereas the old aestheticians talk about sound in motion, I would reverse this for my purpose as an African and talk about motion in sound," he told me. "In the music I compose the motion comes first – you can feel the dance even if there are no dancers present, because it is part of the conception of the music."

Hewale Sounds started to play a funky homage to the jazz standard 'Take Five'. When Professor Nketia spoke, the musicians wound down to a respectful silence.

"Okay, now let's start with the bell – this is what we call the timeline." The bell player struck out an Agbadza rhythm. "Within this is the strong beat – if you're a dancer, this is your cue. Now let's add the rattle." As one instrument after another was invited in, it became clear that each player was listening to the rhythm pattern already established and slotting his own unique variation on that rhythm on top of and between the beats being played.

It was exactly the same with the dancers. On a nod from Nketia, they leapt up. They listened and picked up the bell pattern, placing the right foot on the strong beat and the left foot on a weaker one, and gradually finding compatible cross rhythms with their waists and shoulders and arms.

Nketia explained: "The repetition in African music is extremely important. It allows the dancer to anticipate. When the music isn't changing, it's the dancer who makes the performance interesting." The two dancers were in full flight now, their bodies undulating to the music, which was not, in fact, repetitious because the master drummer was engaged in a kind of rhythmic conversation with the dancers.

"The dance steps are actually one of the musical instruments, they're part of the performance – in some African societies they put bells on their feet to exaggerate that movement." Professor John Collins had joined us on our bench. Though originally from Britain, his African musical pedigree is impeccable. He has lived in Ghana all his life, and as a young man he played with everyone who was anyone in West

African music, including Fela Anikulapo Kuti. He now teaches music at Legon University.

"With a lot of Ghanaian rhythms there's a main pulse going through the music which is not played by any instrument. You will find it difficult to know where that beat is – but not if you watch the dancers' feet. You'll find this kind of silent rhythm or hidden beat in a lot of African music: the more important the rhythm the less it's played and this leaves space in the music for the imagination or for the dancing feet."

So the music is not only composed in a way which allows dancers to take part, in many cases it is actually incomplete without them.

In the 1920s a Swiss psychologist came up with a kinetic theory describing the relationship between rhythm, dance and music. John Collins explained: "If you beat a drum, you make two movements. You go down with gravity, and up against gravity. He called the downbeat 'acoustic' because you hear it, but everything else is silent. He claimed that unlike musicians from other parts of the world, Africans are as aware of the silent up beat which spaces the sounds as they are of the acoustic down beats."

I remembered a British born Nigerian friend of mine who couldn't beat a rhythm if his life depended on it. I felt that we might be nearing dangerous ground. Professor Nketia remained serene: "Some African and African-American intellectuals want to de-emphasise the fact that we dance – they're afraid of the implication that we can't do anything else. But this fear comes from ignorance. African music and dance require great discipline from the performer."

Many an accomplished Western musician cannot play a little rhythm and repeat it without change. It is something you have to learn, and something to be proud of, as musicians all over the world who are fascinated by African music realise.

"It's no accident that black music – music with African roots – dominates the popular music scene worldwide," John Collins offered.

The next thing I knew, he had produced a fat manuscript. "I haven't published this yet, but it's about how African music is in touch with the future. The problem started in the West when classical music got detached from dance – and became slave to a single dominant rhythm. It was around the same time that Newton and Descartes came up with their linear concept of space and time, which is now obsolete."

Physicists now know that there are multiple dimensions of time and space, and that matter is discontinuous with quantum gaps – a bit like the silences between the pulses of sound in a piece of rhythmic music. In fact, it's all there in African music."

Hewale Sounds played on, oblivious.



*Catherine Fellows has been working for the BBC African Service for five years. Before that she lived in Cameroon – and Edinburgh where she worked as an arts journalist. She now produces Artbeat, the BBC's weekly look at the African arts and music scene. She recently spent time in Ghana recording material for a series on music and dance, which you will be able to hear later this year.*

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