



6/8 RHYTHM *By Eugene Skeef*

Module Four Post – Task

The Western concept of common time being 4/4 is actually misleading. In Africa, rhythms in multiples of 3 are actually more prevalent.

When a pregnant woman is at her most relaxed her heart beats in 3/4 or 6/8. This rhythm brings peace and harmony to the unborn child and similarly to a community or nation. The 6/8 time signature honours the echoes of the heartbeat of a people's state of consciousness. This beat is the pre-eminent metaphor of people who are at one with themselves and their environment.

This rhythmic tendency can be visualised as a triangle nestling in a square. The triangle has three sides, while the square has four. In African cultural traditions the number four is considered to be feminine and stable, while the number three is male and constantly in motion, conceptually never coming to rest.

The combination of these values in society leads to a kind of motive harmony, where the instinct for movement is equal to that of accentuating the home base. The alternate and simultaneous apportioning of prominence to either and both of the numbers three and four is the essential thrust of the African 3/4 or 6/8 rhythm.

It is therefore not uncommon, when you are playing percussion accentuating a 6/8 rhythm, imagining enveloping repeated cycles of three, to suddenly experience a momentary head spin in which the feeling (or “feel”) of a strong sense of four beats takes over. This oscillation is the basis of our perpetual search for home.

Eugene Skeef was a great friend of the late Bheki Mseleku. Bheki was globally renowned for his highly developed harmonic sense and was known as a master improviser at the piano. His scintillating solos often incorporated rapid melodic runs that left audiences and fellow musicians in total awe of his unbelievable speed. Eugene described how a friend once said about Bheki that his speed reminded him of John Coltrane in that no matter how fast he played, he articulated every single note of a run as if he was visiting people in his neighbourhood – stopping to greet every single one, exchanging pleasantries and having tea with them, before moving on to the next neighbour, until he had paid everyone in the community a visit.

There is an extent to which, when you’re playing that fast, the binary linear articulation of notes in a 4/4 relationship has to be elasticised and become triangular for you to be physically able to go beyond the limitations of normality. The morphing into three beats per cycle is like an acknowledgement of our having reached the outer limits of human capability and having to therefore embrace infinity in our tonal articulation.

Now answer the following questions?

1. Rhythm is the oldest human creative format for telling stories. Storytelling is an intrinsic part of being human. Through story-telling inspiration for melodies, lyrics, rhythms, choreography emerges.

Choose an object that is significant to you and share your personal story behind this object in a creative way.

2. Every single musical instrument carries in its soul an infinite number of stories. These include its origins, the ceremonies in which it has been played, the reasons behind its creation, in whose presence it has been played and where else it will carry the memories of its sound.

3. Can you place this story onto your instrument?

4. As always, record your creation so as to share with us.



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