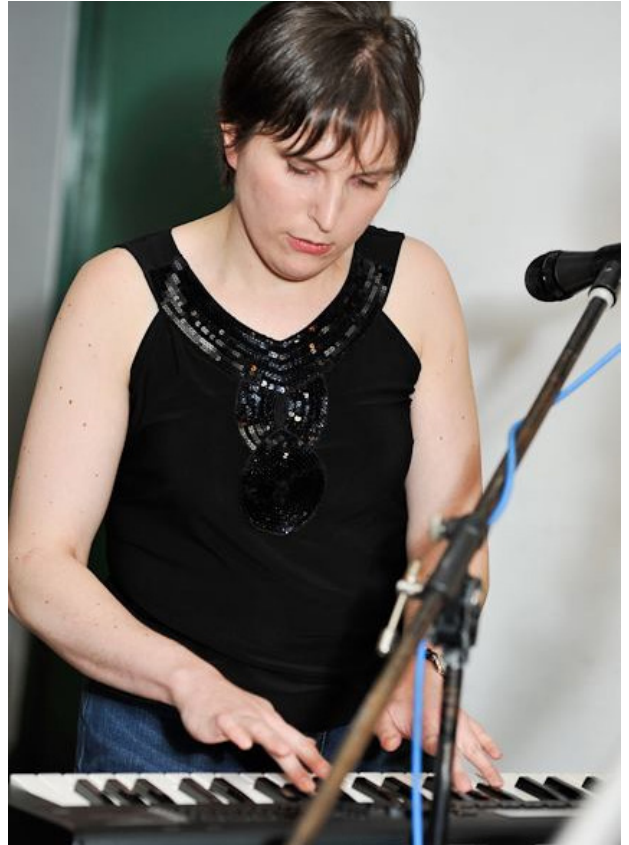## Notating Across Cultures: A Composer's Dilemma
Jeryl Johnston

In the summer of 2017 I had the good fortune to spend several weeks in Havana, independently studying Afro-Cuban music. I was inspired by ways in which some Cuban musicians varied their religious music using jazz vocabulary, so I decided to try my own hand at this type of variation, while including Euro-classical vocabulary as well. The result was "Yemaya—Okuo and Other Songs," a piece that I created during the first half of 2019.

Often, when someone hears this work, they ask "How did you notate that?" The first thing that came to mind when I was asked that question is that I hadn't ever really thought about it. The manner of notation didn't make any difference to me, as long as it resulted in effective communication between musicians. I believe that my lack of concern about the method of notation is one of the reasons why the project was successful. If I had been attached to any particular style of notation, then I would have run the risk of alienating key players who weren't comfortable using that notational style. For this reason, I used the multiple notational styles preferred by the various musicians, including myself.

Each of the genres at play in this piece uses an entirely different mode of notation. For example, Lucumí music is passed down through aural/oral tradition.[1] It is normal for highly-regarded, master practitioners to use aural/oral communication exclusively in order to learn, teach, and execute this music. At the same time, standard jazz heads are usually written down using lead-sheet

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photo by Ana L. Alicea

notation, which defines a melody, a corresponding chord progression, and very little else, making it the responsibility of the performer to determine what interpretation of the notation is appropriate. Euro-classical music is traditionally notated very specifically, with very little left for the performer to decide. While creating this piece, I had to take into consideration the fact that practitioners of all three of these various styles would need to communicate with each other successfully in order for the project to work.

The first thing that I needed to do in order to facilitate this project was to acquire a working knowledge of each of the types of music involved. By the time I started studying Lucumí music, I had already spent many years playing salsa and Latin jazz. Put simply, salsa (an umbrella term) is descended in part from a variety of Afro-Cuban traditional drumming and singing styles, including those of the Lucumí people. My experience playing salsa made sacred Lucumí music more accessible to me than it would otherwise have been, and it provided a common starting point through which I and the musicians who play Lucumí music could relate to each other. Only after spending years studying each of the three aforementioned genres did I undertake the creation of a piece that utilized all of them.

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One problem I encountered early on was how to label my own role in the writing and production of the piece. The piece uses melodies by the Lucumí people and their ancestors, and it also uses music that I composed in both the classical and jazz styles. On the one hand, if I called myself the "arranger," then those familiar with the classical music definition of "adaptive arranger" would assume that I hadn't composed any of the music in the piece. On the other hand, I could not simply list myself as "the composer" because then I run into issues of cultural appropriation. Moreover, if I was communicating with a jazz musician or aficionado, they would likely understand the word "arranger" to be contributive and therefore, part-composer. It is hard to know the specialty of the people whom I am addressing, yet it is important to label my role clearly, as the leader and central creative entity. This is especially true because of the assumptions that I find are often made about the roles of participants in an ensemble based on gender and race. So far, my solutions have been to either list myself as "contributive arranger," regardless of familiarity with the term, or to list multiple composers, as in "Composed by Traditional Lucumí/Jeryl Johnston."

If the relatively basic words "composer" and "arranger" can create such confusion, then how can composers persuade musicians to dialogue with the intricate musical notation of unfamiliar cultures? Fortunately, there was no need for all of the musicians involved to read each other's musical languages, as long as at least one person was willing and able to read all of them, and the others were open to receiving a translation. In the case of "Yemaya—Okuo…," I served as the main translator. I also had help from my principal percussionist, Louis Bauzo, who has more fluency in the rhythms of Lucumí batá drumming and who translated my requests to the other percussionists. A key element to the success of the project was the open-mindedness and professionalism of the musicians playing the piece.

One rather controversial decision I made was to write the piece in 12/8 time. In order to explain, it is important to define *clave*. Briefly, clave is a term that is often used in reference to an African rhythmic tradition, and that has remained at the foundation of the music of the Lucumí. Clave is always a precise rhythm that is repeated over and over, creating a cycle which is used as the rhythmic structure in a style of music. This rhythm need not be audible in order to be the underlying structure. There is also a musical instrument called the claves. When I use the word clave, I am referring to the rhythmic cycle, not the instrument.

Example 1

Example 2

Afro-Cuban derived music in the United States is notated in two ways. Most commonly, one clave cycle is the equivalent of two measures of music, as seen in Example 1. This method is very prominent in salsa, the style of music that all of the musicians in this ensemble originally had in common.[2] Less commonly in Afro-Cuban music within the United States in general, but more commonly in the few instances of notation of Lucumí music, one clave cycle is the equivalent of one measure of music, as seen in Example 2.[3] The second way is more efficient, for two reasons. First, if one bar equals one clave cycle, then the musicians who read music have very little room for confusion with regard to how the music fits the underlying structure of the clave, even if the clave is not being played. Secondly, if one clave cycle is equivalent to one bar, then communication between those who read music and those who don't becomes easier, because one can refer to "X" number of bars as "X" number of claves.

In order to aid the communication between musicians, and to simplify the notation, I chose to notate the music in 12/8 so that each measure would equal one clave cycle. This was not very familiar to the musicians who read music, including myself, and took some explaining and some getting used to, but it worked very efficiently.

Because of my European classical music background, it was natural for me to use a score. Some of the musicians who were trained in the Lucumí aural tradition naturally worked without a score. There were others trained in the Lucumí musical tradition who referred to the score from time to time but often elected to play without it, and there was still

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another performer who favored using a lead sheet. For this reason, I organized the score to reflect the different preferences of the musicians involved.

One example of this hybrid technique that stands out is the percussion solo (1:35). With the exception of the improvised solo on the conga, the rhythms played by the percussionists are traditional, meaning they are prescribed and played from memory. In general there is no need for notation. However, the percussionists who choose to read notation would want to be able to see where they are in relation to the other musicians, so I needed to notate a percussion part. To achieve this, slash notation, from the language of lead sheets, worked best (see Example 3).

Example 3

One exception to this almost-non-notational method in the percussion parts is the *llamao*, which is a rhythm played by the lead percussionist to start the music or to change the rhythm (see Example 3, mm. 1 and 2, percussion part). I preferred this method to the more Western style of "counting off," so a *llamao* was used to begin the piece. I notated the *llamo* in the score even though the percussionists didn't require it. This made it easier for the bass and keyboards to line up their introductory phrases with the percussion. It worked as though we were reading a cue in a European-style score or part.

Another place in which I used slashes in order to denote time was the bass solo (Example 3, 0:25). In this case, no notes needed to be written down because they were improvised. In addition, I knew I could depend on the bass player, so I left it up to him to determine how he wanted to play his solo, both harmonically and melodically. The only factor that I needed to notate was the piano cue used to exit the bass solo and move on to the next section.

The piano cadenza that I played at the end (5:32) was not included in the score, even though I notated it in detail for myself in another document. I played it from memory, and the other musicians didn't need to see it in order to play their parts well. In the score I simply wrote "Piano cadenza on Okuo" in the appropriate place, and kept the written copy of the cadenza nearby for reference. The cadenza is nintey seconds long, but it is indicated in the score by one bar of slashes with repeat signs for the percussion, and the aforementioned phrase in English for myself. This was all that was necessary in order for us to know where we were in the score (see Example 4 for details).

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Notation of the lead vocal parts was not needed. The melodies sung by the lead vocalists are traditional melodies performed from memory, and they almost always varied within traditional parameters of rhythm and form. The background vocal parts, however, were notated very precisely (Example 4, 4:32), so that I could remember how the vocal lines were divided into sections as the piece progressed, and how those subdivisions matched the chord progressions I composed. As far as I know, I was the only person in the ensemble who used the notation of the background vocal parts.

Example 4

Another place in which precise notation was necessary was the bassline that the electric bass and keyboard play together during the percussion solo (listen to Example 3, 1:30). Not only is this bassline very specific, but it is played in a different key each time it returns. These key changes are deliberately free from any pattern, and therefore had to be fully written out, without repeat signs. In addition, more repetitions of the bassline exist than are heard on the recording. This facilitates performance situations where the piece needs to be lengthened. The four bar cue out of the percussion solo results in the bass and piano playing the progression starting on B-flat, regardless of which key we were on immediately before. Because of the random key movement, the moment is more varied than what is usually found in background piano and bass accompaniments to percussion solos in Latin and American jazz styles, so the notation had to be more specific and demanded more space on the page, as shown in Example 5.

Example 5

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Score notation took a mapping role in the overall trajectory of the piece, much in the same way that it is used in jazz and salsa, but in this case, with even fewer notes and more flexibility. Without the map that the score provided, rehearsing and recording would have been very disorganized, because this map was what we referred to when translating between aural, lead-sheet, and scored methods of communication.

There was only one rehearsal before we recorded the piece. Each person learned the music in the way that he or she was most comfortable. I was the only one who used the score the whole time. The bass player preferred to use a lead sheet, two of the percussionists used no notation at all, and two of the percussionists referred to the score peripherally, but played mostly from memory.

At this moment, real-time translation between musical cultures became important. Bearing in mind that most of the musicians had substantial

Yemaya—Okuo and Other Songs *recording session*

parts of this music already memorized because of the traditions that they had been trained in, those who learn aurally learned their parts by listening to the examples played or sung by those of us who referred to the score. For them, the transmission of information was aural, as usual. At the same time, the bass player learned his part using a lead sheet, as he is accustomed to doing, and the rest of us used the score, more or less often, depending on our preferences. Each of us used the notation that we were comfortable with, in our own way.

The recording process was complicated, employing a mixture of gadgets, locations, and performance practices including multiple digital audio workstations, a handheld recorder, a small recording studio, click tracks, overdubbing, improvisation (musically and logistically), MIDI, sound libraries, and various other components. I'll save a detailed explanation of our recording experience for another time.

The last step was to revise the score to reflect what we actually recorded in the studio. For instance, I originally intended to comp during the bass solo, but during the recording session it became apparent that this was superfluous. Also, the way in which the piano ostinato at the end interacts with the drum parts is different than I had intended. Originally I had wanted the piano ostinato to line up rhythmically with the percussionists, but while recording I realized that this was not necessary, or even desirable, because of the rhythmically free nature of the piano cadenza beforehand.

This brings us to the version that you hear via the link provided at the beginning of this essay. Now that I have thought about the process of creating and notating this piece, my conclusion is that flexibility is key. In order to do a cross-cultural project like this, I had to be willing to move outside of my comfort zone and to reevaluate my definition of the "correct" way of learning and composing music. I also had to allow the piece to change during the production process, rather than be attached to a particular version, notated or otherwise. Most importantly, all of the musicians involved had to be open enough to respect each other's methods, which allowed us to translate and receive translation. That is to say, we were all flexible enough to cooperate.

Notating Across Cultures (cont.)

Notes

1. For more on Lucumí music, see: Kenneth Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmissions, Bonding and Creativity* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013) and Judith Gleason, "Notes on Two Sacred Afro-Cuban Songs in Contemporary Settings," *Research in African Literatures* 24: 3 (1993), 113–21.

2. See Larry Dunlap and Rebeca Mauleon-Santana, *The Latin Real Book* (Sher Music Co., 1997) and Carlos Campos, *Salsa and Afro-Cuban Montunos For Piano* (A.D.G. Productions, 1996).

3. For example, see Michael Spiro and Justin Hill, *Roadmap for the Oru Del Igbodu (Oru Seco)* (authors, 2012). For a more detailed example of the debate between use of cut and common time in Afro-Cuban Music, see Kevin Moore, *Beyond Salsa Piano* (Timba, 2009). Schweitzer, listed in footnote 1, uses a combination of methods.