

STUDIA INSTRUMENTORUM MUSICAE POPULARIS XVI
Tarptautinės tradicinės muzikos tarybos Liaudies muzikos instrumentų
tyrimų grupės XVI tarptautinės konferencijos straipsniai /
ICTM Study Group on Folk Musical Instruments
Proceedings from the 16th International Meeting

ISSN 1392–2831 Tautosakos darbai XXXII 2006

**“THE OLDER FOLKS USED TO FIDDLE AROUND
THE NOTES.” PLAYING THE VIOLIN
FOR TAMBRIN BANDS IN TOBAGO (WEST INDIES)**

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Subject: Folk dance music on the Caribbean Island of Tobago.

Purpose of study: To show how a concept of making music is challenged.

Method: Descriptive.

Keywords: Reinterpretation, musical change, folkdance music, Caribbean music, heritage.

The colonial history of Tobago began in the early 16th century. The island changed hands more than 30 times among the English, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the French until it became independent in 1962 to form a nation with its bigger sister island of Trinidad. In the 18th century a typical slave and sugar economy was established. More than 90 percent of the residents were slaves from Africa. Today, approximately the whole population is of African ancestry. Some of the musical genres performed on the island correspond to these historical backgrounds. Like other African American forms of expression they can be characterized with terms like syncretism and creolization (see Manuel 1996: 14–16). For the music of Tambrin¹ bands, a concept of playing together was developed during a process of reinterpreting European folkdance music styles to reveal similarities to musical constellations found in some West African cultures until today. Below I will try to show how that concept is challenged due to musical and contextual changes, and how the role of one instrument, the violin, proves to be of particular importance here. My perspective and interest in this issue results to some extent from my experiences in Ghana (West Africa), where I carried out fieldwork in 1993, 1997 and 2000. The material from Tobago was collected during two excursions in 1995 and 2005². The main part is comprised of video recordings made during arranged sessions, rehearsals, and concerts with the following groups:

The Rising Youth from the villages of Les Coteaux and Golden Lane (1995);
Tambrin group from Mont St. George (1995);

Pembroke Folk and Cultural Performers from Pembroke (1995)³;
The Unity Folk Group from Golden Lane (2005);
Sweet Fingers from Plymouth (2005);
The Professional's Cultural Group Culloden from Culloden (2005).

Ensemble and Repertoire

A Tambrin band normally includes five musicians playing three frame drums (the “tambrins”), one triangle and one violin or, more recently, sometimes a harmonica. The frame drums are heated by holding them over an open fire, thus allowing them to be tuned to different pitches before playing. They are called Cutter, Roler⁴ and Bass or Boom. The Cutter is tuned to the highest pitch. The drummer of the Cutter is the only one who varies his patterns possessing several playing techniques with open and muted strokes. The open ones are generally carried out with splayed fingers at the edge of the drum. Muted strokes are played rather in the middle, whereby the closed hand briefly remains on the membrane. The instrument is beaten with the fingertips. Faster patterns sometimes are executed with single alternating fingers. The other percussionists carry out equidistant beats, while the violinist repeats the melody of a folksong⁵, thus marking a kind of cycle. Since the violinist always begins to play first, he establishes the tempo of the music. The tunes are often characterized

The image displays a musical score for a reel titled "Call Me Mamma". The score is arranged in two systems, each with three staves. The top staff is for the Violin, the middle for the Cutter, and the bottom for the Boom. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 140. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The Violin part features a melody with various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and is marked with fingerings such as 5, 2, and 5. The Cutter part consists of a series of rhythmic strokes, with stems pointing up for open strokes and down for muted strokes. The Boom part provides a steady, equidistant beat with a simple rhythmic pattern. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a treble clef and a common time signature.

Example 1a. *Call Me Mamma*. Reel. Performed by the Tambrin band from Mont St. George. 1995. Here and in the following: For open strokes played on the drums the stems point up, for muted strokes the stems point down.

Example 1b. *Call Me Mamma* (variant). Reel. Performed by the Tambrin band from Mont St. George. 1995

by a steady change of binary and ternary divisions of the beat marked by the Boom. The interplay of the Cutter and the violin also leads to 2 : 3 constellations very often (examples 1a, 1b and 2). As Rebecca S. Miller reports, a related dance music style with similar rhythmic constellations can be found on the neighbouring island of Carriaco which belongs to Grenada. The musicians there accompany quadrille dances with a violin, tambourine, triangle and one deep sounding cylindrical drum. However, this kind of music has become rare (Miller 2005).

The Tambrin musicians in Tobago accompany different dances with European or Latin American names like jig, reel, castilian, quadrill (in Tobago: “cagedrill”), marsh, and paseo⁶ (pasillo, in Tobago: “pasa”). The jig and the reel are the most important ones and make up more than 90 percent of the repertoire. They both are couple dances with many spins and steps corresponding to the patterns played by the drummer of the Cutter. The reel is performed at a faster tempo, while the jig proceeds in a more laid back fashion. Different to the jig, where every second beat of the Boom is often accentuated by the dancers (e.g. with a circular movement of one foot), the reel is mostly done with fast, short steps. The analogical difference is the respective structure of the tunes played on the violin. The melodic phrases for the jig frequently comprise two beats of the Boom with an accent on the first beat (example 2) while those for the reel are generally longer.

Example 2. *Come Let Meh Tell You This* (first half of the tune). Jig.
 Performed by *The Professional's Cultural Group Culloden*. 2005

Engagements

Traditionally the music is heard at weddings and during healing ceremonies where certain “gifted” people fall into a trance while dancing and call up or drive out ancestor spirits. Since I was not able to join such a rite during my trips to Tobago, I would like to add here the descriptions of some musicians. The drummer Prince Williams from Les Coteaux tells about a ceremony at the beginning of the 1990s:

I have a cousin. It is still alive, we still do that. Once they went to help a sick woman. And I think the doctor gave up the woman saying: You will die. They said that the woman have had some spirit. So they called for a dance to help the woman. And he went and helped the woman. Now the house that we gave the dance is about 12 feet high. And when he caught that spirit, the spirit comes within him. He didn't pass by the front door. He jumped through the window of the house, 12 feet high (Interview from March 1995).

Rawl Titus, violinist from Mont St. George reports:

This was in Golden Lane, there was this guy who was about eleven years old. And at about age five he lost his ability to walk. I don't want to say became crippled because he could walk with crutches. And he came to the reel dance, his parents brought him to the reel dance and the gentleman who was in charge of the reel dance was dancing and he went

off into a trance – it was a long trance. He was in a trance for about half an hour before he eventually spoke. And when he spoke he told them to bring the boy. They made the guy to lay flat on the ground and they struck him with what we call a broom. And they hit him with the broom a couple of times and eventually the other guy got up who was in the trance and was dancing around him and told the little boy to get up and dance. And he got up and danced. The people were scared, they run from the place. But the little boy walked after that. I saw that happen (Interview from March 1995).

Sometimes people fall into a trance during a wedding, as vividly told by the drummers Lloyd “Dakota” Turner and Peter Caterson also from Mont St. George:

Turner:

There was a young lady who went to this wedding on Saturday morning, Friday night, and when I started to play tambourin she just got up and started to flatter like a fowl. <...> She jumped on the ground and started to flatter, right, and she started to talk certain things and a fellow came and took her up and moved her out. But before that, she came and sit on my leg. I played the tambourin and she came and sat down here. I said: “Trouble tonight!” I started: “Ah, me Roler, Roler give me!”

Caterson:

I was the Roler and I gave her the backbeat. She left his leg and she walked on her back through the fire. There was a fire on the fireside; she passed straight to the burning fire. She walked on her back, climbing the stairs. <...> When I saw that, I said: “Yes, this is it” (Interview from March 2005)⁷.

By 1995, healing ceremonies had become rare, and the musician groups were hardly engaged for weddings since most of the young people preferred DJ-music. Sometimes Tambrin bands were invited to play in beach hotels. Hotel managers, however, preferred to engage percussion groups with big, deep sounding drums or steelbands, which possibly correspond more to tourists’ preconceived notions about Caribbean music. Thus there were hardly any chances for the groups to perform, apart from folklore festivals organized by the state – the most important of which is the annual Tobago Heritage Festival.

Changing Sounds

Only three violin players who could perform for Tambrin bands had remained on the island in 1995, Rawl Titus from Mont St. George, Van Dyke Bailey from Les Coteaux and George Charles who played for the *Pembroke Folk and Cultural Performers*. I made recordings with the groups of Charles and Titus. Their styles of playing were not very clean in the European sense, and were characterized by individual techniques. Rawl Titus for instance always played close to the bridge of his instrument, pressing the strings strongly. The resulting scratching sound was low and drowned out by the drums. Charles’ style sounded similar although he—in contrast to Titus – frequently produced glissandi and suspended notes. Both musicians pressed their instruments against the upper chest while playing.

When I came to Tobago in 2005 George Charles and Van Dyke Bailey had died and Rawl Titus had left for Trinidad⁸. However, some new groups had come on the



Tambrin Band from Mont St. George. 1995

scene, and there were three new violin players around. Two of them, Seon Forde and Gary Cooper, belong to families where Tambrin music has been played for generations. Seon Ford, from the village of Culloden, performs together with his brothers, sisters and parents. Gary Cooper, from Golden Lane, has formed the “Unity Folk Group” with his wife Ursula and his children. In 1995 the family belonged to the Tambrin band “Rising Youth” where Gary Cooper played harmonica. A third violinist, Lawrence “Wax” Crook, is an all-around musician playing gospel, folk and steelpan music. He and Cooper had attended violin classes organized by the state Cultural Comitee which were held in Scarborough, the island’s capital.

“We had to sustain culture, the indigenous music, Tambrin music. So I had no other choice but was to fall in and do a thing with the violin”, Lawrence Crook said in an interview and added:

What was taught basically was to utilize the bow and the fingering and I took myself and I did the rest <...>. The class was about three months. We had classes twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays (Interview from February 2005).

Accordingly, they both freely used the “classical” bowing techniques and they placed the instrument under the chin while playing as it is taught by “classically” trained musicians. Compared to 1995, the sound had changed. The melody lines were more dominant and much cleaner. The musicians were aware of this change. “I want a cleaner sound”, said Gary Cooper and Lawrence Crooks added:

The older folks used to fiddle around the notes. <...> I am more precise in the playing. I try to give the notes for note (Interview from February 2005).

Seon Ford did not attend classes but learned from the late Van Dyke Bailey, thus his playing techniques differ. He presses the instrument against the upper arm or the upper chest and has to move the instrument to play the different strings (as the older musicians did). Anyhow, he also has a much cleaner sound compared to the recordings from 1995. His tunes, like those of the other new violinists, always come to the fore just as the violin is mixed into the foreground when the music is amplified electrically at concerts and at studio recordings made by some of the groups⁹.

A Changing Concept

The stronger dominance of the violin not only changes the sound, but a whole principle of music making. Traditionally the Cutter was considered the lead instrument, which manifested itself in the music and was confirmed by musicians I talked to in 1995¹⁰. This corresponds to the position of the so called “master drummers” of many percussion ensembles in African cultures. The master drummer is the one who changes his patterns. Most of the other musicians, if not all of them, strike more or less obstinate figures or equidistant beats. In a variety of West African areas, among others in Ghana and in the West Sudan Region, percussion is combined with singing. In many cases there are certain songs for certain combinations of drum patterns. A song may prompt the drummers to play a rhythm. In the course of the performance the singing often fades into the background (see Meyer 2005: 35; Polak 2004: 94). In Tambrin music, the role of the melodies is traditionally similar. “You have the tunes from long ago that suit the tambrin”, explained the drummer Lloyd Turner who played together with Rawl Titus in 1995 (Interview from March 2005). According to Wendell Berkley from the *Pembroke Folk and Cultural Performers*, the tunes are regarded as “fills” (Interview from March 1995). The changes in Tambrin music can be interpreted as a kind of departure from a way of playing together, which is related to musical concepts from Africa. Today the violin part attracts the same attention as the drumming, and the lead drummers sometimes vary their playing a bit diffidently and less multifariously. Clime Forde for instance, Seon Forde’s brother, who plays the Cutter for the group from Culloden, seems to try not to be too loud while striking the drum and his playing style recorded in 2005 is more static compared to the drumming of 1995. Then Lloyd Turner e.g. not only varied his patterns in many ways but also added more or less autonomous material which brought in new rhythmical tensions.

The changes, and above all their consequences can hardly be explained by the fact, that some of the new violin players received “classical” training. More important is that – although the belief in spirits is still strong¹¹, the groups hardly ever play in the traditional contexts. During a healing ceremony and also on weddings, they have to play two hours and even more without a pause. Most of the interaction takes place between the dancers and the drummers. At a festival where the bands



Violin player Seon Forde from Culloden. 2005

predominantly perform today, one piece is hardly longer than three or four minutes. The dancers belong to a group, and the choreographed dances are part of the performance. The public just listens and watches. One can imagine that in a context like this, a western educated audience pays more attention to the tunes than the people attending a healing ceremony. Furthermore there are prizes to win during a festival, and there are judges who look for the different features of the performance. A low scratching sound might not satisfy their aesthetic claims. Finally, another circumstance significant for the changes seems quite paradoxical; the violin is considered traditional. As mentioned before, due to the lack of violinists, harmonicas sometimes replace the instrument, and this is not embraced by purists. The violin is an “indigenous sign” one drummer told me (Peter Caterson, Interview from March 2005). That is why the demand for violin players is high. Laurence Crook, for instance, although a member of the Tambrin band called “Sweet Finger”, is often invited to play violin with other musicians who normally use the harmonica, since those who want to engage them demand a violin (Laurence Crook, Interview from March 2005). The violin is considered an instrument which is hard to learn. Thus all members of the “Unity Folk Group”, Ursula Cooper told me, are able to play the leading drum, but only her husband plays the violin (Interview from February 2005). This changes the hierarchy within the ensemble. Accordingly, Seon Ford describes his musical development within the group from Culloden as follows:

Basically the inspiration for playing this music as a young person, right, is you grow up in this folk group, first I was a dancer and then, you know, it is like a graduation thing, we move from one stage to the next stage. We start to play the music, first the tambrin, and then we had the need for violinists, so I took up the job, took up the role and started playing the violin (Interview from March 2005).

It is hardly a coincidence that the rising reputation of the instrument comes along with its rising predominance in the music. Thus it appears that innovations occur despite, and perhaps because of, ideas of preserving the tradition and somewhat puristical attitudes.

Conclusion

In her article on *Sounds of Sensibility* the American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett distinguishes music that is part and parcel of a way of life from music which has been singled out for preservation, protec-

tion, enshrinement, and revival. For the latter she uses the term heritage music (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 52). Heritage, she writes elsewhere, is created through a process of exhibition (e.g. as performance) and is producing something new (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 369–370). Tambrin music in Tobago apparently has turned into heritage music. “Exhibited” at folklore festivals, it has changed according to the concert conditions and the expectations of western educated listeners. Ideas of authenticity adapt themselves to the new setting. Musical features thus can be transformed and yet considered genuine. The process of contextual changes was developing already in 1995 and probably a long time before that. However, in 1995 the genre was still in the hands of musicians who were strongly associated with the old ways of performing. It was left to the young people to fulfil the musical transformation.

NOTES

¹ Tobagonian spelling of “tambourine”.

² The collection from 1995 is kept at the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv under VII VS 0131 and VII VB 0249, the collection from 2005 at the private archive of the author.

³ This group not only performed Tambrin music but also other percussion music styles and string band music.

⁴ The terms “Cutter” and “Roler” can also be used for the respective musicians.

⁵ Some of the songs can be found in a collection of folksongs from Tobago collected by J. D. Elder (Elder: 1994).

⁶ In Trinidad and Tobago normally an adaption of calypso.

⁷ Translated from Caribbean English into Standard English by the author.

⁸ In 1995 Rawl Titus was a schoolmaster. Since then, he has made an outstanding politically carrier eventually becoming the Vice-President of the Senate of Trinidad & Tobago.

⁹ Gary Cooper’s group for instance produced a CD entitled „Unity Folk Group – Tambrin Music” which is distributed privately.

¹⁰ For instance by Rawl Titus and Wendell Berkley, leader of the group from Pembroke. Interviews from March 1995.

¹¹ According to many musicians I talked to. Hence it is common to pour libation to the ancestors before playing until today.

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**„SENESNI ŽMONĖS GRIEŽDAVO NEPATAIKYDAMI Į TONĄ.“
SMUIKO MUZIKA TOBAGO (VEST INDIJA)
TAMBŪRINŲ ANSAMBLIUOSE**

ANDREAS MEYER

Santrauka

Tambūrinių ansamblių muzika Karibų jūros Tobago saloje buvo kuriama kaip savotiška Europos liaudies šokių muzikos stilių reinterpretacija. Tradiciškai ji būdavo atliekama per vestuves ir gydymo apeigas. Paprastai grupę sudaro penki muzikantai, grojantys trejetu oda aptemptų būgnelių – „tambūrinų“ (taip čionykšte kalba vadinami tambūrinai), smuiku ir trikampiū. Vienas iš būgnininkų tradiciškai laikomas pagrindiniu. Jis vienintelis gali įvairiais būdais varijuoti mušamą ritmą. Savo funkcijomis šis atlikėjas gerokai primena vyriausiąjį būgnininką Vakarų Afrikos mušamųjų ansambliuose. Smuikininkas paprastai atkartoja liaudies dainos melodiją, šitokiu būdu pažymėdamas savotišką ciklą. Pastaruoju metu smuiko vaidmuo pasidarė daug svarbesnis, ir melodija visada išskyla į pirmą vietą. Tai ne tik keičia muzikos skambėjimą. Šį pokytį galima suprasti ir kaip atitolimą nuo kolektyvinio grojimo būdo, susijusio su afrikietiška muzikos samprata. Be muzikinių pokyčių, į akis krinta ir tai, kad mūsų dienomis grupės retai kada begroja tradicinėmis progomis. Dažniausiai jos muzikuoja folkloro festivalių metu.

Gauta 2006-06-19