Musica Reservata: Two Initiatory Chants for the Vòdún Worship Society in Benin

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Abstract

Rouget analyzes the recordings of two pieces for *vòdún* initiation ceremonies for the deities of Xevyòsò (thunder and lightning) and Sakpàtá (the Earth), which he recorded near Porto Novo, Benin (formerly Dahomey), in 1958 and 1969, respectively. These pieces are performed in great secrecy and differ significantly in form and style from the drumming, dancing, and singing performed for the public “coming-out” ceremonies at the end of the initiates’ period of seclusion. Using staff and sonogram transcriptions, Rouget focuses on melodic and strophic repetition, as well as the function of chromaticism, a rarity in African music. These pieces reflect how the initiates move from a state of “dispossession,” or self-alienation, which the author chronicles in his photographs, before they are symbolically reborn in the public portion of the ceremony. Rouget argues for the pieces’ status as sacred works of art, originating from before colonization, that are worthy of aesthetic appreciation.

Citation: Rouget, Gilbert. *Musica Reservata: Two Initiatory Chants for the Vòdún Worship Society in Benin*. Translated by Cari Friesen. *Ethnomusicology Translations*, no. 12.

Bloomington, IN: Society for Ethnomusicology, 2021.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14434/emt.No.12.33064>

Originally published in French as *Musica Reservata. Deux chants initiatiques pour le culte des vòdoun au Bénin*. Paris: Palais de l’Institut, 2006.

Gilbert Rouget (1916-2017) was a French ethnomusicologist, honorary director of the CNRS, and former director of the Musée de l’Homme who specialized in the music and ritual practices of Benin Republic (formerly Dahomey). He received his doctorate in 1980 from the Université Paris X Nanterre, with his thesis *La musique et la transe. Esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession*, which was published in English in 1985 as *Music and Trance*. Rouget’s career at the Musée de l’Homme began during World War II, when he

worked with André Schaeffner on musical instruments in the Department of Musical Ethnology. With this began his lifelong devotion to the techniques and analysis of sound recording, particularly in the study of non-Western music, and, as time went on, with the pairing of sound and photographic image. Rouget was the initial creator of the sound archives at the Musée de l'Homme, beginning in 1947. He embarked on many major missions to Africa, first the Ouegè-Congo mission in 1952, and then, between 1956 and 1987, to Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, and Benin, this last of which became the subject of a more prolonged interest and many return trips. Many recognize Rouget to be the founder of French ethnomusicology, giving credit to his creation of the Laboratory of Ethnomusicology at Musée de l'Homme in 1968. Rouget's research extended into several key methodological and theoretical areas, including repetition and paradigmatic analysis, innovations in transcription and other visual representations of musical experience, melody and chromaticism, drum languages and music perception, relations between music and possession, and the nature of musical history and memory in Africa. He remained committed throughout his career to grounding his research in empirical observation, recorded through attentive note taking and sound recording. Many of his most important publications emerged later in his life and were based on fieldwork he had conducted in Benin in the 1950s and 60s, refracted through decades of reflection and study. For example, *Un Roi Africain et Sa Musique du Cour* (1996) describes and analyzes the ritual and historical significance of musical genres like *adjogan* that are particular to the Porto Novian royal court in Benin. *Initiatique Vòdoun. Images du Rituel* (2001) combines Rouget's photographs of rituals for the *vodun* deities Xevyòsò and Sakpàtá with audio recordings, descriptive analysis, and transcriptions to present a rich, multi-sensory account of these initiations and their associated songs, thanksgivings, and prayers. His last publication, *Afrique Musiquante* (2014), is a collection of vivid photographs and analytical descriptions from Rouget's travels throughout Africa, going back to the 1950s.

Cari Friesen recently completed a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, and is currently based in Edmonton, Alberta. Her dissertation focused on the intersection of music, religion, and identity in Burkina Faso, exploring issues of connectedness expressed in the musical practices of the Burkinabé Mennonite Church. Her current research, which also thematizes community music-making, focuses on community choirs that deliberately reach out to immigrants, refugees, and other newcomers to Canada.

Manuscript Editor's Introduction (with Translator's Introduction)—Sarah Politz

English-language readers in ethnomusicology are likely most familiar with Gilbert Rouget's *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession*, published in English in 1985. Or perhaps readers will have come across his excellent article "Court Songs and Traditional History in the Ancient Kingdoms of Porto-Novo and Abomey," in Klaus Wachsmann's edited collection *Essays on Music and History in Africa* (1971). This new

translation offers a window into many of Rouget's larger theoretical interests, although relative to the depth of his bibliography, it remains a snapshot (an appropriate image for the visually oriented ethnographer-phonographer-photographer). This article reveals, for example, Rouget's long-standing interests in paradigmatic analytical techniques; meticulous listening and recording; and sustained, intense attention to the specificities of musical experience and performance. This Rouget is better known to readers in French, who count among his many important contributions to the ethnomusicological literature on musical transcription and analysis such essays as "Transcrire ou Decrire? Chant Soudanais et Chant Fuégien" [To Transcribe or to Describe? Sudanese and Fuegian Song] (1970) and "La Répétition Comme Universel du Langage Musical. À propos d'un Chant Initiatique Béninois" [Repetition as a Universal Musical Language: An Initiation Song of Benin] (1990). One sees in this article, too, Rouget's attention to the potential for universals in music as a form of art, in counterpoint with an appreciation for music's ritual and spiritual functions, themes that appear throughout his work in different ways. His ongoing interest in musical structure is expressed here in the analysis of melodic repetition and chromaticism, while he continues his focus on the theoretical and perceptual implications of the visual representation of music in multiple visual formats, from staff notation to sonograms to vivid field photographs.

Musica Reservata was originally delivered orally as a talk in 2005 (and later revised for publication in 2006) at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris, for an audience of French scholars of art, as well as Beninese dignitaries. This setting provides some context for the conversational nature of the writing, and for the emphasis Rouget places on the status of the Beninese initiation songs as art through a consideration of their beauty and structure. These aesthetic positions of artistic and cultural uplift would have resonated with his listeners.

In several places in his address, Rouget pushes back explicitly against the trends of the preceding two decades in Anglophone ethnomusicology; for example, the move away from the use of staff notation, the critique of structuralism, a resistance to making aesthetic value judgments, and a postmodern view of musical meaning. He prefers the search for universals to most forms of cultural relativism. His approach is comparative in the broadest sense as he draws parallels between the initiation songs and the music of Bach and Stravinsky, for example. And yet his line of argument aligns in intriguing ways with contemporary thinking on performativity, musical experience and perception, and embodied technique. At times, when he struggles to convey in words the immediacy of his own experience (his "taste," as he calls it), he directs the reader to listen to the recordings while following the movement of the transcription's contour "with your eyes and heart as one does a Zen diagram [i.e. a mandala]." In these moments, Rouget offers the reader a glimpse into his own private world of intense, detail-oriented focus, and the connections he was able to form through joining his senses of sight and sound.

The document will be useful to present and future generations of readers interested in the religious traditions of Benin and its historical and contemporary diasporas, as well as to those working with techniques of analysis and transcription and theories of musical repetition, melody, and aesthetics. The "reserved" status of the music analyzed here makes it unfamiliar to many

contemporary Beninese musicians, who, unless they or their family members have been initiated, are typically more familiar with the public portions of the musical repertoire for the *vòdún* which feature drumming and dancing, and it is these styles that they have adapted and transformed in Benin's popular brass band and jazz genres. It is my hope that a copy of the French version of this publication and the recordings be added to the library at the French Cultural Center in Cotonou so that Beninese listeners may have access to it as well.

A word about the CD recordings that accompany Rouget's French print version of *Musica Reservata* is necessary here. As the author notes in the text, due to the sacred nature of the two initiation songs, those in charge of the *vòdún* societies in question placed a set of conditions on their recordings, that they not be circulated or broadcast for any commercial purpose, but only for cultural, educational, or academic use. The recordings in this publication have thus been available for listening only in those select libraries that hold a copy of the folio and CD in their collections. Since Rouget's passing in 2017, his family has maintained his wishes and those of the *vòdún* societies in limiting the dissemination of the recordings and has requested that they not be distributed via the internet. The original recordings remain available for library users at, for example, Harvard University, Indiana University, the New York Public Library, University of Texas-Austin, the International Library of African Music at Rhodes University (South Africa), the Institut d'Ethnologie in Geneva, and, in France, at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Musée du Quai Branly, which now houses the collections of the old Musée de l'Homme. They are a central part of Rouget's scholarly contribution in this article, and are well worth a listen.

The translation of the article from French to English came with a few technical challenges, aptly navigated by Cari Friesen. Rouget's writing style in French is fluid but complex, and in English results in many long, multi-part sentences which have in some cases been broken up for readability without losing the author's meaning. The language is also technical in places; a good example is in Rouget's distinction between "une strophe" (a strophe) and "une stance" (a stanza), pointing out the fine distinction in the uniformity (strophe) or non-uniformity (stance) of the units of repetition in the two initiation songs. We maintained a preference for true cognates, as in the case of Rouget's "réprise," while avoiding their use in cases where they would obscure more of the author's intent than they reveal.

Another consideration was in the choice to write the Fon-language words, which Rouget writes using French phonetic spellings, using their now more standardized spellings according to the International Phonetic Alphabet. All spellings are those used in the *Dictionnaire Fon-Français* compiled by Hildegard Höftmann and Michel Ahohounkpanzon (2003). This was a complex choice, as the IPA spellings, while preferred by most Beninese scholars, are unevenly employed in everyday written Fon, and many Beninese people are more familiar with the French spellings. Our goal was to provide a spelling that conveyed as accurately as possible the pronunciation of the words for an international audience, and not to accept uncritically the influence of French spelling and grammar on the Fon language.

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Musica Reservata: Two Initiatory Chants for the Vòdún Worship Society in Benin

by Gilbert Rouget
Translated by Cari Friesen

Acknowledgments

Naturally, my acknowledgements go to the Académie des Beaux-Arts and to their Permanent Secretary, Arnaud d'Hauterives, for honoring me with the invitation to present this paper (at the suggestion of François-Bernard Mâche). I also thank them for providing me the opportunity to publish this in its current form. In keeping with the conditions set by those in charge of the *vòdún* worship societies, the present recordings will have limited distribution, and they will be made available purely for cultural objectives and solely for non-commercial purposes.

May their Excellencies Mr. Edgar-Yves Monnou, ambassador of the Republic of Benin in France, and Mr. Babalola Olabiya Yai, Benin's ambassador delegate to UNESCO, also be profusely thanked for the honor and the pleasure they have given me by coming to listen to me.

Finally, my thanks go to my colleagues and friends of the *Laboratoire d'ethnomusicologie du Musée de l'Homme* and of CNRS. Thanks to their effective collaboration, after nearly fifty years I am now seeing this work through to its conclusion in its present form.

Musica Reservata **Two Initiatory Chants for the Vòdún Worship Society in Benin**

by
Gilbert Rouget
Session on October 26, 2005

The aim of this presentation is to share the recordings of two sung pieces, revealing a whole aspect of the vocal art of Black Africa that has until now, for various reasons, remained extremely little-known.¹ In the prestigious setting of the Institute, and in the presence of the two ambassadors – one in France and the other to UNESCO – each representing the African country from which they originate, I express my wish that this paper will help promote this art form and affirm its pride of place in the landscape of humanity's musical heritage.

In Benin (formerly Dahomey; before that the Slave Coast), the *vòdún*² are divinities of one of the two traditional religions that share the south and center of the country.³ The worship society of the *vòdún* recently required that their new recruits, mostly adolescents or even children, begin by enduring a very long initiation. Nowadays these rites of initiation have been abbreviated a great deal. But four decades ago when the present recordings were made, the rites would stretch on for a year if not longer, no matter which of the *vòdún* were involved.

Throughout their initiation, the novices (mostly girls) were kept completely separate from the rest of society. They lived together in a state of total seclusion under the direction of religious leaders (men and women). In this isolated state, to what did they devote (and still devote, however briefly) the majority of their time? To singing and dancing.

Their musico-choreographical repertoire contains many distinct genres. Three such genres consist of a cappella songs: First are the "thanksgiving songs," which can be long or short; second are the "collection chants;" and the last ones I would call "walking chants," as that is their function (if they have a name, I am unaware of it).⁴

The "long thanksgivings" (i.e. the thanksgiving songs of the long type)⁵ are remarkable for their composition, which results from a very elaborate dialectic of recurrence and non-recurrence. They are "long" in the sense that they characteristically last almost twelve minutes and are always sung multiple times in succession.⁶ Long thanksgivings are peculiar in being performed in a bent-over position that is very unsuitable for singing—a matter to which we will return. During the entire period of seclusion, these long thanksgivings are repeated morning and evening for three out of the four days.⁷ They are memorized religiously (literally and figuratively) and performed by the group with one voice in the most perfect manner possible. The initiates will eventually sing these songs during the initiation and at the grand release-from-seclusion ceremonies that mark its end. After the newly initiated have returned to everyday life they must never sing these songs again, lest they be guilty of committing sacrilege. Let us add that in everyday life no one, whether initiate or not, would ever think of singing or even humming this genre of song. It would be tantamount to blasphemy.

These facts give rise to the title of this presentation, *musica reservata*.⁸ we will be dealing with a rigorously "reserved" form of music. But I'd like to point out, before going further, that an entire section of the musico-choreographical repertoire learned by the novices during their seclusion is not *reservata*, but *vulgaris*. I am speaking here of the dances that the novices learn to perform during the ceremonies that conclude the initiation (the release ceremonies). These are performed to the accompaniment of instrumental music provided by professional musicians. These latter dances return in the annual *vòdún* festival, a large public ritual in which all the adepts participate.

The two long thanksgivings on which this paper focuses are those of two worship societies: 1) that of Xevyòsò, the Thunderstorm divinity, also called "*vòdún* from above," and 2) that of Sakpàtá, the Earth divinity, "*vòdún* from below."⁹ Xevyòsò and Sakpàtá along with a third, Dàn (the Serpent), are the deities most abundantly represented in the regional pantheon. The two songs under discussion were both recorded in the surroundings of Porto-Novo, on November 2, 1958, and January 31, 1969, respectively.

Long Thanksgiving Chants

Xevyòsò: Circumstances of Discovery

In 1958, I was staying in Dahomey with the goal of continuing my study of court music in Porto-Novo, which I had begun six years earlier. On this occasion, I took up research on a

musical instrument that had been described to me in Paris by a Dahomean friend, Joseph Akondé, a chauffeur for the embassy. In his free time, Akondé helped me decipher the cryptic texts sung by the king's wives¹⁰ and familiarize myself with the tones of his language, which I was beginning to learn. The instrument in question was obviously a pit xylophone, but it seemed to him to be exceptionally large and consequently worth our attention. Having learned that this instrument was only used during the grand ceremonies in honor of Xevyòsò, the thunderstorm *vòdún*, I went in search of a “convent” dedicated to this society.¹¹ There was a renowned one near Porto-Novo. The king Gbèfa facilitated my entry. The leaders of the worship society (the *vòdúnnɔ*) welcomed me warmly, expressed willingness to teach me, and promised to show me the instrument. Several days later, our first work session devoted to this xylophone was finished and the sun was setting on the convent, a place wonderfully serene and of great beauty, dominated by a gigantic tree where innumerable birds nested. As I was leaving, I was suddenly struck by the sound of extraordinary music, pinning me in place, dumbfounded. Whence came these voices of unseen children? What was this purely a cappella song, whose melismas sung in unison by the choir brought to mind a kind of plain-chant totally unheard-of in Africa? I remained still for a long time, listening, but something undefinable made me feel like I was intruding, so I slipped away. I asked myself whether there might be, by some chance, a Benedictine convent in the area. Yésoufou Mashoudi, my faithful interpreter and friend who accompanied me (and without whom I never could have spoken with the *vòdúnnɔ*), set me straight immediately. Without the slightest hesitation, he told me that the worship society's novices, secluded in the cloister of the convent, intone this song morning and evening in honor of their deity.

Returning several days later, and naturally eager to record the song, I obtained authorization from the *vòdúnnɔ* to record it, with the express condition that in no instance would I try to see the singers. “Come tomorrow,” he told me. It was agreed that the microphone would be hung by Mashoudi at the top of the enclosure behind which, completely hidden from my sight, the novices would be located for singing. This is what occurred. What the novices began to sing now was, owing to its chromaticism, very different from what I'd heard the first time. All seemed to be going well when, after only half a minute had passed, the song abruptly ended. Surprised, disappointed, I queried the *vòdúnnɔ* with a look. “Didn't you hear? This night Xevyòsò raises his voice,” he told me. It came to me, vaguely, that the night had been stormy and it had thundered. I said, “Ok, and?” and he replied, as if it were obvious: “So, no thanksgivings.” At that moment, I confess, I had the strong impression that I was being mocked. “Return tomorrow,” he continued very cordially. This I did, naturally feeling a bit anxious but with a renewed sense of hope. This time everything went wonderfully, except that the novices began to sing before the microphone was ready.¹² To maximize recording time, I had taken the precaution of fitting my Nagra out with a large reel of ultra-fine magnetic tape and setting it to record at half-speed.¹³ Well done! The novices sang (superbly!) for an hour and ten minutes in all, with five brief interruptions of a dozen seconds each at regular intervals. For certain reasons which, while dramatic enough, are too long to relate here, I was never able to hear them again.

Let me add that their large, end-of-seclusion ceremony only happened after my return to France, and in consequence, I never saw this either.

Six short years later, in August 1966, I was again given the opportunity to hear and record some long thanksgivings chants, again sung as offerings to Xɛvyòsò, but this time in a completely different place and in a totally different context. The ritual was held in a tiny hamlet in the middle of nowhere, which was dependent on a small neighboring kingdom.¹⁴ The only people living there were the male and female guardians of the worship society who were in charge of the group of novices undergoing initiation. The isolation of this hamlet, which no one came to visit, served as the place of seclusion and made it unnecessary for the novices to be concealed in an enclosure while they carried out their thanksgivings. This is what allowed me to see and photograph them while making recordings (see page 13). It was a completely extraordinary situation and which, as far as I'm concerned, never happened again. Only these documents affirm that the novices perform their long thanksgivings bending tightly forward throughout their period of seclusion—lying with their noses in the dust just as they do during their grand coming-out ceremony. There were nine novices varying greatly in age; the group was composed of eight (young) women at least one of whom was very obviously pregnant, and one young boy under ten years old.

Let me quickly note that their long thanksgiving song, which I had the chance to record once in the morning and four times in the evening, was significantly shorter—about two and a half minutes on average—than those of Xɛvyòsò discussed above.¹⁵ They were also incomparably less well sung. That said, they were no less interesting. To it were added several small pieces—short thanksgiving songs—very representative of a certain chromaticism specific to the initiatory repertoire, to which we will return later.

Sàkpàtá: Circumstances of Recording

Since Sàkpàtá has been perhaps the most abundantly represented deity of all the *vòdún* in Benin, I had many opportunities to attend his initiates' coming-out ceremonies,¹⁶ but I had to wait until 1969—eleven years after attending one for Xɛvyòsò—to have the opportunity to record his long thanksgiving songs. Again, it was not possible for me to see the initiates while they sang, as they were totally concealed in "the secret enclosure" near the sanctuary housing the *vòdún*. It was evening by the time they came out from seclusion. Thanks again to King Gbèfa, I had obtained permission to record their two long thanksgiving songs—identical, as it so happens—one for the morning and one for the evening. They sang each of them with two reprises separated by a brief interruption.¹⁷ The style of this long thanksgiving turned out to be totally different from that for Xɛvyòsò, but its length was almost the same—about 12 minutes—and, as we will shortly see, its composition was determined by a similar principle.

I might add that listening to this thanksgiving was as much of a complete surprise and also as moving as it was eleven years earlier when I heard the thanksgiving for Xɛvyòsò. On page 17 you will find a very subjective attempt to describe what this new discovery did for me.

In contrast with what happened for Xevyòsò, this time I was allowed to attend these novices' coming out of seclusion (see page 14).¹⁸ It was a powerful moment of emotion for all the villagers, who had heard nothing from the novices since their entry into the convent and were anxious to see them. There were eleven novices. One of them, dressed in white unlike all the others who were dressed in red, was not an initiate of Sàkpàtá but of Lisa, a *vòdún* of a related but different origin. Again, they were of varied ages and only one of them was a boy. He played an important role in their first grand outing in public; a marvelous dancer, he's the one who "opened the road."¹⁹

Dear Reader, allow me to advise you to proceed without further ado and listen to this book's associated recordings on CD [included with this book in the original print version], wherein lies the essence of this publication. The pages above have provided the contextual information needed to approach this music and the photographs on pages 13 and 14 present several images of people actually performing the music. The two transcriptions on facing pages (15-16) make it possible to follow these two thanksgiving songs as they are sung. The musical enjoyment you are bound to experience (we will return to it later) will help inform your reading of the subsequent pages. A word needs to be said about these transcriptions, however, as the current fashion tends to cast doubt on not only the usefulness, but also the validity of this type of representation of musical activity.²⁰

These transcriptions constitute the last stage of a very meaningful sequence of transformations²¹ and have no other purpose than to permit listeners to know (and to say) where they are, to locate themselves temporally in these two pieces of music, to imagine the music's architecture, to compare the pieces one to the other with precision, and to see exactly what my remarks reference.

Composition of the Long Thanksgiving Chants

For Xevyòsò

On November 2, 1958, the day it was recorded, the long thanksgiving song addressed to Xevyòsò consisted of five identical repetitions of the same sung piece (I presume but cannot confirm that this is the norm). This was then followed by a sixth slightly shorter piece that takes up the same two types of components but combines them quite differently. For the moment, we will set aside discussion of the sixth piece.²²

The five reprises of this long thanksgiving were composed identically, as noted, of two parts [I and II] differing greatly in length. The first reprise [I] is made up of a series of sixteen strophes preceded by an introduction [i] (namely, the refrain) and concludes with the return to this introduction, in other words, with a da capo [d.c.] section. The second reprise [II] consists of a very brief series of three short phrases that are more rhythmic than melodic, followed by a return of the first strophe of [I].

The piece forming track 1 of the CD is the fifth reprise of this very long series and naturally presents the two successive parts, long and short. However, the musical transcription

(page 15) only reproduces the first part [I]—the long part—in view of our objective, which is to easily compare it with the long thanksgiving song of Sàkpàtá.

Immediately evident in this thanksgiving song's structure is the use of two complementary constituents, [A] and [B], which differ melodically and rhythmically, and alternate systematically between two tempi. Aside from three partial variants, [A] is strictly repetitive, let us call it the refrain; [B], by contrast, appears differently each time, let us call it the melody. As the refrain and melody always alternate and this form recurs throughout the sequence, we say that the refrain-melody unit is a strophe. But we will say that the melody [B] is not a strophe [*une strophe*] (a term that connotes, precisely, the idea of return) because it changes after each return of the refrain; rather, we will call it a stanza [*une stance*]. In other words, each stanza appears as a melodic constituent [of the strophe], a “unit of non-recurrence,” compared to the others. In addition, [A] the refrain has the peculiarity of being, on the one hand, the component with which the reprise opens and closes, and on the other, of always preceding [B] the stanza. Reprises 1 to 5 have all been constructed from the same series of sixteen strophes (reprise 3 had seventeen), each strophe made up of this refrain-stanza unit. [Editor's note: It is unclear why Rouget states this, having indicated earlier that reprise 2 is constructed differently.]

For Sàkpàtá

The second of our two long thanksgiving songs, the one addressed to Sàkpàtá, was fortunately recorded twice, once in the morning and once in the evening. Each performance consisted of the same song repeated twice in a row, in an identical fashion.²³ Although this thanksgiving song was roughly the same length as the one for Xevyòsò, it was different in some respects. One notices right off the bat that the manner of vocal production is different: the novices sing in a surprisingly high-pitched register; they sing this way continuously, and especially during the introduction. Moreover, they sing at an extremely slow tempo, in contrast to the very lively one characteristic of the song for Xevyòsò. Unlike the previous song, which contains lyrics from beginning to end (of which I will be able to say nothing as they are in a “secret language”), this song does not include any lyrics (unless there's an error on my part). Rather the whole song is vocalized using sequences of vowels, which are more-or-less open or closed according to the needs of the melody. Finally, another of its great peculiarities is its use of a particular chromaticism, first during the long introduction and then for the conclusion in the form of the da capo. This chromaticism is just as unusual as the high-pitched use of the voice specific to this style. We will return to this chromaticism (of which something has already been said regarding the songs for Xevyòsò) later.

Let us go now to this piece's composition which, despite appearances, draws upon the same principle as the preceding piece. As our transcription shows (page 16), it consists of seven melodic units, varying in length; each unit is made up of a series of several phrases, and each phrase is different from the others (in these respects this composition resembles that for Xevyòsò). Here again, then, it is a matter of stanzas. But unlike the previous piece, this long

thanksgiving song for Sàkpàtá contains neither a refrain nor, consequently, a refrain-melody. This being the case we will not speak of strophes.

Stanzas: Repetition and Non-repetition

Below (pages 15-16), you will find the two transcriptions of these thanksgiving songs laid out on facing pages to facilitate comparison.

Sàkpàtá

Let us begin with the song for Sàkpàtá. This one shows the stanzaic composition of the piece more clearly than does the song for Xevyòsò. (We will set aside for later discussion the introduction and the da capo, which are so strongly marked by chromaticism.)²⁴ The composition comprises seven stanzas, each one different from the others; each stanza, in turn, consists of a string of more-or-less lengthy segments or motifs.²⁵ The melodic particularity of each of these motifs is immediately apparent (whether or not one reads musical notation) in the melodic contour sketch (sonogram) above each segment of staff notation.²⁶ You can thus very quickly verify that none of these motifs appear in two different stanzas. Each stanza has its own motifs. You will also notice that these different motifs are repeated a certain number of times within a given stanza. With one exception (stanza VII) the distribution of these repetitions differs from one stanza to the next. In other words, six out of the seven stanzas have their own unique patterns of repetition, which serve doubly to distinguish those stanzas from the others. An examination of the score will quickly make this convincing. Listening alone would make it difficult, since the unity of style that these motifs present together, along with their many repetitions, tends to mask the very real variety within the stanzas.

The recurrence of each motif in each stanza is easy to see in the sonogram sketches and can be represented vertically as follows:

Paradigmatic Table of Recurrences

I 1, 2, 3 2 1, 2, 3 2	II 1, 2 1, 2, 3 2, 3 2 1, 2	III 1, 2 1, 2, 3, 4 3, 4 1, 2	IV 1, 2 1, 2, 3, 4 3, 4 3, 4 1, 2	V 1, 2, 3 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 4, 5, 6 1, 2, 3
	VI 1, 2 1, 2, 3 3 2	VII 1, 2 1, 2, 3, 4 3, 4 1, 2		

The great variety of patterns of recurrence is evident in the table. Each pattern, combined with the specificity of each motif, defines the unique character of each stanza in its own manner.²⁷ Motifs constitute units of recurrence (UR) because they appear more than once; stanzas, in contrast, are units of non-recurrence (NR) because they appear only once.

During their seclusion

Xevyòsò

◀ August 20, 1966. Bowing towards the east, the novices of Xevyòsò of/at Sôkhwé sing their long morning thanksgiving.

Lacking the ability to show the never seen novices of Xevyòsò at Sôké (those of the disc), this page shows others, seen in postures equally representative of the rituals in question.

Return to the “house of the secret.” ▶

▲ Shortly after, the same singers sing their long thanksgiving again, this time towards the west.

After their coming out from seclusion

▲ February 19, 1969. Novices of Dhikwin sing their long thanksgiving—the same as that of Xevyòsò of Sôké transcribed later—before leaving for Porto-Novo to pay tribute to the king.

January 14, 1969. Several of the ninety novices of Ohwèè, at the palms, singing their long thanksgiving in tribute to the king. ▶

Sàkpàtá

February 2, 1969. Masked, the novices ► leave the enclosure where they were isolated/secluded for more than one year. Led by their instructors, they head in a procession to a sacred spring to be briefly immersed. ▼

◀ Still entirely hidden under a mask of fresh raffia, each novice is bathed in turn by their instructors.

This done, she is wrapped in cloth and brought back like a parcel to the village. ►

▼ Shielded from sight, the novices have their hair shaved and are then dressed from head to toe.

Four in the afternoon. Appearing for the first time in public, they cross the village in a line. ▼

◀ End of the afternoon. Taking turns, the novices—including the smallest among them mounted on stools—come to demonstrate their talent as dancers, most often by facing each other for a pas de deux/duet.

◀ February 6. ► Here we see the entire group of novices performing one of the collection dances that they will do during their next circuit.

Χεῦνόςο Long thanksgiving

refrain ♩ = 108 stanzas ♩ = 144

i 0' 23

[1] 1 0' 56

2 1' 35

3 2' 20

4 3' 00

5 3' 36

6 4' 15

7 4' 53

8 5' 39

9 6' 20

10 6' 51

11 7' 04

12 7' 37

13 8' 21

14 9' 01

15 10' 10

16 11' 00

d.c. 11' 25 - [11] → 12' 59

Transcription: Trần Quang Hai. 1980
Synopsis: Gilbert Rouget. 1980, 2005
Computer graphics: Jacques Bertrand. 2006

clapping
.....

Sàkpàtá Long thanksgiving

60

i 0' 09

1 2' 08

5 7' 12

sung one tone higher

sung 1/2 tone higher

2 3' 17

6 9' 11

sung 1/2 tone higher

3 4' 37

sung 1/2 tone higher

sung 1/2 tone higher

7 10' 05

sung 1/2 tone higher

SS? 4 7' 12

sung 1/2 tone lower

sung 1 tone lower

d.c. 11' 08

clapping
.....

Sonogram and transcription: Jean Schwarz. 1984
Synopsis: Gilbert Rouget. 1984, 2005
Computer graphics: Jacques Bertrand. 2006

Vakon, January 31, 1969

*The cool of dawn in the palm grove,
vague murmur of the village awakening.*

Suddenly the air resounds with a concert of unreal voices, celestial, otherworldly.
Hidden from sight, in the secret enclosure, the new wives of Sàkpàtá, the earth divinity,
slowly unfold the vocalizations of their morning liturgy.

first, very high, a very long cry descending in steps
chromatic
cut with silence and ascending in mirrored articulation

describing winged paths in the sky
the transparent spirals of these high voices, soft, flute-like, without any vibrato, light as arrows, enliven the universe
circular flights slowly rolling curves whirling

the song glides above the invisible convent
traced by a tranquil brush
this writing, full, free, and empty, defines its intangible domain

Time occupies Space

It was useful to uncover this constant dialectic of recurrence and non-recurrence. Listening to this song cannot fail to give the listener the impression of having to deal with music that is predominantly repetitive. Recurrence certainly exists, but within a frame of non-recurrence that plays an equally important part in the composition of this musical genre.

Xɛvyòsò

Recurrence and non-recurrence manifest themselves in this thanksgiving song quite differently than in the one discussed above. The refrain is subject to verbatim repetition (i.e. it is a unit of recurrence UR) fourteen times, and it recurs four times with slight variations (i.e. as a unit of recurrence with variations URv): the introduction, da capo, and strophes 1 and 11. As for the stanzas, each one is melodically different from the others. Nine of them contain recurring units (UR) of varying length and number, whereas the seven others do not contain any recurrences. [Editor's note: recurring units are shown vertically in the notation of stanzas 1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16; unlike in the song for Sàkpàtá, these recurrences are immediate, and are "repetitions" in the English sense of the word. Rouget used the French term *répétition* for both immediate repetitions and more dispersed recurrences]. Consequently, the alternation of refrain-stanza presents, despite its absolute regularity, all the characteristics of a great deal of irregularity. The result is that each of the 16 strophes of the song is composed in a different manner, and can in that sense be seen as a unit of non-recurrence (UnR).

This said, the great stylistic unity of the numerous motifs that compose the stanzas, together with the nearly identical repetition of the refrains, gives the false impression that the piece is repetitive.

In fact, this is far from being the case. The stanzas certainly call upon many types of melodic formulas, or motifs if you prefer, but from one instance of the formula to another the change often resides only in the permutation of two successive notes. Therefore it is important for the singers not to make an error. Here we encounter, in another form, the non-repetitiveness of the recurrence described for Sàkpàtá, where the distribution of motif recurrences differed at the level of the stanza (and not, as here, at the level of the motif).

Performance and Transformation of the Person

As I have said, in performing the long thanksgiving songs, novices must remain in abject submission, completely bent over their knees with their faces almost on the ground from beginning to end. This is a particularly grueling position in which to sing for a long time: more than an hour with three very short interruptions for the song for Xɛvyòsò, and almost a half-hour for Sàkpàtá. But that is not all. Remaining side by side, and if their numbers require it, in two or more rows, they can neither be seen nor look at each other while they sing. There is not, of course, a choir director. The form is call and response, in which a soloist briefly starts up the stanza, and then all her companions together provide the response, always at much greater length. (Unless I am mistaken, the soloist is not necessarily the same from beginning to end.) The issue is thus for the leader to intone the calls correctly in the desired order and for the others

to respond each time one after another by correctly sequencing the collection of motifs composing the stanza, while respecting not only the way the motifs follow each other, but also the number and the location of their recurrences.

That being said, to sing together correctly with one voice in the position described, and for such a long series of different stanzas from a composition so complex; and working through such a dialectic of recurrence and non-recurrence; and furthermore, to perform the song of a dozen minutes not only once, but in one case twice and in the other five times in a row, constitutes from all evidence on the part of the singers, quite an accomplishment. This performance is both collective and individual, requiring of each a great deal of self-control, both intellectually and physically.

Intellectually, far from facilitating matters, recurrence and non-recurrence give rise to a dialectic that is mastered only after a great deal of memorization, the performance of which requires unwavering attention. Physically, singing while remaining tightly bent over for such a long time, a position that was never meant to be comfortable, is clearly an ordeal for the body that one must endure without weakening. Here the “technique of the body” (Mauss) seems to be the deliberate object of a kind of counter-engagement, a true challenge that, most certainly, is not overcome without a great deal of training.

Performance: it is about achieving together, and in perfect unison²⁸ the performance of a song whose composition is quite unusual and requires exceptional intellectual and physical technique. Arriving at the end of their initiation, the novices put on a show as they go with great pomp to the king, before whom, tightly bent over in submission of course, they sing their long thanksgivings. The action occurs in the only courtyard in the palace that is freely open to the public. A noisy crowd comes to watch the event, but the singers are not at all bothered. Seated on his sofa [*canapé*], with his ministers and nobles at his feet, the king listens to the singers with all the attention that they deserve, and then congratulates them and has them served a meal. Beyond the tribute that the novices' clan brings to the king as testimony of its vassalage, one must also see said clan's desire to demonstrate publicly the power of the king's *vòdún*. Such power is capable of making the zealously executed performance successful.

It requires great care to train accomplished singers (and dancers), who have been installed [*investis*] as male and female guardians of the *vòdún*, the male guardians in the capacity of master of the buildings where their long seclusion takes place, and the female guardians as bearers of the musical tradition specific to their divinity. The novices, and the musical mastery that they demonstrate publicly, are the fruits of the guardians' labor [*oeuvre*] and thereby the work of the *vòdún*. This work consists of taking custody of creatures in a totally uncultured state following the symbolic death they underwent before entering into seclusion (the *vòdún* selects the novices by “killing” them), and transforming them little by little, by means of apprenticeship and initiation, into individuals gifted with exemplary talents, custodians of knowledge forbidden to other mortals. This transformation, this transition, is ultimately, from a state of nature to one of culture. The dramatically different clothes the novices wear when they come out of seclusion

(photographs on pages 13-14) are clearly symbolic of this change in state from “before” to “after.”

What a happy civilization, entrusting the transformation of the person and the formation of character to the practice of music and dance!

But regarding this transformation, we must now speak very briefly on what grounds, both psychological and physiological, it operates, since important musical consequences follow from it.

Chromaticism and the State of Dispossession

As we know, the *vòdún* worship society is one of the religions making use of the phenomenon generally known by the term possession. That is to say that, in certain contexts, the devotee is “possessed” by the divinity and becomes for some time its receptacle. The person thus identifies with the divinity, and this identification, experienced in a state of trance, manifests itself through behavior that corresponds to the particularities of the divinity in question, behavior that is expressed primarily through dance. But this behavior is highly coded and takes shape only after a long initiation—precisely the subject that has been occupying us until now.

As we’ve said, the entry of novices into initiation requires their having undergone a symbolic death, meaning that they have been elected by the divinity. In that moment, the individuals they once were cease to be: the initiation transforms them into another personality. During all the time of their seclusion, the novices are thus no longer what they were, nor are they yet what they will become. As a consequence, the novices enter a peculiar and special state for the entirety of their novitiate. Seen in context, it seems legitimate to suggest that this state be called “dispossession.”²⁹ Without entering into detail, let us simply remember that the visible form of this state (known as *ère* in the local language) is a kind of disturbance [*égarement*]. This is expressed very differently, depending on the activities in which the novices engage throughout the day. No matter the circumstances, the novices constantly give the observer the impression that they are elsewhere.

It is thus in this state that the novices sing their long thanksgivings, but as we outlined at the beginning, their musical repertoire also includes another repertoire entirely, that of “collection songs” [*chants de quête*].³⁰ These songs, which the novices learn during seclusion, are performed later in public during the entire period that follows their coming-out and that precedes the rituals that put a definitive end, several weeks later, to their novitiate. The novices will then go from market to market, asking for “food.” The distinctive characteristic of these songs, as brief (one to two minutes) as the thanksgivings are long, is that they always contain a more-or-less marked chromatic aspect. The very brief invocation that the novices address to Xevyòsò when there has been thunder (we discussed this above on page 7, it is reproduced on track 2 of the CD) constitutes a very striking example of this chromaticism. The introduction to the long thanksgiving for Sàkpàtá (track 3 on the CD) constitutes another. Whether in the repeated semi-tones in the first case, or the series of semi-tones in the second, this chromaticism is found in the deliberate production of an interval that contrasts in every way with the intervals

of anhemitonic pentatonic scales.³¹ A particular pentatonic diatonicism (if you will allow me the term) is specific not only to the rest of the region's vocal music, sacred and profane, but also to the vast majority of vocal music within oral tradition.

I have discussed at length elsewhere (Rouget 1961 and 1982) the diverse reasons for considering this chromaticism an expression of the very state of dispossession we've been discussing.³² Let us briefly take another look at two of them. The first relates to the point that in a particular children's game practiced in the past in Benin, chromaticism (instrumental, in this case) occurs clearly to signify disturbance. The second, still speaking of Benin, is that sung chromaticism appears exclusively in the repertoire of the novices. The two facts are indisputable. It remains, nonetheless, to understand why, given the permanence of their state of dispossession throughout their initiation process, the novices sometimes, and only sometimes, sing chromatically.

The "*Pièce chromatique*," to which Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964:261 sq.) devoted himself, starting from a myth of the Bororo people and concluding with the celebrated *Tristan* chord, should, moreover, convince the reader that the symbolic function of chromaticism in music, in oral tradition (universally, not just African) as well as written, should be a matter for serious consideration. Stravinsky himself, whom we know paid minimal attention to the expressiveness of music, was, against all odds, preoccupied with it [the symbolic function of chromaticism]. Invited to speak of chromaticism by Robert Craft (1963:149) Stravinsky addressed *musica reservata* specifically, "we are unable to hear it contrasted with the customary diatonic music which was its background." Returning, several lines further, to the existence of this "contrast between chromatic and diatonic," which is the occurrence that interests us, he concludes: "'Chromaticism' means something different to each and every composer today."

"Composer?" The question presents itself differently when, as is the case here, it concerns music from a purely oral tradition, and thus, of collective creation, regardless of the reservations regarding the phrase.³³ Returning to Benin, what "collective representation" corresponds to the use of this chromaticism, under so many different forms but in the same context? There is surely one. Implicit? Explicit? The research deserves to be undertaken. It seems unlikely that no one, especially no researcher native to the country (an indispensable condition for the attempt to have any hope of success) has ever considered it.³⁴ Think what we could learn if we knew what the lyrics sung to Xɛvyòsò in the secret language meant! It is clear that these thanksgiving songs were not invented, or more precisely, composed, by the novices who sing them. Consequently, who are the composers?

These works of art, as that is really what they are, despite lacking any material form, are not born of the Holy Spirit. They can only be the result of a very slow and lengthy elaboration. Collective creation, as we have said. But which collective? Let us hazard a guess: the collective of guardians of the worship society;³⁵ in other words, the women in charge of teaching these songs to the novices.³⁶

Let us finish by noting that the brief “collection songs,” which we have discussed and which are remarkable for their very particular use of chromaticism, are as a genre nothing less than little masterpieces of musical art.

The Art of Melody

Art. It is high time for it to arrive! The first words of this little paper were to say that its goal was to make a certain little-known music heard in order to let others appreciate the greatness of its musical qualities; in other words, to make its existence known as a work of art. Here we are. But before proceeding to the aesthetic considerations and risking value judgements, I must alert the reader. I am not a philosopher. I will thus keep myself from venturing into the minefield of the philosophy of art.³⁷ It is with utmost naivety that I make this claim. It is the naivety of someone who is convinced that there is a certain quality of actions, of works or of things, that makes us find them beautiful – or not. If this beauty is not only in those things and it is from our dialogue with them through which this beauty derives its very existence, this does not seem to diminish its reality in any way. But I must also emphasize that, in defending this position, I firmly reject the one that is more generally professed by both musicologists and ethnomusicologists. Indeed, I hold that by choosing not to “establish a value judgement” and by refusing, following Max Weber, “all aesthetic evaluation,” a course of action called for by a recent ethnomusicology publication, one simply misses the point.³⁸ Note, however, that fortunately not all are in agreement on this point, as evidenced by another article just as recent.³⁹ Thus I will be allowed to say here, very naively once again, how this music seems beautiful to me; in other words, why, very subjectively, but for what explicit reasons, it moves me and I like it.

I would naturally like to share this pleasure with the reader. Please permit me, if you are not familiar with this genre of music, to caution you about what might ruin it for you. I do not speak here of the many kinds of flaws (whistles, lack of presence, various background noises) that tarnish these recordings, but, much more importantly, the errors of intonation which these songs sometimes suffer. Even taking into account, of course, that their own interval system is not that of the Well-Tempered Clavier, it happens that in their own system, the singers sing incorrectly. May you, dear reader, not be disturbed in your listening, but rather take interest. Even further, I would say, let you take pleasure: the pleasure of discovering what they wish to do, and what it is when they succeed. There are two examples, both within the song for Sàkpàtá, with particularly difficult intonations.

Let us first compare the singing of the first notes of the introduction with the return of those same notes in the da capo: the introduction's intonation is more uncertain, while that of the da capo is perfect. Let us next compare the first statement of the first motif of stanza 5 (the B at 7:15, then B-C-B at 7:22-24), clearly sung out of tune, with its return at the end of the stanza, obviously sung in tune. Changes, or more precisely, adjustments, result from this practice of repetition, whose importance cannot be overstated. For the reader, it is thus a question, in short, of listening not only to composed music, but also to a piece of music being made, or, if you

would prefer, of accompanying what the singers are doing, or again, of taking into account both the music and those who make the music [*musiquants*].

Xevyòsò

For me, the most immediate quality of the long thanksgiving songs for Xevyòsò resides in their vitality: a kind of hymn to life, to strength, to resilience. The world as will to live. Or, if you'd prefer, music as re-creation of the world. Let me risk what will seem to many an extravagance: I find something in common between the somehow vital quality of this thanksgiving song and that of Johann Sebastian Bach's extremely famous Chaconne for solo violin; the total disproportion of technical means involved does not change the essence of the matter. Let us remember, nevertheless, that if the length of these two pieces is of the same order (a dozen minutes), the Xevyòsò novices perform theirs without a break, five times in a row. Would Nathan Milstein play the Chaconne five times in a row without stopping? It is not only the singing of the novices, constantly recurring, but also the composition of the music itself that is responsible for this intense life. The manner in which stanza and refrain succeed each other, never the same, is always surprising; because the stanzas were different in form and length, the refrain returns each time in an unexpected manner, endlessly creating an impression of renewal. It is the same but never exactly the same, and has a momentum such that nothing will stop it. The refrain, in the identity of its recurrence, contrasts with the false repetitiveness of the stanzas, such that all resemble each other, but none are identical to any other. So spontaneously, as fleeting as the end of a stanza—12, to give an example—the singers pass calmly to the refrain, with neither the hint of a ritard or pause, nor a hesitation. Behind this series of verbatim recurrences and false non-recurrences, an inventiveness of every moment is at work, coupled with an unfailing sureness of execution. To finish, let me say, still subjectively, that this continuous swell of sung notes, that happens so rapidly that we are almost tempted to say that they come tumbling out, unfolds within an interior peace born of absolute certainty: this hymn to life seems constantly inspired by a profound spirituality.⁴⁰

Sàkpàtá

Steeped in spirituality, the thanksgiving song for Sàkpàtá, divinity of the earth, “*vòdún* from below,” is just as inspired, but in a totally different way. More than impatient praise of life, it seems to wish to express philosophical detachment from things: praising contemplation, if not even unreality. An overview of life rather than participation. Sàkpàtá's indifference and deliberateness responds to Xevyòsò's agitation and rushing. Musically? The tempo goes from 144 to 60. Of course, here again, as for Xevyòsò and the Chaconne, it is the art of variation at work, but more specifically that of melody, par excellence. To approach this perilous subject, let us no longer invoke Bach, but Rameau. “Melody,” he writes (1722:142), “has no less force in expression than Harmony, but it is almost impossible to be able to give precise Rules, in which good taste has a greater part than the rest.” What does this mean, unless for him this “good taste” defies definition? Or that we are there in the undefinable domain of the purely perceptual

[*sensible*]? We are, or we are not. In Sàkpàtá, the melodic sketch, which constantly reinvents itself from motif to motif and from stanza to stanza, achieves—to my “taste”—a perfect blending of grace and indifference. Again, one must, of course, be disposed to hear it. It does not demonstrate itself. But maybe this will reveal it: I thought I might suggest (page 17) that the reader look at the melodic contour of a passage (particularly successful in my opinion) of this thanksgiving for Sàkpàtá (CD, track 4).⁴¹ Giving you this contour to look at as you listen, or to listen as you look at it, quickly following the movement with your eyes and heart as one does with a Zen diagram, seems to me (always very naively) the most certain means of winning over even the least willing listener to my view (to my “taste”).

A few more words on this contour. Our encounter with Rameau is not due to luck. As we know, his theory of Harmony relies on the discovery, recent in his time, of the fact that while listening to a sound you do not only hear one note, as they previously thought, but an entire series, its harmonics. Nowadays we say its spectrum. The contour placed here before the eyes of the reader is that of a sonogram, in other words a spectral analysis of the sound passage in question.

For better legibility, the chosen contour is not that of the first harmonic (the fundamental), but of the second harmonic, its upper octave. To reproduce the rest of the spectrum, as we could have done, would not have added anything to our remarks. Rousseau was correct: the melody is large enough in itself. And that may be what, in spite of himself, Rameau meant.

Let us quickly pass on to another aspect of this melodic art. The high-pitched register of this song’s introduction is very peculiar, as is its surprisingly chromatic character. But there is more. The first five melismata of this introduction continue for a long time in a manner, as it were, of ever more melodious chromaticism (The introduction will return later, as we have seen, to form the *da capo*.) In this way it transitions gradually through the beginning of the first stanza, so resolutely diatonic, that it has, it seems, the function of preparation. There is a musical achievement that deserves to be pointed out. This said, each stanza presents itself, each time in a different way, as a true melodic enchantment: a series of sketches, each of an extreme elegance, at times repeated, at times abandoned. It is an art that constantly reiterates itself without ever repeating itself.

But in Sàkpàtá (as in the ensemble of the corpus of sacred music), not all is reduced to the art of the melody. Even though it appears much less—no trace of percussion, of any kind—the art of rhythm is equally decisive, not by its strictness, but on the contrary, by its fluidity. The swing, a very light swing, is constantly there with its imponderable and undefinable presence, with its irreplaceable improvisational character. In neither rhythm nor melody is anything marked out—not by the ruler and not by the compass. This music is fundamentally estranged (I was about to say unruly) from temperament on one hand, and from the metronomic beat on the other. This does not prevent it from being governed by a system. The whole point is to bring it to light, with all its nuances. We have a long way to go.

Envoi

To conclude, how should we situate this melodic art in time? From which era does the tradition of initiation songs originate? All sorts of clues suggest that this music puts us in the presence of an art dating from “Africa before the Whites” [*l’Afrique avant les Blancs*].⁴² It is therefore a matter of a purely African art. At a time when there is nothing left except the unsubtle praise of *métissage*, it has to be said.

This Africa has presented without fail a picture of an immense variety of styles in the domain of art. By the rigor of its composition, the extreme economy of its means, the strict and constant control of its performance, this *musica reservata* has the right to be called, however unexpectedly, “classical.” It possesses a classical style, as has often been said of the art of the famous lost-wax bronzes that make up the glory of neighboring Nigeria (Ifè, and also more distant Nok) and of ancient Benin (Bini).

“To randomly remove ten or 20 centuries of history would not significantly affect our knowledge of human nature,” observes Claude Lévi-Strauss (1993:176), at the end of his meditation “Regard sur les objets” [“Regarding Objects”]. “The only irreplaceable loss,” he adds, “would be that of the works of art that these centuries would have seen born.”

The present publication is meant to be, first and foremost, such a project of rescue.

Notes

1. By “extremely little-known” I mean unknown, other than by the several ethnologists or musicologists who attended the rare presentations for “learned societies” where I was able to play this music in France. But it is likewise unknown, or nearly so, by the Béninois themselves. I can in any case see that it is as much a discovery for those Béninois who hear these songs in Paris in the circumstances I just mentioned as it is for the other listeners. In addition, this music was the object of several publications (see the bibliography), each with an extremely limited distribution. I will address the reason later (note 8). All this means that this music, already obscure even within a specialized milieu, has remained totally ignored by those interested in music and in the arts more generally. This paper is its much-desired chance to make a debut.
2. “*Vòdún*”: originally from “*vaudou*,” Haitian, a religion strongly marked with syncretism, which is not the case of the Benin *vòdún*.
3. A religion, let us say to simplify, from the Àjá tradition, the other traditional religion being from the Yorùbá, and thus the divinities are called “*orisha*.”
4. For more details on this repertoire, and on this subject more generally, see G. Rouget 2001.
5. In the Fòn and Gùn language: *kpedido ga*.
6. Always, except when it is time for their grand coming-out ritual. Then they will sing it before the king, in which case they only perform one time (this is, at least, what I've been able to observe).
7. The *vòdún* week, as I will call it for simplicity's sake, is generally four days. One of them (I don't know if it's considered the first or the last) is called “day of prayer.” It is the only day during which the long thanksgiving is not performed.
8. As any look at the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* will show, the term *musica reservata* has had multiple meanings over the centuries. My use here draws on several of those meanings, above and beyond the idea of a music being “reserved” for a certain function. One pertinent usage refers to a particular practice of chromaticism (we will return to this at length, later) and another refers to “un flot continu de la ligne mélodique” [a continuous swell of the melodic line]. It matters not whether this music is sung with words or merely vocalized. Certainly *musica sacra* would also have been suitable, or even preferable, as it would have provided a clearer distinction from *vulgaris*. However, the word *reservata* has the advantage of being much more specific. Furthermore, it is the word that best corresponds to what the *vòdúnnɔ*, guardians of the societies in question, wanted to reveal to me, in specifying that they wanted these songs to be neither broadcast nor “put in the shops” (i.e. commercialized). I have scrupulously observed this restriction in handling the material and preparing this publication.
9. These two thanksgivings were both described at length by François-Bernard Mâche on pages 232-234 of *Musique au singulier* [Music in the Singular], a monograph that focuses a great deal on the contributions of ethnomusicology.
10. They were also “long” songs, but with very different music. See Rouget 1996.
11. “Convent” is a translation of *ku xwé*, literally, “house of the dead.”

12. Track 1 of the compact disc inserted at the end of this journal [in the original print version] comes from this recording during which six reprises of the same song appear one after another. This track comes from the fifth iteration. The very short song (truthfully more of a lamentation than a song) recorded the night before, appears on track 2. Lacking more information, it was entitled, without great risk of error, “Invocation.” It is chromatic and thus markedly introduces the following song for Sàkpàtá.
13. The Nagra was at the time the tape recorder of choice for ethnomusicologists, and for good reason.
14. It is thanks to Wézé, king of the Tori (or Toli), who died in 1977, that I was even able to record and photograph this ritual.
15. Some of these songs for Xevyòsò figured in my 2001 publication (vol. 2 and CD). Inadvertently, on page 1 of volume 1, I wrote that all thanksgivings sung for Xevyòsò “necessarily begin and end with a series of claps.” It was in reality the one for Sàkpàtá that I had in mind.
16. And, notably, while filming an episode in collaboration with Jean Rouch. See Rouget 1963.
17. The term reprise is used here following Rousseau’s definition in his *Dictionnaire de musique*. It follows that whatever the number of repetitions, the first statement of the piece in question is called (improperly, to tell the truth, but that does not matter since this is how it is used, and not only in music) the “first reprise.”
18. See also in Rouget 2001, vol. 1, the series of 138 photos showing various incidents of this coming out ceremony that were spread out over several weeks.
19. Rouget 2001, vol. 1, photos on page 18.
20. Let us leave aside the pointless critiques often made of the use of musical notation used in scholarly Western music when it comes to writing music of other traditions or the oral tradition more generally. These musics are not constructed within the tempered system, they tell us, and therefore this notation is improper. This reasoning is not defensible. A musical staff with five lines is nothing but a grid on which any system can be written; it is purely a question of convention. The main point is to know in which system and for what reason the music was described (Rouget 1972) [this likely refers to Rouget’s 1970 “Transcrire ou Decrire?” article cited in the bibliography.] Let us acknowledge that in this case the system is unknown, which is highly regrettable but, let us hope, only provisional. In time, no doubt, we will get there. Lacking anything better, hearing the music itself will permit listeners to soak themselves in a kind of knowledge that is if not intellectual, at least sensitive to the system in question and its interpretation in order to get some idea of that system. We’ve had until now, of course, the system of scales in mind. Let us make the same claim regarding the rhythmic system.
21. These two transcriptions are the result of the digitization of transcripts that were originally hand-written. The first, that of Xevyòsò, owes itself to the pen of Trần Quang Hai. Published for the first time in 1981, it must be seen as having been a true masterpiece of the genre, as much for his notational precision, obtained purely by ear, as for the qualities of his calligraphy.

The second, for Sàkpàtá, owes itself to Jean Schwarz, and gave rise to a two-stage process that consisted, first, in sonographically obtaining the melodic outline of this song, and then in its notational translation, followed by its inscription below the series of sonograms previously arranged in a synoptic manner. Destined to become the subject of a large exhibition poster (CNRS, *Images de la recherche*, Paris 1984), this transcription was thus synoptically presented in two complementary forms: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Since the present publication aims to compare these two thanksgiving songs, it was important that the two transcriptions appear to the reader in the same format. Because the objective was to highlight the dialectic of repetition and non-repetition, a paradigmatic presentation was necessary. This is the reason for the synoptic form given here, for the first time, to the transcription of Xevyòsò's song. For the sake of legibility, Jacques Bertrand (EHESS) was good enough to rewrite these two transcriptions, giving them a clarity in the detail of both the notes and the format that only good computer skills can achieve. It was considerable work for which I thank him very much.

A word now on the third transcription (page 17), which was also digitized. It is courtesy of Madeleine Leclair, who notated the song a semi-tone higher than did Jean Schwartz in his large transcription, as Schwartz himself indicated. Regarding the second interval, noted B-D (thus a third), I prefer to hear it, following J. Schwarz, as being a fourth (B-E), especially since D is a sound totally absent from this stanza. Let us see in this remark only one example (among many others!) of the famous “non-uniqueness of phonemic analysis,” well known to phonologists.

As for the photographs, another aspect of the representation of reality, thanks must be given to Philippe Jobet for his collaboration in their processing and layout.

22. Though I can't confirm it, I believe that this sixth repeat constitutes a “short” and not “long” thanksgiving. You will find in Rouget 2001, annex of vol. 2 (MdR 1), a transcription (owed to Trân Quang Hai) reproducing the series of repeats 2, 5, and 6 of this thanksgiving.

23. The iteration reproduced here was first one sung on the evening before the great coming-out of the novices. It was not sung the next day, the “day of prayer.”

24. In my 2001 publication (vol. 2: 13-14), I gave this introduction a slightly different interpretation, dividing it, as in our present transcription, into two parts, but suggesting that a transition stanza can be seen in its second part. It seemed simpler not to go over that again here.

25. Motif here means any melodic segment separated from the following by a silence. A definition of motif based on the fact of being repeated or not—another, and more rigorous, principle of melodic segmentation in a phrase (see Rouget 1964: 41 N.B.)—would amount to the same thing in terms of the distribution of repetitions within a stanza.

26. Technical detail: contour obtained from harmonic 2 of the melody, in other words from its upper octave. [For reasons unknown, Rouget himself (presumably, given the initials “G.R.” in the margin) crossed this footnote out in pen in the published copy at Harvard University's music library.]

27. In his long chapter dedicated to the study of the refrain, F.-B. Mâche (2001: 233-234) examines at length the composition of these “stanzas,” where the “play of recurrences” is, he

notes, “particularly complex.” He proposes a representation of these recurrences that is very different from the table of figures above.

28. In the 2001 review that he made of my work, for which I thank him, Michel de Lannoy (2001: 351) critiques (with cause) my expression “perfect unison.” This is not as perfect as I would like to suggest, he rightly observes. In effect, yes, but I do not share his interpretation of things. In my opinion, it is important not to judge the quality of this unison as you would if it were a highly trained European choir under the direction of a choir director. The performance conditions are totally different here. In addition to being music from a purely oral tradition, in other words lacking any written cues, the singers, without a leader, are kneeling beside (and/or behind) each other and thus do not see each other. Their only cues come from listening to each other. In these conditions, I believe it legitimate to maintain that the unison they demonstrate is indeed worthy of being called perfect.

29. This state was described for the first time in 1954 with the term “*hébétude*” by Pierre Verger, well known for his research and later numerous publications on the worship of *orisha* and the *vòdún*. *Hébétude*, *égarement*, psychological disturbance, or dispossession, whatever the term we use, it seems that one is there in the presence of a very particular kind of trance (hypnotic, somnambulistic?), and that the skillful administration of certain drugs is not unknown (Rouget 1990: 124).

30. For more on these offertory songs, which are also dance songs, see Rouget 2001.

31. That interval is a semitone. To be precise, it is the interval of the “cry” on track 2 of the CD (Xevyòsò having given voice in the night) measures (approximately) 117 cents of a tempered semi-tone. The best way to measure those intervals that introduce the first five segments of the one for Sàkpàtá would be to do it from the da capo, which is much better sung than the introduction.

32. Without entering into the detail of my argument, let us recall here the following particularly conclusive fact. In a game of Hide the Thimble [or Hot and Cold, Fr: *cache-tampon*], played by children in Benin, the musical instrument (a zither) that guides the seeker in their hunt, continuously uses the opposition of diatonic/chromatic. The diatonic, obtained by the proper divisions of the string, indicates that they are on the right path, while the chromatic, created by a *glissando* performed in both directions all along the length of the string by the instrumentalist, indicates that they are not. Understood as saying *lunulon! lunulon!*, a word that designates an idiot, a naïf, a simpleton, this *glissando* is repeated as long as the seeker is disoriented.

33. For collective musical creation, see Braïloiu 1959.

34. Neither Berthélémy Adoukonou (1980), nor Basile Goudabla Kligueh (2001), authors, one Beninois, the other Togolese, longtime researchers on vòdún societies, have made any allusion to these initiatory songs.

35. In the local language, the *hungbonon*, “(female) guardians (or protectors) of the great secret,” on this point, see B. Adoukonou 1980, t. 2: 60, and Rouget 2001, Glossaire.

36. In *Un roi africain et sa musique de cour* (1996: 213), I put forward the hypothesis that one part of the repertoire sung (the so-called traditional repertoire, literally “found at birth”) had been composed by the king's wives.

37. We do not speak of intentionality (upper and lower case), a major subject of a certain philosophy.

38. Denis-Constant Martin, 2006: 132-133. My criticism, in any case, does not call into question the importance of this article, which is full of new ideas.

39. The “beauty” of music: the principal subject, we could almost say, of the most recent work of B. Lortat-Jacob (2006: 52 et note), who, speaking of a certain Albanian music (note 28) does not hesitate to write, as his final word, that it is “magnificent.”

40. “Spirituality,” may the reader be aware that in writing this word I am not inspired by any kind of religious conviction. Nothing is stranger to me than such a sentiment. You can be perfectly atheist and resolutely materialist, as is my case, without being insensitive to spirituality.

41. May the reader permit me this confidence: You may have recognized in the last line of the text preceding the reproduction of this sonogram a quotation of the famous line from *Parsifal*. I owe it to Pierre Souvtchinsky and his very penetrating observations on the “temporal and spatial form of all musical phenomena.” He was very impressed by this music that I played for him at the Musée de l'Homme in 1969, upon my return from Africa. I had the pleasure of giving him the original of this sonogram, along with a manuscript of the first version of the text which now accompanies it for his 80th birthday, during a party hosted by Suzanne Tézenas.

42. Title of the work by Basil Davidson 1962. [Tr. “*L'Afrique avant les Blancs: découverte du passé oublié de l'Afrique*,” French translation of *Old Africa Rediscovered: The Story of Africa's forgotten Past*, published in 1959.]

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Contents of the Compact Disc

Track	Length	Title
1	12'59"	Long thanksgiving performed for Xevyòsò, the Thunderstorm divinity, “ <i>vòdún</i> from above.” At Sòké, November 2, 1958.
2	0'27"	Short invocation by Xevyòsò's novices, after night of thunder. November 1, 1958.
3	11'49"	Long thanksgiving performed for Sàkpàtá, the Earth divinity, “ <i>vòdún</i> from below.” At Vakon, January 31, 1969.
4	0'28'	Final fragment of the 5 th stanza of the preceding piece.

CAUTION

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