

Name

Date

Course

Prof.

### **The Third Commentary**

In this assignment, I am going to discuss some of the things I thought about while listening to and watching four musical pieces and videos, namely Wu Man's performance of "Ambushed from All Sides" and "Night Thoughts", James Brown's "Cold Sweat", and Clyde Stubblefield's demonstration of his drum playing.

Wu Man's pipa performance in the Tiny Desk Concert was absolutely out of sight. It starts with the song "Ambushed from All Sides" and the technicality is just breathtaking. Without any warm-up, Man just started shredding the instrument, exhibiting outstanding tremolo techniques with five fingers, reminding me of how Spanish guitarists play flamenco. Also, you can almost tell instantly it is Chinese music because of the dominant use of pentatonic scale.

Starting at the 1:49 mark, Man started playing a section that gradually increased the tempo. It kind of built up the tension until it finally exploded at 2:10ish. Technique-wise, the string muting technique from 1:49 to 2:10 resembles how metal guitarists play the rhythm part in which they use their palm to mute the thickest string while picking it and mixing it with sporadic melodic parts on the lower strings, all while the distortion pedal is on. I thought that metal guitar music was one of a kind,

but seeing Man's performance just made me realize that it has direct lineages from Pipa, regardless the pioneering metal guitarists knew it or not.

More surprises were yet to come. At 2:25, the pipa in Man's hand started 'squeaking'. It is unlike anything I have heard. The closest resemblance is probably pinch harmonics on electric guitar, but the squeaking-harmonics-on pipa took it to a whole other level where it is basically harmonics of multiple strings at the same time. Now, I have come across a guitarist who has used almost the same pipa technique on acoustic guitar. The guitarist is Xun Chao, and the song in which he used the same technique is called "Slaying Huaxiong with Warm Wine" in which the same technique starts at the 1:48 mark (Chao, 2021). Although this is probably not within the scope of this assignment, I feel a need to get it off my chest because applying a technique belonging to one instrument on another instrument is something we perhaps need to value.

The next piece "Night Thoughts" by Man carries a completely different sentiment. Its heavy use of the Phrygian scale adds a distinct mysterious flavor to the song. A very interesting thing emerged at around the 6:49 mark where Man played a minor chord but then transitioned into a totally melody-led section. As someone who has been listening to Western music for all my life, I initially thought she was going to continue playing another chord right at 6:50ish following the previous minor chord because this is something Western musicians always do-chord progression. Instead, she started to play nonharmonic melodies, which is something Chinese music always

does. It reflects how Chinese or Eastern music prioritizes melody over harmony while in Western music it is mainly the other way around.

Funk music stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned pieces in terms of the feeling it carries and the differing musicality. The “Cold Sweat” by James Brown is completely unrestrained. First of all, Brown’s vocal lines stand out, as the frequency range of his voice is extremely wide and his mixture of utterances with actual lyrics sounds liberalized. This can be heard around 0:45 when he screams in a high pitch. At 1:21, Brown says “I ain’t ready I gotta do some more” in a fashion that does not follow the rhythmic pattern of the song, which makes the song feel more free and passionate.

Aside from Brown’s distinct and sometimes hoarse vocal line, the song has a genuine bright feeling to it. The drum beat is not even, emphasizing the third beat of the 4/4 time signature. The guitar tone also feels light and tight. I could see why people named Jimmy Nolen’s guitar sounds as “Chicken Scratch”. More importantly, I think the saxophone solo that started at around 3:25ish further accentuated the funkiness of the whole song and is a perfect embodiment of funk music. Specifically, you can hear that the solo is very spacey, with each sentence starting and ending oftentimes at the third beat or in between the beats. The solo is not filled with many notes; rather, notes are spread out and spaced carefully in a tight sequence in which each melodic sentence starts and ends in a way that conveys a captivating groove.

Clyde Stubblefield’s demonstration in drummerworld provides insights into the rhythmic foundation of early funk music, such as Cold Sweat. Stubblefield explained

that central to James Brown's and his collaboration in Cold Sweat is his emphasis on the first beat in the drumming playing, the dominant one, as he called it. Then, Stubblefield went on to explain ghost note in Funky Drummer. Between the second and the third beat of every bar, Stubblefield releases the drumstick and lets it fall freely before tightening his grip and catching it again, creating a diminished bouncing sound from the rebound of the drumstick. He says that some refer to it as "ghost note", which is kind of like an off-rhythm note, essentially a syncopation. Now, this legend has just explained much of what funk music basically is. It is through the syncopation that the spaciness, bounciness, and brightness of funk music are created. Moreover, Stubblefield explained that it all stems from his feelings at the moment, which might be contrary to what many would assume about rhythm construction, which is that musicians oftentimes approach playing and composing with calculated measures. It relates to music education because most of the time formal music education only teaches theories, which, in the case of music, are very much similar to mathematics where theories of harmony, rhythm, and scale all require mathematical thinking and numerical representation. However, you hardly ever learn how to feel. It is not that formal music education is neglectful in this respect. It is just that feelings are so personal and not always teachable. Besides, learning theories allows one to put his emotions and feelings through notes and rhythm, enriches one's musical vocabulary, and contributes to the overall understanding of music. It is just a thought after hearing Stubblefield says that he just improvises as the song goes.

Overall, listening to these pieces has been enjoyable. Man's performance was very eye-opening in that I have rarely seen any pipa performance in the past. I also got to know the basic features of early funk music through Brown's Cold Sweat and Stubblefield's explanation.

### **Reference**

Chao, X. (2021). *Slaying Huaxiong with warm wine Finger Style Guitar Original*.

Www.youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9BwvHZrepY>