Diverse Compositional Techniques in Yusef Lateef's African American Epic Suite "First Movement - The African as Non-American"

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Background and Introduction

It is a difficult task to summarize Yusef Lateef's career concisely in conventional terms. A powerful tenor saxophonist and inventive composer, he has performed and composed in styles best described as musical hybrids. With a discography spanning the entire second half of the twentieth century, Lateef was playing world music before the genre was defined. Noted as the first musician to substantially incorporate elements of Arabic and other Eastern musics into the more traditional bop and blues forms, he brought the expressiveness of the blues to the flute and oboe, instruments not considered idiomatic to the style.

As the diversity of his music grew, so did the number of instruments he utilized to make his voice heard: Egyptian *argul*, India's *shanai*, flutes from Africa and Asia, instruments he created for himself to play, and eventually synthesizers and computers. His compositions range from blues and song forms to classical chamber and symphonic works. An established educator with an Ed.D. from the University of Massachusetts, he spent four years in Africa as a senior research fellow at Ahmadubelaa University's Center for Nigerian Cultural Studies. He is a poet, a philosopher, an amateur instrument builder, a painter, has written short stories, a novella, and short dramatic works. He is a devoted Muslim, having dedicated much of his life to Islamic studies in the United States and abroad. In 1957, he lived in the Ahmadiyya Mosque in Detroit where he served as Imam (prayer-leader) and developed curriculum for children and adults. Lateef also engaged in Islamic studies in Copenhagen, Denmark, and in Mecca and Medina, Arabia. His music has successfully defied categorization, demanding to be known simply as the music of Yusef Lateef.

He is credited with introducing John Coltrane to Eastern music and the philosophies which started Coltrane down the path of spirituality. Sonny Rollins, another tremendously influential tenor saxophonist, cited Lateef's Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns <i>Miles Davis: The Straightenin'</i> as a valued resource in his practice regimen. Archie Shepp also claims Lateef as a source of inspiration, endorsing that same book on the back cover (Lateef 1981). Furthermore, Lateef's years with Cannonball Adderley's sextet placed him in one of the great

1 Berendt 1992, 250.
2 Lateef 1977, 7.
4 Tirro 1993, 386.
tours and recording bands of the sixties, with his prominent presence as a composer and a soloist on tenor saxophone, flute, and oboe. Further confounding attempts to label his music, Lateef received a Grammy in the New Age category for his Atlantic recording Little Symphony (1987).

A rare and valuable look at Lateef's work is found in Weinstein's (1992) cross-cultural approach towards African-American music which devotes an entire chapter to Lateef's role in bringing authentically African influences to Afro-American music. This perspective on Lateef's career is fully realized in The African-American Epic Suite, in which Lateef combines full orchestra with a five-man unit performing on various western and ethnic instruments. The large, four movement composition was commissioned by the Cologne Radio Orchestra (Kölner Rundfunkorchester) and draws upon instrumentations, performance practices, and compositional techniques from Africa, North America, South America, Europe, Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and Aboriginal Australia. In the carefully developed suite, the composer skillfully combines African oral tradition with purely composed sections, improvisation, with various parameters to be considered by the players, unfolding of programmatic motifs, use of tone rows and atonality, and directions to the players regarding the spirit in which phrases are intended to be performed (i.e. with love, with deep feeling, etc.). There is a great depth and sophistication to the work that is a climactic marriage of Lateef's rich experiences.

This article looks specifically at Lateef's African American Epic Suite: 1st Movement "The African as Non-American." It is this author's belief that the movement serves as a microcosm of Lateef's music, containing widely divergent elements of style and compositional process, with an encompassing programmatic agenda. Furthermore, Lateef is never fully bound by any one compositional technique, but rather freely combines procedures which ultimately must give way to the composer's musical will. These qualities of style, technique, and intense programmaticism permeate Lateef's body of works.

Discrepancies in the Score

In comparing the score to the recorded performance, some differences were apparent. Lateef provided substantial freedom to the quintet, often only indicating the desired instrument with slash marks designating when to play, and sometimes text describing the musical intent (i.e., "play dumbeak behind bass clarinet") or providing extra-musical information (i.e., "with love"). Lateef remarks that the quintet's cues are only guidelines and that he trusts the musicians to bring something unique to each performance, something beyond the notated music. He reverently noted Miles Davis as the model band leader, allowing his musicians the freedom to contribute to the music with their individualities. The liberties granted to the quintet obviously result in certain variances from the score. While these differences are negligible in terms of overall musical effect, they sometimes reflect musical choices made by the performers, consciously or perhaps subconsciously, which were useful in analyzing the work.

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6 Lyons 1980, 224.
The first sixteen measures of the score are not rigidly followed on the recording, and sound as if the musicians' entries are cued. The recorded performance of the opening section can be expressed chronologically as follows: 0:00 - moan flute; 0:11 add kalimba; 0:15 add clay pots; 0:18 add gimbrel; 0:31 add dumk and bamboo flute. The dumk begins with a slap on beat four, preparing the group to begin at m. 16, and marking the beginning of definitively metered time. Measures 16-19 provide the conductor with a reference from which to cue in the strings at m. 20.

Beginning at m. 19, there is a rhythmic chanting of the phrase "YA-O-WA, SA-DU-DA IKE, YA-O-WA," which is not marked in the score. In the score, the phrase is divided across measures 24, 36, and 51. On the recording however, the words are cried out, free of the meter, in measures 25, 30, 31, 32, 37, and 45. In Hausa, Yaowa translates as "wonderful" and Saduda Ike as "well done." The clay pot imitates the rhythm of these words. In m. 28, Adam Rudolph rests, switching to kalangsu (talking drum) in m. 32, where he continues to mimic the rhythm of the chant.

The score has a misprint in m. 23, when the first violins change from D♭ to E♭. The part should remain on D-flat through m. 31. On the and of beat three at m. 66, the bass should have a D above the clef, not the B indicated in the score. There is another misprint in the trumpets and trombones in mm. 79-80 and a similar misprint in the clarinet and bassoon parts in m. 79. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate the necessary corrections, as transcribed by the author from the recording.

Example 1: Yusef A. Lateef, *African American Epic Suite*, mvt. 1, mm. 79-80. Author's correction to the score, as transcribed from the recording.

Example 2: Yusef A. Lateef, *African American Epic Suite*, mvt. 1, m. 79. Author's correction to the score, as transcribed from the recording.
On the recording, in m. 97, Ralph Jones plays a G-sharp in the final phrase of his bass clarinet solo, in a section clearly marked E minor. One possible explanation for this note choice is that the performer still heard the G-sharp hanging over as a part of the previous harmony, E hexatonic (augmented), which contains both G-natural and G-sharp.

The last discrepancy between the score and the recording is in the orchestral percussion part at m. 139. Although this solo is played on tambourine on the recording, the composer indicates that tenor drum was preferred but was not available at the time of the recording.

Programmatic Elements

According to Lateef’s liner notes:

this movement opens you are taken back in time, about 300 years, to the continent of West Africa. You imagine that you are listening to the music of the Yoruba, Hausa, Akan, Ewe, Senufo, Benin, Dahomey, Ebo, or Ashanti people. In other words, you are listening to a music which has its historical roots in the soil of Africa.7

The composer uses no traditional musical notation in the opening section, calling instead upon aural tradition to emulate an authentically folk element. The musicians are given instructions regarding which instruments to play, and the percussion parts indicate “Ibo rhythm.” Lateef’s expertise on the music of Nigeria is reflected in his reference to the Nigerian Ibo people (also acceptably spelled “Ebo,” or “Igbo”, and the use of clay pots, known to the Ibo as ludu drums.8 The composer’s use of udu drums to evoke an historic Africa is significant, in that the Ibo people once believed the sounds of the udu to be the voices of ancestors.9

In m. 20, the D-flat in the first violins symbolizes the first slave ships, quietly approaching the shores.10 The slavers advance with stealth, marked by slow crescendo. The first phrase builds from pppp to pp. Two measures rest are followed by another long crescendo which goes to a dynamic which is unspecified, but obviously louder than pp. The interruption is now only one measure, indicating that the ships are getting closer. The final crescendo starts in m. 47 at pppp, going to p in m. 55, and quickly surging to mf in just three more measures. At m. 59, the slavers strike.

At this point, the score indicates that the quintet should play “irregularly” signifying the disturbance of the slavers’ attack. The woodwinds and strings play a seemingly chaotic six measure segment to dramatize the confusion of the initial onslaught. At m. 65, the

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7 Lateef 1993b

8 Giorgini 2000.

9 Hall 2000.

10 Lateef 1993b.
slavers organize their efforts to capture the Africans one at a time. The first to be chased is Ralph Jones, depicted in his bass clarinet solo. The soloist is given cue notes at first, but by m. 77, the cues are interspersed with measures marked "freedom." The purpose of these measures is to intensify the suggestion of a struggle, back and forth between the forced structure of capture and freedom, in both the musical and symbolic senses. Lateef indicates that the tutti chords are symbolic of the slavers "acting together" and he wanted to avoid counterpoint to emphasize the point. At m. 97, Ralph is captured and subdued as the music relaxes into a tonal sounding, E minor from the lower strings. Lateef explains that the rhythmic figure in the cellos was meant to recall Debussy's La Mer. This, in combination with the woodwinds playing a short passage marked dirge, suggests Africans being solemnly marched to the ship.

At m. 104, the bassoon plays a nine-tone solo passage which is intended to "signify the unknown future of the captives". This motif is a part of what Lateef calls a "triple diminished pattern," which is defined as a twelve-tone passage with no two adjacent notes being from the same fully diminished seventh chord. The complete twelve pitches are presented earlier, beginning at m. 65 in the violins. Figure 1 shows the motif in the composer's hand. The downward arrows indicate a shared diminished seventh chord (notice the violins begin the pattern on G, cycling through all twelve pitches). The triple diminished motif represents the destiny of the Africans, foreshadowed in the high strings which are orchestrated independently from the simultaneously occurring "chase." The motif appears at several other places in the movement, but only in partial form which suggests an unknown resolution.

Figure 1: "Triple diminished theme" in the composer's hand. Gift to author.

The slavers focus their efforts on capturing Charles Moore at m.106, portrayed by the flugel horn solo. The orchestra begins softly, with gentle sounds. In the aforementioned discussion with Lateef, the composer explained that this section signifies the slavers attempting to coax Charles out of hiding by pretending to be kind and friendly. (It should be noted that the use of first name references to the members of the quintet follows the manner in which the score is marked.) It is significant that the violins are again placed in the high register, hinting back at the initial stealth of the slavers. The orchestra builds in activity and intensity to m. 128, where a dissonant forte signals Charles' capture.

The conga solo which commences in m. 128, symbolizes the slavers focussing attention on Adam Rudolph in a frenetic chase. The slavers now show their relentlessness in full view. The orchestra plays a series of rhythmic stabs and lunges ending with a two measure decrescendo in m. 153, where Adam is finally vanquished. In the middle of the conga solo, at m. 139, there is a tenor drum solo. Lateef conveys that this passage suggests a prayer-like chant in the midst of the despair.

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11 Lateef 1993b.
Lateef's tenor saxophone solo begins at m. 155, with all the musicians instructed to play "with love." Furthermore, Adam is directed to play sensitive and delicate sounds. This section seems to depict a captured Yusef who is exhausted, dreaming of the past, before the slavers captured him. The solo proceeds with guttural sounds and wails, emulating a struggle to find the strength to make a final, desperate attempt to escape, emphasized by the heroic perfect fifths in the violins and violas beginning at m. 160. The strings play sul ponticello in m. 165, and are then joined by the winds in long chromatic glissandi. These sounds could represent the transition from the hallucination to the horrible reality at hand. By m. 169, Yusef breaks away in an ultimately futile effort to escape. He is quickly subdued in just four measures.

The quintet resumes playing the African folk music at m. 174, but this time it is meant to be a hollow reflection of the past. The violins again play the high D-flat, signifying the ships and in m. 178, the bassoon again signals the unsure future with nine tones of the triple diminished motif. The entire orchestra settles into sustained harmony at m. 187, returning to the original pppp. The ships disappear into the horizon as quietly as they first emerged.

Atonal Techniques

The triple diminished motif is one of several tone rows that Lateef uses to generate pitches. This particular theme can be found in many of Lateef's recorded compositions, including selections on Fantasia for Flute (1996), and compositions on the Metamorphosis 1993) and CHNOPS, Gold and Soul (1997). The earliest recorded example of the theme is found in the composition, The Ark, from the recording Woodwinds (1993). On page 91 of the composer's book, Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns, he offers a "triple diminished scale" which contains a portion of the motif. The motif uses a repeating three-note cell (down a major second, up a minor second) which is sequenced in descending minor thirds. The first three notes of the "triple diminished scale" are in fact this same cell in retrograde, as a part of a four-note cell which sequences in a different manner. The significance of this scale will be seen shortly.

The triple diminished motif first appears in mm 65-74 stated by the violins. Beneath the long sustained line, the pizzicato basses play the motif in retrograde, at the third transposition level. Metrically, the two lines do not line up and the violins are left sustaining for one measure to allow the basses to complete their line, with the brass entering to mark the completion of the sequence at m. 77. It is also interesting to note that the first five notes of the bass line are identical to the aforementioned "triple diminished scale."

| P⁰ | G  F  F♯  E  D  Eb  C♯  B  C  Bb  Ab  A |
| R¹ | C  B  Db  Eb  D  E  F♯  F  G  A  Ab  Bb |

"triple diminished scale"
C  B  Db  Eb  D  C#  D#  etc. ...

Table 1: The triple diminished motif with comparison to "triple diminished scale."
The next significant source of pitch material is less obvious, in that it is not particularly exposed and does not have a clearly programmatic purpose. In the section beginning at m. 59, Lateef employs a nine tone row. The row is essentially three triads: an ascending quartal triad starting on F, a descending augmented triad starting on E, and the set G, B, F#. (The remaining pitches, A, C#, D, complete a twelve tone series and will be discussed shortly.) This row can be found in several of the composer's other works, including p. 24 of his Method on How to Perform Autophysioptic Music (1995), See "Finer Fugue" from his One Hundred and Twenty Three Duets for All Treble Clef Instruments (1999), and most meaningfully to this analysis, on p. 92 of his Repository in which the nine tone row is presented as a bass line in combination with the "triple diminished scale" as the treble line. This shows that the composer had already experimented with these pitches together more than ten years before composing African American Epic Suite.

In the duet "Schoenberg Remembered," also from his book of duets, the nine tone row is clearly exposed in the lower part. The upper part does not feel obliged to follow any rigid set of shows that Lateef rules regarding use of the tone row. In a discussion with the author, Lateef indicated that he will sometimes skip notes in a row, or freely move pitches around to find the sound that he is looking for. He further explained that when writing with tone rows, if the row is interrupted by a rest, he finds it acceptable to restart the row from any other point. A tone row is only a point of origin, and it can be mutated whenever he sees fit. Example 3 illustrates the combining of strict row order with free mutation in the upper part. Notice the inclusion of the remaining three pitches in the first two measures of the upper part.

Example 3: Yusef A. Lateef, Schoenberg Remembered, mm. 1-4. Illustrating nine tone row in lower voice, and free mutation with "omitted tones" in upper voice.

As previously alluded to, the nine tone row is actually a portion of a twelve tone row, or perhaps more appropriately stated, a nine tone row with three conspicuously omitted tones. The pitch scheme in mm. 59-64 can be described in three parts. On the first beat, the basses quickly play all twelve pitches in three four note vertical structures: augmented major seventh chords (in various inversions) on C, G, and D♭. This rhythmic and harmonic disruption forcefully indicates the composer's twelve tone agenda. At the same time, the woodwinds and strings play brief outbursts constructed with pitches from the nine tone row. These short cells stay close to row order, or with some mutations, similar to Schoenberg Remembered. The section comes to a close, and the composer's agenda is fulfilled in the whole note chord in m. 64, where the top three notes in the woodwind choir are the three omitted tones, thus completing the twelve tone cycle. These notes are trilled, setting them apart from the other tones and emphasizing their importance.
Harmonic and Melodic Elements

Lateef makes use of symmetrical chords to create a feeling of volatility, primarily utilizing groupings from the augmented scale and occasionally diminished chords or clusters. Lateef indicates that he created thirteen harmonic "entities" which he used at will to create harmonic progressions. This technique is readily apparent in mm 65 - 96 (Ralph Jones' bass clarinet solo). The solo can be divided into two sections, divided by the double bar after m. 76, ending in the transition into the next solo with new material at m. 97. The harmonic scheme of the solo moves from chaos towards order, reaching closure with the stability of E minor from the strings in m. 97. This is one of the only true points of repose in the movement. Lateef calls back to the nine tone row here, with the third triad set (G, B, F#) in the violas and later in the violins. For ease of reference, the thirteen harmonic entities are presented in Example 4.

The first section, mm. 65 - 76 consists of the first seven harmonic entities. At a rate of one chord per measure, entities 1 - 6 are introduced in consecutive measures. At m. 71 and 72, the fifth entity appears at two different transposition levels. The seventh entity is introduced at m. 73 and transposed in the following measure. The fourth entity is reiterated in m. 75 and the fifth entity appears again in the closing measure of the segment.

Beginning in m. 77, the orchestra plays a repetitive rhythmic figure combined with measures of rest, in which the soloist is given the indication "freedom." Harmonic entities 8 - 12 share a common architecture, essentially poly-chordal structures consisting of a major triad with an added flat sixth, superimposed over a major triad with a raised second added directly below the third. (The ninth entity is slightly different, with an incomplete triad in the bottom half.) Half of the measures containing harmony are transpositions of the eighth entity (measures 77, 82, 84, 85, 87, 92, and 96). Entities 9 - 13 appear in the following measures respectively: 79, 80, 89,90, and 94. In addition to the order provided by the similar harmonic shapes, the root movement outlines three ascending diminished seventh chords, on C, B and G. The composer's intent here may have been to provide an overt clue to the triple diminished scheme.

Measure 97 is the first instance of a chord symbol, as the composer marks "E" in the soloist's cues. In this transition to the next solo, Lateef makes use of modal contour, with two measures of E minor add 9, moving towards two measures of brighter dorian with the introduction of C# in the flute. In m. 102, the harmonic color takes a distinctly dark shift to aeolian with the C natural (flatted sixth) in the oboe, violins and violas.

It is interesting to note that the heroism of the perfect fifths in the flute at m. 100 seems to be quickly overshadowed by the darkly romantic flatted sixth just two bars later. Precisely two bars afterward, the bassoon sounds the ambivalent triple diminished motif.

The flugelhorn solo at m. 106 follows the precedent of traditional chord symbols set back in m. 97. Again there is a clear contour moving from open and spacious harmonic and rhythmic materials to greater darkness and density. An F pedal sustains, with some stopping and starting, until m. 124. The harmonic content shifts through the following sequence: lydian, ionian #5 (third mode of harmonic minor), lydian, and the Egyptian scale
(harmonic minor #4). At m. 116, the harmonies become more clustered and the cues change from chord symbols to linear spellings of the vertical structures. Lateef mentions that these linear derivations were worked out by ear at the piano. The harmonies become increasingly dense and in m. 124, complex chord symbols are used as sonorities change every two beats. The harmonic chaos reaches climax in a hybrid seven-tone grouping (F, G♭, G♯, A, B♭, D♭, D) emphasized by Tremolo Punta d’Arco in the strings.

The conga solo, which begins on the aforementioned measure, begins with further development of the diminished agenda. Two diminished seventh chords, broken up into major seventh couplets, sequenced in minor thirds, are divided into a pattern of call, response, then sounding simultaneously, as shown in Example 5.

Example 5: Yusef A. Lateef, African American Epic Suite, mvt. 1, mm 129 - 132. Author’s reduction from the score.

The conga solo continues, as the orchestra combines elements of the nine tone row, particularly the ascending quartal triad on F and the G-B-F♯ set, with the leaping major sevenths which become more densely harmonized. It is important to remember that the rhythmic tutti figures are methodical, and symbolic of the slavers working together to systematically capture their prey.

'Endophytic' Composition

Lateef describes an endophyte as a plant living within another plant. He uses this concept as a way of creating lines based upon the intervals which reside in vertical structures. As previously discussed in the section on programmatic elements, m. 165 can be seen as "Yusef's last stand." This final section utilizes Lateef’s "endophytic" technique in creating furious atonal lines (mm. 170 - 173) which are born out of the preceding chordal entities (mm. 165 - 169). Several of these linear derivations are offered as palindromes in subsequent measures. In this climactic section, there is a fastidious order beneath the chaos which is symbolic of the slavers exacting method for capturing the Africans. Examples 6 and 7 illustrate the endophytic technique, drawing from both singular and multiple parent vertical structures.
Example 6: "Endophytic" Techniques, mm. 170 - 171.

Example 7: Multiple vertical structures with linear derivation and palindrome.

Conclusions

Singular vertical structure with linear derivation and palindrome. The music of Yusef Lateef is a challenge to analyze, as he moves freely between compositional techniques. *African American Epic Suite* is a perfect illustration of his diverse methodologies and the liberties taken by the composer, and often given to the performers, to realize his ultimate musical vision. The first movement alone sufficiently proves this point. Lateef is more concerned about achieving his artistic goals than conforming to a set of rules. In a telephone conversation with the author shortly before the completion of this analysis, Lateef explained "I believe that intuition speaks to us, and that we should listen." We are indeed fortunate that Yusef Lateef has spent his long and prolific career nurturing and giving voice to his intuition.

Reference List


