

TAMAZ GABISONIA
(*GEORGIA*)

SEMIOTIC DIMENSIONS OF DRONE IN TRADITIONAL MUSIC

It can be said that drone is one of the phenomena (if not the only one) which for the most part is regarded as the common feature of traditional musical culture. If anyone refers to drone as the chief symbol of ethnic music, it will be hard to raise a well-reasoned objection.

What can we add to the viewpoints expressed about drone during this century? In any case our paper will seem like a compilation, even if non-purposeful. Hopefully our essay, which implies discussion on the stage of analysis, will be useful at least to encourage the intention.

We will do our best to regard drone according to three aspects of semiotics, also echoed by the features characterized by Medushevsky (Medushevsky, 1976: 29-38). We will also distinguish other, in our opinion, important peculiarities.

Semantics of Drone

Drone can be regarded as the archetype with polyhedral meanings.

The word drone means buzzing in French¹, as well as drone from the old German – humming or buzzing. Similar etymology is based on the continuous sound of an instrument. These names also show an immanent feature- sustaining a sound. Originally “drone” was a sign-symbol, a metaphor like “ostinato”. But the concept of drone does not have a single meaning. Apart from a sustained note, it also denotes background, support tone, recitation. From the standpoint of content, it may indicate unity, stability, transcendental impulse.

Drone also has certain connotational meanings, which can be attributed by the addressee, e.g. “ground”, “support”, “sky” (in the upper register).

Drone as denoting the central sound (tonic) on the one hand, and calmness and steadiness on the other hand, can also be perceived as the symbol of “house”, “room”. This is why it can also imply a kind of nostalgic meaning. From this standpoint it would be interesting to discuss the soundtracks of films with a nostalgic plot.

It can be said that in a certain context drone denotes a daily occurrence, even silence. Silence is also a background, it is also homogenous.... At the same time we perceive a certain sound as a silence, which we are used to as a daily, necessary background (Jordania, 2008: 36). From this viewpoint the Swedish interpretation of drone is interesting – drowse.

Static drone, from the standpoint of communication, has another connotation among performers – as a part for “less skillful performers”.

Drone – Continuum or Constant?

Which substance determines drone, as form – continuum or sound pitch constant? The immanent peculiarity of continuum is expansion of a sound. It is an absolute embodiment of drone; and its secondary occurrence is a discrete, corpuscular sound stretch. The basic feature of sound pitch constant is invariability, which alongside a stretched sound, can also be expressed by recitation,

even by strumming a string or ringing a bell, or at least by regular beating on a shaman's tambourine.

It is also noteworthy that repetition, which essentially contrasts with the idea of drone-continuum, more fits the idea of invariability or constant. For this reason ostinato can be understood as a kind of drone reincarnation. Let us remember Asafiev, who considers "cantus firmus" an occurrence of drone more than of ostinato. As he says "cantus firmus" aims to "unite polyphonic tissue, tie and support it" (Asafiev, 1971: 74).

The best example of constant opposed continuum is the Taiwanese "Pasibutbut" tradition. Is this variable sound drone? Indeed, it is! (audio ex. 1)

Constant nature is the accidental peculiarity of drone, but continuity is a substantial characteristic. This is why it can be said that continuum is the essence, method and form of drone, while constant is only method and form. This is why in relation to continued (pedal drone) recitative drone should be considered as secondary both from chronological and phenomenological standpoints.

Drone – Image of Chronotope

As Orlov figuratively says, time is the soul of music, and the sound is the body of music (Orlov, 1972: 359). We would add: drone is the intersection of these two dimensions. We would consider it as the most minimal and thus adequate expression of chronotope.

Indeed, these two afore-mentioned coordinates are minimized in drone according to two tendencies: 1) of rhythm, by directly leveling the time unit; 2) by leveling melodic movement as movement in general; under the conditions of these two factors we can at some point feel "the border with transcendent timelessness" (Orlov, 1992: 66)

Modal gravitation is directly connected with the time factor. From this viewpoint drone polyphony can be considered as an antipode of modal polyphony- proceeding from modal aesthetics, which contradicts the perception of tonical sound as a simultaneous centre of gravitation. Such a centre creates a coordinate in musical tissue, one regulation of which is the reflection of transcendental by general aesthetics, association of timelessness.

It can be said that for music such an essential time coordinate is more actual in drone – constant than in drone-continuum, as the former is counted in itself or by movement in parallel space, the latter has no such time unit. It can be said that constant is "immovable in mobile" (drone in polyphonic texture), and constant is "mobile in immovable" (perception of drone as a chain of separate sounds).

In Orlov's opinion musical sound is the clearest and most complete manifestation. In time it moves and even rests, "as a Chinese vessel, constantly moving in its immobility" (Orlov, 1992: 395). Here, certainly, under the "sound" the author means "drone" (audio ex. 2).

Boundaries of Drone

Proceeding from the above discussion continuity should be considered as an essential characteristic of drone, and constant nature as its own characteristic. But continuity and discontinuity exist only in formal space without context; and we ask the question: what are the semantics of continuum in music? As a binary opposite it is contradicted by movement, expressed by melody, proceeding from this continued intoning, without melodic movement, musical idea – in narrow understanding can be considered as drone.

Lomax considers that drone does not get lost in a situation where the stretched tone is dis-

placed to another step (Lomax, 2009: 67). We would like to add: but it should not attract attention as a melodic motive.

This is why, in a broader sense, drone is an accompaniment, but drone two-part singing can be understood as a sort of minimal image of real functional polyphony or that with a different function. Drone itself is a minimal or laconic image of bass – one of the chief contours of musical tissue (Nazaikinsky, 1972: 119).

Drone Syntax

Since we consider continuity as the chief characteristic of drone, we also considered an individual stretched sound as drone. Proceeding from this, drone can be embodied 1) individually or collectively, 2) recitatively or continually, 3) instrumentally or vocally, 4) with contrast function (from other voice parts) or with a single function, 5) statically and dynamically. These pairs of five dimensions are regarded within one voice part, as binary opposites. In the same way, they can make different combinations: individual contrast drone – *homey* (audio ex. 3), instrumental solo drone – *didgeridoo* (audio ex. 4), collective single-part drone – Tibetan psalmody (audio ex. 5) total choral drone – *Pasibutbut*, contrast continual drone – *Chakrulo* (audio ex. 6), etc.

Indeed, the embodiment of drone in more than one voice part is a very rare occurrence, particularly in any of the afore-mentioned forms. A different presentation of the drone idea in one performance is not natural.

This is why the disseminated notion “drone polyphony” denotes not essentially a drone vocal movement (such can only be the music playing imprinted with the priority of drone creativity, for instance “Pasibutbut”), but polyphony with drone. Thus the term “drone polyphony” (similar to “drone” itself) does not proceed from real essence, nor is inadequate. So how did it happened to be inculcated? Evidently, for thrift reason, on the background of melodic diversity, drone is the only non-melodically active part and represents a relatively stable predicate.

Drone – Background

In Asafiev’s words “the strive to prolong the musical material is intrinsically connected to the strive to help us perceive the architectonics of the blurred tones in memory, in other words: melodic movement and pedal” (Asafiev, 1987: 88). Here the scholar particularly focuses on drone as the stable background of gestalt.

Gollitzin states that the simplest way to focus attention on stimulus is to match a contrasting background to the object. This allows the attention to move to the background sometimes and return to the object again (Golitzin, 1980: 59). This mechanism can be completely applied to the relation between the bass drone, as a background, and the upper leading voice, as gestalt.

Rarely, drone turn into gestalt – it can be distinguished by a powerful functional initiative, leaving the melodically active voices a secondary role.

Another function of drone is attaching a harmonic component to a melodic voice – as to the modal support of the phrase. In general, modal support, with a tonical (tonal?) reference-point, creates a green-house effect for the improvisation of the upper voices.

Drone Pragmatics

Indeed, people with a drone culture determine the degree of the functional meaning of drone. For instance Greeks consider that the Byzantine chant with ison is a single-part tradition, but Geor-

gians consider “Metivuri” (East Georgian song with a pedal drone on the unchanged tone throughout the song) as a two-part song.

In the subjective perception of drone’s actual time coordinate there arise evident associations, most fruitfully used in meditative religious cultures. Here it is necessary as the background for improvisation: harmonica for qawal, tanpura for the raga, recitation in Buddhist psalmody. The Byzantine isokratema itself, with its tonical charge, is knitted as a foreign body into the modal scale, but it survives in this dialectic environment.

It is noteworthy that the above-mentioned religious spaces are mostly encountered in monadic cultures. In Georgian chant the drone is less important than in Georgian folk song.

From the standpoint of religious music we would like to mention another dimension of drone – its introvert vector, in contrast to the extravert mobile voice, mostly directed downward. The Buddhist mantra “Aum”, or the Mongolian “Hoomei” are the examples (audio ex. 7).

The Russian liturgical basso profundo can also be regarded as a parallel method. Such recitation is also based on drone.

We can distinguish between the intentional and communication performance of drone. In the first case the drone performer focuses on the peculiarities of the drone, in the second case the direction of the drone is determined by another *gestalt* voice.

Drone – Motivation and Affect

Musical figures are types of “emotional-acoustic codes” (Levi, 1992: 93) and among them the drone is distinguished in a distinct, economic structure, with a certain narrative context. Let us remember the vargan (audio ex. 8) and didgeridoo, containing “speech-like” vibration. This language is used for speaking with spirits. When ascending from speech to music we usually “step” on a same pitch repetition, drone, which equals to the documentation of musical sound itself. Drone is more epic than lyrics. This is the chief emotion caused by drone.

In general, according to the ethnomusicological practice, there are two qualities in the drone (stretched) sound: 1) dynamic, active (intensive, even annoying, charged with energy) – buzzing, prolonged – *zurna*, *chianuri*, bagpipe, fiddle drone, drone from Shop region in Bulgaria, etc 2) Static and passive (calming, meditational, passive background) – tambourine in raga, harmonica in qawwali, drone in the song “*Metivuri*”, etc.

Why the drone produces anxiety in some cases, and relaxes in the others? Dynamic drone is mostly in the upper register, the static one in the low register. According to Sokhor, more effort is needed to produce high tones than low ones. They are regarded as expressing more emotional tension (Sokhor, 1986: 34).

Habitual drone polyphony corresponds well “.....tranquil mechanism of music recognition and understanding” defined by Medushevsky (Medushevsky, 1976: 136)

Drone background does not only denote statics, conflict-freedom, but also neutralizes its conflict *gestalt*. Sound, constructed on simple intervals and based on a bass drone does not have agonal (competition) effect (Gabisonia, 2012).

It is interesting that the absence of rhythm is perceived more negatively than rhythmic music by man, because the latter is based on the repetition of a more pleasant intonation (Levi, 1992: 95). Obviously, the solo stretched voice of “melody register” provokes opposite, destructive reaction.

Sometimes a “calm” drone also creates the environment for the effect of dramatization – via the contrast with the partner voice, but a similar layer causes positive emotion both as artistic goal

and the mechanism of psychological projection. Vigotsky considers that the factor of catharsis is present in every piece, as “essential affective resistance”, which causes opposite sensations followed by their brief inclusion and annihilation” (Vigotsky: 1986: 267).

It is known that the listener perceives music and interprets it (Kostiuk, 1986: 14). This is why music with a drone is often more understandable. It is easier to decode drone than melodic movement, particularly a less predictable one. Indeed, “the lesser is the listener’s thesaurus, the bigger is the role of sonorous, common-syncretic perception” (Duvirac, 1986: 106). And drone is a kind of buffer to our ear against strange and hardly-adaptable notes in the upper voices.

We would also discuss other interpretations of drone, for instance the maintenance of unison at the end of a song, characteristic of the Slavs, can be explained as overcoming the inertia of movement on the one hand and striving for documenting infinity on the other hand, which is a sort of protest against the phrase ending (audio ex. 9).

Frequently, the verbal text of the upper voice represents a certain latent copy in the bass drone. Considering this psycho-physiological reality, it can be implied in the co-prayer “With one heart and one mind” in ison chants sung on the Byzantine syllable.

Is drone a compromise decision resulting from the individual’s inability to follow the melody in unison? Such motivation is supposed on the level of individual, not collective thinking. In the early epoch of musical evolution joining the melody or tuning drone might be determined by social function, not by ability.

Drone in Georgian Tradition

Accompaniment of a solo singer with a bass implies primarily the drone. However the latter is the small sub-sign of a larger capacity term “bass”, denoting accompaniment in general.

It is noteworthy, that in three-part singing implied by Ioane Petritsi the term “bami” has a combining function (Pirtskhalava, 2002: 115), which makes us presume the existence of drone polyphony in the Georgian tradition of the time.

It is interesting that in Georgian tradition drone has no distinguishing name; it is referred to as “*bani*” in Kakheti, the same term which represents a virtuoso low part of a Gurian trio. However the name of the Georgian instrument *chianuri* – which can also have the meaning of “squeak” (compare with Laz *chilili*) can be considered as the parallel to the afore-mentioned buzzing, also connected with recitation.

The pedal drone in four-part work songs *naduri* has the particular name “*shemkhmobari*”. Its location is not marked out by the range of the bass even in three-part *naduri* songs (let us remember the “diving” of the top parts under the drone in Imeretian *naduri*), indicating that background is not its primary function. Indeed it denotes a supportive, axis tone, but is more dynamic – with appealing character and not static as the bass in table songs (audio ex. 10). It is interesting that *shemkhmobari* stops when the phrase ends and the other three parts start moving towards a cadence.

“Upper voice must be sung by soloists, the bass by a choir” – this can be considered as the chief rule of Georgian singing tradition, and only the bass of a western Georgian trio is allowed to violate this rule. By why do Georgian singers perform the melodically developed bass in unison? Apparently, this principle of ostinato and bass drone is inertia coming from old tradition.

Finally it can be said that drone is one of the basic elements of musical structure of traditional music, which despite (or possibly because of) its primitiveness and homogeneity appears to be a poly-semantic and poly-layer concept.

Notes

¹ <http://www.britannica.com/art/drone-music>

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Audio examples

1. *Posibutbut*. Bunun Men's Choir. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2cYeIr3zCQ>
2. *The Music of the Spheres*. Tibetan Singing Bowls. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcka0wrn1ok>
3. Mongolian *Homey*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1KzgJAvS8M>
4. Australian *Didgeridoo*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgwsGjRk61M>
5. Tibetan and Nepalese Nuns singing. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4jAOrHPHFw>
6. Georgian song *Chakrulo*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sWsuc223uk>
7. Tibetan *AUM MANTRA*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW0xSVw2gXc>
8. Mansi & Khanty *Tumran* (Vargan). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDqC42oR9oo>
9. Ukrainian song *Oi, davno, davno, (Oh, long ago)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAfBO9vMwt4>
10. Georgian *Naduri* song *Jikurai*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeCyyRg0vb0>

Translated by *Maia Kachkachishvili*