

Receptivity in the Music of Kilautiup Songuninga¹

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In April 2006, The Rooms art gallery and museum in St. John's held an Inuit cultural exhibition to mark the inauguration of Nunatsiavut as a regional ethnic government in Newfoundland and Labrador (Nunatsiavut Government). The event, called "Celebrating Nunatsiavut," was to feature creative contributions from local/prov-vincial Inuit. According to Inuit artist and musician Stanley Nochasak, Colleen Shea at The Rooms approached him about performing traditional Inuit music (Nochasak, personal communication, March 18, 2009). At the time, Stanley along with Sophie Angnatok, Josephine Obed, and Solomon Semigak had been learning some Inuit songs from Mary Piercey—a non-Inuit PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Memorial University who has lived and taught music in Nunavut. The Rooms brought down Simon Kohmeister from Labrador to help Stanley and the others make their own Inuit frame drums, while the St. John's Native Friendship Centre provided space to gather and rehearse. The members² performed for the first time as a group at "Celebrating Nunatsiavut."

Kilautiup Songuninga, then, was the result of the collaborative efforts of The Rooms, the Friendship Centre, Piercey, and a small group of Inuit in St. John's. Currently, the group is made up almost entirely of Labrador Inuit living in the province's capital (as a non-Inuit, I am the only exception at this time). That the members of Kilautiup participate actively in their cultural traditions is significant, because drumming and throat singing are widely thought to have disappeared in Labrador following the arrival of Moravian missionaries in the late eighteenth century.³ Historian James Hiller writes that the Moravians discouraged many pre-contact traditions as part of a "crusade against the devil as personified in the *angakut* (shaman)" (Hiller 164).

Perhaps because such oral lines of transmission were broken in Labrador, the members of Kilautiup have relied on other ways to gain access to aspects of their culture that were not available to them growing up. The group continues to learn songs and dances from Nunavut musicians visiting St. John's or at cultural gatherings out of the province, which they occasionally attend. CDs are also an important resource for group members, as

is YouTube. The history of Inuit musical culture in Labrador and the innovative ways young Inuit are reconnecting with that history are topics that I am exploring in my doctoral research. The following is a discussion about the role receptivity plays in the music making of Kilautiup. Receptivity refers here to particular ways group members listen and respond to rhythmic and melodic contingencies that arise in the course of drumming and singing.⁴

Ethnography

Members of Kilautiup Songuninga stand with the audience, waiting for their turn while a First Nations drumming group performs. They are in performance dress—canvas *silapâks* (outer garments for men), *amautis* (parkas worn by women) with decorative trim and *kamiks* (sealskin boots).⁵ Sherry Blake, who is standing next to me, says she is nervous. She laughs and nods when I ask her if she thinks she will make it through the performance. There is a pause in our exchange that might be considered awkward in some social circles, but not for Sherry. She is outgoing and sociable, but is also comfortable with silence; I have never sensed from her that a pause in conversation needed to be filled. Her easiness emphasizes my awkwardness. In many respects, this contrast characterizes my interactions with the group as a whole and prompts the following discussion about receptivity in the music making of Kilautiup.

I break the silence and ask Sherry where her son is—she thinks he is inside. She then points to her four-year-old niece playing with some children on the other side of the lawn. I think she is making conversation for my benefit. Originally from Rigolet, Labrador, Sherry and her four sisters have been living in St. John's for seven years. They grew up surrounded by their own Inuit culture but have been living in the capital long enough to be familiar with the unwritten codes of non-aboriginal city life. It is reassuring to me that, at least in Sherry's case, the addition of a new set of codes does not seem to have translated into a subtraction of old ones.

It is October 4, 2009, and the St. John's Native Friendship Centre⁶ is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Kilautiup is performing as part of the event. Over fifty people of all ages—including local politicians, aboriginal leaders, and Centre personnel—are standing or sitting in a row of chairs around the lawn of the Friendship Centre. The sun is out and the atmosphere is lively. CBC television is also there to film some of the events.

When it is time for Kilautiup to perform, unofficial group leader Solomon Semigak introduces the members and announces the first drum-dance into a microphone. They perform several more drum-dances, Sherry and Tabitha Blake (Sherry's sister) sing two throat songs (two women at a time only), and William sings a solo version of "Labradorimiut" while accompanying himself on the drum. Brenda Blake, also Sherry's sister, starts this final performance with a down-stroke pattern on her frame drum. She has the only sealskin drum of the group. It resonates above the ambient noise (children playing, wind in the trees, traffic on Water Street). The drum is about two feet in diameter with a sealskin diaphragm stretched across one side of the poplar frame; it looks like a celtic bodhrán with a handle. The piece is choreographed with Brenda at the end of a line that alternates, female—male—female—male. Solomon, next to Brenda in the line, then joins in with the down-stroke pattern. His drum, made with a synthetic diaphragm, does not resonate the way Brenda's sealskin drum does. After Solomon, Tabitha joins in and the others follow one at a time. When all five drummers are playing, they add a second beat, an up-stroke, to the down-stroke pattern creating a double-time rhythm.

A "Multi-Vocal Unison"

The double-stroke pattern is difficult to coordinate with the beats of the other members and with one's own body/foot movements. Consequently, the switch from the basic single-stroke pattern to the double-stroke one affects the synchronization of beats—the overall sound becomes more diffuse, multi-vocal rather than univocal. But, while such multi-vocality can be linked to an increase in difficulty, it also points to general ways of making music in the group that emphasize receptivity. Receptivity is integral to the shared group sound of Kilautiup Songuninga. Members are constantly listening and responding because tempos and the synchronization of beats fluctuate. Internal calculations that anticipate where the next beat will fall

based on a pattern generated by the previous beats are present just as they are in most musical interactions. However, such a conception of rhythmic meter does not fully reflect the contingency of rhythm and tempo in the drumming of Kilautiup. Group members seem to listen to the beats as they fall and respond accordingly.

It could be argued that receptivity takes precedence over other ways of achieving a shared group sound in the music making of Kilautiup. While variations in tempo and synchronization sometimes occur for technical reasons (e.g., changing from a single- to double-stroke pattern), such fluctuations also occur *because* the drummers are listening and following each other. Experienced drummers such as Solomon and Sophie tend to follow the ones who are not as advanced. In this sense, the 'leaders' of Kilautiup, as the more experienced musical listeners, are actually the followers. The result is a 'multi-vocal unison.'

Where Will the Beat Fall?

I have recently started playing guitar at Kilautiup rehearsals. A few weeks ago, Sherry asked if I would accompany her while she sang "Heavenly Home," a song written by her father, William Blake.⁷ I agreed and all three sisters joined in; now it is a regular part of our rehearsal routine. I have noticed that, at the same place in each verse of the song, the equivalent of about one metrical beat is dropped (by all four singers) from a long held note before the pick-up to the next phrase. This means that in the middle of each verse, a 2/4 measure (approximately) is inserted into the 3/4 structure of the song. I say approximately because the meter change is not consistent. The space between the end of one phrase and the beginning of the next seems to be determined by who starts singing the next phrase first.

As an accompanist, I was thrown off at first. But when I heard the pattern, I listened and followed. If something similar were to happen at the rehearsal of a rock band similar to the ones in which I have played, I would stop and point out the "error," or would expect that a band-mate would do the same for me. But in this context, I chose to listen and follow instead. The alternative (stopping the song and pointing out the dropped beat) did not seem right for the context. After all, I am there to learn from them, not to teach them. In this case, beyond a realization that approximately one beat was dropped in the same place in each verse of "Heavenly Home," I learned that when making music with the Blake sisters, count-

ing and anticipating takes a back seat to listening and responding.

“Tuning Out” as a Listening Skill

William’s solo version of “Labradorimut,” which he sang in Inuktitut while accompanying himself on the drum, is another particular way in which rhythmic meter is felt and manifested in the group: the meter of the song and the meter of the drum were independent. That is to say that, if a downbeat on the drum coincided with a downbeat in the song, it was coincidental. William has since moved back to Labrador and “Labradorimut” is now performed by the whole group, with one person providing a drumming accompaniment. But the same independent relationship between singing and drumming remains.

Even now, when I am singing, surrendering to the mutual independence of song and drum beat is a challenge. And when I am the lone drummer, I intuitively want to synchronize my beats with the 4/4 meter of the song. But rhythmic unity is difficult to achieve for the same reasons accompanying the Blakes on the guitar is challenging: adhering to a formal structure of rhythmic meter and bar lines, counting and anticipating, are simply not priorities in the group. As a result, Kilautiup’s version of “Labradorimut” has its own distinct ‘sound,’ and efforts on my part to conform to rhythmic models familiar to me only detract from the song’s integrity. Yet as a formally trained musician, I still wrestle with the urge to override deeply ingrained conventions of unison.

At first, the example of rhythmic independence as it appears in the music making of Kilautiup members may appear to contradict the idea that listening and responding are central to group interactions. Indeed, it seems that the opposite, *not listening*, is the necessary skill needed for this type of performance. That is, in order to maintain a degree of rhythmic steadiness, the drummer must “tune out” the singers and vice versa. But I would argue that tuning out or switching off is a necessary and valuable skill that is well developed and/or intuitive in the members of Kilautiup. The ability of a group member to tune in to one sound source depends on the extent to which s/he can tune out another. As such, the ability to tune out becomes the sign of a skilled listener.

At no time during Kilautiup performances or rehearsals is the idea of tuning out as a listening skill more apparent than when Inuit throat singing is being taught.⁸ The distinctive sound of Inuit throat singing can be reduced to two basic ele-

ments. The first, the rhythmic vocalizations and breathing, can seem otherworldly to the acquainted and unacquainted alike. The impact of the distinct vocal timbres and breathing is further intensified by the use of an echo technique, the second element, which Jean-Jacques Nattiez has described as “canonically dephased” (Nattiez 457). Both throat-singers usually sing identical (or close to identical) parts. However, they stagger their entrances so that one follows a metric beat or two after the other. Strictly speaking, this technique results in a series of vocal sounds and their echoes. However, to the listener, a throat song is rarely heard as such since, when done well, it often sounds like one voice. Still, if the listener is paying close attention, the echo effect can sometimes be heard.

Sophie teaches a throat song by demonstrating the basic phrase, breaking it down and having the student reproduce its constituent parts (syllables, rhythms and pitches where applicable), and then having them put it back together into a unified phrase. She has the student repeat the phrase alone after which she “cuts in.” The two voices together, “de-phased” as it were, creates the canon. For those learning throat singing for the first time, grasping the concept of the canon and then maintaining it is usually more difficult than learning the basic timbres and rhythmic phrases. For beginners, singing the basic phrase of a throat song by oneself is relatively easy. But when the teacher cuts in, the initial impulse is to join the second voice, thereby bringing the two into unison and interrupting the canon. When this happens, Sophie tells the student not to listen to her and instead to concentrate on what s/he is doing. If necessary Sophie even tells the student to cover his/her ears in order to tune her (Sophie) out.

As with drumming, the expert practitioner follows the inexperienced singer when rhythmic fluctuations occur. While she may ask the student to tune her out, Sophie herself is listening intently and intuitively. When two experienced throat-singers perform together, the dynamic is similar i.e., there is a leader and a follower. However, the roles can change several times within a given song. Throat songs, sometimes called throat games, are competitive and the first person to stumble or laugh is the loser. I have witnessed Sherry and Tabitha speed up a song to the extent that it nearly doubles its starting tempo. They might then slow it down to a near standstill before speeding it up once again to an even faster tempo. This usually leads one or the other to stumble and

stop, a frequent source of humour in the group. In such cases, they are both listening and tuning the other out, following and leading.

Ethnomusicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez wrote that throat singing “is a kind of ‘host-structure’ susceptible to absorbing sound sources of various origins” (Nattiez 460). He observed that throat songs serve as vehicles for the programmatic representation of people, places, animals, historical events, and/or “*something present at the time of performance*” through “meaningless syllables and archaic words” (*ibid.*, my emphasis). Nattiez’s “something present at the time of performance” refers to objects, people or circumstances that are present and meaningful as they are singing. I have witnessed group members improvise throat songs based on immediate circumstances (e.g., “six pack” at a Christmas party and “up more” going up an escalator in a shopping mall), further reinforcing the observations of Nattiez. However, I would add that “something present” refers not only to objects of the singer’s immediate attention, but also to a way of living in the moment, interacting with the other singer, leading, following, listening, responding and laughing. The ‘doing’ of throat singing is equally as meaningful as its content. As such, throat singing is also a “host structure” for being present in the world.

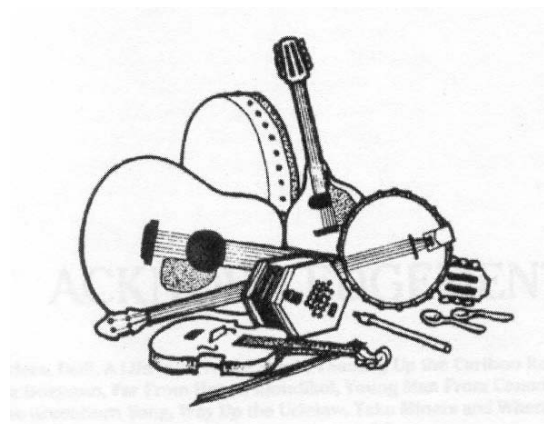
Following the Melody “Outside the Key”

The discussion so far has centred on aspects of rhythm. However, the group’s emphasis on listening and responding is apparent in other ways as well. One last example demonstrates how musical pitch is negotiated by Sherry and Tabitha when they sing a duet version of Susan Aglukark’s “Anaanaga” (Aglukark 1991). The Blakes’ version, sung *a cappella* and in near perfect unison, is riveting. That they should sing together so beautifully and with such skill is not remarkable. Yet, in light of this discussion about listening and responding, it is noteworthy that their rendition might be considered “out of tune” by some. While Aglukark’s original is recorded with a piano accompaniment and conforms strictly to Western rules of melody, harmony and intonation, the Blakes’ version does not. Intervals are irregular and the key modulates into areas that would be impossible to locate on a piano without a pair of pliers. The melody usually returns to the original key for the beginning of a new verse (Sherry has very good pitch memory; she almost always starts a familiar song on the same note).

The Blake sisters’ unique performance of “Anaanaga” further demonstrates the importance of listening and responding for Kilautiup members. In this case, the sisters have practiced and performed the song so often they can anticipate melodic forays “outside the key.” But at the same time, no two performances are exactly the same, and since specific notes are absolute entities for the Blakes (as they often are in a system that measures a note, say “A,” in terms of 440 Hertz), they still rely on listening and responding in order to stay in tune with each other when the melody leads to places that cannot be anticipated.

Conclusion

The drumming of Kilautiup Songuninga, then, is characterized by fluctuating tempos and a ‘multivocal unison’ that demands a high level of awareness and flexibility on the part of the drummers. Songs accompanied by a single drummer that are “out of synch” demonstrate the ability of group members to tune out. Furthermore, when throat-singers respond to their immediate surroundings by adding new sounds or changing the tempo to trip up their partner, it is a way of being present in the world. And finally, a melodic sensibility not strictly tied to conventions about pitches and scales allows the Blake sisters to follow the melody “outside the key.” For the members of Kilautiup, flexibility, the ability to tune out, being present in the world, and following the melody “outside the key” are all made possible by an overall emphasis on listening and responding, or receptivity.



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Notes

- ¹ Kilautiup Songuninga is Inuktitut for "Strength of the Drum."
- ² For this first performance, the Nippik Inuit Drummers, now Kilautiup Songuninga, consisted of the following members: Stan Nochasak, Sophie Angnatok, Jennie Williams, Josephine Obed, Solomon Semigak, Natalie Fost, Lena Onalik, Nick Zarpa, and Mary Piercey (Mary Piercey, personal communication, July 27, 2009). Nippik Inuit drummers is Inuktitut for "Human Sounds of Inuit Drummers" (*ibid.*)
- ³ Although they discouraged Inuit practices such as throat singing and drum-dancing, Moravian missionaries introduced a rich musical tradition of their own that has since been adopted and adapted by the Labrador Inuit (Gordon 2007).
- ⁴ The relationship between musical production and reception has been examined in depth by a number of social theorists (e.g., Adorno 1991 (1936); Cook 1990; Born 2009). However, 'receptivity' here does not make reference to such discussions. My primary aim is to give attention to the particular dynamics evident in Kilautiup rehearsals and performances as I have observed them. How such dynamics relate to larger philosophical discussions is a question for another paper.
- ⁵ Spellings for these terms vary greatly depending on the region and dialect. I am using Northern Labrador dialect spellings as found in *Labradorimi Ulinnaisigutet: An Inuktitut-English Dictionary of Northern Labrador Dialect* (Andersen, *et al.*, 2007).
- ⁶ The St. John's Native Friendship Centre, located at 716 Water Street, St. John's, was established in 1983 to "support the quality of life and sense of community for aboriginal people in an urban environment by providing programs and services in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and friendship." (<http://www.friendshipcentre.nf.net/programsandservices.htm>. accessed July 20, 2009).
- ⁷ "Heavenly Home" is included in Tim Borlase's compilation songbook *The Songs of Labrador* (Borlase 1993).
- ⁸ The following is a link to a Youtube posting of Sherry and Tabitha Blake performing the Inuit throat song "aa-ee-oo": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wte7RWbNFw&feature=related>.