Perspectives on the Standard African 12/8 Bell

By Jerry Leake

This article examines the ubiquitous Standard African Bell (SAB) from several perspectives: traditional African/Afro-Cuban, academic analysis, and contemporary contexts. Numerous theses have been written about the SAB; this discussion draws entirely from my 30-plus years involvement with the 12/8 bell in several contexts, beginning with a pure language-based African perspective.

EWE PEOPLE OF COASTAL GHANA

To get inside the 12/8 Standard African bell pattern we will first use the spoken language of the Ewe people of Ghana (taught to me by David Locke). The words *matekpo matekpo* translate to "I jump, I jump." The words *kple* (pronounced *ple*), *ku*, and *dza* (pronounced *ja*) are a combination of drum and nonsense syllables that finish the phrase. As a learning game, Ewe children speak *matekpo matekpo kple ku dza*, jumping to land on the syllable *DZA*. Repeat the "rhythmic sentence" without any awareness of pulse and downbeat (Example 1). In this manner we are learning the African way.

Example 1

matekpo matekpo kple ku dza
matekpo matekpo kple ku dza

As we will see in analysis, the bell pattern actually begins off of beat 1 with "*ma*"*tekpo*. Beat "1" (*dza*) marks the end of the musical phrase, not the beginning. Beat "1" is not the origin of the pattern. It is, in fact, the destination. This is also true of all the support drum patterns for the rhythm Agbekor, for example, which do not have "open" drum sounds on beat 1.

Using a non-western notation system of numbers and symbols, we can realize the 12/8 bell as a series of seven strokes and five rests. Shown in Example 2, the twelve eighth-note pulses are set to the top line, with numbers 1, 4, 7, 10 underlined to mark the dotted-quarter-note "beat." The second line marks actual bell strokes using "X." The third line sets the *matekpo* language into position, revealing how the syllable "ja" (in parenthesis) marks the end of the phrase landing to beat "1."

Notice that the syllable "tek" falls on the empty second (#4) and third (#7) beat of the phrase. This will be examined in greater detail later.

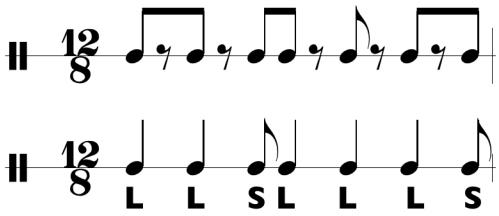
Example 2

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
(ja)	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	kple	–	ku

WESTERN NOTATION

In the western notation that follows we can see two renderings of the bell in Example 3: first isolating each beat using beamed notes and rests (a preference for drummers), and then a non-punctuated version that eliminates all rests, revealing two types of strokes: quarter notes (long) and eighth notes (short).

Example 3



ACADEMIC POINT OF VIEW

As shown above in the second notation treatment, the bell pattern comprises two stroke durations: Long (L) and Short (S). In academic discussion, the SAB is often presented solely as LLSLLLS. When speaking "long" and "short" syllables the player will feel the inherent 6/8 quality of the bell pattern because the first three syllables—Long Long Short—mark the first three strokes of the bell felt in "6." However, when speaking *matekpo* you will feel more of the 12/8 pulse of the bell. This happens because the two "tek" syllables mark empty beats 2 and 3, thereby establishing the 12/8 contour of the phrase, like an "African waltz."

As an exercise, tap your foot to the 4-pulse (dotted-quarter note) and speak *matekpo* several times. Then speak Long and Short strokes, beginning from beat 1. Notice how the two languages reflect the different 4 and 6 qualities of the bell.

ALTERNATE ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

African scholar James Koetting developed a more musical (less academic) way of speaking the bell using the syllables *Sang* (L) and *Si* (S), as shown in Example 4. Repeat the same exercise using 12/8 *Matekpo* and 6/8 *Sang*/*Si* languages. (SA = *Sang*/SI = *Si*)

Example 4



"HARMONIC TIME" STEPPING SEQUENCE

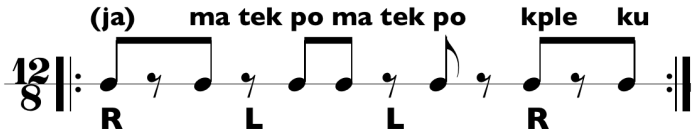
Using my Harmonic Time method, we can apply a four-beat side-to-side stepping pattern to establish the literal "ground beneath our feet" for clear and consistent timekeeping. Start with the feet together. The stepping cycle begins with the right foot out (to the right, not forward), followed by the left foot coming in for beat 2, then left foot stepping out for beat 3, followed by the right foot stepping in for beat 4: R L L R. This sideways sequence aligns beats 1 and 4 to the right foot and beats 2 and 3 to the left. As shown in Example 5, the right foot (1, 4) coincides with "X"

bell strokes (resolution points), whereas the left foot (beats 2, 3) does not align with bell strokes (tension). An elegant balance of tension (*ten*) and resolution (*res*) is built into the phrase.

Notice in example 5 below that the syllable "tek" marks the left foot for beats 2 and 3, helping to ground the phrase and eliminate tension. Cycle the pattern many times to enhance your awareness of bell and beat (also shown in western notation).

Example 5

1			2			3			4		
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
ja	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	kple	–	ku
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–
res			*ten*			*ten*			*res*		



BEAT STUDY

This next level will challenge our awareness of the four-beat of the phrase (dotted-quarter note) and our skill with just playing the bell. Begin by cycling the previous example. When comfortable, stop speaking *matekpo* and speak the word "one" on beat 1 where the jump occurs, as shown on Example 6. Repeat at least four times. Also refer to the western notation in Example 5 to speak the beat study.

Example 6

1			2			3			4		
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
one											
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

Example 7, speak the 4th beat to mark bell and beat resolution points.

Example 7

1			2			3			4		
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
one									four		
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

For Example 8, add beat 3 to mark the 3, 4, 1 energy that is present in the dance, the *totoji* support drum, and a common shaker pattern. You may notice immediate challenge and "tension" when speaking the third beat: it does not align with the bell, but does align with the left foot.

Example 8

1			2			3			4		
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
one						three				four	
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

Finally, add beat 2 to finish the four-pulse. As shown in Example 9, all four beats align with the stepping sequence. Now return to the *matekpo* phrase for 4–8 cycles and repeat the entire beat study.

Example 9

1			2			3			4		
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
one			two			three				four	
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

The same beat study can be realized by switching voice and stick patterns: speak *matekpo* while sticking beats in the same sequence. In Example 10 the stick plays each of the four beats that align with the stepping pattern. Mix up all possible combinations.

Example 10

1			2			3			4		
X	–	–	X	–	–	X	–	–	X	–	–
ja	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	ple	–	ku
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–

3/4, 6/8, 12/8 RELATIONSHIPS

One of many interesting aspects of the 12/8 bell is how it can be notated in 3/4, 6/8, and 12/8 without requiring any metric modulation or change in actual notation values. This makes it possible to understand and apply the pattern in different meters and contexts from classical 3/4 waltzes to 3/4 jazz standards, 6/8 Afro-Cuban, and, of course, African 12/8.

Shown in Example 11 is the bell first notated in 3/4 as a two-bar phrase, then in 6/8 with (essentially) the same notation in a different time signature, and finally in 12/8 as a single-bar phrase. In all three examples, the notation values have remained exactly the same with either a barline added or a time signature change.

This is made obvious, of course, by the fact that the numbers defining 3/4 are half the value of 6/8 and 6 is half the value of 12 in 12/8. The ratios between each version place all three treatments inside the same ternary family.

Example 11



BEMBÉ 6/8 BELL

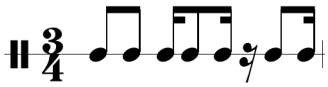
Bembé is a style of music that comes from the Yoruba people of Africa who were brought to Cuba as slaves in the 19th century. The Bembé bell can be discussed in terms of 6/8 or 12/8 meter, the only difference in notation being the barline added to the 6/8 version, as described above.

Colleagues with a more Afro-Cuban background refer to the pattern as the Bembé bell, whereas in Africa my teachers refer to it as the Agebekor bell (Agbekor is the primary warrior rhythm of the Ewe people of Ghana). In academic terms, the pattern is referred to as the Standard African Bell (SAB). Whatever your context and terminology, the pattern remains the same.

BINARY NOTATION

We have examined the SAB written in one- and two-bar treatments in 3/4, 6/8, and 12/8. We can also notate the phrase in 3/4 as a one-bar binary phrase, as shown in Example 12. The point being that the bell can be felt in a variety of pulses and meters that can be utilized in contemporary music settings.

Example 12



SOUTH INDIAN PERSPECTIVE 5+7

While working with the South Indian master mrdangam player T.K. Ramakrishnan, I asked him if he knew of the SAB pattern. Immediately upon hearing it he smiled and said: "That is easy! It is 5+7." "Ramki" had heard the two halves of the bell phrase as a group of five added to a group of seven with *only* the odd numbers of each subunit played by the bell (Example 13).

Example 13

1	2	**3**	4	**5**	**1**	2	**3**	4	**5**	6	**7**
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X

Of course a 7 + 5 version (known as "the long bell") could be found by switching the two subunits, as shown in Example 13.

Example 13

1	2	**3**	4	**5**	6	**7**	**1**	2	**3**	4	**5**
X	–	X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X

MODES OF THE AFRICAN BELL

In the August 2007 issue of *Percussive Notes* (Volume 45, No. 4) I presented an article titled "The Modes of the African Bell." It discusses how the bell pattern—LLSLLLS—coincidentally relates directly to the major scale of western music whole and half steps—WWHWWWH. In this imagination we can refer to the SAB as the "Ionian" bell with all other modes revealed using phrase rotation. Refer to the August 2007 issue for greater detail.

Shown in Example 14 are the seven modes using L S analysis (also speak *Sang* and *Si*). These unique modal bell treatments are actual bell patterns in other traditional contexts and repertoire.

Example 14

Ionian:	LLSLLLS (WWHWWWH)
Dorian:	LSLLLSL (WHWWWHW)
Phrygian:	SLLLSLL (HWWWHWW)
Lydian:	LLLSLLS (WWWHWWH)
Mixolydian:	LLSLLSL (WWHWWHW)
Aeolian:	LSLLSLL (WHWWHWW)
Locrian:	SLLSLLL (HWWHWWW)

CONCLUSION

In Ewe tradition the bell is called the grandfather of the musical family, whose role is vital to maintaining the flow, energy, and clarity of the entire ensemble. The bell functions much like the clave of Afro-Cuban music, with all other instruments weaving in, on, and around the syncopated pattern. The bell is much like the center of a musical solar system (sun), keeping all other planets/instruments aligned with the powerful gravity of its piercing sound, rhythm, and essential function.

This article contains a brief summary of SAB perspectives that should enhance and deepen your awareness for playing in traditional and contemporary settings. There is much more to uncover and discover through continued research, analysis, and application of the most famous of bell patterns.

Jerry Leake is an Associate Professor of Percussion at Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory of Music. He is leader of the world-rock-fusion octet Cubist, which has released an acclaimed studio and live CD. He is also co-founder of the world-music ensemble Natraj and the dub/trance groove collective Club d'Elf . Jerry performs regularly with R.A.R.E, C-Jammers, Another Realm, and the Agbekor Drum and Dance Society. On tabla, he has accompanied Ali Akbar Khan, Steve Gorn, Sharafat Ali Khan, Nandkishor Muley, Kumkum Sanyal, Chitravena Ravikiran, Purnima Sen, and Shyamdas. Jerry graduated from Berklee College where he studied jazz vibraphone with Gary Burton and hand percussion with Pablo Landrum. He studied tabla in Pune, India with Rajiv Devasthali and Carnatic rhythm theory and mridangam with T. K. Ramakrishnan. He has learned African music for 20 years with Dolsi-Naa Abubakari Luna of the Dagomba tradition, Ewe music with Godwin Agbeli and David Locke, and balafon/djembe with the Coulibaly family in Burkina Faso. Jerry has written eight widely used texts on North Indian, West African, Latin American percussion, and rhythm theory; manuals for playing world rhythms on drumset; and articles published in *Percussive Notes*. Jerry is former president of the Massachusetts PAS Chapter and has been a composer and member of the Portland Symphony Kinder Koncert percussion ensemble since 1984. PN