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Music of The African Diaspora

Since I was a child I remember sitting on the passenger seat of my mom's car listening to the classical music radio station challenging each other to guess the name of the composer just by the sound of the piece, something that would only be announced at the end of a performance on our local station. This habit always fascinated me because even before I studied music I was often able to detect the musical characteristics of a particular composer and make an accurate guess within seconds. Though now, I understand the process of developing a particular style depends on one's musical upbringing and experimentations, back then I couldn't help but believe the differences between each composer's work had to be built into their DNA. The same can be said about music genres and music that was influenced by practices of different countries. The idea that the way a particular piece of music sounds is dependent on biological or spiritual trends as opposed to individual exposure to a certain culture produces a large number of misconceptions about the upbringing of musicians from different backgrounds.

In the case of African American music in the United States I believe this issue comes in part, due to non musicians lack of understanding about the variety of ways people learn their musicality, and in part due to the long and current history culture of racism, which diminishes the musical accomplishments of African American musicians by discrediting their learning abilities.

When analyzing contemporary music with etymological knowledge of musical elements it is possible to make educated assumptions of what regional elements influenced the sound of the particular piece making it sound characteristic of a particular social group.

The piece “Heart Don’t Stand a Chance” by Anderson .Paak is an example of contemporary American music which is both made by an African American musician but also has the sound of what is typically associated with American black music.

The song’s introduction is made up by an heterophonic melody line much like in the tradition of African call and response music where the response is sung in different tonal centers but with the same melodic outline. The main verse then introduces a completely different drum beat increasing the importance and complexity of rhythm in the song. The new beat which accents the second and fourth beats of the measure is performed slightly behind the harmony and melody beats increasing a sense of syncopation and creating a sense of polyrhythm similar to African drum music. The harmony generated by an electric piano is filled with tensions which were introduced to American music during the 20’s fusion of European and African music thanks to African American composers such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Sidney Bechet. The vocal quality of Anderson .Paak’s performance distance itself from European classical training by focusing on vocal texture rather than projection. Anderson’s singing also deviates from a strictly melodic performance, sometimes shifting to speech like singing. This constant shift between vertical and horizontal singing not only generates a stronger sense of rhythm but also brings emphasis to the lyrics which depicts the story of a seduction occurring on a music venue.

All of these musical elements can be directly connected to music from the African diaspora in the way in which they create a contemporary sense of black identity to Anderson .Paak’s music. These connections though often attributed to genetic dispositions exposes the path in which African musical elements may have made their way to Anderson’s musical upbringing resulting on his distinctive sound.