

The rhythm of popular music

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Abstract: *Starting from the results of a survey regarding youth's musical preferences, I noticed that the rhythmic dimension is what persuades the listeners to repeatedly listen to a current piece. Overlapping this observation with a brief analysis of pop songs in the current charts, I would like to emphasize, through this article, the supremacy of the rhythmic component in today's popular music, to the detriment of melody, harmony and textual message. As noted by Marc Tarrant, Adrian North and David Hargreaves in a 2000 research, the gesture of listening to music is "emotional satisfaction" and "satisfaction of social needs". Satisfaction of social needs is closely related to the musical movement and dance, generated by the rhythm of the current music. Regarding satisfaction of emotional needs, we have to formulate the following question: is the rhythm preponderance in the constructive-musical preferences, in the current music, a mirror of the souls of today's youth? If so, what does it symbolize? As musical professors and music pedagogues, I think it is our duty to observe the musical preferences of young people in order to have a realistic picture of artistic needs for a sustained intervention in the field of musical education.*

Keywords: *pop music, popular music, rhythm, hit.*

1. Introduction

„Rhythm is the flow, the movement in music. In modern measured music it is also the element that holds the various parts together and gives the music definitive form.” (Gehrkens 2015, 45). An opinion regarding the importance of the rhythmic dimension in the musical composition, for readers in the musical field, seems a truism. That is why I chose to talk, in the present paper, about the reason why the rhythmic component is important, in relation to the current pop music, for young music listeners. The questions that this paper wants to give answers to are: is the rhythm preponderance in the constructive-musical preferences, in the current music, a mirror of the souls of today's youth? If so, what does it symbolize?

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Karl Wilson Gehrrens argues that the musical rhythm is defined both intellectually and emotionally, but it must not be too precise, on the one hand, or too sentimental, on the other (Gehrrens 2015, 45-47). This statement, applied to the present research, referring to the predilection of young people towards the rhythmic element in the musical construction, reveals a balanced man, at the confluence between reason and feeling. Is this the reality of today's youth? Looking at the current bibliography, starting from the results of a survey on youth's musical preferences, overlapping this observation with a brief analysis of pop songs in current charts, I would like to emphasize, through this article, the supremacy of the rhythmic component in today's popular music, to the detriment of melody, harmony and textual message, as well as the significance of the research results in terms of the artistic needs of the young.

2. Discussion

When asked "what musical-constructive element draws your attention when listening to music?" (a multiple-answer question, part of the *Music preferences* survey, made in 2018 by Rucsanda Mădălina and Belibou Alexandra) among the 106 Romanian respondents with the average age of 25 years, 75 have said that it is the rhythm that attracts them primarily to a musical composition.

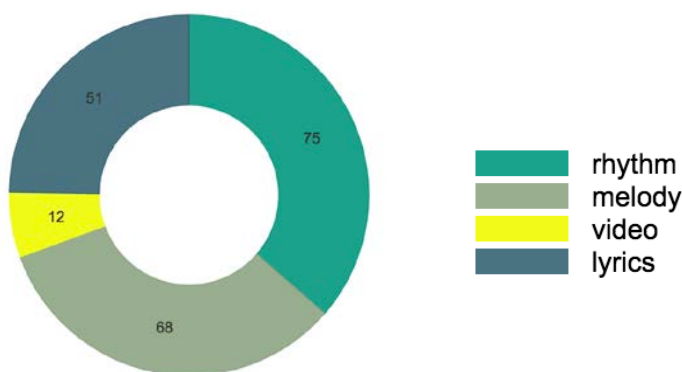


Fig. 1. Graphic showing the results of the survey containing the question: „what musical-constructive element draws your attention when listening to music?”

As Marc Tarrant, Adrian North and David Hargreaves state in a 2000 research, the gesture of listening to music is "*emotional satisfaction*" and "*satisfaction of social needs*" (Tarrant, M., North, A. C., & Hargreaves, D. J. 2000, 166). Satisfaction of social needs is closely related to the musical movement and dance, generated by the rhythm of the current music. Dean, R. T., Byron, T. and Bailes, F. A. notice that „*Darwin proposed that music and dance may be part of courtship display leading to reproduction, and hence preservation of genes. Sexual selection could act on either or both music and dance, but we argue it may act most powerfully on their synergistic rhythmic co-performance.*” (Dean, R. T., Byron, T. and Bailes, F. A. 2009, 341). If we take into account these allegations and we observe the rhythm of the first melodies in the Billboard chart of October 2018 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100>), we see that the rhythm of today's hits has the ability to satisfy the need for social attachment in terms of dancing atmosphere.

Number I in the Billboard chart - Maroon 5 feat. Cardi B: *Girls like you* – proposes, from the first bars, an ostinato guitar accompaniment, based on the following rhythmic scheme:



Fig. 2. *Ostinato rhythmic scheme of "Girls like you" - Maroon 5 feat. Cardi B*

In a vocal-instrumental polirhythmia, based on the same rhythmic ostinato figure, the chorus provides the necessary groove for the song to confirm the results of the above survey, the rhythm being the one that expresses itself to the detriment of melodic-harmonic and expressive-textual features.

Number II in the Billboard chart - Lil Wayne feat. Kendrick Lamar: *Mona Lisa* – is a rap song that uses rhythmic speech on a soft long chords accompaniment. The repetitive rhythm on a single voice tone generates a percussion effect, the textual message being on the secondary level due to the asymmetric fragmentation of the words in favor of the rhythmic unity.

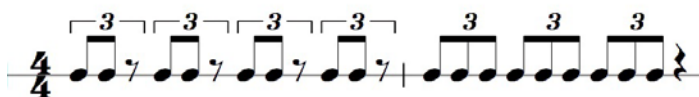


Fig. 3. *Rhythmic pattern used in the vocal line - Lil Wayne feat. Kendrick Lamar: „Mona Lisa”*

The Billboard chart continues with Post Malone's *Better Now* song, a musical composition that outlines the vocal, rhythmic-melodic recitative, developed through motif repetition.

The image shows a musical score for the vocal line of the song "Better Now" by Post Malone. The notation is in G minor (one flat) and 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are: "You prob-'ly think that you are bet - ter now, _ bet - ter now, _ you on - ly say that 'cause I'm". Above the staff, there is a guitar chord diagram for Am (x02020) and Cm (x32023).

Fig. 4. *Rhythmic-melodic recitative in the vocal score - Post Malone's "Better Now" song*

Other tracks in the Billboard Top 10 rankings in October 2018 are rap compositions that use the rhythm of recitative with the effect of a percussion instrument, pop creations with a predominantly rhythmic accompaniment which, blended with the rhythmic vocal line, cause a polirhythmia, creators' attention being turned to the current groove, above melody, harmony and textual message. These facts lead to a conclusion about the rhythmic predominance: the listeners' preference for the rhythmic component is supported by the current compositions that emphasize rhythm, and the popular music creators aim for success by subjecting their creations to structural patterns proved to be successful in our times.

The specialized bibliography tells us about the rhythmic quality of music in connection with the psychological parameter, the cyclicity and the rhythmic regularity being the one that confers the comforting psychological boundaries with regard to the safety of occurrence of events over time (Bispham 2009, 46; Fraise 1984, 32; Freeman, 2000). Social rooting appears when individuals of all ages predict the regularity of advent of events in the future (Jones 1976, 327). Thus, the conclusion I propose is that the satisfaction of emotional needs through the current music audition and the preference for the rhythmic parameter refers to the youth's need for repetitiveness in the emergence of events over time, as a call to safety and simplicity in the course of life. The musical pulse creates the perception of a cyclical framework (Repp 2001, 600-621) and is unequivocally perceived by individuals of any culture (Stobard and Cross 2000, 63-94).

In his paper entitled *The Rhythm of Popular Music: Primitivist Slumming in a Machine Age?*, professor Kurt Poterack concludes: *I want to stress that I have tried to delineate rhythmic trends in American popular music: the faux primitive, the mechanical, and the African. These are not the only trends, nor do they explain every single piece of popular music. However, these are major, significant trends. So my response to the question at the beginning of the article is that, because of the decline of African influences over the last halfcentury or so, only a small percentage of rhythm in popular music today could be considered musically “excellent.” On the other hand, the rhythm of much popular music today speaks volumes about where we are as a culture”* (Poterack 2018, 7).

Referring to Maslow's hierarchy that addresses the different needs that motivate human behavior, we see that the need for safety and belonging to a group are at the basis of the pyramid (McLeod, 2018). As I have previously argued, the need for safety in the case of young people is satisfied by current music auditions based on repeated (predictable) rhythm, and the need for socialization is satisfied by listening to and dancing on popular music.

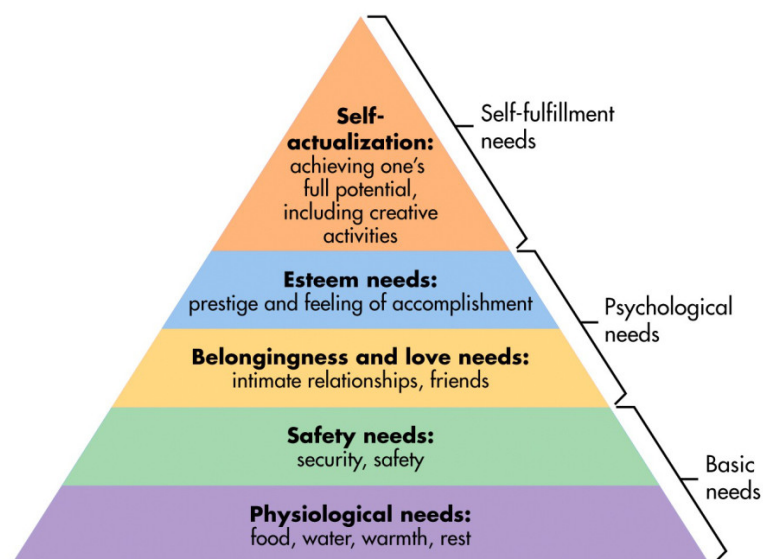


Fig. 5. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

The popular music listening is a means for young people to meet these needs, so we must be aware, as musical educators, of the aspiration level of the students we come into contact with. In our attempt to meet their high needs of creativity,

authenticity, significance, through repeated exposure to genius classical music, composed in different spaces and times, we disagree with their artistic needs. That is why, „*literature on the relationships between music education and popular music continues to focus on questions of whether popular music should be studied (Cutietta, 1991; Gass, 1992; Newsom, 1998), how this is done (Middleton, 1990; Dunbar-Hall, 1993, 1996; Lowe, 1997; Kirschner, 1998; Dunbar-Hall, 1999a), and the position of popular music in the broader context of music education - especially at secondary and college levels (Vulliamy & Lee, 1982; Barry & Walls, 1999; Wemyss, 1999b)*” (Dunbar-Hall, Wemyss 2000, 23).

3. Conclusions

In today’s world, called: „*computerized society, digital society, information society, knowledge society, knowledge-based society, network society, ICT society, Internet society, communication society, cybersociety, media society, post-industrial society, postmodern society, virtual society, most of these concepts and claims have in common that they stress the importance of knowledge, the production, generation, diffusion and use of information, the rise of the computer and digital network technologies such as the Internet or the mobile phone*” (Fuchs 2012, 414). In this constantly changing context, it is natural that young people need to engage in effortless social relationships through dance music. Also, their preference for the rhythm of current music speaks to us about a necessity of simplicity and predictability in the unfolding of events in life. All this is explained by the fact that rhythmic movement is “*the well-timed action and relaxation, which has a beginning, intent and ending, and is executed so that one can perceive the final stage of one sequence and the commencement of the next phase*” (Huff 1972, 198).

Responding to the questions at the beginning of the article, I believe that the preference for the rhythmic component in the current music and the presence of preponderant rhythmic creations in the music charts reflects the state of mind of young people. In an era of socialization platforms, the individual feels the need for real socialization, using rhythmic and dance music, as in the oldest times. Also, the predictability of the future confers an illusion of control over one's own life, a characteristic that the repeated rhythm of the current pop music emphases to the fullest.

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