

Composition Principles in Forest Nenets Music

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Abstract: The paper aims at showing how the musical thinking of Forest Nenets differs from those structural patterns that correspond to European music. Experiments and interviews with the informants were used for that purpose. My own background for the perception of folk music comes from old Estonian runic tunes. When I analyzed Forest Nenets music by using this experience, I would come to the conclusions that would be considered wrong by the representatives of the Nenets culture. For the Nenets singer/composer it is rather important what he wants to say and not how he is going to shape it into a song. In my own traditional culture it is rather vice versa.

Keywords: folk music, Nenets folk singers, West Siberia

In the autumn of 2000 I had an opportunity to work with two different Forest Nenets informants. They were Tatva Logany and Juri Vella from the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region in West Siberia.

Tatva Logany (b. 1959) is an excellent singer and an expert in folk culture. His repertoire includes songs in various styles created at different times. The singer lost his eyesight at the age of three. He has not received any formal education and is completely illiterate. The informant has lived in the mother tongue environment and does not know Russian, which is uncommon for a Nenets. The songs that I am going to describe were performed by Logany.

Juri Vella (b. 1948) is known as a Nenets poet. He graduated from the Poetry Department of the Moscow Literature Institute and writes poetry both in the Nenets and Russian languages. He is well versed in the traditional music of Forest Nenets, and he can analyze it to some extent as well.

The Nenets differentiate between two types of melodies in their music. In one type a musical phrase is repeated without any noticeable changes. In the second type the melody varies in each succeeding melody line, so that at the end it is difficult to recognize the original melody.¹ The opinion of ethnomusicologists coincides with the opinion of the tradition carriers. Alla Gomon

¹ J. Junkerov, *Starinnye i sovremennye nenetskie pesni v obrabotke Semjona Njaruja*. Salehard, 1997.



Photo 1: Blind singer Tatva Logany.
Photo by Eva Toulouze



Photo 2: Juri Vella in the camp with his computer
and grand-child Anton. Photo by Eva Toulouze

describes two melody forms in Tundra Nenets songs that are in principle different from each other. She calls the first one the equal-length composition. These are metrically organized melodies, where the length of melody lines does not change. They are contrasted with unequal-length compositions. In the latter the length of melody lines differs each time, depending on how the text changes.² The Russian ethnomusicologist Igor Brodskij calls the latter the freely modifying period. The term designates a form which is not divisible into segments.³

The Nenets people are divided into two groups: Tundra Nenets and Forest Nenets. The language differences are considerable, but their music, judging by first impressions, is quite similar. The ethnomusicological literature provides a good overview of Tundra Nenets music, but Forest Nenets music has not been studied. Therefore, we can discuss differences and similarities only on a very general level. One can claim, however, that the composition types described by Gomon occur in Forest Nenets music as well. Therefore, when discussing Forest Nenets music I will follow the example of Gomon and use the terms equal-length and unequal-length composition. I will compare two songs. Example 1 represents an equal-length composition, and Example 2 illustrates an unequal-length composition. I will examine the question how the culture carriers themselves perceive and explain these differences.

² Alla Gomon, *O nekotoryh osobennost'jah v traditsionnyh nenetskih improvizacii*. In *Finno-ugorskij muzykal'nyj fol'klor i vzaimosvjazii s sosednimi kul'turami*. Ed. by I. Rützel. Tallinn, pp. 205–213.

³ Igor Brodskij, *K izucheniju muzyki narodov Severa RSFR*. In *Traditsionnoe i sovremennoe narodnoe muzykalnoe iskusstvo*. Moskva, pp. 244–257.

1. *g^{ex}* o-t(ō)-pye(j) ngo-p(āj) nyo (ngōj) (nga nyo-o-o)

2. *g^{ex}* sin-je na-ho-ma-(dyōj) (ngā nyuo-o-oh o)

3. u-t(ō)-pye(j) dye-wa-lyo-(ngō) (ngā nyuo-o-o)

4. *g^f* man-ka-(dya)-now-nga-t(ōh) (ōj) (ngā nyuo-o-o)

5. san-a(n)-ko-pōj-(nan-now-oh o) (ngā nyo-o-o)

6. *g^{fis}* pya-ku-nyo(ng)-tos-so-na(ng) (ngōj) (ngā nyo-o-oh n'
ad lib.

7. tye-ta-ham-ma-nga-mi-dyam-ma-na(m) nyit kaj

8. dyor-ka-d(aj) va-tow (nan ngōj) (ngā nyo-o)

9. pun-nū(n) tā-w(ōj)-dyām-(mōj) (ngā nyoh u)

10. nga-mō-ne dyāl-haw-han-now (ngā nyo-o-o)

11. *g^{ex}* tal-hya-m(a)-mō-t(ōj)-nga-lhow (oh-o)

12. u-t(ō)-pe(j) ngo-p(ōj) nyu (ngōj) (ngā nyo-oh)

Example 1: Matu's song

Tatva Logany's comment about the background of the song:

This song belongs to my grandfather. His name was Matu. I heard this song from my grandmother. Grandmother never sang her own song, it is likely that she used to be sober all the time. She knew many songs belonging to other people.

Translation:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Utpi [is] the only son. | 7. Now I'm not like that anymore |
| 2. Once up on a time | 8. I'll be over a hundred [years] old |
| 3. Utpi is an orphan, | 9. soon. |

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 4. this is what I say. | 10. Some day |
| 5. When we play, | 11. you'll sing that song like this. |
| 6. the Pjaks are afraid. | 12. Utpi the only son. |

The first problem in connection with Ex. 1 concerns its metre. I would call it regular with some deviations because the notes have a highly uneven length in the second part of all the melody lines. The time could be 3/8. This time is the so-called scribal interpretation, which does not mean that the Nenets themselves group the notes in this way.

The metre of this song posed a problem for me as the researcher because, strictly speaking, the melody is not organized on the basis of a fixed pulse. The informant, however, did not see it as a problem. It was difficult to explain it to him as he was not familiar with the concept of metre. I have encountered a similar problem when analyzing Nganasan music and working with informants. I tried to explain to the Nganasan informant the essence of regular metre in the following way: a metre is regular if we can conduct a song by means of uniform pulse, just like conductors do it. The informant's comment was laconic: "We don't do it like this."

Already at a first listening Matu's song makes an impression of a song with a regular form. This impression is created mainly by refrain-like filler syllables at the end of the lines. As is known, a Nenets song text includes in addition to syllables that belong to the morphological structure of the word also filler syllables without any meaning. One of the reasons why they are used is that a melody line is usually longer than a textual line. Filler syllables help to equalize the length of lines. Péter Hajdú has described in great detail the ways fillers are used in his study of Nenets shaman songs.⁴ If the song text is dictated or translated into some other language (usually Russian), then the filler syllables are omitted. In this connection it is noteworthy that Vella, who translated the song from Nenets to Russian, uttered the filler syllables also at the end of the Russian-language line but omitted the filler syllables within the line (e.g. Line 1: *Utpi edinstvennyi syn nga nji* 'Utpi's /is/ the only son *nga nji*'; Line 2: *kogda-to v proshedshchem vremeni nga nej* 'Once upon a time *nga nej*'). Such an ending part of the textual line, where the filler syllables *nga ngej* or their variants are used, can be regarded as a refrain.

My main purpose was to learn how the Nenets structure their songs. I was primarily interested in the melody line – does this unit exist for a culture carrier and does it coincide with the researcher's view. In order to explain this problem we listened together with the informant to some songs with equal-

⁴ Péter Hajdú, *The Nenets Shaman Song and its Text*. In *Shamanism in Siberia*. Ed. by Mihály Hoppál. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 355–372.

length composition that consisted of melody lines with even length. The informant's task was to click on the pause when in his opinion one unit ends and another begins. Vella did not have any difficulty in dividing these melodies (incl. Ex. 1) into melody lines. He did not hesitate when marking the end of the line after the refrain. That fits in well with my own notation.

Line 7 of Matu's song is different: it has a recitative melody; it is performed *ad libitum*. Such exceptional lines in the song structure are a common stylistic device in vocal music of northern Samoyeds. They can be found, for example, in Nganasan songs. Vella was able to provide a comprehensive comment about this stylistic device. He said:

It is a common phenomenon in Nenets music. It's a phrase that has a 'knock-out rhythm' /the informant used the Russian-language concept *vybivajushaja fraza*/. Sometimes these phrases show a fixed order of occurrence in a song. It means that they may be repeated after a certain number of ordinary lines. The re-occurrence need not be regular. In long songs there may be many ordinary lines between these lines. Sometimes the text may condition such a compressed phrase. The message takes up more space than one line. In that case one has to violate the rhythm and speak in a hurry. Sometimes the singer feels that the audience did not catch the previous line. Then it calls for an explanation. The singer provides a decoding, doing it by singing. He tries to retain the melody but not exactly in the same way as in the rest of the song.

Vella relates the rhythm deviation to the text. However, when examining the translation of Matu's song, it appears that it is impossible to explain the rhythm deviation by the need to decode the text. Line 7 does not provide any additional information about what had been said before. Accordingly, the rhythm deviation should have some other reasons as well. In connection with Nganasan shaman songs the linguist Eugene Helimski has claimed that the compressed lines are caused by the shaman's wish to save time when casting a spell.⁵ The analysis of the text shows that filler syllables are never used in recited phrases. Thus, the text is really packed with information and we can say that a large amount of information is forwarded within a short time. It helps to make an impression of economic time management, which is no doubt important in the modern European conception of time. But having been studied the Siberian cultures for many years I have to say that it is very not important in the Samoyed conception of time.

It is quite common that one is tempted to look reasons for musical manifestations outside the music – in the text or even in the context of the song. In Samoyed songs the text and the function of the song are of utmost importance. It's a generally accepted fact among the researchers of the cultures of this area.

⁵ Eugene Helimski, *Tajmyrskij etnolingvističeskij sbornik*. Ed. by E. A. Helimski. Moskva.

Some musical phenomena, including lines with rhythm deviations, may have a purely musical reason, as we can conclude from the informant's explanation:

One could also say that it is simply such a style. Far from all contemporary songsters are able to perform it. Grand masters who know many long songs use this device to decorate the song.

I tend to regard the lines with rhythm deviations as a possibility to bring variety to the melody lines that are repeated monotonously (*Example 2*).

talhyam mantõma

1. *g=f*
põl - hya - t(a) - (aj) wõn - k(õ) - (õ - õj) - na (ngõ - õ - õj) dyol - h(õ) - dya -
(at) - tye - (e - e - e - e) dyap - tu vye - ek - (e - e - e - e - ej) -

2. lha - ho - (o - oj) dyol - h(õj) - dya - (a) ty - je - (e - e - eh - e - e)

3. *g=g*
dye - wa wa - a - to - (o - o) - pyo - sy(e) - (e - ej) tyä - t(õ) nga - (a) -
ho - (o - o - o - o) nyemy - ja - (o - o) dyew - wa wa - (a) - to -
(o - o) - nga - t(õ) - (õm)

4. *g=ox*
põl - hya(n) - t(õ) - (õj) wõn - k(õ) - (e - e - e - ej) - na (ngõh n)

5. *g=a*
[dyap - tu vye - eh] - dyap - tu vyel - ho - (o - ow) - lhah - o - (o - ow)
dyol - h(e) - dya - (ah) - tye - (e - e - eh) ... (KÕNE)

Example 2: Utpi's song

Tatva Logany's comment about the origin of the song:

This song belongs to my great grandfather. I sing it in the way my grandmother used to sing it. This song is over a hundred years old.

Translation:

1. In Pyhljat tundra thousand reindeer cows look goosenecks-
2. -like. Thousand reindeer cows.
3. When raising the orphan the mother of Ngahany four. I raised an orphan.
4. In Pyhljat tundra
5. like goose necks thousand reindeer cows.

In Ex. 2 both the specific Nenets sound quality, the lack of regular metre and the irregularity of the form indicate that it represents the old song style. It is difficult for an outsider to find something at a first listening that could help to divide it into melody lines. The structuring of Ex. 2 appeared to be problematic for me and for my informant as well.

Vella listened to the song twice until the end and did not make any interruption. He considered it only natural that he was unable to find the place where the line changes. In the informant's view it is great art to be able to sing so that the lines fuse together – not everyone is capable of that. After this, as he was expected to segment the song, the informant tried to find suitable places for interruptions. The results are marked in the notation by vertical lines, the tops of which have encircled numbers. In order to understand better whether he marks the end of the line in the right place, the informant tried to sing the song. He was not satisfied with his results, that is, he was unable to sing exactly in the way Tatva sang it. He then decided to try whether the text would be helpful in the structuring of the song. It appeared that the informant did not have a clear conception how to segment the text into lines. He divided the text into segments that were easy to translate, but they were too short in order to treat them as melody lines. In Ex. 2 the segment boundaries are marked by lines that end with a number surrounded by a rectangle. The informant explained that the Nenets have many songs where a sentence runs over to the next melody line, so that the song cannot be divided into melody lines on the basis of the text. This remark confirms that the informant's understanding of the melody line principally coincides with that of the researcher's conception.

It is a compositional peculiarity observed when analyzing the music of various Siberian nations. For example, Katalin Lázár writes about Ob-Ugrian music that the melody units and the text units need not overlap.⁶ It is quite common that one sings the beginning of a sentence at the end of one melody

⁶ Katalin Lázár, *Structure and Variation in Ob-Ugrian Vocal Folk Music*. In *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 30. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 282–296.

line and the end of the sentence occurs at the beginning of the next melody line. This is how the singers try to achieve the feeling of continuity in the song. This explanation is suitable for Forest Nenets songs as well.

Example 2 includes a place where the change of the melody line breaks even a word (see *wyék-lhaho* at the end of line 1 and the beginning of line 2). In connection with defining the line boundaries Vella also added:

Europeans breathe when the line ends, and it helps us to establish the end of the line. The Nenets breathe at random locations, so that breathing does not *show* anything. [See breathing marks in Ex. 2.]

One has to admit that the boundaries of the melody lines remained unclear to us. The notation of Ex. 2 is based on the repetition of similar melody motives. It means that the motive that opens the first line of the song will also open the following lines in the notation. The ends of the melody lines suggested by the informant coincide with the end of Lines 2, 4, and 5. The informant was unable to explain his criterion for deciding upon the change of line.

The results of the analysis enable us to conclude that the structure of equal-length compositions develops similarly to the principles of European music. Unequal-length compositions are based on different rules. The songs created in accordance with this principle are like uninterrupted narrations. Their segmentation into melody lines is in some sense an artificial procedure that is performed in the interests of notation and analysis. If there do exist any rules that the Forest Nenets follow when creating unequal-length compositions, then these rules were not revealed in the course of working with the informant.

In Forest Nenets traditional culture it is not customary to theorize about one's music. If we want to speak about traditional music theory, then we cannot speak about anything else but popular musical terminology, which is actually only a very small part of the entire theory of music. When working with the informants it appeared that educated Forest Nenets do make efforts to explain the characteristic features of their music. They do it in Russian, using those internationally known scientific terms that they happen to know. Popular terminology, on the other hand, is on the decline.

To a certain extent Vella is an insider and also an outsider for his culture. He provides witty explanations about Forest Nenets music although they need not always adequately reflect traditional reality. He investigates how the Nenets music is composed, starting from the premise that is a peculiar mixture of traditional understanding and theoretical knowledge. Unfortunately, this approach where the theoretical knowledge has been enriched with traditional experience still failed to explain those composition principles that are totally different from European norms.