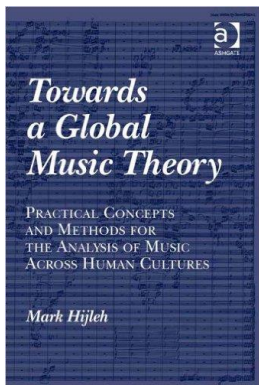


# **[Review] *Towards a Global Music Theory: Practical Concepts and Methods for the Analysis of Music Across Human Cultures*, by Mark Hijleh**

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**Hijleh, Mark. *Towards a Global Music Theory: Practical Concepts and Methods for the Analysis of Music Across Human Cultures*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2012. 227pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-2336-2.**

I am one of those rare people who loves high-level music theory books. As a researcher with a degree in ethnomusicology, I also love books on ethnomusicology-related topics, reading as many as I can. Therefore, I was excited to find a book that seems to tie these two loves together: *Towards a Global Music Theory*, by Mark Hijleh. I soon found that

even though I've been immersed in scholarly articles and books as part of my Ph.D. research, and even though Hijleh's book is a confluence of topics that I generally enjoy, this book was very hard for me to follow and to finish. Hijleh's basic premise is that there are some musical universals, things that are common from culture to culture or region to region. These aspects of music can be analyzed quantitatively, comparing them without intrusion of personal bias. Hijleh presents these possible universals, suggesting that since these features are found worldwide, they should be the starting points for analysis of music.

The author also addresses concerns that he is advocating for a basic universality of all musical systems (or, that “music is a universal language”). Contrary to such criticisms, he says,

These analyses illustrate the notion (introduced early and repeated throughout this study) that the proposed theory does not in the end erase meaningful differences between musics. Rather, it highlights how “qualified musical universals” . . . may be manifested in a myriad of ways without at the same time necessarily denying that such universals may exist. (57)



Hijleh begins with a clear statement of the book's purpose. Until recently, ethnomusicologists were encouraged to strive towards bi-musicality, but globalization has changed the paradigm: “The well-established ethnomusicological model of bi- or tri-musicality is inadequate to describe us anymore; we are approaching multi- or a virtual pan-musicality,” Hijleh says (1). We are living in a world more connected than ever before. Musical styles evolve, as they always have, which now includes more fusion of ideas than ever before. Western musicians are no longer seen as the exclusive holders of “correct/refined” music; instead, scholars from all over the world contribute to the body of scholarship about music. With greater understanding about musical diversity worldwide, we may need a new way of analyzing music.

This premise is easy to understand. The book itself, however, is written for Western music theorists, people with a serious academic background in advanced Western music theory. I need to stress this point from the beginning of my review. This does make sense to me, given the conversation that the author wants to initiate with his readership, whether those who would embrace this new model and develop it, or those who would brush it aside as an unuseful model that will not move beyond the pages of this book. If a change is to happen in the ways people think of music theory, and if this alternate conception of analyzing music is to be a viable option, then this book must appeal to these scholars and professors; these are the people who will develop and disseminate these ideas.

Though writing for Western music theorists, Hijleh looks at musical ideas emically as much as possible, sharing insights and classifications from multiple cultures. He uses the term *emic* without defining it, no doubt assuming that most people reading his book will understand what he means. Ethnomusicologists should be familiar with this term, but Western music theorists might not have encountered it before. Kenneth L. Pike coined the distinction of *emic* versus *etic* in 1954. It was intended to

make it possible to define sets of contrasting units and to describe their distribution, behavior, and arrangement in both verbal and nonverbal domains . . . [he defined ‘emic’ as] the cultural analysis of a physical continuum, as well as the procedures by which units are discovered, identified, and validated, as well as the units themselves which turn out to be functional within a given system. ‘Etic’ is thus described as the procedure in cultural analysis guiding the preliminary phase of description, as well as the units in a system which are not functional. (Alvarez-Pereyre and Arom 1993, 8)

Hijleh begins identifying and defining a global music theory by looking at rhythm, which he defines as “the management of time in human musical processes” (12). He suggests that any rhythmic process can be broken down at its most simple base level to combinations of twos and threes; even in the complex polyrhythms in

some African musical genres, for example, the common rhythmic patterns “are largely based on evenly distributable groups of beats that conform to two-footed dancing” (17). In my study of tabla in North India, my drum teacher taught me the 7-beat Rupak Taal as 3–2–2 (“ti ti na, dhi na, dhi na”). Hijleh says:

[A] practical theory of rhythm must provide a way of analyzing and organizing patterns into easily manageable groups, to aid in such negotiation. These groups, then, are twos and threes, the most basic and generative prime numbers. All other longer groups at the various hierarchical levels of distinction may be broken down to composite sums of twos and threes, and are thus best seen as such composites. (25)

This is a very good point. Westerners often think of African rhythmic patterns as massively complex, and they do seem to be at first observation. As Hijleh points out, however, while this intimidates many people from attempting to relate these rhythmic theories to Western ones, even these complex rhythms are formed to fit in some way with “two-footed dancing,” as he says, and can thus be reduced in some way to being complex patterns of twos and threes. That dancing is integral to African music is a well-established fact.

Ethnomusicologist Rob Baker points out that “telling an African ‘do not dance to the music’ is like saying to a Westerner ‘sing me your National Anthem, but without the tune’; nonsensical and pointless, as one of the key elements of the performances is missing” (Baker 2012, 52). Hijleh's argument rings true, that even complex rhythms can be understood as sets of twos and threes.

The next section looks at “Global Melody”:

One “qualified musical universal” in this context is that the vast majority of human musics that utilize pitch distinction as an element (which, yet again, seems to be the overwhelming majority) do so using limited pitch collections that can be understood and described according to certain principles rather than as random phenomena. (59)

Hijleh avers that musical analysis can conceptualize pitch relationships “as arising directly or indirectly from frequency ratios of 3:2 and 2:1 in various combinations” (62). He develops this idea, with supporting data in charts and tables throughout, and demonstrates how this theory of melodic analysis applies to multiple musical genres. My take-away from this analysis is that, although musical genres differ greatly, they can be viewed as having very similar melodic structures, looking at the frequency-ratios, and that perhaps this should be the starting point for analyzing various musics: start with the similarities, and then move outward to the differences.

The book then progresses through “global harmony” and “global synergy in musical processes and products.” The author develops each of these points in painstaking detail. I won't summarize these chapters in detail, but know that they are just as in-depth and compelling in their arguments as the earlier chapters I have summarized.

Before looking at further implications, Hijleh concludes by looking at “Global Analytical Examples.” Over the course of about 50 pages, he shows how the concepts described in the book can be used comprehensively across currently established musical boundaries: from Bach to mridangam, from fusion ensembles to the opening theme of *The Simpsons*. There can be no skipping ahead to this chapter, as the concepts developed throughout the whole rest of the book are now used to compare and analyze bits of music, in a way that shows how this type of analysis can work.

This book is not written for the casual music listener, but for those well-versed in Western music theory. Keeping in mind Hijleh's intended academic audience, I believe he makes many great points throughout his study, and university professors, music theorists, and ethnomusicologists should consider reading and engaging with Hijleh's ideas. Having more quantitative ways of analyzing music may indeed prove useful in comparing seemingly unrelated genres and showing links between them, or in making cases for studying various musics around the world without appealing to the emotional side of music. As an anthropology-minded researcher and a musician, I do not believe that music is only properly understood apart from emotion; music apart from emotion is like weak, decaffeinated coffee: some of the flavor may be there, but it doesn't leave me satisfied. Other researchers, however, prefer looking at objective facts. Having multiple analytical methods, such as those shown in *Towards a Global Music Theory*, could prove useful. For the general musician, and perhaps even for many researchers, this method would not be very beneficial, as it introduces great complexity into simple concepts. But having a basic understanding of these concepts as possible tools can be a good thing.

As he says in his concluding paragraphs, “like Western tonal theory over a span of some 400 years, the elements of a global music theory need to be widely applicable throughout the world while also capable of illuminating obvious aural differences” (212). Hijleh proposes an idea of how to do that: how to look comparatively, accurately, scientifically, and fairly at widely diverse musical genres while transcending traditional musical boundaries. The way that he suggests takes “human judgment calls” out of the mix, and looks at analyzing music in a quantitative, comparative method.

## Bibliography

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