

Castaldo, Daniela
(Università del Salento (Lecce))

**African Music in the
European Travel Literature of
the 17th and 18th Centuries**
[session VE02]

Travels and explorations to the extra European continents, especially to Africa, carried out between the 16th and 18th centuries, were documented by a very rich corpus of publications, such as reports, diaries and chronicles. This travel literature, in addition to their geographical and naturalistic descriptions, documented also the customs and the traditions of the peoples encountered by the travelers. This paper focuses on the musical practices of people inhabiting the central-southern regions of Africa (from Congo to South Africa) described and illustrated in some works dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, such as the *Description of Africa* by Olfert Dapper (1668), the *Voyage du Chevalier Demarchais en Guinee* by Jean-Baptiste Labat (1730) and the wide compilation *Histoire générale des voyages* (1746–1759) by the Abbé Prevost. These authors very often based their reports on the oral tradition carefully collected: therefore, even if the information reported by images and texts could not provide the sound of these ancient musics, nevertheless they do supply information about musicians, meanings of performances and musical traditions, functions of musical instruments in different groups and societies. These kinds of sources offer an important contribution to the ethnomusicological research by outlining the historical background of some musical practices, some still existing at the present time and which are studied by ethnomusicologists mostly on the basis of the oral sources. At the same time, these ancient sources are suitable for enhancing the documentation concerning Black studies and, more in general, the musical exchanges between Western and “other” traditions.

Castellengo, Michèle
(Centre National de la Recherche
Scientifique (CNRS),
Institut Jean Le Rond d’Alembert)
& Susanne Fürniss
(Centre National de la
Recherche Scientifique (CNRS),
Eco-anthropologie)

**New Perspectives on the Study
of Musical Scales**
[session VIA07]

It is usual in ethnomusicology to approach the study of music through the concept of musical scale, generally by measuring frequencies. We propose here a method to orient the research on intervals rather than on degrees. This avoids errors due to the fluctuations related to the recording equipment or the performance. We will use the example of the music of the Aka of Central Africa to illustrate our approach. Their rich and fascinating musical tradition is characterized by the practice of vocal polyphony, which has given rise to important research, including that on the pentatonic system. However, despite numerous field experiments and acoustic measurements, the exploration of the Aka musical scale has led to an unsatisfactory theoretical compromise. The research presented here takes a new starting point: temporal spectrography. Interval identification is based on the visual observation of harmonics common to two consecutive or simultaneous sounds. This method combines sonographic analysis and precise frequency measurement for both successive intervals of a monody and superimposed intervals of a polyphony. Based on new theoretical foundations, our research confirms Fürniss’ proposal that Aka pentatonism is not a scale concept. Rather, it is a system of varying combinations of intervals from the 6-9 range of the harmonic series: the fourth (4/3), the fifth (3/2), the major tone (9/8), a minor seventh (7/4) and three unnamed intervals: 7/6, 8/7, 9/7. The latter – which a Western listener has difficulty in hearing as such – are at the root of the difficulties in understanding the interval system of Aka music. This system favors the combinatorics on which all performances of this music are based, while remaining harmonically coherent. It should also be noted that the usual reference to equal temperament and measures in cents prevent the comprehension of such a system.