

## **Perspectives on the Standard African 12/8 Bell**

By Jerry Leake

This article examines the ubiquitous Standard African Bell (SAB) from several perspectives: traditional African/Afro-Cuban, academic analysis, and contemporary contexts. Numerous theses have been written about the SAB; this discussion draws entirely from my 30+ years involvement with the 12/8 bell in several contexts, beginning with a pure language-based African perspective.

### **Ewe People of Coastal Ghana**

To get inside the 12/8 Standard African bell pattern we will first use the spoken language of the Ewe people of Ghana (taught to me by David Locke). The words “matekpo matekpo” translate to “I jump, I jump.” The words kple (ple), ku, and dza (ja) are a combination of drum and nonsense syllables that finish the phrase. As a learning game, Ewe children speak “matekpo matekpo kple ku dza”, jumping to land on the syllable DZA (pronounced “JA”). Repeat the “rhythmic sentence” without any awareness of pulse and downbeat (ex. 1). In this manner we are learning the African way.

Ex. 1

**matekpo matekpo kple ku dza**  
**matekpo matekpo kple ku dza**

As we will see in analysis, the bell pattern actually begins off of beat 1 with “ma”tekpo. Beat “1” (dza / ja) marks the end of the musical phrase, not the beginning. Beat “1” is not the origin of the pattern it is, in fact, the destination. This is also

true of all the support drum patterns for the rhythm “Agbekor”, for example, which do not have “open” drum sounds on beat 1.

Using a non-western notation system of numbers and symbols we can realize the 12/8 bell as a series of 7 strokes 5 five rests. Shown below in example 2, the twelve 8<sup>th</sup> note pulses are set to the top line, with numbers 1, 4, 7, 10 underlined to mark the dotted quarter note “beat”. The second line marks actual bell strokes using “X”. The 3rd line sets the matekpo language into position, revealing how the syllable “ja” (in parenthesis) marks the end of the phrase landing to beat “1”.

Notice that the syllable “tek” falls on the empty second (#4) and third (#7) beat of the phrase. This will be examined in greater detail later.

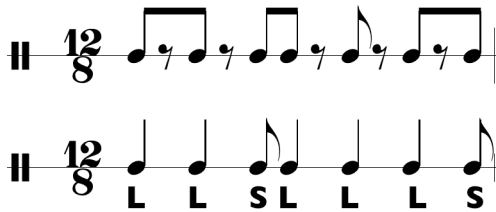
### Ex. 2

<u>1</u>	2	3	<u>4</u>	5	6	<u>7</u>	8	9	<u>10</u>	11	12
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X	–	X
(ja)	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	kple	–	ku

### Western Notation:

In western notation below we can see two renderings of the bell in example 3: 1) isolating each beat using beamed notes and rests (a preference for drummers), and 2) a non-punctuated version that eliminates all rests, revealing two types of strokes: quarter notes (“long”) and 8<sup>th</sup> notes (“short”).

### Ex. 3



### Academic POV

As shown above in the second notation treatment the bell pattern comprises two stroke durations: Long (L) and Short (S). In academic discussion the SAB is often presented solely as LLSLLS. When speaking “Long” and “Short” syllables the player will feel the inherent 6/8 quality of the bell pattern because the first three syllables—Long Long Short—mark the first three strokes of the bell felt in “6”. However, when speaking matekpo you will feel more of the 12/8 pulse of the bell. This happens because the two “tek” syllables mark empty beats 2 and 3 thereby establishing the 12/8 contour of the phrase, like an “African waltz.”

As an exercise tap your foot to the 4-pulse (dotted quarter note) and speak matekpo several times. Then speak Long and Short strokes, beginning from beat 1. Notice how the two languages reflect the different 4 & 6 qualities of the bell.

### Alternate Academic Language

African scholar James Koetting developed a more musical (less academic) way of speaking the bell using the syllables Sang (L) and Si (S), as shown below in example 4. Repeat the same exercise using 12/8 Matekpo and 6/8 Sang/Si languages. (SA = Sang / SI = Si)

Ex. 4



### “Harmonic Time” Stepping Sequence

Using my Harmonic Time method, we can apply a 4-beat side-to-side stepping pattern to establish the literal “ground beneath our feet” for clear and consistent time keeping. Start with the feet together. The stepping cycle begins with the right foot out (to the right, not forward), followed by the left foot coming in for beat 2, then left foot stepping out for beat 3, followed by the right foot stepping in for beat 4: R L L R. This sideways sequence aligns beats 1 and 4 to the right foot, and beats 2 and 3 to the left. As shown below, the right foot (1, 4) coincides with “X” bell strokes (resolution points), whereas the left foot (beats 2, 3) does not align with bell strokes (tension). An elegant balance of tension (*ten*) and resolution (*res*) is built into the phrase.

Notice in example 5 below that the syllable “tek” marks the left foot for beats 2 and 3, helping to ground the phrase and eliminate tension. Cycle the pattern many times to enhance your awareness of bell and beat (also shown in western notation).

Ex. 5

1		2		3		4					
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X		
ja	–	ma	tek	po	ma	tek	po	–	kple–	ku	
R	–	–	L	–	–	L	–	–	R	–	–
<i>res</i>		<i>ten</i>		<i>ten</i>		<i>res</i>					

(ja) ma tek po ma tek po kple ku

R L L R

### Beat Study

This next level will challenge our awareness of the 4-beat of the phrase (dotted quarter note), and our skill with just playing the bell. Begin by cycling the previous example. When comfortable, stop speaking “matekpo” and speak the word “one” on beat one where the jump occurs, as shown below on example 6. Repeat at least 4 times. Also refer to the western notation in example 5 to speak the beat study.

Ex. 6

1		2		3		4					
X	-	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X		
<b>one</b>											
<b>R</b>	-	-	<b>L</b>	-	-	<b>L</b>	-	-	<b>R</b>	-	-

Example 7, speak the 4<sup>th</sup> beat to mark bell and beat resolution points.

Ex. 7

1		2		3		4					
X	-	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X		
<b>one</b>							<b>four</b>				
<b>R</b>	-	-	<b>L</b>	-	-	<b>L</b>	-	-	<b>R</b>	-	-

For example 8, add beat 3 to mark the 3, 4, 1 energy that is present in the dance, the totoji support drum, and a common shaker pattern. You may notice immediate challenge and

“tension” when speaking the third beat: it does not align with the bell, but does align with the left foot.

Ex. 8

1		2		3		4					
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X		
<b>one</b>				<b>three</b>			<b>four</b>				
<b>R</b>	–	–	<b>L</b>	–	–	<b>L</b>	–	–	<b>R</b>	–	–

Finally, add beat 2 to finish the 4-pulse. As shown below in example 9, all four beats align with the stepping sequence. Now return to the matekpo phrase for 4-8 cycles and repeat the entire beat study.

Ex. 9

1		2		3		4					
X	–	X	–	X	X	–	X	–	X		
<b>one</b>		<b>two</b>		<b>three</b>		<b>four</b>					
<b>R</b>	–	–	<b>L</b>	–	–	<b>L</b>	–	–	<b>R</b>	–	–

The same beat study can be realized by switching voice and stick patterns: speak “matekpo” while sticking beats in the same sequence. In example 10 below the stick plays each of the 4 beats that align with the stepping pattern. Mix up all possible combinations.

Ex. 10

1		2		3		4					
X	–	–	X	–	–	X	–	–			
<b>ja</b>	–	<b>ma</b>	<b>tek</b>	<b>po</b>	<b>ma</b>	<b>tek</b>	<b>po</b>	–	<b>ple</b>	–	<b>ku</b>
<b>R</b>	–	–	<b>L</b>	–	–	<b>L</b>	–	–	<b>R</b>	–	–

### 3/4, 6/8, & 12/8 Relationships

One of many interesting aspects of the 12/8 bell is how it can be notated in 3/4, 6/8, & 12/8 without requiring any metric modulation or change in actual notation values. This makes it possible to understand and apply the pattern in different meters and contexts from classical  $\frac{3}{4}$  waltzes,  $\frac{3}{4}$  jazz standards, 6/8 Afro-Cuban, and of course African 12/8.

Shown below in example 11 is the bell first notated in  $\frac{3}{4}$  as a 2-bar phrase, then in 6/8 with (essentially) the same notation in a different time signature, and finally in 12/8 as a single bar phrase. In all three examples the notation values have remained exactly the same with either a bar-line added or a time signature change.

This is, of course, made obvious by the fact that the numbers defining  $\frac{3}{4}$  are half the value 6/8 and 6 is half the value of 12 in 12/8. The ratios between each version place all three treatments inside the same ternary family.

#### Ex. 11

Example 11 illustrates the 'bell' pattern in three time signatures. The notation consists of three staves, each starting with a double bar line and a time signature. The first staff is in 3/4 time, the second in 6/8, and the third in 12/8. The notes and rests are identical in all three, demonstrating how the same rhythmic pattern can be notated in different meters without changing the actual values of the notes.

#### Bembé 6/8 bell

Bembé is a style of music that comes from the Yoruba people of Africa who were brought to Cuba as slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Bembé bell can be discussed in terms of 6/8 or

12/8 meter, the only difference in notation being the bar line added to the 6/8 version, as described above.

Colleagues with a more Afro-Cuban background refer to the pattern as the Bembé bell, whereas in Africa my teachers refer to it as the Agebekor bell (Agebekor is the primary warrior rhythm of the Ewe people of Ghana). In academic terms the pattern is referred to as the Standard African Bell (SAB). Whatever your context and terminology, the pattern remains the same.

### Binary Notation

We have examined the SAB written in 1- and 2-bar treatments in  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{6}{8}$  and  $\frac{12}{8}$ . We can also notate the phrase in  $\frac{3}{4}$  as a 1-bar binary phrase, as shown below in example 12. The point being that the bell can be felt in a variety of pulses and meters that can be utilized in contemporary music settings.

Ex. 12



### South Indian Perspective 5+7

While working the South Indian master mrdingam player T.K. Ramakrishnan I asked him if he knew of the SAB pattern. Immediately upon hearing it he smiled and said: “That is easy! It is 5+7”. ‘Ramki’ had heard the two halves of the bell phrase as a group of five added to a group of seven with *only* the odd numbers of each subunit played by the bell (example 13).

Ex. 13

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5 6 7



X - X - X X - X - X - X

Of course a 7 + 5 version (known as “the long bell”) could be found by switching the two subunits, as shown below in example 13.

Ex. 13

**1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5**  
X - X - X - X X - X - X

### Modes of the African Bell

In the August 2007 issue of Percussive Notes I presented an article entitled: “The Modes of the African Bell”. It talks about how the bell pattern—LLSLLS—coincidentally relates directly to the major scale of western music whole and half steps—WWHWWH. In this imagination we can refer to the SAB as the “Ionian” bell with all other modes revealed using phrase rotation. Refer to the 2007 issue for greater detail.

Shown below in example 14 are the seven modes using L S analysis (also speak Sang and Si). These unique modal bell treatments are actual bell patterns in other traditional contexts and repertoire.

Ex. 14

Ionian:	LLSLLS (WWHWWH)
Dorian:	LSLLSL (WHWVWHV)
Phrygian:	SLLSLL (HVVVHV)
Lydian:	LLSLLS (VVVHVVH)
Mixolydian:	LLSLLSL (VVHVVHV)

Aeolian: L S L L S L L (W H W W H W W)  
Locrian: S L L S L L L (H W W H W W W)

## Conclusion

In Ewe tradition the bell is called the grandfather of the musical family whose role is vital to maintaining the flow, energy and clarity of the entire ensemble. The bell functions much like the clave of Afro-Cuban music, with all other instruments weaving in, on, and around the syncopated pattern. The bell is much like the center of a musical solar system (sun), keeping all other planets/instruments aligned with the powerful gravity of its piercing sound, rhythm, and essential function.

This article contains a brief summary of SAB perspectives that should enhance and deepen your awareness for playing in traditional and contemporary settings. There is much more to uncover and discover through continued research, analysis and application of the most famous of bell patterns.