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Paper review:

The Rhythmic Interpretation of Monophonic Music by H.C. Longuet-Higgins and C.S. Lee

This paper attempts to articulate what happens when listeners group note occurrences into metric structure. While many ambiguities may be present in music, the authors point out that listeners resolve ambiguities by choosing an appropriate metric interpretation. This interpretation often turns out to be the simplest or most regular choice.

The authors begin by stating some of the factors that go into interpreting rhythmic relations. Among these are accent, tonal relationships, and lyrics. However, they choose to severely limit these clues for the sake of the study, and focus only on relative durations of notes. It was not entirely clear what they meant by “duration,” however.

I did not like how the premise of the paper involved the interpretation of written music only. The authors do provide a justification for this approach, drawing a parallel in linguistics where printed text is used for analysis. However, music perception occurs regardless of whether there is a printed score in front of the listener. The process of reading a score is a skill that is not only recent in history, but also is still restricted to a very small population of trained musicians. With this in mind it is hard to accept the paper on a larger scope of music perception.

It was also hard to get past the initial examples, where the reader is supposed to agree with the “obvious” metrical interpretations. I was “wrong” on several accounts, despite having had years of formal musical training and experience. Background training is not given much thought in the presentation of the paper in general. It would be interesting to note how listeners differ in interpretation by cultural upbringing. A listener from Bulgaria, for example, is likely to view “odd” or “unnatural” meters such as 5/8 or varying 2+3 cycles as the norm; whereas the reader of the present paper is assumed to dismiss such rhythms as too complex or out of the ordinary to consider here. With such limitations I was reluctant to consider the authors’ suggestion that the findings generalize to perception of musicians.

The actual algorithm was generally well presented, although sometimes the descriptions were hard to follow. Various metrical interpretations were given as tree diagrams. Rhythmic hierarchies and weights proved to be reliable starting points for the method. When the authors move on to attempt to include phrasing, however, it was again too generalized. It is assumed that phrasing is equal to slurring, and that the purpose of phrasing is to give the audience clues as to the correct meter—when, of course, the purpose is often to deliberately confuse and manipulate the listener as well.