

# Theoretical Systems and Practical Realization: Observations of Children Musicians in *Bahar Dar*

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## Abstract

This paper is based on a research conducted in central Ethiopia in 1997. The study particularly focusses on child musicians from *Bahar Dar* between 10 and 14 years of age, their musical activities and their experience in their traditional music repertoire. Other important aspects refer to orally transmitted music cultures related with the process of learning that can only take place through active participation in music events.

This paper thus portrays the musical life of child musicians, their efforts to compete with adult musicians and offer their music on various occasions. Alternatively, the question, to what extent children can master and arrange the traditional music, abstract certain systematic aspects or understand similar theoretical features; to what extent they comprehend musical rules that are principally related with pitch sequences that represent traditional tuning, the *qəñat*, have been taken into consideration. As a result of the investigation I found out that the theory of the *qəñat* system as such was unknown to the children, even though in their music they practically use the *qəñat* along with the typical pitch sequences. Hence, preconceived situations that are at first taken as written information like for instance, the theory of the *qəñatoč*, the distinctive pitch sequences and their interval relationships are due to their specific purpose - here the pedagogical - not necessarily aligned to the same objective, namely the view of music repertoires practiced in reality or in the everyday life of the communities. The observation of the children musicians in *Goğam* - far away from the capital city Addis Ababa – gives us more insight about practical learning processes within the frame of oral tradition rather than attempting to search for supposedly available theoretical know-how in the consciousness of the musicians and/or to subordinate them this knowledge and last but not least to judge them qualitatively.

**Keynote:** musicology, music anthropology, child musicians, *Bahar Dar*,

Between April and July 1997, I conducted several field researches in the regions of *Goğam* and *Gondär* where the *Amara* population predominantly reside. This case study focuses on children from the town *Bahär Dar*, on their daily lives and musical activities as singers and instrument players.

Likewise, many Ethiopian cultures, the *Amara* music has ever since been orally transmitted for generations. Traditional and/or formal music training in schools or corresponding institutions do not exist. Therefore, music learning is carried out through active participation in music events and through ongoing experiences resulting from it. Instrument playing; e.g. the six-stringed lyre *kərar*, the one-stringed spike fiddle *masinqo*, singing as well as the traditional dancing called *əskəsta* are easily learned by children through intensive observation and participation on various traditional music occasions from early childhood onwards.

The children I contacted and interviewed are between 9 and 14 years of age. Some of them visit school whereas others do not have such opportunities. The reasons are among others that the children are either orphans, or are living separated from their parents on the streets of *Bahär Dar* to survive in every possible way. Hence, they have no time, money or any chance to visit schools. They have to shift for themselves, call attention on their artistic skills although there is always a limited chance to break possible barriers. Young boys usually perform songs accompanying themselves on the fiddle *masinqo*. Likewise, adult *azmari* musicians, these boys move from place to place looking for social events such as wedding ceremonies in order to offer their music, entertain their listeners and make some money for their survival. These children musicians mainly master a large part of the music repertoire likewise experienced adult *azmariwoč*. However, their disbursement is not set in advance, since they are usually not ordered by the customers, due to their young age and the luck of recognizing them as musicians. For that matter, their chance of making money by performing music is relatively low.

Another group of children (both male and female, ca. 10-12 years of age; see figure 1) I observed during a wedding ceremony in *Bahär Dar* was capable of performing traditional antiphonal wedding songs sung alternatively between a song leader, the so-called *awrağ*, and an accompanying chorus group, the *täqəbajoč*. Additionally, the children were good in dancing the *əskəsta* as well. Their songs were accompanied by the double-headed cylindrical drum *käbäro* beaten by the girls one after another; i.e. whenever the drummer was tired she was immediately replaced by the next voluntary participant. Sharp trills and/or ululations (*alalta*) that are commonly used to embellish traditional group songs were perfectly carried out by the female participants according to the custom (music example 1).

I was above all interested in finding out how far children are able to arrange their music repertoire, abstract certain systematic aspects or understand similar theoretical aspects. In order to get answers to these questions, I talked to some of the children (boys) who primarily performed solo songs accompanying themselves on the *masinqo* (figure 2).



**Figure 1: Children singing and accompanying themselves on the drum *käbäro* Photo: Teffera 11.05.1997/ Bahar Dar, Goğam**

As a result, I was able to realize that in the first place the so-called *qañät* system (traditional mode and/or pitch sequence) is not that familiar to the musicians in terms of theoretically explicable rules. Even though they play analogue traditional *qañät* scales consisting of five pitches and maintaining the characteristic intervallic relationships on their instruments, but it was strange for them to realize that there are at least four basic traditional modes utilized in the *Amara* music repertoire. Following, I asked them to play the five pitches of the various *qañätoc* - which they in fact use in their performed songs - one by one on the *masinqo* starting from the keynote (the initial pitch) of their choice and proceed in ascending order. This was however not possible, because they immediately tended towards playing analogous melody fragments belonging to corresponding songs. I further asked whether they are aware of the existence of the 4 basic *qañätoc* commonly known as *təzəta*, *batī*, *ambassäl* and *ančī hoyē länē*. They affirmed my question, but started playing the respective songs entitled *təzəta*, *batī*, *ambassäl* and *ančī hoyē länē* (music example 2).



**Figure 2: A boy singing and playing the *masinqo* , Photo: T. Teffera/ 12.05.1997, Bahār Dar/Goḡam**

In this relationship it is important to note that the four *qinitoč* are based on these well-known traditional songs, each consisting of a huge repertoire bearing similar intervallic relationship and/or pitch-sequences. For instance, the *təzata qəñat* may comprise songs known as *Təzata*, *Alemiš zare new zare* and *Bir ambar sebereliwo* (music example 3).

This fact proves that at first the corresponding melodies are imagined in every song which means that the question: to which *qəñat* a specific song would belong is irrelevant or less important. Even music instruments are tuned on the basis of this standard rule. In doing so,



certain melodic fragments of the corresponding song are hummed in order to tune the instrument appropriately. This tuning method may for example be used on the strings of the lyre *kərar*. According to further investigations the **peculiarity** of the term *qəñət* as such does not **only** refer to these children who in any case have no information about its theoretical system, but also a large number of musicians, singers and instrument players. Therefore, I strongly believe that the rules of the *qəñət* are only known theoretically, namely principally in the Ethiopian capital *Addis Ababa* where they were invented at the Yared School of Music shortly after its foundation in 1968. In the practical music of the everyday life, not only the pitch sequences and the intervallic relations of the various *qəñətoč*, but also the terminological usage of the word *qəñət* as such are unknown.

The *qəñət* modes are believed to be the foundation of the Ethiopian music, but this is a wrong interpretation, since the various ethnicities residing in this country possess their own musical languages and dialects likewise the abundant local languages.

In this context, I would like to mention Powne's (1968) work in titled *Ethiopian Music*. In this book, Powne comprehensively discusses the sacred and the secular music practices in Ethiopia, their historical and cultural backgrounds and their development over time, the organology of various traditional music instruments like for instance the lyre *kərar*, the fiddle *masinqo*, the box-lyre *bägäna* and the end-blown flute *wašənt* played among the communities of central highland regions of Ethiopia.

Some of Powne's accounts should be viewed critically, e.g. his description about the five pitches of the *təzəta qəñət*. Here, he attempts to demonstrate the pitch sequences that are predominantly typical for the music of central Ethiopia with the help of two music instruments. These are the end-blown flute *wašənt* and the lyre *krar*. Except the *təzəta qəñət*, the other three *qəñətoč bati*, *ambassäl* and *anči hoye läne* are exactly noted, whereas the *təzəta qəñət* consisting of an incorrect pitch as shown below. Powne lists the pitches played by the *kərar* from left to right as represented in figure 3:

1	2	3	4	5	6	string numbers
c''	c'	a <sup>b</sup> '	g'	e <sup>b</sup> '	d <sup>b</sup> '	<i>qəñət</i> pitches
	→	→	→	→	→	

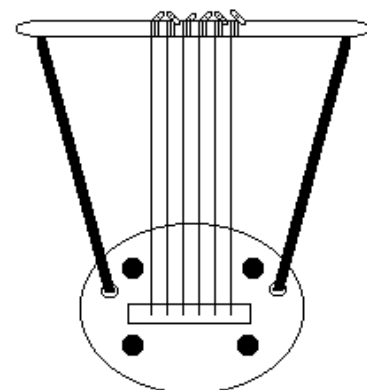


Figure 1



Figure 2

The same pitches appear again in figure 4 starting from the keynote *c'* and move in ascending order, since this is the frequently used and imagined succession for all *qəñətoč*.

The octave pitch *c''* (a repetition of the keynote) should not necessarily be taken into consideration, because for the explanation of a *qəñət*, just the first five ascending pitches consisting of the respective intervals are sufficient. The repetition of the keynote *c'* one octave higher occurs in any case in all pitch sequences. This may be ascertained while

listening to a tuned instrument like the *kərar* commonly consisting of six strings<sup>1</sup> or the fiddle *masinqo*. In instrumental pieces or when singing, the octave pitches are not frequently used.

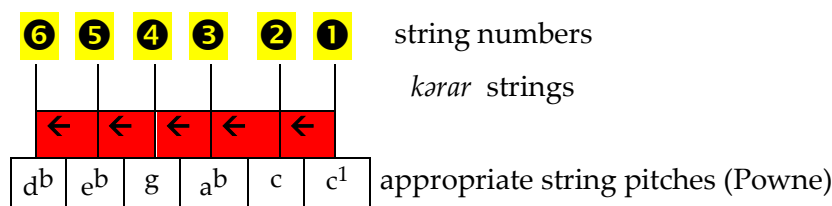


Figure 3

The *təzəta qəñət* comprises two versions of pitch sequence. The first: c'-d'-e'-g' and a' (c' = keynote), while the second version corresponds to the pitch succession that has been explained by Powne in figure 4 except for the incorrect pitch d<sup>b</sup>'. It should in fact be a natural pitch, namely d. Thus the correct version of this *qəñət* is given in figure 5.

In addition to the *qəñət* pitches, Powne indicates each *kərar*-string with a finger number consecutively from right to left 1 to 6 as demonstrated in figure 6.

Figure 4

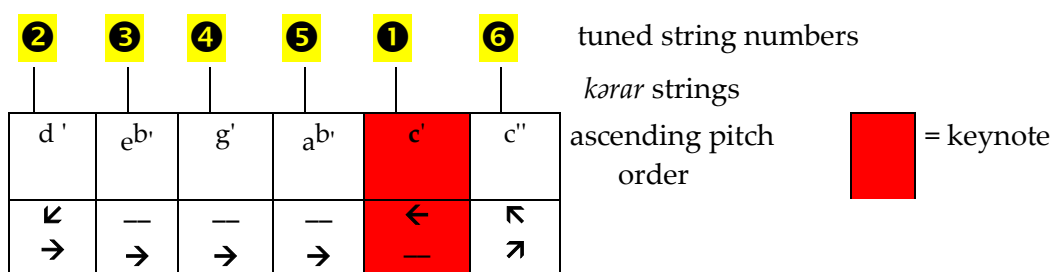


In figure 3 Powne indicates every pitch with a *kərar*-string number (from left to right) although this succession does not correspond to the usually tuned *kərar* pitches. Therefore, this illustration is confusing apart from the fact that the commonly used ascending pitch order remains uncertain.

For that matter it would be reasonable to arrange the *kərar* strings according to the finger and string number system that as also invented at the Yared School of Music<sup>2</sup> with the purpose of creating simple and effective methods of music learning and instrument playing.

First of all, the frequently used tuning method the *kərar*-strings usually represents an ascending pitch order owing to their numerical arrangement. According to the chart in figure 7, string number 1 refers to the keynote of the *qəñət* followed by other pitches belonging to this *qəñət* (see arrow mark under each pitch).

Figure 5



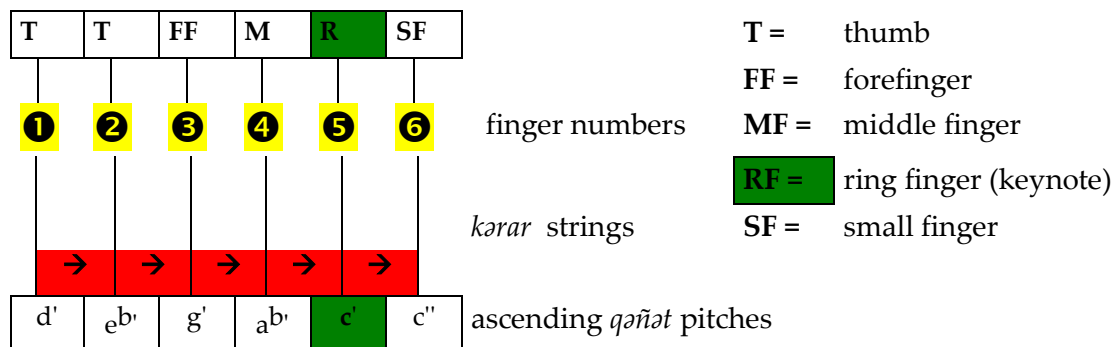
1 There are also *kəraroc* (plural of *kərar*) that consist of only 5 strings like those used among the *Təgray*.

2 Powne's book was published in 1968, so that it is apparent that his research was carried out previously. Therefore, he probably couldn't make use of the numbering system invented at the Yared School of Music after 1968.

However, this numbering system does not correspond to the one represented above. Apart from the melodic imagination of a certain musical piece, that plays a primary role while tuning the respective pitch set, it must first of all be imagined in this succession. In this way it would also correspond with the intervals given in the corrected version of figure 5, i.e.  $c' - d' - e^{b'} - g' - a^{b'}$  and  $c''$ . Still, based on the numbering system, the six *kərar*-strings are indicated with the finger numbers as shown figure 8. Of course, the finger numbers are ordered from left the right likewise that what Powne has represented, but the pitch of each differs from one another (compare the pitch sequence  $c'' - c' - a^{b'} - g' - e^{b'} - d^{b'}$  in figure 3 (Powne's version) with the sequence  $d' - e^{b'} - g' - a^{b'} - c' - c''$  represented in figure 8).

When a pitch sequence is described, it is considerably important to pay a special attention on the string sequences and the corresponding pitches of the *qəñət*, if the example is demonstrated on the *kərar*<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 6



Powne further explains the pitch  $c''$  as the lowest, but this does not correspond to the practical utilization, because exactly the reverse is the outcome; pitch  $c''$  is the highest. Pitch  $c'$  is the departure pitch that is mostly tuned before to all other strings. The octave pitch  $c''$  is fixed either immediately after  $c'$ , or at last.



Figure 7

There is no doubt that Powne noted the exact pitches as played by the *Wašənt* and the *kərar* without necessarily proving their correctness. He might have probably not realized that the *Təzətə qəñət* has two variations.

According to the intervals given by Powne, we may therefore perceive that the first version of this *qəñət* was played by the *wašənt* and the second by the *kərar*. But Powne noted all pitches as perceived in a single line considering them as a set belonging to the same pitch group (figure 9):

Powne explanations of the *təzətə qəñət* comprising of the above demonstrated eight pitches, is a wrong hypothesis.

By chance, only the *batī qəñət* consists of exactly the same pitches played by both instruments so that after combining both sequences Powne had a pentatonic scale as a result. The other two *qəñətoč* namely *ambassäl* and *ančī hoye länē* played by the *kərar* are exact even and if Powne's method of analysis is still misleading in my opinion (Powne 1968: 47-48). So in

<sup>3</sup> In the case of another instrument such as the *masinqo*, another image will be the outcome that is related with the construction of this instrument, its playing position and technique.

general one may imagine what Powne's investigation result would be, if in all the *qəñət* scales demonstrated by the *kərar* and the *wašənt* more deviations would have occurred?

## Conclusion

Children are commonly very fast in learning, understanding and memorizing whatever their environment offers. The research experiment made with children from *Bahar Dar* was important to comprehend the level of their musicality and the extent of their understanding the traditional music repertoire they perform everyday mainly on the streets of the town. From this point of view one may generally be amazed how perfect these children have mastered the major part of the music repertoire which they perform in almost a professional manner by controlling their voice range/s. All this know-how is a result of the oral tradition, a long-lasting learning process that can only be mastered through continuous and active observation and participation in music events as already stated above. Mention must also be made that the children play the *masinqo* perfectly while simultaneously performing their songs. Interesting is also to observe their capability to tune the instrument according to their voice ranges as well as to switch off from one *qəñət* to the next and consequently position their fingers correctly. So except for their early age they can fully compete with experienced adult musicians. The overall nature of competition to become the best in performing music and to make some money enables these children to develop their virtuosity. Even though the destiny of every child may vary, but the intensive experiences accumulated during the early childhood can be a good base for a possible artistic career and music business in the future.

With regard to the main subject matter of this paper, namely the understanding and/or misunderstanding of theoretical systems and the practical reality of the *qəñətoč*, the children discussed here are not at all exceptional. This means that the level of understanding and/or misunderstanding refers to both children and adult musicians. Therefore, it is very important to make differentiations between the allocations practised in everyday life and theoretical systems that have been invented and accordingly developed over the years at the Yared School of Music for merely pedagogical purposes.

A research should always be based on the practical aspect of music, using sufficient source material, since preconceived conditions that are at first seriously taken as written information like for instance, the theory of the *qəñətoč*, are due to their specific purpose - here the pedagogical - not necessarily aligned to the same objective, namely the actually practiced view of musical repertoires.

The observation of children musicians in *Bahar Dar* - far away from the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa - gives us more insight about practical learning processes in orally transmitted cultures such as that of the *Amhara* rather than the attempt to search for supposedly available theoretical know-how in the consciousness of the musicians and to subordinate them to this knowledge and judge them qualitatively.



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## Music Examples

All below listed recordings were made by Timkehet Teffera in May 1997 in *Bahar Dar/Goğam*, Central Ethiopia. The original recordings are preserved at the *Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv* under the code "Teffera-Ethiopia/97" and they are accessible for researchers.

### Music Example 1

Song title: *Ašeweyna*  
Repertoire: Traditional antiphonal wedding song  
Performer: 14 year old *azmari* singing and playing the *masinqo*, accompanied by a group of girls, *Käbäro*, hand clapping and trills/wedding ceremony

### Music Example 2

Interview made with *Mekwanent Adane*, a 15 year old boy who sings and accompanies himself on the fiddle *masinqo*, Issue of discussion: The traditional *Qinit* scales

### Music Example 3

Song title *Alle Gena*  
Repertoire: traditional antiphonal wedding song  
Performer: a group of girls singing; playing the *Käbäro*, hand clapping and trills