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The Bolero Rhythm in Rock

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ABSTRACT

The Bolero rhythm, a triplet-infused rhythm pattern derived from Maurice Ravel’s “Boléro”, appears in a number of rock music singles beginning in the late 1960’s. Although Ravel’s highly recognizable pattern is commonly quoted in many genres of popular music, the Bolero rhythm takes on added significance in the realm of hard rock: it acts as a symbolic musical topic that represents military fanfare. In this paper, I provide a brief history of the Bolero rhythm topic as it appears in rock recordings, and I explore the features that characterize this topic—triplet patterns, a featured snare drum, and a unison “riff”—as it is frequently heard in a rock context.

INTRODUCTION

In the genre of early 1970’s music that we now call hard rock, three bands fought for supremacy: Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Deep Purple. Although Deep Purple’s legacy has softened over time, their star burned brightly in 1970; the group that had offered the pretentious Concerto for Group and Orchestra just a year earlier met the new decade with a more focused, no-nonsense approach, as heard in their album Deep Purple In Rock. The obligatory minor-mode rock ballad that closes side 1 of this album, “Child in Time,” is a showcase for newly hired vocalist Ian Gillan; the section that follows the song’s opening verses features Gillan soaring through the upper range of his head voice, reaching a peak of A5. And although the eight-bar instrumental break that follows may seem incongruous to modern ears, this brief passage is the perfect match to the intensity of Gillan’s stratospheric scream as it prepares the following guitar solo. This break, with its percussive, triplet-infused unison riff, is known to rock musicians as the Bolero rhythm.

Example 1: Deep Purple, “Child in Time” [1].

The Bolero rhythm appears in a handful of rock recordings of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, and we may safely assume that its title is derived from the well-known Maurice Ravel work of the same name. But whereas the eight-bar break in “Child in Time” shares Ravel’s use of triplets, there is little else in this passage that would suggest association with Boléro. Treating this rhythmic break as a hard-rock convention allows us to look beyond Ravel, and beyond the dance it represents, and in the examples that follow I offer a framework for hearing the Bolero rhythm as a shared cultural code—a musical topic—with its own associations derived from a handful of musical features. These features are the triplet rhythm pattern, the snare drum, and the monotonic unison riff.
BOLÉRO, “BECK’S BOLERO,” AND THE BOLERO RHYTHM

That the Bolero rhythm takes its name from Ravel’s Boléro is largely due to the popularity of this work among Western listeners of all cultural strata. One of the more notorious assessments of the cultural currency of Boléro comes from Allan Bloom, whose 1987 monograph The Closing of the American Mind focuses on the implications of repetitive rhythm: “Young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse. That is why Ravel’s Boléro is the one piece of classical music that is commonly known and liked by them [2].” Perhaps Bloom’s decision to single out of Boléro was influenced by its featured role in the 1979 movie 10, in which Jenny, portrayed by actress Bo Derek, tells Dudley Moore’s George Webber that “Boléro was the most descriptive sex music ever written.” Yet if we wish to propose references to Bolero in rock, there are much more suitable candidates to be found: “Abbadon’s Bolero” by Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and “Bolero,” a section of the side-length track “Lizard” by King Crimson, both use Ravel’s snare-drum pattern as an ostinato, in its original triple meter, with Ravel-like melodies floating above. Another contemporary recording, “The Bomber” from the James Gang’s 1970 album James Gang Rides Again, contains a middle section labeled “Bolero,” attributed to Ravel, in which both Ravel’s melody and his 3/4 snare ostinato are preserved; Ravel’s estate threatened legal action upon the release of this album, and the track was edited to exclude the Bolero section in subsequent pressings.

In comparison, the break from “Child in Time” would strike us as a rather weak allusion to Ravel’s Boléro. If we wish to associate this passage with another musical work, a more compelling alternative is the influential 1967 single “Beck’s Bolero,” featuring guitarists Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. Though both Beck and Page have in the past claimed authorship of the track, both acknowledge that Page was responsible for the Bolero rhythm that drives the opening section; not surprisingly, Page specifically mentions Ravel’s Boléro as the inspiration for the rhythm pattern of the piece [3]. The stature of Beck and Page among hard rock guitarists, and the surprising chart success of “Beck’s Bolero”—released a year after its recording date, as a B-side to the bubblegum pop tune “Hi Ho Silver Lining”—suggests an attractive alternative to the Ravel lineage: Deep Purple and other performers of the Bolero rhythm may have turned to “Beck’s Bolero,” not Ravel’s, for their musical inspiration.

Example 2: Jeff Beck, “Beck’s Bolero [4].”

FEATURES OF THE BOLERO RHYTHM

The triplet rhythm pattern heard in Page’s strummed 12-string guitar is the most aurally distinct element of the Bolero rhythm: it is a salient departure from the simple meter typical of rock music. And whereas the cultural influence of Ravel’s Boléro suggests that this triplet rhythm is the mark of a dance topic, a broader survey of 19th- and 20th-century Western concert music confirms that triplet rhythms may conjure any number of musical associations. Raymond Monelle writes in The Musical Topic that a triplet or 6/8 rhythm is often used to invoke hunting, but this is a rather unlikely interpretation in a rock context. More promising for our purposes is Monelle’s association of triplets with march topics: in a pithy statement in The Sense of Music, Monelle notes that Leonard Ratner’s description of march topics omits “an essential
feature of the march: its tendency to articulate in dotted figures and triplets, which continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [5]."

With this possibility in mind, I offer another late-1960's single that makes similar use of triplet rhythms. Although the snare drum riffs heard in the opening minute of David Bowie's 1969 single “Space Oddity” are not an instance of the Bolero rhythm, they do share with the Bolero rhythm the same use of triplet figures. Drummer Terry Cox's triplet patterns, heard in relief against the simple-meter texture of guitars and vocals, capture the solemnity of the moments leading up to a spacecraft launch. “Space Oddity” invites us to consider triplet rhythm patterns in a context that has little to do with dance: these rhythms are the sounds of a ceremony, and as such we may understand them as a form of march topic.

Example 3: David Bowie, “Space Oddity [6].”

The introduction to “Space Oddity” and the Bolero break in “Child in Time” share more than just triplet rhythms: in each passage, the percussionist performs the rhythm pattern solely on the snare drum. To the modern listener, the snare drum is able to evoke images of ceremonial marches with relative ease; it is one of the instruments most associated with military music. Yet this association is relatively recent: Monelle notes that the trumpet, not the snare drum, was understood as the primary instrument of military music up to and including the early 19th century, and that “the military snare drum was at first excluded from European bands because it was established as a signaling instrument in the West [7].” Once admitted into the orchestra, the snare drum quickly became identifiable as a signifier of marches or calls to military action, as befitting a signaling instrument: the most obvious use of the snare drum in this capacity is heard in the opening movement of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, dubbed “Leningrad.” The snare-driven ostinato that dominates this movement is the military equivalent of Ravel's Boléro. Whether one hears this passage as either patriotic propaganda or dystopian parody of war, its signification of the German/Russian encounter during the Siege of Leningrad is unmistakable: the snare drum is both the call to arms and the sound of the battlefield.

Example 4: Dmitri Shostakovich, Symphony no. 7, I. Allegretto [8].

In contrast, the snare drum has always been a staple of rock; the constant presence of the snare backbeat in rock is not the sound of battle, but of youthful energy and dance, as aptly captured by The Beatles in their single “Rock and Roll Music.” But the percussive strikes of the snare can also model the sounds of military procession, and examples of the Bolero-as-march rhythm beckon within the genre of hard rock, with noted gun enthusiast Ted Nugent providing the most telling of these. In the 1975 single “Stranglehold,” drummer Tommy Aldridge produces the Bolero rhythm march signal, while Ted Nugent’s overdubbed guitar lines, with their sudden shift to the major mode, provide the unmistakable trumpet fanfare that punctuates his triumph over Death: “some people think they gonna die someday / I got news you never got to go.”

Example 5: Ted Nugent, “Stranglehold [9].”

The third element of the Bolero rhythm, the monotonic unison riff, is lacking in the percussion-only rhythm pattern heard in “Stranglehold,” but in a tutti or homophonic texture it is always present: the classic Bolero rhythm break is the sound of
a single repeating note or chord, with changes in pitch only where mandated by a change in harmony. Such bluntly repetitive riffs, of course, are a staple of the genre of rock that would become heavy metal, and as such they have attracted the greatest ire of rock critics: the unison riff is maximally simple music made accessible to contemporary youth with little capacity to digest polyphony. The notebooks of 1970's rock critics such as Lester Bangs and Robert Christgau are filled with invectives against riffmasters like Black Sabbath, as their barbs take aim at both the technical limitations of the band and the haplessly simple results of their performances. Yet Deep Purple are clearly above such limitations: the tightly synchronized Bolero rhythm riff in “Child in Time” is not the sloppy sound of drug-addled performers outfitted with overly loud amplifiers.

Done well, simplicity can be a difficult thing to achieve: whereas any foot soldier can master the simple steps of a march, coordinating the steps of hundreds of soldiers requires effort and discipline. And although this observation opens the door for an Adornian critique of repetition in popular music, numerous scholars have rebuffed such critiques by embracing the social connotations of simplicity. Robert Walser's defense of simplicity in *Running With the Devil* is particularly fitting for this purpose: while acknowledging the repetitive similarities of heavy metal music and military marches, Walser states that the purpose of marches is not to inculcate mindlessness but rather single-mindedness. […] both marches and metal sometimes rely upon an impression of simplicity for their social effectiveness, an impression that in fact may be made possible only by considerable skill and technical mediation and that may serve to help articulate complex social meanings [10].

The archetypal Bolero rhythm break, therefore, is a display of military precision, which lends itself well to the tropes of power that Walser and other rock scholars locate in nearly every sonic detail of hard rock: in the guitar’s distorted timbre, in the vocal scream, and in the whack of the drums. But the Bolero rhythm does more than simply repeat a march pattern in homophonic texture: it does so by repeating a single pitch. There is no melody to speak of in the Bolero rhythm: the extensive repetition of a pitch thwarts the basic human expectation of pitch variation as an essential melodic element. This distinction is critical: whereas a regularly rhythmic melody suggests the musical coordination of human activities such as dances and marches, the same rhythm used in the service of a single repeated sound is anti-lyrical, even anti-musical, as Stravinsky aptly demonstrated by using his repeated “Augurs chords” as the sonic record of primitive ritual. Human speech is never strictly monotonous, barring physiological impairments; but the sounds of humans’ activities, their physical exertions upon the world, can be monotonous, and in industrial society they often are. The single repeated pitch or chord in the Bolero rhythm is not a musical accompaniment to marching soldiers: it is the sound of marching itself, of boots upon stone, and of war machines.

The exemplar of this tactic in Western concert music is Holst’s “Mars, the Bringer of War,” the first of seven movements from *The Planets*. “Mars,” like the first movement of the “Leningrad” Symphony, is about battle, but the two works emphasize different aspects of battle: whereas Shostakovich gives a sonic rendering of a battle scene, Holst chronicles the impending threat of attack. Holst’s pulsing figure heard in the low strings and percussion provides the ominous backdrop of war, the sounds of innumerable assembled forces, which characterizes the movement. All of the ingredients of the Bolero rhythm break are heard in this riff, and if this movement were as widely
known as Ravel’s Boléro I might be discussing the “Mars rhythm” in rock, similarly transformed into a 4/4 meter.


The Bolero rhythm represents battle in a rock context equally well; it is heard at the climactic moment of “The Knife,” a recording by the progressive rock group Genesis that tells of a fictional, dystopian armed revolution. Following a long instrumental section that includes the sounds of soldiers’ voices and guns, the Bolero rhythm enters with a monotonic unison riff that stands in shocking contrast to the multi-layered passage that precedes it. This unison riff gives way to a slightly more complex blues-scale riff, and organist Tony Banks soon follows with an arpeggiated figure, seemingly to remind us that we are, in fact, listening to Genesis. In a nod to Allan Bloom’s critique of rock music, the actions portrayed by this musical section are indeed mindless; singer Peter Gabriel’s lyrics point toward the futility of violent revolution. Yet the effect of militaristic single-minded uprising is fully present in this passage: it works perfectly as a soundtrack for the pending and actualized conflict of Gabriel’s revolutionaries.

Example 7: Genesis, “The Knife” [12].

CONCLUSION

As I’ve noted earlier, the Bolero rhythm held a relatively brief period of popularity: Ted Nugent’s “Stranglehold” is one of the later rock recordings to employ the Bolero rhythm as a break. Its strength as a musical topic is its ability to model the sounds of marching and battle; when grafted onto a less militaristic context, as in the Styx power ballad “Lady” from 1974, it is reduced to one of many tropes of power heard in 1970’s rock. But shades of the Bolero rhythm may also be heard in the newer generation of hard rock that emerged mid-decade, as heavy metal bands such as Judas Priest and Iron Maiden favored a riff-heavy texture that left little room for the R&B-derived textures of 1960’s rock. In the following clip, taken from the first track of Iron Maiden’s 1981 album Killers, the Bolero rhythm is heard as an extension of the unison, rhythmically driven section that opens the piece: the effect is no longer one of difference, but of rhythmic diminution. The title of this track, “The Ides of March,” provides a wonderful double entendre with which I’d like to conclude: although we may acknowledge the nominal links between the Bolero rhythm and the Ravel work of the same name, my exploration of the Bolero rhythm suggests that the historical and topical path of this motive may be understood in its most prototypical form—as a triplet-infused snare pattern, accompanied by monotonic riff—as a late 20th-century form of a march topic, signifying the mechanized sounds of military activity, and the procession of military might.

Example 8: Iron Maiden, “The Ides of March” [13].
REFERENCES