According to the Cambridge University Press website, “Cambridge Companions are a series of authoritative guides, written by leading experts, offering lively, accessible introductions to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics, and periods” (www.cambridge.org/core/what-we-publish/collections/cambridge-companions). Cambridge Companions topics/series include American Studies, Culture, Law, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Religion, The Ancient World (i.e., Classics in the western sense), along with a miscellany that ranges from Baseball, Cricket, and Horse Racing, to Chomsky, Durkheim, Gandhi, Jung, Levi-Strauss, and the Bible. The music series includes sub-ranges for specific composers (by century), musical instruments, and opera.

The present volume, the “Cambridge Companion to Rhythm” (“CCR”) is not listed in any of these series but under “music criticism,” of which it is the only entry. This is not surprising. Could one imagine the “Cambridge Companion to Melody” or the “Cambridge Companion to Harmony”(?) For of course rhythm is one of the primary parameters of music, and as such, its remit cuts across historical genres, instruments, composers, and styles. Thus as one might expect, the contents of the CCR are extraordinarily broad and diverse. I will not trouble to list/detail them all here, as TOCs and chapter abstracts are all available on the CUP website (www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-companion-to-rhythm/B79C86BBE511DA0EAB525DE0D8DAAE96). The CCR has five major sections: (1) An overview of basic aspects of rhythm, including rhythm perception, (2) various aspects of performing rhythm, (3) rhythm in western art music, (4) rhythm in western jazz and popular music, and (5) rhythm in global (i.e., non-western) music. The book concludes with a chapter on “The Future of Rhythm” which discusses the impact of digital audio and other technologies on rhythmic practice and thought.

The editors, Russell Hartenberger and Ryan McClelland, both associated with the University of Toronto, have assembled an all-star lineup for each section, with chapters written by some of the leading scholars and musicians whose work and/or performances have focused on issues of musical rhythm. This is the book’s strength and, alas, its weakness. As these different disciplines have different traditions of scholarship, citation, argument, and presentation, the result is that the form and style of the book’s contents are vastly uneven. Chapters vary widely in size; Robertson’s chapter on conducting rhythm is five pages, while Horlacher’s chapter on rhythm in post-tonal music runs for twenty-six pages, including notes. Some chapters have extensive notes and bibliographies, while others have none whatsoever. Some have many musical examples (e.g., Kreb’s chapter on rhythm in the 19th century German Lied) while others have none, or have all of their materials on a companion website, which, while understandable for media supplements, is cumbersome for the print edition user; indeed, Dodson’s chapter on visualizing performance rhythms and Locke’s chapter on rhythm in Agbadza song are more or less unintelligible without having their companion websites at hand. Thus the experience of reading the book in its entirety is somewhat unsettling.
However, reading the book in its entirety may not be the point. When one searches for Cambridge Companion titles or content on CUP website, one is led to the “Cambridge Core,” that is, an institutional access platform for a wide range of CUP publications. Thus providing content to populate the online Cambridge Core seems to be one of the main commercial points of the Cambridge Companions series. Placing the book in the context of the Cambridge Core also answers, at least in part, a question this reviewer had while reading the CCR, namely, “who is this book really for?”

For very few chapters of the CCR offer a “lively, accessible introduction” to a musical topic, genre, or style. First, almost all presume the reader has a strong musical background and can read music with facility, as many musical examples involve large orchestral scores and/or modern and post-modern compositions with complex rhythmic notation. Many chapters presume a strong familiarity with the topic of their chapters; for example, Schick, Roberson, & Sliwiniski presume the reader is conversant with a wide range of 20th century and current art music composers and repertoire; indeed, Schick’s chapter seems mostly targeted at percussionists who would be playing the music he discusses, given its practical bent (e.g., how to hold the stick at different heights to perform different rhythms, as noted on page 72). Krebs presumes a deep knowledge of 19th century Lieder (and facility with German), while Nick Collins name-checks a swath of EDM and techno-pop. And McClelland, Dodson, and Horlacher presume the reader is conversant with a good deal of music theory and analysis.

To be sure, some chapters of the CCR do offer a lively and accessible introduction to their topic. For example, Hartenberger walks the reader through the process of learning to play Steve Reich’s music, and along the way one gains a an understanding of “feel” of Reich’s rhythms. Butterfield introduces the problem of defining the notion of “swing” in jazz, and gives the reader a history of the term’s origins and associations. De Clerq’s chapter on rhythm in rock is pitched an appropriate introductory level, introducing the reader to basic terms, and illustrates his points with “cover” versions of songs which the reader can readily access via the internet. Locke uses a small set of Agbadza songs as a window into basic aspects of African Ewe music, and Kippen grounds his explanation of the rhythmical practice of the Indian subcontinent on Adi Tal, the most common rhythm counting framework in both Karnatak and Hindustani music, proceeding in step-by-step fashion.

Nonetheless, as a companion to introduce the reader to the general topic of rhythm—which is admittedly inherently diffuse —the CCR necessarily falls short; one cannot imagine a typical reader who might be interested in the full range of topics covered in the book, nor will most readers have enough of a background to understand and appreciate the contents of more than a handful of its chapters. Thus the book’s main use/target audience is likely to be students in undergraduate and graduate courses taught at institutions with subscriptions to the Cambridge Core, where instructors may choose relevant chapters in an “à la carte” fashion, as fits their particular syllabi.

While the CCR’s strength, as noted above, is in bringing together essays from composers, performers, ethnographers, psychologists, and music theorists, with few exceptions (most notably the entries by Cameron & Grahn, Hartenberger, Locke, Ohriner, and Butterfield), the entries in each section remain rooted in their disciplinary silos. Perusing the bibliographies and
notes (at least in those chapters that have them) one finds little interdisciplinary engagement—
theorists cite other theorists, performers and composers cite other performers, and
ethnomusicologists cite other ethnomusicologists. This is a shame in at least two significant
respects. First, there is an awful lot of re-inventing the wheel, with basic terms and concepts like
“beat,” “measure,” and “accent” continually re-defined and re-explained. And while there may
be some important differences in rhythmic domains—for example, syncopation and stress have
different functions in commetric versus contrametric rhythmic styles and practices (see
*Ethnomusicology*, 17.3 (1973), 494-506)—there are also important commonalities that can and
should be mutually informative and illuminating.

One example must suffice. In his chapter on the rhythms of the Indian subcontinent, James
Kippen describes “stroke melodies,” that is, “fixed patterns [of drum sounds] whose
combinations of timbres and stresses set up what might be best described as a groove: a
repetitive rhythm rooted in bodily movement that often involves offbeat stresses and that
conveys a feeling of motion” (p. 251). This characterization of stroke melodies, and their role in
metrical orienting both musicians and audience (and dancers) has strong parallels to David
Locke’s discussion of the bell pattern and other instruments in the Agbadza drum ensemble that
“give musical time a distinctive pattern or shape” (p. 222), as well as the backbeat patterns,
marked by the actions of the kick and snare drum, as discussed by Ohriner in his chapter on
rhythm in rap music. In all of these contexts (all of which involve predominantly contrametic
rhythmic patterns) pitch, timbre, as well as dynamics play key roles in the shape of the rhythmic
pattern, and most importantly our ability to grasp and move with it. As these diverse chapters
make clear, rhythms are more than simply patterns of inter-onset intervals or a sequence of
metric positions, but always involve other qualities which convey their metric orientation and
motional qualities.

Thus there is perhaps one more audience for the Cambridge Companion to Rhythm, and that
would be its own authors, and the academic/professional tribes they represent. For while this
volume admirably shows the ways in which rhythm is manifest, performed, and understood in a
diverse set of musical and intellectual disciplines, sadly, for the most part it also shows how little
those disciplines intersect, to the impoverishment of all.

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