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Measuring Rhythmic Complexity in the West African Standard Pattern

The so-called West African standard pattern is a ubiquitous rhythm that serves as a temporal reference for dozens of genres across the Black Atlantic and beyond. Although the pattern has various versions, the focus here is on one that is traditionally used in Ghana, Cuba, and Brazil, (Notation: <2212221>). How do musicians and audiences who are familiar with this pattern react when the point of reference is shifted in time? This presentation engages this question from an empirical point of view with three psychological experiments on rhythm. The three experiments measure perceived, metric, and performance complexity of the standard pattern in its 12 possible rotations and in three contexts: the rhythm alone, and in conjunction with a 12/8 and a 3/2 pulse. The results are compared to more traditional analysis of rhythm complexity based on syncopation and metric strength.