

*La musique des Inuit du Caribou. Cinq perspectives méthodologiques, sémiologie et analyse musicales.* Par Ramon Pelinski (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1981.

Beverley A. Cavanagh

Volume 3, Number 2, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081079ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081079ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cavanagh, B. A. (1981). Review of [*La musique des Inuit du Caribou. Cinq perspectives méthodologiques, sémiologie et analyse musicales.* Par Ramon Pelinski (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1981.) *Ethnologies*, 3(2), 167–170. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081079ar>

intéressera sûrement le public en général à cause, surtout, des nombreuses photographies, mais qu'elle attirera beaucoup plus l'attention du lecteur éclairé et préoccupé par l'analyse de divers phénomènes culturels. Par conséquent, l'ouvrage se veut plus éducatif que divertissant.

Enfin, nous pouvons affirmer que l'auteure atteint son objectif de départ et que la démarche poursuivie au cours de cette recherche nous apparaît structurée et rigoureuse. En effet, la matière rassemblée principalement à partir de plusieurs témoignages et articles de journaux nous est bien présentée avec détails. La mise en ordre des faits étant maintenant connue, il reste à pousser l'analyse. Nous constatons donc que la recherche dans le domaine de la culture populaire urbaine et articulée dans une perspective ethnologique ne fait que commencer.

Josée Bouchard Martineau  
CELAT  
Université Laval  
Québec, Québec

**La musique des Inuit du Caribou. Cinq perspectives méthodologiques, semiologie et analyse musicales.**

*Par Ramon Pelinski*

(Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1981.

This book is one of the most intellectually stimulating that I have read during the past year. To review it for folklorists is a particularly interesting project since the author deals, to a large extent, with issues for which there are no adequate folk explanations. In fact, in all but the first of the five studies he examines the very relationship between diverse explanations

— folk/scientific, emic/etic, metaphor/metalanguage — and considers their power to provide answers or interpretations and to facilitate understanding. The domain of musical expression in which "meaning" is more abstract than in verbal genres because it is non-denotative (sometimes also non-verbalized or even unconscious) has been entered via many disciplinary doors. Pelinski has provided us with an eclectic collection of methods and approaches to the same subject, the drum song of the Caribou Inuit. On one hand we must consider what his work contributes to our knowledge of Inuit music and, on the other, what he has done to enrich the on-going discussion of methodology in ethnomusicology.

A fine complement to his earlier published collection, (Pelinski, Ramon with Luke Suluk and Lucy Amarook *Inuit Songs From Eskimo Point*, Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979), Pelinski's *Cinq perspectives*... are based on his own, mid-1970s work in the Keewatin communities of Eskimo Point and Rankin Inlet, but also use the historically significant collections of Christian Leden and Jean Gabus. Complementing the five studies is an appendix containing transcriptions of the tunes (unfortunately without texts and with a somewhat confusing double numbering system) of 46 personal songs and one modern (Panagoniak) composition.

The five essays pass from somewhat impressionistic, ethnographic description to a variety of more formal analyses. Each is influenced by different developments in social scientific thought: semiotics, distributional and generative linguistics, numerical taxonomy. In each essay Pelinski confronts major philosophical and theoretical issues in ethnomusicology (actually in humanistic thought) with clarity and rigour and considers what the aforementioned developments can offer to the solution of basic problems. His writing is most elegant when it is most abstract. It is in the *application* of theory

and the handling of data that I have a few reservations. The depth and breadth of Pelinski's thinking stimulates careful and energetic debate and it is in this spirit that I write some of the following comments.

The first study, "Chants Inuit Ajajait, traditions musicales et Changements a Rankin Inlet" provides ethnological background for the more detailed chapters to follow. Photos of both general (community scenes, informants) and specifically musical (a personal song performance, throat singers, a button accordion performer, and the preparation of the drum) subjects are found throughout. After a discussion of the importance of inter-related diachronic/synchronic perspectives, the author describes contemporary musical practice. Of particular interest are the definitions of Inuktitut terms relating to musical genres, personal song structure (*Tainirk* and *Kimmik*) and drumming, the extensive quotation of informants' comments and descriptions of acculturative agents such as radio and television.

The second chapter, "Polyphonie Inuit et polysemie occidentale" faces the problem of cross-culturally applying a term such as "polyphony", an issue which had previously been discussed by Zygmunt Estreicher (*Journal de la société des américanistes*, 37, 1948) for Inuit singing from the same area. Pelinski approaches this issue with a long discourse about language and meta-language, successfully sorting out the complex and diverse meanings (hence polysemy) attributed to "polyphony" in Euro-American usage, with a view to a clear definition which would serve metalinguistically for cross-cultural phenomena. The actual discussion of data seems to me to be somewhat separate from this theoretical section. His work is based on a larger body of data than that used by Estreicher and is supported both by informants' statements and musical analysis. his conclusion, that the incidence of "polyphony" ("multisonance", or "paraphonie")

"characterizes the execution rather than the structure of the sonic material itself," is very significant. Pelinski's findings (and those of the many others concerned with the process as well as the products of music making) imply that the terminology originating in the European classical tradition is not only ambiguous but often inappropriate. it is usually concerned with structure not procedure and the lack of a language for the process of performance is severely felt. This, of course, is a challenge we all face and not a criticism of Pelinski's work. However, one does feel that the results of his inquiry about Inuit multisonant singing must be used as a starting point for another level of systematic research. What is the process? If one accepts that multisonance is a function of performance practice, could one investigate the social variables relating to its usage? As a point of departure, one could contrast data about the performance occasions, seating arrangement of the singers, physical space and acoustical factors, constituent members of the chorus and their individual vocal ranges, range of the songs (this volume provides information about range for the polyphonic songs but not for the monophonic repertoire). Other aspects could undoubtedly be pursued in a further study — perhaps a future second volume of *études*.

"Pratique emique de substitutions intervalliques dans le chant personnel des Inuit du Caribou" is a revised version of an article published in *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 1978, Vol 2(1). Using the methodology of musical semiotics, he compares variants of songs, considered intraculturally identical, from his own collection and the aforementioned one of Leden. Through a series of paradigms in which equivalent intervals are vertically aligned, he arrives at a series of substitution rules and invents an "emic" notation in which the melodic variants appear as optional square notes. Pelinski's conclusions from the previous chapter could also have a bearing on the

results of this study. Having established the emicity of certain sound objects (i.e., interval equivalence), one is struck by the questions which remain about performance processes. Different explanations may be required for different examples. Conceivably, there is a flexibility in the *intonation* of certain tones which is acceptable performance practice and which is separate from conscious *melodic* patterning. A variety of other hypotheses could be tested here. Are the differences textually related? Does transcription magnify differences which are aurally slight? Are there rules for proceeding through a melodic passage that are independent of tonal structure, or inter-dependent on tonal structure? Are the differences a product of rhythmic patterning? Larger sociological questions are also suggested. For example, what acculturative (or other?) factors might account for the greater difference between variants of the Leden and Pelinski collections than between variants within Pelinski's recordings? The answers to these questions probably lie outside of the laboratory with lengthy, field testing. They challenge us to seek further fragments toward that elusive goal of total understanding.

In collaboration with statistician L. Logrippo and programmer B. Stepien, Pelinski evolved a system for the computer analysis of melodic contour, publishing his results in Chapter IV, "Typologies des contours melodiques de chants personnels Inuit realises a l'aide de l'ordinateur." This paper is the most innovative — hence the most vulnerable — and probably the most difficult for mere social scientists to understand. I would advise a careful reading of the Appendix (pp. 127ff.) which provides clear explanations and simple examples of potentially obtuse concepts such as "degrees of similarity", "Euclidian distances", "minimal trees" and "phenograms." (The only thing about which I was confused in the Appendix was the fact that the

horizontal lines in the Phenograms appear to be one numerical unit too low.)

From a musicological point of view the notion of "melodic contour" is widely accepted as an important parameter of sonic design but a highly problematic one. The first problem is that the term is a metaphor, an inter-sense word borrowed from the domain of the visual and referring to shape. This is partially the reason for its varied usage with regard to aural phenomena; unfortunately, Pelinski does not investigate the varied approaches to contour as he did earlier with the definitions for polyphony, and his working definition in this case ("a 'Gestalt' or configuration which is the basis of a relation of similarity or dissimilarity between songs of a given corpus. Surface elements...are considered as variables which do not affect the aforementioned relationship.") is rather vague. While some ethnomusicologists have made the visual derivation explicit by drawing contour shape, others have preceded Pelinski in an attempt to quantify shape in some numerical form. (The work of Brown, who considers initial and final levels as well as the highest and lowest points of the melody, is cited; Kolinski (*Ethnomusicology*, 9, 1965) has also used the same criteria to derive his "level formulae" and this method has been used by Merriam among others.) The problems of the "quantifier school" are substantial: 1) How does one reduce or simplify a shape in order to derive its "basic Gestalt?" 2) How does one translate this visual pattern into numbers?

The authors humbly suggest that theirs is but one of many possible solutions. My initial reaction to such procedures as adding or deleting tone reiterations to make uniform the length of the songs, dividing the pitches into ten groups of ten notes (without regard for motivic structure), and taking the note furthest from the tonal centre as

"representative" for each group is that these methods over step the fine line of *technocentricity*. Material is molded to the technology in the same way that researchers of an earlier period framed their data in terms of their ethnocentric perceptions. I tested this reaction by referring some of the computer results back to the transcriptions. While recognizing that surface similarities and differences could confuse the issue, I am, nevertheless, bewildered by the fact the computer relates some contours but not others.

Criticism is obviously much easier than finding alternatives, however, and defining the acceptable limits of *technocentricity* is no easier than being realistic about ethnocentricity. (For example, logical analysis/synthesis are themselves formed by our ethnocentric and technocentric backgrounds but most of us work within the bound created by an acceptance of this position.) The work of Pelinski and his collaborators is certainly innovative and many of their procedures will be useful for other researchers.

At the end of this chapter is some very interesting material about the relationships between community repertoires, relationships which the contour analyses revealed. If these were verifiable by other procedures, the validity of the methodology would certainly have to be re-evaluated.

Associated with community inter-relationships, although somewhat apart from contour, is the discussion of melodic formulae or nodules which Pelinski has been able to isolate for individual and family repertoires. This section was very convincing after I discovered that, in my copy, Table 18 (allegedly on p. 156) Factually appears as Table 1 in the following chapter.

The final chapter, "Essai d'une grammaire de chants personnels des Inuit du Caribou" seeks to define structural units for the repertoire and to formulate rules for a generative grammar. We shall await with interest the composition of new songs and their validation by Inuit which Pelinski sees as

the next stage of the work. The most important obstacle which lies in the way of such a validation is the consideration of melodies divested of their texts. While the text and melody are elsewhere said to be indivisible (p. 34, paragraph 4), the texts are used only as a supplementary criterion for the segmentation of a song into structural units.

Pelinski explains that the melody is written in the form of a "paradigm of syntactic classes and their equivalents," but this does not actually explain the criteria for beginning and ending a structural unit at the exact place chosen. That is to say, in a repertoire in which there is a lot of repetition of certain pitch sequences, the determination of the point of segmentation must be consistent. Text might be used as the determinant in an alternative paradigm of syntactic classes and their equivalents. The rules governing the resultant structure would differ slightly from Pelinski's. The critical question is, of course, whether one, neither, or both sets of rules will generate acceptable new compositions and for this we have no answer as yet. Attributions of isomorphism (e.g., between musical structure and Inuktitut) must be treated very circumspectly until we are sure we have the correct basis of segmentation.

In conclusion, my comments must be placed in their proper perspective. Because of the clarity and depth with which Pelinski discusses the theoretical nature of the various problems he approaches, one feels inclined to examine the data relating to Inuit music, with his own idealistic standards in mind. But this assumes, falsely, that perfection is within our grasp. The individual studies in this volume considerably deepen our knowledge about the music of the Inuit. They will interest far more than Inuit scholars, however, since they contribute significantly to the discourse on theory in ethnomusicology.

Beverley A. Cavanagh  
Queen's University  
Kingston, Ont.