

6/8 RHYTHM

Pre-task : Rhythm as the connecting point

Through his travels, over many decades, Eugene has worked in diverse communities. He has worked in prisons, with people serving life sentences, schools, communities, and with orchestras. He used to cars for Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness movement. He writes poetry every day. Eugene employs rhythm as the principal motivational, focusing, galvanising and energising force.

He anchors everything in Ubuntu: “Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu,” meaning, “A person is a person through other people.” This Ubuntu philosophy says we are interconnected, as is all of life.

This makes perfect sense in rhythm because vibration is oscillation. It is molecular motion. When molecules collide in the air, that is how sound travels. What is that, if it is not rhythm?

You know that maskanda music blaring, when you walk across a taxi rank to get your ride home? That rhythm pulsating all round is pushing you on in the afternoon, home-bound crowd of commuters. You know the tabla pounce, walking into a Pakistani cellphone shop to buy ten Rands of airtime? This music makes your head bob with the beat, your fingers snap in unison and your heart throb with joy.

Being hooked to rhythm in a song disregards your fluency in the language of the melody or your adeptness in the dance of the music style. You get lost in rhythm, oblivious of all dangers.

This is Africa where rhythm is the foundation of all music and it is a unique rhythm, laced with syncopation and polyrhythms.

We, South Africans are children of a heady, whirling, musical rhythm: the KhoiSan's circle at midnight features foot rattles, wooden pegs clapping, haunting sopranos and tenors of the trance and dance; the Vhenda Domba python-like wriggle in unison in the fire-lit night for girl initiation rites; BaSotho droning male voices in harmonic songs, accentuated by the accordion; the uKuxhensa shoulder trembles and timed foot stomps; the drum and squeal of sorghum beer-inebriated sangoma initiates, amathwasa; the reverberation of Zululand hills as amahubo by the warrior regiments that echo from valley to valley; a-capella harmonies of isicathamiya in the male hostels; the piercing horns of European classical music (Dutch, English, German, Portuguese); the sad melodies in the minarets muezzin music; the bible-thumping and clanging bells accentuating repetitive Christian hymns; the urgency, wide mouths and insistent hand gesticulation of African classical and choral music; the light, peppered spin and toothless laughter of minstrels as they thump goema

wine barrel drums from the Cape Carnival. The two chord guitar and beer and pork of Boere vastrap music. The flying skirts, pink panties and throbbing breasts in the sweaty dance for African jazz, kwela, marabi, mbaqanga, isicathamiya and Free jazz. We got rhythm all right.

Resonance is the key to the pulse of life. Because all life pulses at its core and the ripples of our consciousness travel from the centre of our being, outward, to touch every other living entity in our midst, we are forever connected to all life. One arrives at this point of connection through group meditation, chanting or playing rhythmic games and exercises. The success of applying the deep principles of rhythmic connection to our lives in so-called modern society begins with attaining balance in our own lives. Even before we can move towards being connected to others in our community, we need to establish a connection with ourselves first. This connection can also be understood as alignment. When we are aligned with ourselves in the deepest sense of the word, we become more balanced in every aspect of our being. Our ancestors were connected telepathically.

Rhythm is mathematics. In Africa there was no margin or barrier between maths and music. Therefore, we can always turn the simplest task into an opportunity for exploring and expressing rhythm – like stirring a cup of tea in a deliberately rhythmic manner; or tapping the edge of the pot with a ladle in a particular beat; basically being joyfully silly about the lessons of rhythm hidden just beneath the surface of everything that surrounds us. Because rhythm is everything.

The technique of going into the soul and spirit of the animal

Do you remember when Ladysmith Black Mambazo used to perform and they would go *rrrrriqiqi* and do those sounds on stage?

Those sounds are what the boys made. The young guys were the ones that herded the oxen and cattle and also guided and controlled the oxen ploughing the land. Those sounds, together with the bright whistles are all part of “vibing”. This is a creative Zulu thing.

Eugene grew up in Clermont, which was a violent township. His dad’s nickname was Bhubesi, Zulu for lion because he was the toughest man and an expert in rhythm. He used to wrestle with oxen. As a child, Eugene used to imitate the songs of birds and monkeys in the bushes. There are many lessons for rhythm we can draw from animals.

There is a tradition of herd boys in Africa playing their flutes to the rippling of muscles of the hindquarters of cattle. The Dinka people, who live along the Nile River, just like the Nguni people of South Africa, are very close to their livestock. Young herders sleep with them. They use the animals’ bodies and dung to keep themselves warm. The rhythm of a cow’s breathing when it is still helps the young herders to relax and distend their own diaphragms, to increase their breathing capacity. The relationship they have with their animals reassures them of their connection to the universe, through their shared pulse of life. The herds give them a sense of belonging. Their cows constitute the centre of their universe of reality.

Now answer the following questions

1. Endeavour to liberate yourself from electronic devices for this task. This task is an opportunity to spend more time physically exploring your creative gifts and using them to increase the sense of “who I am.”
2. Listen carefully to feel the pulse of your internal rhythm. Relax into the rhythm and let yourself go with it.
3. Play your rhythmic riff with your instrument.
4. Invent a phrase that metrically fits the pattern and improvise with it. If you can, as always, record your invention to share with us.