

## TECHNIQUE IN THE MUSIC OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

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Music should be recognized as a phase of the culture of the American Indian. When this is done we are ready to look for standards of excellence as in other phases of culture. These are not found as easily in music as in such arts as pottery and basketry. The Indians cannot describe their music in detail and little beyond a general knowledge is gained by listening to the singing at ceremonies, games, and dances. Information must be gained by patient investigation and the Indian often tells a great deal when he is unconscious that he is giving important facts.

The present consideration will be limited to technique in the singing of the Indians except when the tempo of the song is different from that of the accompanying instrument. An interesting study could be made of the Indian technique in drumming and the use of other percussion instruments, as well as the more primitive forms of accompaniment, such as clapping the hands. These, as well as whistles and other wind instruments, are familiar to students of Indian music.

The following are phases of technique that are common to many tribes:

*Tone production.*—The Indian produces his singing tone by a peculiar action of the muscles of his mouth and throat. The writer once sang a Chippewa song for Maiñ'gans who had recorded it and asked him if it was correct. He replied, "The tune is right but you haven't an Indian *throat*." That is the fundamental element in the old Indian singing and cannot be imitated successfully by a white person, neither is it heard in the singing of young, educated Indians. By the use of this peculiar technique an Indian could separate the tones of his song without the use of words or syllables. He could produce note values as short as 32d notes with distinctness. Among the old Chippewa a peculiar, artificial tone was used in love songs and in no other songs except those of the scalp dance. It is a nasal, whining tone, with a gliding from one pitch to another, and the old love songs can be recognized by this mannerism. It has been compared to the sound produced by an animal and also to an imitation of the sound of

a wind instrument. The writer recorded numerous love songs prior to 1911 that were sung with this technique, by both men and women.

A different tone production is used by men who sing around the drum at dances. Theirs is a piercing quality of tone that can be heard a long distance. A similar quality of tone is used by men who make the announcements each evening in a large camp. Such a man was once brought in to make a recording with the statement that he was more than a hundred years old. The writer expected to hear a weak voice, but his voice was astounding in its volume and force.

Some men can sing in falsetto, and there are men who have their own manner of tone production that is admired. Thus songs were obtained in 1911 from a young Chippewa who came down from Canada to Red Lake, in Minnesota, to attend a celebration. He sang with a peculiar throaty *vibrato* and said that he discovered his ability to do this when a child and had cultivated it ever since. It is heard in the records of his songs.

*Use of words.*—This custom differs in various regions. For example, the Chippewa use few words in their songs—only enough to indicate the idea. One of their old songs is in honor of a warrior named Cimau'ganic and the only words were translated "Cimau'ganic killed in war." In such a song the name of a popular hero may replace that of an old warrior, the words of praise remaining the same. Such words generally occur in the middle of the melody, the remainder of the tones being sung with the native tone production requiring no words. In contrast, the songs of Santo Domingo Pueblo contain words through the length of the melody, often describing in detail a custom, such as that of bringing in a harvest of corn from the field.

*Accuracy in repeating a melody.*—In certain ceremonial songs it is required that a song be repeated if there is the slightest mistake in its rendition. The writer has recorded many repetitions of dance songs in which there was not the slightest difference. This custom however, is not universal. In a series of renditions of a song by a good singer there are often short, passing tones and by-tones. These are permissible to a good singer, as in our own race. In one tribe many differences were noticed in the renditions and the singer was asked to record the song only *once*. He did so, and a simple melody was heard instead of the rather elaborate versions that he had been recording. In reply to the writer's question, he said that he intended to sing it a little differently every time and that his ability to do so was a mark of his skill as a singer. This has not been found elsewhere.

*Improvisation.*—This custom has been recorded in only one tribe, but was connected with folk stories which have not been a subject of special study. It was found among the Northern Ute and several

examples were recorded. In these instances the entire folk tale was sung instead of spoken. The melodies contained no rhythmic units nor repetitions of phrases yet the singing of each story had an individuality that was, in some way, characteristic of the actors in the tale. Thus a story about the prairie dogs was expressed in an *agile* melody and the song about the bear who stole the wolf's wife was sung to a slow, simple melody. The story about the wolf's little children who won a race was sung to a melody with a compass of 11 tones, moving freely within that compass. Three of these songs were recorded by an aged woman who said that she learned them from her mother, up in the canyon. When she was a little girl her mother sang them to her and told her of the time when "the wolves were people." An additional song of this sort was recorded by another woman who was known as Fanny Provo, but no others were found.

*Difference in tempo of voice and drum.*—In many recorded songs the tempo (metric unit) of the voice is not the same as that of the drum. A singer may sing in one tempo and beat the drum in a different tempo, or he may sing in one tempo while the drum is beaten in a different tempo, by another Indian. In a comparative analysis of 60 old and 62 comparatively modern Sioux songs, the tempo of voice and drum was different in 31 songs of the former group and in only 15 songs of the latter group. A similar comparison was not made in any other tribe.

*Change of pitch-level during renditions of a song.*—This peculiarity was found to the largest extent in the songs of Santo Domingo Pueblo, N. Mex., though it occurred also in songs of the Yuma in southern Arizona, the Makah in Neah Bay, Wash., and the Winnebago in Wisconsin. This peculiarity has been widely noted in primitive music and mentioned by writers on that subject. After noting the rise in pitch-level in many Santo Domingo songs, the singer was asked whether it was intentional. He replied without hesitation, "Yes, that is the way my grandfather taught me to do when he taught me the songs." He added that the rise in pitch-level was used in the old war songs. In some songs the pitch-level was gradually lowered, the change in both instances being about a semitone, after which the new pitch-level was sustained to the end of the performance.

Certain mannerisms are connected with various classes of songs. Thus the dancing songs of the Sioux Sun Dance were sung with a "jiggling" tone. This was heard also in recordings of similar songs by the Northern Ute. The Choctaw of Mississippi use different "shouts" with each class of dance songs. This may be a form of the "hollering" that is a custom of Negro singing and was designated by that name among the Seminole of Florida. Similar "shouts" have

not been heard in songs of northern tribes. The syllables "ho ho ho ho" are heard in the Chippewa songs of the Mide'wīwīn, occurring during the songs and between renditions. Similar sounds are made by medicine men when treating the sick. War songs in many tribes may be interrupted by sharp cries or explosive sentences, and similar cries may follow the songs. In some widely separated tribes the labial *m*, with the lips closed, is heard during portions of the song. It is apart from the purpose of this brief paper to document the foregoing statements which are described in various books by the present writer, but their occurrence shows a degree of technique among Indians and limited standards of excellence in their musical performances.

The intention of the writer's work has been to discover what music means to the Indian and to describe it from his standpoint. In that work it is necessary to use musical terms that are familiar to musicians of our own race, though they are not accurate. Music is a source of pleasure to Indians, and skill according to their standards is appreciated and honored, but music to them, in its highest sense, is connected with power and with communication with the mysterious forces that control all human life. In that, even more than in the sound of the singing, lies the real difference between the music of the American Indian and that of our own race.