

Analyses and Prose of Native American Music

Musical analysis of any kind is incomplete without reference to historical and societal context. This is especially true of people groups whose music revolves around sacred ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations. Native American music is unique to its culture in that it was (and still is today) taught by rote, oral traditions, and through the learning and mastering of specific ceremonies and rituals, unlike the European Americans who learned their music through written record and notated songs.¹ Native Americans utilize their music for practical purposes, such as ceremonies and rituals, while the Europeans enjoyed their music for art's sake.² Due to this dichotomy of use, Native American music can initially sound similar, perhaps even redundant, because it serves an entirely different purpose than European art music. Further analysis assures the listener that Native American music employs great contrast and interest.

While there are always benefits to analysis and prose of a piece of music, one must eschew analyzing Native American music using similar verbiage as a European piece of art music due to its difference in purpose. The following prose will employ verbiage meant to assist the listener in appreciation and not necessarily validate the composer's authority in said music.³ This paper will examine three Native American songs and describe the songs' context, structure, rhythm, melodic contour, and pitch.

The Arizonian White Mountain Apache tribe performed the Crown Dance during the Sunrise Ceremony, a four-day ceremony to celebrate an adolescent girl's transition into

1. Leland Wyman, *Navajo Ceremonial System*, ed. William Sturtevant (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1983), 538.

2. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, xiii.

adulthood.⁴ As with most Native American rituals, the four days included a variety of prayers, paintings, chants, and blessings.⁵ Structurally, the song has two clear sections, which will be labeled A and B for this discussion. The sections are combined into AAB larger sections, with the final section repeating the A as a reprise. The form could be expressed as AABAABAABAAA. The rhythm produces a strong quarter pulse from the very beginning, though the meter is ambiguous. Most of the A section is comprised of groups of two-, four-, or six-beat combinations, though the first collection of notes is uniquely grouped into seven-beats. The B section has two major groups of notes divided by a breath, the first comprising 12 beats and the second 8.

The A section melodic contour is comprised of descending phrases, meaning they descend in both pitch and line. The A section has two sung lines and the pitches begin with a C# and D# moving into an F# and G# pattern. The second line begins with the largest interval of the entire song, with a G# to C# combination, then moving back into the F# and G# pattern. The B section has little variance within the contour and pitch, except repeated stepwise-like notes, moving up and down. While the pitch system is clearly heard, it must be stated that there are variances within the pitch, as well as pitch bends and “vocables,” a Native American vocal technique utilizing nonsensical syllables and melody concurrently.⁶ Instrumentally, the song begins with a solo male voice, adding a driving drum pulse after the first 7 beats and a rattle when moving into the second A section line. While a fully notated score is possible, it would require a deep understanding of the language and an applicable system to notate vocables.

4. Tika Yupanqui, “Apache Female Puberty Sunrise Ceremony,” *Becoming Woman*, last modified January 15, 2001, <http://www.webwinds.com/yupanqui/apachesunrise.htm>.

5. Karen Strom, “Navajo Ceremonials,” *Voyage to Another Universe*, last modified 2016, <http://www.hanksville.org/voyage/navajo/ceremonials.php3>.

6. George Herzog, “Speech-Melody and Primitive Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1934): 453.

The Kwakiutl band is part of the larger Kwakwakawakw tribe located in British Columbia, Canada along the Pacific Northwest Coast.⁷ The Kwakiutl have two sacred ceremonies: the *T'seka* Winter Ceremonies and the *Tla'sala* Peace Dances.⁸ The Peace Dance, performed as part of the *Tla'sala*, is similar in nature to the Apache Crown Dance. The form is comprised of three clear sections with an ending, which will be labeled A, B, C, and D, and could be described as ABCABCD. Rhythmically, the song is similar to the Crown Dance, with beat groupings of two-, four-, or six- beat combinations. The A section drumming pattern varies slightly in tempo, though the voices remain in tempo. The A and B sections utilize the same drumming pattern while the C section is signified by a half-time drumming pattern.

Instrumentally, the song begins by beating a hand drum for eight beats, with a rattle adding timbre. A solo male voice begins singing the first A, B, and C sections monophonically, at which time other monophonic male voices join for the subsequent A, B, and C sections. The melodic contour is interesting, because most of the melody only moves stepwise. There are two specific places where the melody moves outside of the stepwise motion, both in the B and C sections, creating sudden dynamic interest, but the remainder of the contour varies through the delivery of syllables and breaths. Pitches include A, B, C, D, E, and G, though just as in the Crown Dance, one cannot assume that only these pitches are desired. The Peace Dance again uses pitch bends, partial pitches, and syllabic vocables.

7. Laura Redish and Orrin Lewis, "Kwakiutl Indian Fact Sheet," *Native Languages of the Americas*, last modified 2015, http://www.bigorin.org/kwakiutl_kids.htm.

8. William Wasden, Jr., "Kwakwaka'wakw Dances and Dancing: Traditional Dances," *Department of Canadian Heritage through Canadian Culture Online*, accessed July 10, 2016, http://www.native-dance.ca/index.php/Kwakwaka'wakw/Traditional_Dances.

The Southwest Tiwa tribe of New Mexico resides in Taos Pueblo, a community built between 1000 and 1450 A.D.⁹ Round Dances are used by many Native American tribes as social dances during celebratory events, such as weddings and feasts.¹⁰ The form is AAAAA, initially appearing simplistic, yet of the songs thus far analyzed, the Round Dance is by far the most complex. The song opens with a solo drum but unlike the repeated quarter beats of the other two songs, the Round Dance uses a consistent triplet feel, playing the first two notes and resting on the third. The contour is most like a traditional European melody, in that the melody begins low in pitch, moves to a high note climax, and then descends melodically to the end of the phrase. Intervals move well past stepwise and skipping motion, utilizing the distance of an octave and outlines an F# Major triad with an occasional G# present, as well. Instrumentation remains the same with a repeated hand drum present throughout, but instead of solo singing, a call and response technique is used with various voices providing the solo call and a unison vocal ensemble joining in. It appears that all text in this song is vocables, perhaps suggesting a level of Native American improvisation, which would be consistent with the oral tradition.¹¹

As exemplified, Native American music is far from simplistic, though it clearly allows for several commonalities including vocalizing, instrumentation, structure, pitch sets, and text.¹² In analysis of any music, one must remember to focus on its intended purpose and context to

9. Kathy Weiser-Alexander and Dave Alexander, “New Mexico Legends: The Taos Pueblo – 1,000 Years of History,” *Legends of America*, last modified 2016, <http://www.legendsofamerica.com/nm-taospueblo.html>.

10. Anna Hoefnagels, “Renewal & Adaptation: Cree Round Dances,” *Department of Canadian Heritage through Canadian Culture Online*, accessed July 10, 2016, http://www.native-dance.ca/index.php/Renewal/Round_Dances?tp=z.

11. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 389.

12. *Ibid.*, 398.

fully appreciate its beauty. The music must be examined without reference to “similarity with good qualities and difference with bad,” but instead appreciating the art and culture within.¹³

13. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 7.

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