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Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin), 1876-1938: (Re)discovering *The Sun Dance*

Zitkala-Sa (Yankton Sioux) was an extraordinary woman of "mixed blood," perhaps best known for her autobiographical stories and her retellings of Indian legends. She has been making her way into college classrooms across the country since the renaissance of Native American literature. Political and historical scholars know her as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin: activist, progressive, lobbyist, and feminist. The late anthropologist Omer Stewart referred to Bonnin as "one of the most powerful women who ever lived in the United States," crediting her as the major influence on anti-peyote legislation in fourteen states. Indeed, in her lifetime of sixty-two years, Zitkala-Sa wore many hats, including those of wife, mother and educator. Another major component to Zitkala-Sa's life, sometimes briefly mentioned but most often overlooked, is her music. Among other activities, she collaborated with composer William F. Hanson on an opera *The Sun Dance*. This essay will briefly introduce the musical life of Zitkala-Sa, concentrating on *The Sun Dance*, which premiered in Vernal, Utah, on the Uintah-Ouray Indian Reservation in 1913.

Gertrude Simmons was born on February 22, 1876, just four months before the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Her father was white, but other details of her parents' background are not entirely clear. "Gertie" was raised in the traditional Sioux manner with her mother, Ellen Simmons, on the Yankton Indian reservation in South Dakota. It is safe to assume that, as a child, she was familiar with the principal instruments of Native American music: the voice, the drum, and, for many tribes, the flute.

Quakers recruited Gertrude to boarding school (White's Manual Institute) in Wabash, Indiana, when she was eight years old (she later recalled being enticed by the offer of red apples, a richly symbolic memory the significance of which she did not underestimate). After three years she returned to her mother a stranger, having lost much of her native tongue. She remained in South Dakota for four years and then returned to Indiana to complete her diploma. Caught between two cultures as she came of age, Gertrude Simmons renamed herself Zitkala-Sa (Red Bird). Although her Midwestern education remained a source of tension, she returned home every summer. Entering Earlham College in the fall of 1895, Zitkala-Sa wrote poetry for *The Earlhamite* and excelled in oration, winning college and state contests the following year, but did not finish a degree.

It is not known exactly when or where Zitkala-Sa began her formal musical training, but in 1899 she entered the New England Conservatory of Music to study violin for a brief period. She then moved to teach and play at the Carlisle



Figure 1. This photograph of Zitkala-Sa first appeared in 1917 in the *American Indian Magazine* announcing her appointment as secretary to the Society of American Indians

(Pennsylvania) Indian Institute for eighteen months, and while there she agreed to appear as soloist with the Carlisle Indian Band. She became their most heralded musician, an accomplished violinist, whose abilities earned her much attention. In a review of a New York concert by the Carlisle Band, the New York Musical Courrier hailed her playing as "charmingly artistic and graceful." While on tour with the band in Europe, Zitkala-Sa "received outstanding reviews for her virtuosity."⁴ Announcing her solo performance at the Paris Exhibition in 1900, Outlook Magazine captioned her photograph, "Miss Zitkala-Sa, Yankton Sioux, gifted with musical genius."5 Another review of the period a young girl clearly reflects the savage/salvation paradigm held since the earliest days of European contact. "The fact of an Indian girl being able to play so marvelously well on so difficult an instrument is regarded as showing clearly the possibilities of not only lifting the Indian race completely out of the slough of despond. but elevating them to the same plane as that which the advanced man occupies."6 This comment, while typically reverberating with the inherent paternalism embedded in such assimilationist attitudes, suggests that her later interests in multicultural negotiation were strengthened by such an early demonstration of prowess.

Married in 1902 to Raymond T. Bonnin (an educated Yankton Sioux and Indian Service employee), Zitkala-Sa embarked on a new life as wife, mother and teacher at the Uintah-Ouray Reservation, where she remained until 1916. She also founded and directed the Uintah Academy Band. Never abandoning her love for making music, she occasionally travelled to Salt Lake City for piano lessons. While living in Utah she met William Hanson and collaborated with him in the creation of *The Sun Dance*.⁷

Born in 1887 in Vernal, Utah, Hanson was the son of Danish musicians. Having grown up with Indian children as playmates, he strongly desired to preserve traditional ceremonies and music. Hanson himself spent fifteen years gathering materials, with Zitkala-Sa assisting for the last eleven years. His notes from the revised 1938 score reveal: "Zitkala-Sa... worked tenaciously in helping the composer to assimilate and record the plot and helped acquire the sacred chants for transcribing." ⁸ His daughter later explained that Bonnin would play the Indian melodies and chants on her violin for Hanson to transcribe. ⁹ Edward Hipsher, reflecting his evidently extensive familiarity with her work, also commented on Zitkala-Sa's contribution to the opera: "In this collaboration it was she who furnished the missing links that made a story of the Sun Dance; she who revised Mr. Hanson's poems, phrase by phrase, so that they should truly interpret her people; she who criticized his music, whenever it departed from true Indian melody." ¹⁰

The Sun Dance (Wiwanyag Wachipi), a "Romantic Indian opera" in five acts, "based on Ute and Sioux Culture with Native Themes," weaves a love story with a mixed group of tribal legends, reflections on Indian values, and depictions of every day life set against the backdrop of the Ute Sun Dance. A



Figure 2. The opening page on the second microfilm reel of the William F. Hanson Papers, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, a preliminary title page.

background sketch of the Sun Dance religion suggests why Hanson and Zitkala-Sa found it so attractive as a subject. Essentially the Sun Dance is a giant prayer, invoking the sacred power (Wakan Tanka) with song. It is a group ceremony involving singers, dancers, musicians and spectators, as well as a complex mythology. Rooted in ancient beliefs, the social and religious ceremonies of the Sun Dance are dated by historians to around 1700 and associated with the Cheyenne. Its earlier purpose appears to have been to insure successful bison hunts and warfare. 11 To this day, the Sun Dance involves deep cleansing and self-sacrifice through sweat baths and fasting. Because it tests the limits of physical endurance and spiritual intensity, it has been referred to as "the most awe-inspiring of Native American rituals."12 The Lakota Sioux practiced an especially graphic and dramatic form of the Sun Dance which allowed the piercing of the skin and muscles of the chest of the most dedicated participants in one part of the ceremony, although the Ute (the tribe for which Hanson and Zitkala-Sa first presented their opera), late acquirers of the Sun Dance, apparently avoided this element.

Beginning in 1883 the Sun Dance and other "heathenish dances and ceremonies" were officially forbidden by a blanket Federal policy, even though not all tribes practiced the piercing rituals of the Lakota. Many groups simply took their ceremonies underground to avoid being jailed or denied rations for participating in the Sun Dance. Since the Utes did not practice "self-torture," their agents tended to be more tolerant towards technical breaches of the law. Despite official prohibition, Zitkala-Sa's access to both authentic Sioux and Ute ceremonies was undoubtedly ample.¹³

In 1933 Indians were finally extended the Constitutional right to religious freedom accorded to other American citizens, 14 but in the period from 1883 to 1933 when traditional Indian ceremonies were being suppressed by missionaries as well as the government, Zitkala-Sa, through the medium of opera, sought to open a door to Native American culture in a distinctly pan-Indianist way. As with her literature and her political work, her collaboration on The Sun Dance reaffirms her role as cultural bridge. This opera is more than the story of familiar lovers, villains and heroes. It debunks stereotypical images of "heathen stoics," "noble savages," and "wild Injuns" preserved in thousands of popular songs and adventure stories, solidified at the end of the nineteenth century by the campaign to "civilize the Indian," and substitutes traditional tales and songs from several tribal sources. Hipsher had this to say in 1924: "the opera does not depict the Indian in the dime novel fashion familiar on the stage and screen. It portrayal of the real Indian-a conscientious attempt to delineate the manners, customs, dress, religious ideals, superstitions, songs, games, ceremonials—in short, the life of a people too little understood."15

At the same time, however, the story of the Sun Dance, as told by Hanson and Zitkala-Sa, reflects several elements adapted from or parallel to German Romantic opera: the plot incorporates legends, supernatural beings and events; the mysterious and spiritual elements of Nature are magnified; and Indian

melodies are employed in a fashion that does not differ markedly different from the characteristic treatment given to folk-like melodies of the early nineteenth-century, embodying a self-conscious simplicity of line, accompaniment and form. Like the famous "Wolf's Glen" scene from Weber's *Der Freischuetz* (and countless melodramas), the music occasionally stops for spoken sentences. Dialogues, often accompanied by choral Indian chants, tell the story of the Sun Dance ceremony and interpret it for the audience. These elements, besides the combination of Western instrumentation with traditional Indian drums and flutes, exemplify the complex cross-cultural phenomenon taking place within this opera.

As the curtain rises on *The Sun Dance* we meet the major characters. Act One takes place on the banks of a river. Sweet Singer, a Shoshone brave, enters during the overture. His song tells us that he is leaving his land in disgrace for Sioux country because he has been lured by a Sioux maid. The mixed chorus and orchestra complement Sweet Singer's tenor voice. In Scene One we meet the other two members of a romantic triad: Winona, the chieftain's daughter, and Ohiya, her suitor/hero. Winona's soprano solo, "He Smiled At Me," is followed by a duet in which the young lovers profess their devotion to each another. Ohiya's solo, "The Vow," is based on two Sioux love songs, and the score calls for Winona to "ad lib," the first of several such directives in the score. Among the most intriguing and vague of Hanson's indications, these "ad lib"s appear to refer to the addition of either text or music (and not merely a freer tempo, as the term normally suggests in a musical score). It would seem that the creators were trying to make space for the inclusion of authentic elements, even spoken passages in Indian languages, providing the widest latitude for the use of appropriate materials from the tribal groups which made up the audience (originally Utes) and performers. Zitkala-Sa herself drew from Ute, Sioux, Shoshone and Iroquois sources.

Scene Two begins with Ohiya's mother pleading with him to finish his love-flute and "break not our love traditions." The hopeful future mother-in-law (who is not named) is waiting to give gifts. The scene then shifts to "dreamland/night," in "retrospect." Ohiya's mother at an earlier time, her hair shorn to signify widowhood, sits by the smouldering fire, talking (in her "native" language) to her baby and to her star—her departed husband. "To A Star," the lullaby that she sings with piano, flute and women's chorus, is noted by Hanson on the score as "an old Indian Love-chant as told by Mrs. R.T. Bonnin - Zitkala-Sa—Sioux" (Example 1). Scene Three begins with dialogue between Ohiya's mother, a comic female named Blue Necklace, and the gossips. They share several rumors that parse the personalities and motives of the two male leads, Sweet Singer and Ohiya. The last scene of Act One brings comic relief with the character Hebo. Sweet Singer unsuccessfully attempts to teach Hebo the Sun Dance songs with his tom-tom, and Hebo's tells "ad lib" a story about his bad luck.

Act Two shifts to the Sun Dance grounds and the circle camp in the meadow. An introduction for offstage chorus and orchestra in unison lead to the



Example 1. The Sun Dance, Act One, "To a Star," beginning Scene Two.

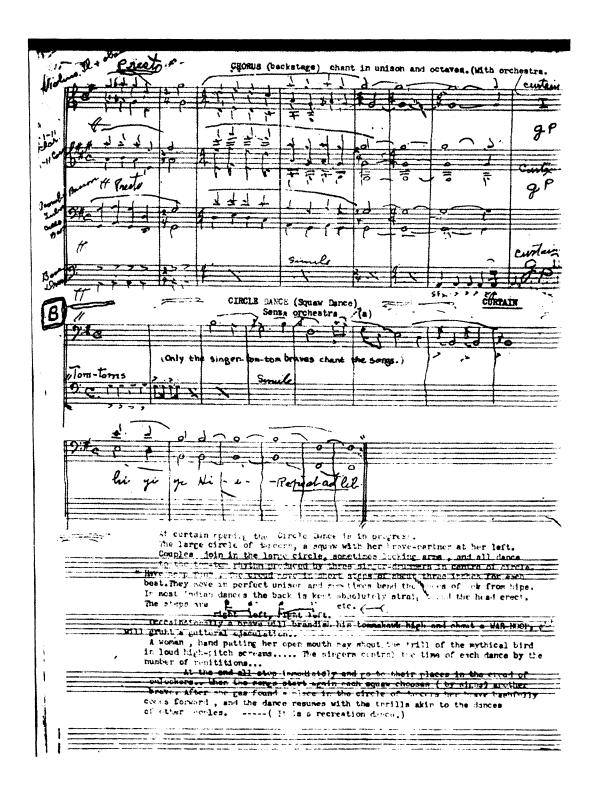
four scenes in this act which contain several preparatory elements universal to Sun Dance ceremonies (Example 2). For example, in the Circle Dance (sometimes known as the Squaw Dance or Round Dance) three Indian singers surround the drum in a singing and dancing ensemble. Next comes the sham battle, complete with horses and pageantry. Personified "tall trees" are captured for the Sun Dance arena. The parade, in which the prayer pole is carried, is led by Ohiya and the chorus. Once the center pole is in place the chieftain sings his magnificent bass solo, "Tall Trees," the major song of Act Two (Example 3). A genuine Sun Dance chant for the braves accompanied only by drum is also included in this number. The dedication of these ritual objects, the trees, is followed by the Victory or War Dance (Ute Turkey Dance), performed by experienced warriors, and also includes the women's chant from the Sioux Scalp Dance. Many war cries, whoops and trills are sung to the accompaniment of bass drum and tom-toms. The second act is entirely ceremonial in character and therefore serves as a sharp contrast to the love story of the surrounding acts. 16

Act Three takes us back to the young lovers, singing back and forth, as Ohiya with his flute serenades Winona outside her moonlit teepee. Winona's spoken monologue draws together a variety of different tribal legends as she explains the mythology of the "fairies of the night" (fireflies), the witches of pipestone quarry, and the elfin arrowhead makers. After her solo, "The Magic of the Night," the chorus joins in on "To the Witches of the Night."

Act Four takes place inside the Sun Dance arena. We meet the Shoshone maid spurned by Sweet Singer (who is still pressing his suit for Winona by sending gifts to the chief, her father). The chief and Winona enter as the maid hides. In the chief's aria, "Great Eagle," he prays for wisdom to choose the ablest man for his daughter to wed. It includes a Medicine chant, tom-toms, and eagle-bone whistles all played, once again, "ad lib." Sweet Singer then encounters Winona and mocks her for picking sweet herbs for her lover, who Sweet Singer predicts will fail in the Sun Dance. Sweet Singer's aria underlines his cruel boast that Ohiya shall know disgrace. A duet between Sweet Singer and the Shoshone maid follows. After being rejected again, the maid calls to the witches of pipestone quarry to wreak vengeance on Sweet Singer.

Act Four ends the next morning with the "Sun Call" by the Medicine Man. The "Great Spirit Hear Prayer" is comprised of Ute and Sioux Sun Dance motifs (Example 4). Soprano, tenor and bass voices and drums accompany the Medicine Man in a firm but simple manner with harmonies restricted to the simplest unisons, fifths and thirds. The orchestra and chorus then perform the "Sunset March." Ohiya and Winona sing against Sweet Singer.

With all the preparatory ceremonials (in Act Two) complete, the Sun Dance proper begins in Act Five. The continuous playing of eagle-bone whistles imitates the sound of hundreds of birds. The stage is set appropriately with the center prayer pole and booths surrounding the arena. Here, while men chant and women trill to the accompaniment of drums, the score is marked "molto religioso." Dancers fall and are carried to their booths. Female attendants soothe their



Example 2. The Sun Dance, Act Two, Introduction and Circle Dance, with detailed dance instructions and the musical cue "repeat ad lib."



Example 3. The Sun Dance, Act Two, Chieftain's aria, beginning.



Example 4. The Sun Dance, Act Four, "Great Spirit Hear Prayer," beginning.

dancers with sweet herbs during rest periods. 18

While Ohiya struggles on through his exhausting dance, the curtain closes and reopens with a finale. Ohiya is taken to his booth to rest as Winona approaches the center pole for her aria, "My Love On Burning Sands Asleep." Finally Ohiya puts forth a final effort and succeeds in completing his trial as he backs away from the center prayer-pole. The Chieftain gives an "ad lib" speech in his native [Sioux] language. The orchestra reprises the overture and accompanies the concluding song, "He Won Winona," sung by the full chorus.

The opera premiered February 13, 1913 in Orpheus Hall, Vernal, Utah, for three performances utilizing local talent. 19 In the following year at Brigham Young University, eleven performances with skilled soloists, a sixty piece orchestra, and a chorus of one-hundred Native singers and dancers were given. Then the opera lay forgotten for over two decades. Within five years Zitkala-Sa had moved to Washington, D.C., and her editorial writing and political work soon overwhelmed all other concerns. She became active in the Society for American Indians (1916-1920) and served as founder/president of the National Council of American Indians (1926-1936); Hanson also went on to other projects. In 1938, the New York Light Opera Guild, apparently through a renewed lobbying effort among old musical friends of Zitkala-Sa, selected *The Sun Dance* as "Opera of the Year," and it was performed at New York City's Broadway Theatre in late January, just days after Zitkala-Sa's death. Indians from many American tribes volunteered to participate. The male solo dancers reportedly were "thrilling showmen." The chieftain was played by Yolache, a famous Yakima baritone. One hundred and fifty members of the New York Society of American Indians attended in full Indian regalia.

Director John Hand's words about this opera in 1938 are still compelling today. "The Sun Dance is without question one of the finest works dealing with the American Indian ever to be presented on the operatic stage . . It [is] one of the most striking educational sources in existence, and will retain for future generations authentic Indian melodies, musical forms and effects existent no other place in our history."²⁰ But while Hand's praise is impressive and optimistic, the ultimate fate of the opera is unsure. While Zitkala-Sa's role in this musical and cultural landmark speaks to her passion for music and her dedication to Native traditions, her work is also problematical. By placing sacred ceremonies on display in an opera, she and Hanson were attempting to open a genre where the possibilities for misunderstanding were, and still are, rife. Although filled with apparently faithful borrowings from Native tribal cultures, with melodies accompanied in a rather straightforward tonal idiom, even this modest filtering through a white cultural prism might be greeted warily nowadays. Furthermore recent perspectives from Native writers make it clear that the issue encompasses more than mere ownership or the expropriation of sacred materials. Spiritual power inherent in sacred songs and ceremonies can produce harmful effects when formats are tampered with.²¹ A new mounting of the work would demand a significant degree of cross-cultural negotiation and understanding that cannot

be derived from the score alone. Whether *The Sun Dance* ever achieves recognition and performance such as to certify it as a definitive work embraced by new generations of Native Americans remains to be seen.

NOTES

- 1. The beginning of this literary renaissance is attributed to N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1968). In addition to being anthologized, Zitkala-Sa's *Old Indian Legends* (Boston: Ginn, 1901) and *American Indian Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Hayworth, 1921) are both available in reprints from the University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln), 1985.
- 2. Omer C. Stewart, "Gertrude Simmons Bonnin," *University of South Dakota Bulletin* 87 (May, 1981): 10-11.
- 3. Dexter Fisher, foreword to *American Indian Stories*, by Zitkala-Sa (Washington D.C.: 1921; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1985), vii.
- 4. David L. Johnson and Raymond Wilson, "Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, 1876-1938: 'Americanize the First American,'" *American Indian Quarterly* 12 (Winter 1988): 28-29.
 - 5. Stewart, "Gertrude Simmons Bonnin," 11.
- 6. Peter Iverson, Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 28-29. For further discussion of the attempts to "civilize" and so "save" Indians, see Robert Berkhofer, Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missionaries and American Indian Responses, 1787-1862 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965) and The White Man's Indian (New York: Knopf, 1978).
- 7. The most accurate biographical information on Zitkala-Sa can be found in Dexter Fisher's foreword to *American Indian Stories* by Zitkala-Sa, and Mary E. Young. "Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons," in *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, Edward James and Janet Wilson James, eds., (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1971): 198-200.
- 8. William F. Hanson Papers, MSS 299, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
 - 9. Ibid.
- 10. Edward Hipsher, *American Opera and Its Composers* (Philadelphia, 1927; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 246.
- 11. Joseph G. Jorgenson, The Sun Dance Religion: Power for the Powerless (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972): 17-18. See also Royal Hassrick, The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964); Gordon Mac Gregor, Warriors Without Weapons, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); and Ruth Underhill, Red Man's Religion: Beliefs and Practices of the Indians North of Mexico (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
- 12. Mary Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 252.
- 13. Omer Stewart, *Peyote Religion: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 129-30.
 - 14. Ruth Muskrat Bronson, Indians Are People, Too (New York: Friendship Press, 1944), 31.
 - 15. Hipsher, American Opera and Its Composers, 247
- 16. For further discussion of the particular dances within the Sun Dance ceremony, see Reginald and Judith Laubin, *Indian Dances of North America: Their Importance to Indian Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1977); Judith Vander, *Songprints: The Musical Experience of Five Shoshone Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988)
- 17. The smallest of the Indian flutes were made from eagle wing bones, often decorated with eagle down and worn suspended from the neck. No two played exactly the same note. The constant blowing matches the intensity of the prayers within the Sun Dance ceremony. Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 146; Laubin, *Dances*, 279, 285.

- 18. Hassrick writes, "After each intermission the dance would become more intense. Assistants wiping . . . perspiration with wisps of sage . . . perhaps a lover might surreptitiously give her dancer a bit of water" (*The Sioux*, 245).
- 19. Notes preserved in the Williams Hanson papers made by Hanson's daughter, Neva Hanson Greiner, indicate that Old Sioux, a one-hundred-year-old survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn was among the original cast of dancers in 1913.
 - 20. William Hanson papers.
 - 21. Barre Toelken, "Fieldwork Enlightenment," Parahola 20 (Summer 1995): 29-38.