

Reviews

Writing American Indian Music, Historic Transcriptions, Notations, and Arrangements, ed. Victoria Lindsay Levine. *Recent Researches in American Music*, 44 / *Music of the United States of America*, 11. Middleton, Wisc: A-R Editions, 2002. xxxviii, 304 pp.

The subject of American Indian musical transcription and notation has never been inaccessible, but now, thankfully, Victoria Lindsay Levine's volume of "historic transcriptions, notations, and arrangements" brings together a strong representative sampling, together with her observations about their place in music history and ethnomusicology. It becomes clear how much those of us who study and teach North American Indian music have been missing in the absence of a book like this one. It provides multi-dimensional views of the ways in which academics (among them a few Native scholars) have approached the study of Native American music.

Delightfully user-friendly, this book does not distract the reader with the copious detail that one might expect from such an academic project. Dr. Levine distills her introductory essay, "Reading American Indian Music as Social History," into thirty-eight pages. She then presents 116 graphic examples, nearly all displayed within a light-gray box as facsimiles of their sources, and ten full-page plates. The examples include "the first Spanish transcription of Native American music north of Mexico," within the body of a letter, by Fray [Friar] Felipe Arroyo de la Cuesta (p. 18). Also of note is a full-page photograph of the Cayuga Condolence walking stick of Andrew Spragg, which is inscribed with the names of Iroquois Chiefs together with lines of poetry and other markings. (It served, in effect, as an elaborate mnemonic device for a ritual leader.) A decoding of its markings constitutes Example 77 (p. 159). The introductory essay refers the reader to the examples, which are paired with additional explanatory information in the main text and that tend to increase in breadth as the items in question move forward in time. The explanatory, critical, and editorial notes for each example are consistent in format. Each entry includes: "Title," sometimes derived by the editor; "Description" of group, place, genre, and performance context; "Date" of transcription and publication; "Bibliographic source;" "Type" of transcription, notation, or arrangement; "Process," i.e., whether transcribed from a live or recorded performance and name of transcriber; "Biographical information" regarding the author(s) of the transcription and occasionally of the singer; "Reason for selection," noting the significance of the item in question; "Comments," which often quote

the original source and further contextualize the piece; and finally “Critical notes,” prose descriptions of the graphic representations.

The introductory essay serves as a guide to the selected examples. Levine imparts provocative information:

Between 1880 and 1930, a unique confluence of artistic, social, educational, and academic concerns led to a florescence in writing American Indian music. Composers, educators, and scholars who are themselves American Indians also became active as writers of native music during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. xix).

She describes the introduction as a sketch of “the broad socio-historical trends that motivated writers of American Indian music and their diverse approaches to representation” (p. xx). For those who are not music specialists, Levine defines the terms notation, transcription, and arrangement. Furthermore she submits each as an approach to representing music with its own kind of historical evidence. She notes, for instance, that American Indian notational systems both preserve the shape and content of specific repertoires and offer historical insight into native musical thought (p. xx).

Indeed, one side of the only color insert in the book (the verso of one glossy page between pages 176 and 177) is entitled *Meda Songs*. Some explanation of the pictorial system can be found in the comments supplied for Example 78, a black and white duplicate (p. 162). The facsimile appears to have been drawn from the original by Capt. S. Eastman of the U.S. Army (whose signature appears at the lower left side of the page), probably at the request of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who first collected it around 1820 (p. 162). We learn from the critical notes that “the original tablet [presumably the original facsimile] was run through a rolling press by Peter Maveric in 1825 to produce this image” (p. 163). We learn more about Schoolcraft through a cross-reference back to note 16, which tells us that he was an ethnologist, explorer, geologist, and Indian agent in Michigan Territory, married to a mixed-blood Ojibwa. He later became a founding member of the American Ethnological Society (p. 24). From the introductory essay, we learn that Schoolcraft was the first to include a musical transcription in an ethnological study of Native Americans, in 1855. These bits of information, together with other notes, enable the reader to glimpse many different sides of the historical picture.

The materials are organized by topics and presented in four parts: Explorations of American Indian Music (Examples 1-75), Native Notations and Transcriptions (Examples 76-95), Popular Arrangements (Examples 96-108), and Composer Arrangements (Examples 109-16). Critical commentary and the social-historical contextualization are encapsulated in the introductory essay. In Levine’s discussion of the first section of the book, the reader moves through the earliest transcriptions of the seventeenth to early twentieth century. Levine again reaches provocative conclusions:

French authors of the era represented Indians as primitive, heathen, and inferior to Europeans—a perspective that helped them garner support for missionary and commercial ventures. To support this representation, seventeenth-century French transcriptions depicted native songs as short and unsophisticated in melody and rhythm, and lacking any longer formal structure, instrumental accompaniment, variation in vocal texture, or other complication or refinement of musical style (pp. xxi-xxii).

The author mentions the important contributions of Franz Boas and his contemporaries (Jesse Walter Fewkes, Edward Sapir, George Herzog, Helen Heffron Roberts, among others) in turning the persistent tide of evolutionist thinking. Levine, likewise, notes the system of transcription developed by German scholar Otto Abraham and the Austrian Erich von Hornbostel (1909), which sought to avoid Eurocentricity in the notation of non-Western musics. She traces the gradually emerging boundaries between scholars and composers over time, observing change in the scholarly realm:

Since the 1950s, the importance of transcription as a means of primary documentation has gradually diminished, as the sound quality of recordings has improved and playback equipment has become widely available. Recordings have become the primary document of Native American music in academic research, while transcriptions now serve primarily as analytical tools (p. xxvi).

Levine's introductory discussion of Native notations and transcriptions is extremely engaging, as is the following one on collaborative studies between a Euramerican and a Native American scholar. It is interesting to note, however, that while the introductory essay attributes the transcription design of Example 88 to both individuals, there is no explanation of why only the white scholar was credited in the published transcription duplicated in this volume. Presumably this occurred because she was the person who transcribed the discrete pitches and rhythms, but in the context of the introductory discussion this reader is left wondering.

The discussion of Popular Arrangements takes us through American Indian songs adapted for use by educational and other institutions and hobbyists, as well as work by American Indian composers and music educators since the 1970s. Levine summarizes the history of popular representation of native music, addressing children's classroom editions in part. She describes two kinds of hobbyists: "non-Indians who are interested in all aspects of American Indian life, but especially in music, dance, and handicrafts" (p. xxxii), and "adults rather than children [who participated] in the music clubs and Indian music lecture-performances that were important social venues for members of the American middle class before the Second World War" (p. xxxiii). Of course the Boy Scouts enter this

discussion. Provoking us yet again, Levine submits about this problematic phase that:

the inference that Euramericans are responsible for the preservation of native music and dance through performance erodes American Indian self-determination. But the major problem with popularizations of American Indian music is that members of the general public have tended to accept them as authentic, rather than as Euramerican representations of native music, created and marketed for general consumption" (p. xxxiv).

The volume takes us at the last to examples of Euramerican art music based on Native American melodies and to works by American Indian composers themselves. Beginning with a reference to pieces whose titles evoke Indian peoples but do not quote Indian melodies, we move through cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth century and Edward MacDowell to John Philip Sousa's transcription of Ghost Dance songs for the ethnologist James Mooney. The journey continues until we end with the names of Native composers, including the prominent Louis Ballard (Quapaw-Cherokee) and Brent Michael Davids (Mohican of the Munsee group). The entire score of Davids's *Mtukwekok Naxkoma* (*The Singing Woods*) is reproduced as Example 116, pp. 272-84. The time-honored Native emphasis on timbre is present in this piece, as we learn from the comments (p. 273). "The score calls for extended instrumental techniques and microtones that are carefully selected to contribute specific coloristic dimensions to *Mtukwekok Naxkoma*." The first movement, named after the autumn wind, uses the edges of leaf shapes for the staff notation, which necessarily follows the contour of the leaf it is on. Different dimensions of space play into the visual score, tiny hot-air balloons alerting us to the sky realm of this or that musical sound (p. 272). This score rivals the opening scores of the other movements, although the graphic depiction of the third movement's spring rain is particularly evocative of the forces of thunder and lightning (p. 278).

Writing American Indian Music will no doubt bring fresh insights every time we sit down to review its contents. This volume is a must for all Americanists and a model for similar studies in other cultures. It offers an exciting new collection for use in university classes on American Indian music, and it constitutes a collection that speaks equally to the curious casual reader and the scholarly musician, ethnologist, or ethnomusicologist who seeks an understanding of the processes of cultural interaction, and in particular, of indigenous/European musical interaction. Levine is to be commended for a job well done.

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