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by Frances Densmore (1867-1957)

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Citation

[Densmore 1915a] Frances Densmore (1867-1957). "The Study of Indian Music", *The Musical Quarterly*, Volume 1, Number 2, April 1915, pages 187-197. JSTOR ID 737845. Archive.org ID [jstor-737845](https://archive.org/details/jstor-737845).



THE STUDY OF INDIAN MUSIC

By FRANCES DENSMORE

TO study Indian music is to study a crude, though cultivated art. It is pleasant to think of an Indian lover trilling in the dawn an improvised song to his beloved, or an Indian hunter singing beside his campfire, but neither picture represents the custom of the Indian tribes whose music I have studied. Indian song, in my observation, is far from being a spontaneous outburst of melody. On the contrary there is around it the dignity and control which pervade the whole life of the race. Many years ago I knew a Chippewa guide in the forests that lie to the north of Lake Superior. Indian music was somewhat new to me at the time and I said "What songs do you sing when you hunt?" A quizzical look was in his eyes as he waited a moment and then replied "When we hunt we don't sing, we keep very still and watch, then we *shoot*."

Among the Chippewa, Sioux and northern Utes there still are Indians who say that they "receive songs in dreams." Probably this custom obtains in tribes of which I have not a personal knowledge, but I have phonographically recorded "dream songs" among these peoples. The song is considered a gift from the bird or animal which appears to the dreamer and which is thereafter considered his supernatural aid. Thus a certain Sioux dreamed of the thunderbirds who assumed human form, talked with him, assured him that they would always answer his summons, and also taught him a song. Another Sioux dreamed of a lodge filled with elk who were singing. He learned their song, and sang it when he wished to secure their supernatural aid. Among the Chippewa it was the custom for medicine men to build "nests" in the trees, where they waited, fasting, until they secured a dream and its song. A man was very proud of a song received in this manner. The words were often in a "sacred language," which consisted of common words used with an occult significance. A medicine man always sang his principal dream song and related the dream before he began to treat a sick person, these being in the nature of credentials. A successful medicine man had many such songs, and if he sold the formula of herbs for preparing certain remedies he sold also the songs which made the remedies

effective. On the Dakota prairie I recorded songs from two old medicine men who sold me dried roots of herbs, together with fresh specimens of the plants for identification, and the songs which were used with each herb. For instance, a certain herb was used in the treatment of fractures, and when it was applied a certain song was sung, the words meaning, "Friend, now come, behold all these, a bear told me this; friend come." The medicine was received in a dream of the bear, and Indian musicians are careful to give credit to whom credit is due.

Among the Sioux I heard many "chief's songs," and I asked "Do the chiefs *sing* these songs?" The reply was "These are praise songs. A chief would not sing them. The chief sits still while the others sing his praises." An ordinary man, however, might sing a song which embodied the story of his valor; indeed there were occasions on which he was expected to do this, as an evidence of his right to some honor which was being conferred upon him. There were various uses for praise songs in the old days, and a man might weary of hearing his praises sung by his friends. Thus if food were needed at the council tent, or for some tribal gathering, it could always be secured by singing the praise songs. A party of men and women would make the circle of the camp. Pausing before the tent of a successful warrior they sang of his victories, often inserting his name in an old song. Who could fail to respond to such an appeal, bringing out venison or the choicest buffalo meat?

The songs of military societies are in themselves a wide field of study. Among the Sioux there were the White Horse Troop, the Strong Heart Society, the Wolf Society, and many others, each having its own songs, separate and distinct, which were sung at its meetings, as well as at the social gatherings of the tribe. Even more numerous than these are the songs of native religions. I have been reliably informed that the 107 songs of the Chippewa Grand Medicine Society which I recorded, are only a small part of the songs of that organization. A majority of the original songs are probably lost in the sleep of the singers, for the Grand Medicine is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

The Indians *sing* as they play their games. It is said that in the old days all the Chippewa songs of the moccasin game were "dream songs"; that gambling was a gift from the "manido" (spirits), who also gave songs to ensure success; but this original attitude of the Chippewa toward the game has disappeared except in remote places, and the moccasin game songs of the present day are usually modern melodies. As great a change has come

in the love songs. Among the Sioux it is said that the old type of love song always concerned a man's qualification to wed, this qualification depending on his success in war. I have succeeded in securing some of these old love songs, but among those recorded there is none which contains a direct avowal of affection. From my observation among the tribes mentioned, as well as among the Mandan and Hidatsa, the *outspoken* form of love song is the more modern. An Indian trusts much to silence. It is the white man who thinks he must put his thoughts into words. Love songs abound today on every Indian reservation and are constantly being composed by the young men. Thirty Chippewa love songs were recorded and only one was inspired by happiness. All these songs were comparatively modern. Too frequently the words contained the information that the singer intended to drown disappointment in liquor. On moonlight nights one hears wailing songs of this kind issuing from the barred windows of the agency guard-house. Let us hope that future students of Indian music will pass them by. Weird they are, and melodious they may be, but representative of true Indian character they assuredly are not.

Three classes of material are available for study at the present time, and the lines of demarcation between these classes of songs should be clearly kept in mind by the student. First, there still remain some of the old songs, sung by the old singers. These are, of course, the most interesting and valuable of any songs. Second, there are old ceremonial and medicine songs belonging to men now dead, but which can be sung, and sung with reasonable correctness, by men who heard them given by their owners. These are less valuable than the first but are well worth preserving if the singer is known to be conscientious. Third, there are comparatively modern songs, which represent a transitional culture. If differentiated from the really old songs, these are not devoid of interest, though it is scarcely worth while to collect a great many of them. My own work has been chiefly with the first class of material, though songs of the others have also been secured. During the past seven and a half years I have been collecting and analyzing Indian songs under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, about 900 songs having been phonographically recorded in the course of the work.

To those at all familiar with Indian usage it is needless to say that important ceremonial songs are never sung by men who have not the ceremonial right to sing them. In the old days a man who was being fitted for some ceremonial position would be taught these songs by the man who was preparing him for his office,

and he would pay liberally for the instruction and the songs. I have met with much opposition in securing such songs as these, some of the old men insisting that it were better to let the songs die than to sing them for any fee less than the value of a horse, which was their value in the old days. Fortunately there have been others willing to sing them for a reasonable fee, in order that they might be preserved.

The rehearsal of an Indian song by a chorus around the drum is interesting to hear. The song is as carefully repeated as by white singers, and those uncertain of the melody sing softly until they are sure of the progressions. I recall one gathering which I was asked to attend. The singers were to rehearse a certain song in my honor which they intended to sing at the approaching Fourth of July celebration. The song had been recently composed by several men, collaborating in the work. It was a happy group, on the wide Dakota prairie. For miles and miles there was no white person except myself. I had not mastered the Sioux language, but courtesy readily makes itself understood and my trusted interpreter was with me to translate all conversation. Fur robes were spread for me to sit upon, and every one came to shake hands with me, even tiny babies having a dark little hand held out by their mothers. A beef had been killed, part of it simmering in the kettles and part drying in the sun, being cut in thin strips and hung over poles. The feast was not lacking in abundance or repartee, and no one was offended that I had brought my own lunch, supplementing it with a cup of their coffee, for the sake of sociability. As the sunset sky grew rosy in the west the singers returned to their task around the drum, singing right heartily that I had "been kind to the poor and needy." Over and over the song rose and fell in its minor cadences. The full light of the moon rested on the little camp as I drove away to the Government School, which is my home when on a reservation. Afar through the summer night I heard the throb of the drum, and I knew how the camp fires flickered and the horses dozed beside the wagons.

Do you doubt that the Indians *love* their music? There are among them men who are recognized as good singers and who are invited to "sit at the drum" at all tribal gatherings; there are also indifferent singers, and men who correspond to those of the white race who only know Old Hundred and cannot be sure of *that* tune. In the early days of my work I recorded two or three songs from a man who said he was one of the best singers in the tribe. When I examined the songs I found in them no sense of a keynote. The

melodies rambled about in a way to suggest marvelous complications of key and scale. What theories of Indian musical culture I might have evolved, with those songs as evidence—for they certainly were recorded by a typical “old timer,” if one judged by appearances! But the mass of material, gathered on many reservations, contradicts the songs by this singer who, I found, had no recommendation except his own. Later another singer recorded the same songs, and behold—a keynote appeared! The melody crystallized along definite lines, and the progressions became those of an ordinary major key. I would not be understood as saying that *all* Indian songs correspond to the scales and keys of the white man’s music. Some of those which I have analyzed show only a slight feeling for what we call a keynote, but the singer can repeat the melody any number of times with no appreciable variation, and it “makes sense.” One learns by experience to distinguish between poor *singing*, and a song which is full of native irregularities. Concerning a feeling for a tonic, or keynote, it may be of interest to state that, in a series of 340 Chippewa songs which have been fully analyzed, it was found that 67 per cent ended on a tone which, by the test of the ear, was a satisfactory keynote.

There are many mannerisms among Indian singers, and it is important that they be not regarded as essentials. Among these are the exaggerated tremolo, and a certain attack by beginning a tone sharp and immediately sliding downward to the sustained tone. From extended observation of the songs of native religions and of medicine it appears that a vibrato was always used in these songs. There is also a tremolo or vibrato which is cultivated by young men and is commonly used by singers around the drum. In phonographic recording it is difficult for some Indians to steady the voice enough to make a record which can be transcribed. An Indian once said to me, “No white person can sing exactly like the Indians, for he has not an Indian *throat*.” It is difficult to describe the vocal method of the Indians, except to say that tones are separated by a contraction of the glottis, so that, without the use of either words or syllables, an Indian can give short note-values corresponding to eighth or sixteenth notes with perfect distinctness. These do not vary in repetitions of the song.

Field observation and the phonographic recording of songs are the first steps in the study of Indian music. The collection of songs is followed by their transcription and analysis. There are two methods of transcribing Indian songs so that the melodies can be presented to the eye and made available for practical use.

One of these methods concerns minute variations of pitch and may be compared to a perfectly focused photograph which shows even the smallest lines in the object before the camera. With the apparatus available at the present time the scope of this work is limited. Variations of tone in Indian singing are so constant and so very minute that to trace them in any large amount of material is a stupendous task. The other method, which is the one I use, may be compared to a painting, in which outline and mass take precedence over detail. Thus if we were to study the oak we might photograph single leaves, or we might paint the tree, giving its outline and environment. A thorough study would include a knowledge of the leaves and their variations of form, but we would be careful to keep our grasp of the subject of oak-trees as a whole. This simile, like any other, can be pushed too far, but it may serve to illustrate the difference between two recognized methods of studying all exotic music, the first being purely mechanical, the second depending primarily on a test by the ear.

In my work I transcribe Indian songs in ordinary musical notation, with a few additional signs to designate peculiarities which appear with such persistence as to be rightly considered part of the melody. I find the octave sung with a very fair degree of correctness, also the fifth and third. Intermediate intervals may vary, but when the song reaches these points the boundary seems, in some strange way, to have been kept, and the interval is sung with surprising accuracy. As a justification of the use of the common staff with its lines and spaces, it should be borne in mind that our present musical system is not a cunning invention. It has been a gradual evolution through centuries of experiment. There must be something human back of it. Our ancestors once lived in tents and hunted animals for their food, as the Indians did in the years before we gave them the trader's store. It is well that we note any comparisons which may exist between the music of Indians and our own established musical system, especially when the work is done among Indians influenced as little as possible by the music of the white race. Another reason for the use of ordinary notation is that, although not showing exact pitch, it is the only method by which Indian songs can conveniently be presented to the musical world. They have so many peculiarities of rhythm that it seems asking too much of musicians to expect them to master a strange, cabalistic system of signs, before the music can become intelligible.

As we are to consider the outline, or form, of Indian melodies let us borrow a figure from the graphic arts. Let us suppose that

a student of decorative art had never seen the wild flowers in the field, being familiar only with their conventional outlines. Then let us imagine that in some strange way he found himself in the world of the growing flowers, a world filled with forms half familiar and half bewildering. This, in a sense, is the experience of a trained musician who undertakes the study of Indian music. We scarcely realize the artificial standards of our music until we see the freedom of Indian music. For instance, we have a tradition that the accompaniment of a song shall be neither faster nor slower than the song itself, but the Indian regards no such arbitrary rule. The tempo of the drum is different from that of the voice in 64 per cent. of a group of 220 Chippewa songs, though each record was made by a man who himself beat the drum as he sang. The drum was usually a little faster than the voice, and even if the metronome time of the two was the same the drum slightly preceded the voice. We have also a custom that a song shall be in uniform time. Not so the Indian. If the first measure is in triple time, the second may be in double time; or, if the original unit of measurement corresponds to a quarter note, he may introduce a few measures in five-eighth time, singing them so uniformly in every rendition of the song that there remains no doubt of his intention. This change of measure-lengths occurs in more than 75 per cent. of a group of 300 Chippewa songs. These are some of the differences from our standards which first impressed me in observing Indian music.

But let us return to the wild flowers. Suppose we wish to make a study of the field lily. Suppose it has interested us in our study of decorative art and we wish to learn all we can about it in its natural environment, with a view to comparing the natural with the conventionalized forms. As we go into the field and see the differences from the conventional lily we may be tempted to say that field lilies are haphazard in shape, but if we measure a great many field lilies and compare the outlines we will find that the lines which are common to *all* are very much like the lines of the conventional lily. This is because the outline of the conventional lily was developed from that of the natural lily. So in the study of Indian music we notice first the points of difference from that to which we are accustomed, and, as our study progresses and becomes intensive, we find unexpected points of resemblance. Many years ago there was a general belief that Indian music is haphazard in form. At that time it seemed absurd for any one to maintain that the Indians had definite melodies which they could repeat at will. To Miss Alice C. Fletcher belongs the fadeless honor of having demonstrated the fact of Indian song. The misapprehension and

questionings with which she had to contend are things of the past, but we who study Indian music today are following the trail which she blazed, in hardship and difficulties.

Let us keep a little longer our figure of the lily. As one might draw the outlines of many field lilies, lay these drawings one upon another, and let the light shine through the tracings in order to observe the common outlines, so I have transcribed Indian songs and, as it were, let the light shine through the transcriptions, to observe the common forms. One of the points by which we would judge the lily would be its height, which may be compared to the range of a song. In my observation of more than eight hundred phonograph records of Indian songs I find that, with few exceptions, they have a keynote satisfactory to the ear, and that, in a majority of instances, it is sung as the final and also the lowest tone of the song. I find that, in a group of 340 Chippewa songs, 15 per cent. begin on the octave and 33 per cent. on the twelfth above the keynote. It at once occurs to us that the octave and twelfth are the first and second overtones of a fundamental and we see a resemblance to our own musical system. In music, as in art, the natural shows us the origin of the conventional or artificial form.

Perhaps we wonder *why* the Chippewa framed so many of his melodies in these intervals. Did he hear the overtones of some mighty diapason in the forest and beside the lakes of his early home? This is a pleasant fancy. But if it is true, how shall we explain the fact that the music of the Sioux shows the same characteristics? The Sioux lived on the open prairie where there were only a few trees along occasional streams. The reason must lie deeper than in the environment of a people.

Among the songs which I have studied I find many which seem to be constructed on a *sense of interval*, though the sequence of these intervals is such as to lead downward to a keynote. Thus in Chippewa music a song which begins with interval-phrases usually ends with the descending tones of the tonic triad. But with less cultured peoples the song is often limited to a single interval. Explorers tell of savage tribes who sing only the minor third. This of course should not be understood as meaning the exact interval which is given by the piano, nor yet the exact interval which would be played by a violinist, but rather an interval which, to the ear, appears to be smaller than what we call a major third and larger than what we call a major second. There is something haunting in this interval of a minor third. Beneath it there lies something of psychology or of physiology which is still to be explained. This interval characterized the intoning of the Roman

Church in ancient days, and we find it strongly accented in the old ballads of Ireland, when the harpists sang their melodies. In 340 Chippewa songs, containing more than eight thousand intervals, I found that the number of minor thirds is almost double that of any other interval except the second, which is often a passing tone. Searching still farther, I reduced the intervals in these songs to terms of a semitone, and found the average interval to contain 3.1 semitones, or one tenth of a semitone more than a minor third. Indian music is said to be "minor," and Chippewa music shares this characteristic, yet 57 per cent. of 340 Chippewa songs are, by the test of the keynote, major and not minor in tonality or "key." From these observations it is my opinion that the impression of minor tonality is due to the frequency of the minor third as an interval of melody progression. In some instances a song is found to be major in "key" although 70 per cent. of the intervals are minor thirds.

As the interval seems to be the melodic nucleus of Indian song, so a short phrase or "motif" appears to be the rhythmic nucleus of the song. In this, as in other bases of classification for Indian song, I did not seek for a certain characteristic, but, when it appeared in several songs, I placed them together. In some instances the characteristic proved to be wide-spread, while in others it was a peculiarity of too small a number to be made a general basis of analysis. I had analyzed more than a hundred songs before I became convinced that the "rhythmic unit" was an actual feature of the melodies; I then began grouping such songs, the result being that 64 per cent. of a series of 298 Chippewa songs were found to contain one or more rhythmic units, sometimes repeated continuously throughout the melody, and sometimes occurring only a few times but having an evident influence on the rhythm of the song as a whole. In many instances these rhythmic units were taken apart and "worked over" in much the manner of a composer of the white race, several repetitions of the song showing that this rhythmic form was clear in the mind of the singer. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the rhythm seldom varies in the repetition of a song, though the order of the phrases is sometimes changed, or only a portion of the song repeated. It is my opinion that, in a good singer, the rhythm is even more strongly impressed on the mind than the melody of the song. A marvelous variety of "rhythmic units" occur in Chippewa songs. Thus in 191 songs containing such units there is only one duplication, and that is a commonplace little phrase. The units vary in length from one to eight measures. In observing the average interval in

various classes of songs I found the interval largest in songs of excitement, the moccasin game songs and pipe dance songs having an average interval of 3.5 semitones, while the average was smallest in the songs for the entertainment of children, being only 2.2 semitones. This suggests a definite connection between the content and the form of a song. I have grouped the rhythmic units of the various classes of songs, and it is possible that close examination of them will suggest a connection between the idea and the rhythm of its musical expression.

The statement has been made that Indians use intervals of a quarter tone, or even smaller divisions of a tone. Such gradations of sound frequently occur in their singing, but to hear them is one thing and to believe that they are consciously sung or can be accurately repeated is quite another matter. Unless both these can be proven it is scarcely proper to regard such intervals as part of Indian musical culture. To believe this would imply that they, who are so far behind us in general development, have a musical proficiency far in advance of our own, since few white musicians have full control of such intervals, especially in their production by the voice. This matter is open for demonstration by mechanical means, but in my observation both Chippewa and Sioux Indians have more difficulty with the interval of a minor second than with any other interval unless it be the major second, when repeated in upward and then downward progression. The minor second occurs infrequently in the songs I have studied, and it is said that it never occurs in the music of the Cherokees. More comparative data on this point would be valuable. This, however, does not point to an ability to repeat correctly intervals smaller than a minor second. Another respect in which Indians are sometimes credited with a musical skill beyond that of the white race is the combining of rhythms. It is true that a song in double time is frequently accompanied by a triple drumbeat, but, in my observation, there are no points of coincidence between the two, which suggests that a ratio between them is not present in the mind of the Indian. It is well-nigh impossible for a trained musician to carry two rhythms without merging them at certain points, but a discrepancy between simultaneous rhythms does not trouble a person whose rhythmic sense is not cultivated. Thus I have seen people in remote parts of the west dancing in a time entirely different from that in which the orchestra was playing, and have also seen a child swinging in one tempo and singing in another. In these instances it was an evidence of lack of musical development rather than a sign of a high degree of culture, and it is my opinion

that the same is true of the rhythmic combinations which characterize the musical performances not only of the Indians but of uncultured peoples of distant lands. For instance, the players in the Dahomey "orchestra" at the World's Fair in Chicago performed with a rhythmic indifference to each other which would have been absolutely impossible for a similar number of white musicians.

Four reasons justify the intensive study of Indian music: first, that the songs of a vanishing race may be preserved; second, that our composers may have native themes for use in distinctly American compositions; third, that the analysis of Indian songs may, perhaps, throw some light on the problem of the intuitive lines of musical expression; and last but not least, that, through his music, we may learn the better to understand the Indian.

Too much has been said and written about the tragedy of the passing race. We need to be reminded that the Indians were a race of warriors and knew how to face defeat. There was no self pity in the heart of the Indian and he asked no pity from others. Long ago, in the Sun Dance of the Sioux, there was sung a song in memory of Sitting Crow, who had been killed in battle. The words were few, after the Indian custom, but they are the best eulogy of a warrior. The words of the song are: "Sitting Crow. That is the way he wished to lie. He is lying as he desired."

The Indians deserve to be honored, as those who fought long and well. Their music was one of their most cherished possessions. Today they are willing to give it to us. Let us preserve it, and examine it, if perchance we may find in it some trace of kinship, some new reason that, as we stand beside the grave of the Indian, we may say "Here lies my brother."