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WHAT DO INDIANS MEAN TO DO WHEN THEY SING,  
AND HOW FAR DO THEY SUCCEED?

I HAVE often been asked concerning the Omaha songs taken down by Miss Fletcher, as well as concerning those and other songs which I have transcribed and harmonized, whether any possible transcription in our current notation could fairly represent Indian music. There seems to be a widespread impression among those who have heard Indians sing but have not studied their singing with care, that there is a radical difference, not only in tone-quality but also in intervals, between their songs and our own. That Indian singing sounds very different from ours is apparent to the most superficial observer. Indeed, it is the differences which first strike one; and the less experience one has of Indian singing, the more do these differences possess the imagination of the listener. The points of contact between Indian music and ours do not readily reveal themselves except to him who takes the trouble to make the comparison with the most painstaking thoroughness. Even with the best of intentions, the investigator must do his work under suitable conditions if his work is to be fruitful of results, and he must learn by experience how to use rational methods. Given these conditions, I am profoundly convinced that the unity of all music, primitive and civilized, will become the most striking fact which will force itself on the attention of the observer; that it will certainly be found that the Indian always intends to sing precisely the same harmonic intervals which are the staple of our own music, and that all aberrations from harmonic pitch are mere accidents, due for the most part to imperfect training, or rather to the total lack of it. This is a belief which has grown upon me during the whole of an experience now extending over a considerable number of years, during which I have taken down a great many songs from the lips of uncivilized singers, Indian and others, and have also studied a large number of phonographic records taken by different persons from singers of different Indian tribes.

It may be well, therefore, to give here somewhat in detail the grounds of this conviction. In order to make these grounds intelligible, it will be necessary to give as clear an account as may be of the methods of studying the music of untrained folk-singers which have naturally developed themselves in my own experience and in the experience of those with whom I have been associated. I have found that the most satisfactory way, by far, of studying the songs of our aborigines is to write them down from the singing of Indians, not from phonographic records. There are at least two reasons for

this: one is that, assuming that the Indian sings his song exactly as he intends to sing it, the phonograph must be manipulated with the greatest care, or the record will still misrepresent him; for the slightest change in the rate of speed causes a corresponding variation in pitch. At best the phonograph represents the song somewhat imperfectly; but records unskillfully taken are apt to misrepresent it, sometimes to the point of caricature.

The other reason is that the Indian, like the white singer, occasionally misses the interval he intends to sing, either because it is above or below his natural compass of voice, or for some other reason. In such cases it is usually possible, when working with a singer, to discover what he really means to sing; whereas no positive correction of false or doubtful intervals is possible in transcribing from a phonographic record. The record must stand as it actually is, whether the singer realizes his own intention perfectly or not. But, for the reasons I have given, the best phonographic record must now and then misrepresent the singer; while imperfect records give anything but a true idea of Indian singing.

My own methods in dealing with Indian singers have been as follows: First, to listen to the singer attentively without trying to note down what he sings. This gives me a good general idea of the song. The next step is to note down the song phrase by phrase. Then I sing with him, and afterwards by myself, asking him to correct any errors in my version, of course noting down carefully all variations. My experience has been that every Indian singer, however good, varies more or less from the intervals which he really intends to sing. The interval which is most often doubtful is the third. Indians frequently sing a sort of third which is neither major nor minor, but between the two. Yet I have always found, on inquiry, that either a major or a minor third was intended. I tested the matter in this way: An Indian would sing for me a song embodying a chord, *i. e.* a tone with its third and fifth, but the third might be so doubtful that I could not determine whether he intended a major or a minor chord. Then I would sing the song after him, giving the third which I suspected he was most likely to mean. Usually he would pronounce it correct. Then we would sing it together, when he would invariably sing it true to pitch, not doubtfully as before. But sometimes, when I have sung alone a major or minor third, the Indian would shake his head and pronounce it wrong. Then I would sing it again, giving the other third; whereupon he would pronounce it correct and proceed to sing it with me, true to pitch. I have never known an Indian stick to a "neutral" third under this process of examination. He has always evidently intended either a major or a minor third. And I have always found

the same true of every doubtful interval. There has never been any serious difficulty in obtaining clear and decided evidence of his intentions by the process of singing for and with him.

Further, I have found that Indians will vary from the pitch they intend in different ways in the course of several repetitions of the same song. They seem to intend to sing the song exactly alike every time; indeed, they are very particular in this respect; but they do not always succeed in doing so. I have heard an Indian sing a major, a minor, and a neutral third in the same place in the same song, in the course of several repetitions of it. If I had had only a phonographic record of it, his intention would have been doubtful; but by singing with and for him, I have never had any difficulty in finding out what he meant. He was always clear and decided as to whether my singing was correct or not, and never failed to sing, *when he sang with me*, the interval he had told me was correct.

The next step, when the opportunity offered, was to take the Indian to a good piano and play the song for and with him; first without and afterwards with harmony. Here I have had the same experience. The singer may use doubtful intervals by himself; but he will not tolerate false intervals on the piano. He is always clear as to whether he wants a major or a minor third; and he never fails to sing the interval correctly when he sings with the piano, however doubtful it may have been in his unaccompanied singing.

Further, I have not only often heard an Indian vary the intervals differently in different repetitions of the same song, but different singers aberrate differently in the same song. Yet when they sang together, they seemed to lean on each other and to try to make their voices blend; usually with the result of producing an interval more unmistakable than either of them had produced separately. Miss Alice Fletcher, who has had a much more extended experience than I have in this kind of field-work, has frequently met with facts of the same sort, and so has Dr. Franz Boas. Miss Fletcher has learned a song from an Indian who sang many intervals off pitch, has noted it down carefully, marking the intervals which were sharpened or flatted by the singer with the utmost conscientiousness, and then has been laughed at by other singers of the same tribe for singing the song out of tune. She found that other Indians sang it in correct pitch, just as any white singer would have done; while others sang it out of tune, but differently from the first singer. She found, also, that when several singers sang the same song together, they invariably sang it truer to pitch, according to our standard of intervals, than did most of the individual singers. She found, again, that when she took the consensus of these different versions, which always closely approximated our own standard of intervals, and sang

it for them, it was invariably pronounced correct by all. Her natural conclusion was that the Indians meant to sing exactly such intervals as we sing, but frequently failed to get them exact, just as our own singers often fail in the same way, although perhaps less frequently. Dr. Boas has found himself obliged to correct versions of songs taken down from individual singers by the version heard from a number singing together. The voices, he says, leaned on one another, and the chorals were much truer to harmonic pitch than the individual songs, as a rule.

These experiences of the three of us, the experiments being made sometimes together, but much more often separately and many times repeated, throw the greatest possible light on the true nature of the aberrations from harmonic pitch in Indian singing. They show conclusively that it is not safe to regard the performance of any given singer as the true standard of Indian singing, even for that particular Indian, still less for his whole tribe. One may record any given song exactly as an Indian sang it, and still be very far from understanding the real intention of the Indians. I think there is no difference of opinion between Miss Fletcher, Dr. Boas, and myself, that the Indian invariably means to sing intervals in his songs corresponding to our own chord intervals; a conviction which has been forced upon us by such experiences as I have here attempted to describe. This conviction is the stronger because we all entered upon the work of transcribing Indian songs with the expectation of finding a different set of intervals from those embodied in our folk-music.

After all, there is nothing strange about all this. Every musician knows how frequently our own singers, even soloists of the very highest training, fail to realize their own intentions in the matter of pure intonation. The greatest singers will sometimes sing off pitch, and it is nothing uncommon for a first-class chorus to flat a semitone or even more before they get through an unaccompanied part song, under unfavorable conditions. Our untrained singers at prayer-meetings, camp-meetings, etc., are naturally still more prone to aberrations from correct pitch. Is it anything wonderful that the same should be true in still greater degree of untrained savages? Why must we assume that, although the very best of our own singers fail to realize their own intentions, the untaught savage, with infinitely less to guide his ear and voice than we have, always invariably realizes his? What right have we to assume that every slightest aberration from correct pitch is due, not to accident, but to deliberate intention on his part? And that, consequently, the false intervals which he sings constitute a different kind of scale from that which we have developed? If there ever was the slightest color of excuse for such

an assumption, certainly I, for my part, am unable to find any reason for holding any such opinion in the light of an experience which, taking into account my own and that of my associates, has not been slight. My own conviction is that the chord intervals which have been developed by our own race are not artificial but natural; that they are the same for all races of men because they are based on the same correlation of psychical, physiological, and acoustic laws.

It seems clear to me, in the light of the experiences above referred to, that to record and measure all the slight aberrations from harmonic pitch given by any one singer and present the song thus modified as the true idea of his song would misrepresent it as much as it would misrepresent some of our greatest songs to record them with the sharpings and flattings of some of our own singers and insist on that as the true version. It would be the easiest thing in the world to caricature any of our own songs by such a process, without departing from the actual singing of great artists. But surely we have no more right to caricature an Indian song than any other; less, in fact, for the injustice done thereby is far less easy to remedy. Our business as investigators is to represent the Indian music fairly. Let us note, by all means, the fact that the Indian very frequently sings out of tune; but to my mind it would be an unwarrantable misrepresentation of him to treat these aberrations as intentional. Every particle of evidence I have been able to obtain appears to me to show the very opposite.

*John Comfort Fillmore.*