

“Gnaah” and the Trout Song

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The Cree living around the James Bay have heard Christian hymns for almost four centuries. With emphasis on one hunting song, “The Trout”, I explore the musical, textual, and contextual interaction between the hymns and hunting songs.

Throughout contact time, Native Americans have been receptive to Christian hymn singing, indeed Christian hymns exist alongside traditional songs. Yet, in general, the contrast between performance styles of the two genres is remarkable. For example, the northern Cree hymn is sung in a loud, rhythmically static, nasal voice while their hunting songs are sung in a quiet, rhythmically quick, soft voice.¹ I have long been curious about the Native American adoption of loud nasal singing of hymns because style of presentation is usually slow to change. One does not expect for example, that West Africans will suddenly begin singing in the style of Chinese opera. The records of Francis Fletcher do provide a clue to explain the adoption of this quite different vocal timbre. Fletcher was the chaplain on Sir Francis Drake’s ship in a 1579 voyage along the shores of northern California. He wrote “... whensoever they resorted to us, their first request was commonly this, “Gnaah”, by which they entreated we would sing” (Chase 1966: 6). Musicologist Gilbert Chase suggests that this may have been an imitation of the English singing through their noses and that this tradition was transmitted to New England in the seventeenth century, perhaps at the same time hymns were being heard by northerners along the shores of the Hudson and James Bay. If so, the peculiar vocal quality used for psalm, and later hymn singing, has been part of North American history for almost four centuries: long enough to become an enduring quality.

Despite the extreme difference between vocal timbres, blending of some elements of the hymn and hunting songs has occurred (Whidden 1984: 29-36). The relationship between the two musics is recognized by many Cree. Ken Blacksmith, a Cree speaker from Waskaganish stated, “I believe the church was trying to use songs of the people. Most of the hymns become a chant” (Personal Communication, Ottawa, November 2002).

In this paper I want to discuss a Cree hunting song, the “Trout” as a result of Native and non-Native style blending and show how it is a miniature art song in any music language. As you shall see, music change could more accurately be called music interaction: at contact, sound elements of the foreign

¹ A signal analyzer shows the difference between the two vocal timbres used. For example, the first note sung in a hymn, “It Is Well”, has only two harmonics and the first note of the same singer’s “Bird” song has six harmonics (Whidden 1984:34).

may be carried into the local and vice versa. Music change is structured by the existing song forms yet contingent upon a number of factors, such as the context for the performance (ritual music may be slower to change); the societal attitude to change; and the ability of the performer to transmit the new sounds.

"The Trout" song discussed below shows the ability of Cree elder Joseph Rupert to blend new sounds with the old. Joseph is a Cree elder, living in Chisasibi, Quebec, the community created by the former residents of Fort George after the 1970's hydro flooding on La Grande River which flows into the James Bay. In 1982, and again in 1984, I recorded approximately 80 of these hunting songs in Chisasibi, which includes Joseph's six hunting songs.

Few of the hunting songs I recorded have words that are completely translatable. They may be words, or fragments of words interspersed with vocables, but they were rarely comprehensible to my translators. Yet the elderly Cree singers say they do know what their contemporaries are singing about (Whidden 1987:64). And, while they may not know the precise words, I think the Cree recognize musical motifs. For example, when a lyrical flute tune is played most westerners think of pastoral. I speculate that certain song phrases and syllable patterns suggest certain song types such as calling the geese down from the sky to be shot, or songs about the man-bear relation. Recognizing our difficulty to understand, the hunters took care to explain the song theme, often in poetic form. In general all the songs are about the animals; even the ones that begin, about clouds are "turned" into a song about an animal. The songs are optimistic, affirmative: the animal will be there for the hunter. As one hunter said, the songs are, "to put the animals on my plate". Here are a few songs as they were told to me by the singers:

Fox Song

*I used to love fox hunting
I saw a fox, very well-built, a healthy fox
He was orange; he had an orange-brown back
I went to check my traps to see if the orange back was there
He was caught in my trap, the orange back
I sang this song when I started out hunting in the morning*

Winterbird Song

*I'm going to sing about the winterbird
Somebody was thinking as he was walking with his snowshoes
I wish I could fly
Then I suddenly remembered the winter bird
I was very fast with my snowshoes
I was so fast that I thought I was flying like a winterbird
Then I thought I would steal the song of the winterbird*

Goose Song

This song is about a low cloud; there is a name for every cloud. I learned it from the elders. I used to sing it at dawn: one elder used to sing very well. This was the elder's song. I sang it because I was happy there would be another dawn again. There were times when I did kill lots of geese, just like clouds moving

fast. How fast the clouds go by when it's really cloudy, that's why I sing this song like this.

Recently, while reviewing Curt Sach's The Rise of Music in the Ancient World (1934), I came across three categories that "rang true" for me seventy years after publication as I thought about the Cree hymns and hunting songs. While the categories may be simplistic and not entirely reflective of messy reality, they do provoke thought about song types. The first is **logogenic**, word-born and tending to be level melodically, which Sachs says is related to cantillation (chant). Sach's second category is **pathogenic**, described as song with wide, leaping intervals, tending to cascade and driven by emotion: Plains Grass Dance song and much powwow music comes to mind. Both types of songs have short motifs comprised of only several pitches that are repeated continually. Over time, these motifs can be elaborated, for example, by adding more distant pitches; by establishing a tonic (focus tone); and by sequencing longer phrases. This then is Sach's third type of song, which he named **melogenic**. "Amazing Grace" is an example of a melogenic tune.

Most of the 80 hunting songs I recorded in Chisasibi in the 1980s tend to be logogenic. Logogenic song style is common in world musics, perhaps because humans like to foreground words, using song as a vehicle to carry the message. (I agree that over time the medium itself may become the message). Throughout music history we find musical compositions dominated by the words. For example, through the ages, Christian church fathers have encouraged logogenic music: they did not allow tuneful songs or musical instruments. Chanted psalms, in which the message dominates the melody, continue to be standard fare. There are other examples of logogenic song in western music such as the recitative in opera, where the rhythms and inflections of speech help to quickly lay out the plot, allowing the listeners to return to the more tuneful, reflective arias. Rap comes to mind too.

During a sustained contact time in 17th century New France, it was reported that the Indians were not easily diverted from their logogenic style of song. Gabriel Sagard, writing about the Natives he encountered in New France, noted that the Natives enjoyed the ritual music of the church. On the other hand, the natives "...expressed repugnance at the profane and dissolute songs of the French" (cited in Amtmann 1975:63). Sagard explained the affinity of Natives for church music as the result of the similarity between traditional Native and Christian religious music, believing that "... the sensuous melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structure of the French chanson was too different from traditional native song" (Amtmann 1975: 63). This ritual music of the Roman Catholic Church was chanting; described in 1774 by John Adams as "exquisitely soft and sweet" (Chase 1966: 58).

The translation of the psalms and hymns into Native languages through the strenuous efforts of the missionaries also serves to explain their appeal. For example, in 1982 when I asked an elderly Cree singer if he liked country music he replied, "If I understood the songs of the white man I would probably like them, but since I don't understand them I get nothing from them (Whidden 1986: 26). Certainly the northern Cree conformed well to the Christian hymn-singing tradition, strongly reinforced with the visual aid of the syllabary, a

system of symbols developed by Rev James Evans in 1840 for writing the Algonquian language.

By the 20th century, the James Bay Cree had been well missionized, mostly by the Anglicans, and were receptive to the new hymn style introduced by John Wesley, who was, in turn, strongly influenced by the Moravians. John Wesley composed hymns that were tuneful, emotional and evangelic. These were the hymns preferred by the missionaries for use in Canada's North, selected from volumes entitled, for example, *Sankey's Sacred Songs and Solos*, *Alexander's New Revival Hymns* and *Golden Bells*. One Anglican priest in the James Bay area, Rev. Hordern, recognized the chant-like style of the hunting songs and tried to make the hymns more acceptable to the Cree, for he wrote that some of the hymns were intended to be chanted. It must be noted that, in this twenty first century, the corpus of old hymns written in syllabics have been abandoned, for the most part, in preference for for gospel songs written phonetically in Cree. It seems to me that gospel music now deserves attention as a lineal descendant in function, form and language, of the hunting songs.

The hymns became part of the hunting culture and were sung for the same reason, i.e., to ensure hunting success. When I asked the elders to sing an old song, I might hear either a hymn or a hunting song. For example, Abraham Martinhunter, knowledgeable in traditional ways, and also a lay Anglican priest, sang and described a hymn, "The Great Physician", which was used to calm the turbulent waters of the Bay.

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Pa-shoch i-tao nu-to-ko-lon
Ka-sha-wa-ti-sit Chee-sus
Ay-we mi-nu-wa-che-i-wat
Ka-sa-ki-i-tuk Chee-sus.

Chorus.

Ma-wa-che mi-lo-ta-kwun
Ot i-shi-ni-ka-so-win
Chee-sus a-i-twa-ni-wuk
Chee-sus mi-lo Chee-sus.

Wa-pa-li-tum mu-chi-twa-win
O-nu-to-tu-wik Chee-sus
Ku-kwa o-ti-tu-mwak i-tat
Ki-chi we-cha-wak Chee-sus.

The great Physician now is near
The sympathizing Jesus,
He speaks the drooping heart to
Oh, hear the voice of Jesus.

Sweetest note in sereph song,
Sweetest name on mortal tongue,
Sweetest carol ever sung,
Jesus, Blessed Jesus.

Your many sins are all forgiven
Oh, hear the voice of Jesus;
Go on your way in peace to heave
And wear a crown with Jesus.

I found this striking, because the aforementioned John Wesley adopted Moravian hymn singing for a similar reason. He was impressed by the power of Moravian song to help them through fearful times: "...when, during a severe storm that terrified most of their passengers, the Moravians missionaries calmly stood on the deck singing their hymns entirely unperturbed by the raging storm and towering waves" (Chase 1966: 44).

The relationship between the two musics is recognized by many Cree. Here's Ken Blacksmith, an eloquent Cree speaker from Waskaganish to sum up: "I believe the church was trying to use songs of the people. Most of the hymns become a chant" (Personal Communication, Ottawa, November 2002).

As mentioned earlier, the hymns did acquire some of the qualities of the hunting songs in the James Bay area (Whidden 1984: 29-36), including extra-musical attributes. For example, certain people had proprietary rights to particular hymns that gave them the right to start the hymn off. This may be related to tradition where songs were personal and not sung by the community. There was little concern for euphony. This is not surprising because singing traditionally was done alone or for family. But great care was always taken to get the Cree words correct, further evidence of the importance of words in religious music. And, as mentioned earlier, the vocal quality was "gnaah" and the rhythm decidedly hymn-like.

The clear translatable words of the trout song below make it an unusual hunting song. While not melogenic, it has many of the melodic elements of hymns. The intervals between pitches tend to be larger, for example, major thirds, perfect fourths and fifths and there is a definite tonal center, D flat. The phrases are almost balanced—four beats in each. There are two distinct parts to the song (like the verse and chorus of a hymn?) and variation throughout of one melodic motif. However, many, but usually not all of these melodic qualities are to be found in other hunting songs I recorded.²

On the other hand, there are many qualities peculiar to hunting songs which make it sound logogenic. There are repeated patterned vocables such as "se ya ka". The ends of the phrases are definitely level, all on D flat—much like the endings of northern plains songs, which they call the tail. There is pulsation/tremolo (third line) on several notes. There is great rhythmic flexibility; the words and pitches are a perfect fit. Interestingly, in the second part the beats fall after the word or syllable; it's a feeling of syncopation where the emphasis is not on the expected beat. Most interesting is the dropped endings of words in lines 3, 4, 5, and 6 which may give us clues about what is happening to the words in the other hunting songs.

² For an extensive music analysis of the hunting songs see Whidden (1987: 74-96).

major 3, perfect 4, perfect 5 interval

"Trout"

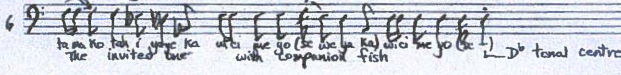
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In "The Trout" song, the words are evocative and both the rhythm and melody are sensitive to the words. In my opinion, Joseph Rupert has composed a song that in western music we would call an art song; it has the qualities of a German lied where the tune and the words are of equal weight. Because of its brevity, yet completeness, I call it an art song in miniature.

Hence, at least for one hunter/composer, Joseph Rupert, and probably others, there was considerable interplay between the hunting and hymn song styles. There is now a recognized need to perpetuate the Cree language, and song is an important tool in this process. Joseph Rupert has created a few songs that can show the way: they are more tuneful in the western sense and musically accommodating of the Cree language. These sorts of successful intermediate song creations, if recognized and used, may offer hope for the future of the language.

References

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