MUSIC FROM THE OJIBWAY'S POINT OF VIEW: ART AN UNKNOWN WORD TO THESE PRIMITIVE PEOPLE, AND SONG A PART OF EVERYDAY LIVING: BY FREDERICK BURTON

THE Ojibway's respect for music is profound. It means more to him than it does to us, for it is an essential part of his daily life. He does not divorce it from his ordinary experiences and look upon it as an art; he has no comprehension of what art is; music is one of the several manifestations of his existence, character and environment; it is a spontaneous expression of his inborn appreciation of beauty, and this form of expression, as distinguished from other expressions, decorative art for example, he holds in the highest esteem, for nature has endowed him with unusually fine perception of musical beauty. It means more to him than it does to us in still another sense, for it implies verse. He has no word for poetry. Whatever departs from plain prose is nogamon, song, which means that his poetry is not only inseparable from music, but indistinguishable from it. Among all civilized peoples the art of expression through verse is one thing, and the art of expression through modulated sounds is quite another, linked though they often are by the deliberate intent of the composer; in the Ojibway conception the two arts are not merely linked inseparably, they are fused into one.

I have been at considerable pains during recent years to bring before the public in one way and another the results of research that have demonstrated the existence among the Ojibways of a type of folksong at once distinctive and beautiful. In that work I spoke and wrote as a musician, to whom song is a form of music, and to whom the chief interest in his research lay in the discovery of exquisite melodies, or tunes. In this paper I shall give brief attention to the other factor in the Ojibway's art, for such his music-poetry is, and shall try to indicate how it enters into his daily life.
Song is the beginning and end of Ojibway music. He has no instrumental outfit for the production of music as such, which helps to establish the fact that he does not conceive of music apart from words, although he does have a strong perception of absolute music, his sense of melodic beauty being far superior to his sense of poetic beauty. For the moment let us understand that whenever he expresses himself through music, he sings. The pounding of the unmelodious drum, so disturbing to the civilized ear, is always an accompaniment to song. He never drums for the sake of drumming. In all his ceremonies, secular and sacred, he dances to vocal music, and no ceremony is complete, or even possible, without it. So, too, with many of his games; he must have song when he gambles. His prayers are songs; every action, impulse, or aspiration in his experience is expressed in song. His one instrument aside from the drum, and it is very rare, is a so-called flute, but it is not designed for the making of music for its own sake; it is always a substitute for the voice, and the tunes played on it are invariably songs.

It often proves difficult for an Ojibway to apprehend music as a distinct, separate creation. Time and again after I had come to terms of intimacy with the people, a man would come to me saying that he had thought of a new song, and proceed to sing it only to reveal a set of words that I had not heard before, the melody being substantially and often exactly the same as I had taken from his lips on a previous occasion. Some of the Indians could not be made to perceive that under these circumstances they had not contributed a new song to my collection. The sound (tune) might be "very like," yes, but the nogamon was different—and yet nogamon is a form of the verb which means, "I sing."

When the paleface separates the factors in the joint art and examines Ojibway verse, he is struck first by its extraordinary compactness. The Ojibway wastes no words, and, being primitive, he usually restricts his poem to the expression of a single thought. This thought may frame itself in words sufficiently clear to him and yet so few that they cannot fill out the melody to which he attaches them. In this contingency he repeats words and phrases, after the manner of the civilized composer, or he resorts to syllables that have no meaning. Here are the words of a wedding song, Bayzhig equayzess ne menegonun, gayget sennah negechedaybe ego. They mean: "A girl has been given to me; yes, I am exceedingly glad that she has been given." That is to say, "I am transported
with delight because my sweetheart’s parents have consented to our marriage.” From our point of view this is the entire poem, but the composer of it, who, be it remembered, was of necessity also the composer of the music, was so tumultuously stirred by emotion over the great event in his life that music was awakened in him to an unusual degree, and his tune could not be confined to a plain statement of his joy. The paleface under similar circumstances might have amplified his original thought by entering upon a glowing description of his sweetheart’s beauty of face and form; he might have descanted on her virtues and graces; or, following the immortal model set by Henry Cary in “Sally in Our Alley,” he might have narrated his present relations with her and forecast the future. Not thus with the Indian. That one thought of jubilant satisfaction was all his mind could carry with comfort at one time; so, having stated the circumstances and his feeling, he proceeds to the conclusion of his tune with “heyah,” which means nothing at all in any language. Does it not suggest the warbling of birds? a musical impulse expressive of deep emotion finding its vent through modulated tones and resorting to meaningless syllables merely because the melody needs pegs, so to speak, to hang it on, or because the emotion, as musical feeling at last analysis really is, is utterly outside the pale of such thoughts as can be expressed in words.

This song, by no means one of the best examples of Ojibway melody, although it is fluent and regular in structure, is one of the comparatively few that may be termed independent, by which I
mean that its words convey quite enough to enable the listener to understand it. Most songs are dependent for their meaning on circumstances in the knowledge of the listener but unexpressed in the words. This accounts partly for the compactness referred to. The Indian tells a story, and at the end says, "This is the song for it," proceeding then to sing perhaps three words which, in the light of the story, are perfectly intelligible, but, without knowledge of it, incomprehensible to the Indians themselves. I may remark that, owing to the Ojibway’s extraordinary appreciation of melody as such, many songs are sung to-day to words which the singers do not understand. This is sometimes because the words are archaic, and sometimes because in the advance of civilization the ancient story has been forgotten, the song surviving because of the strength of the tune, and the words lingering because memory easily retains words associated with music, and because, fundamentally, as hinted above, the Ojibway’s love of music is absolute, the words being merely a convenience to him in expressing his sense of beauty in tone.

A song that illustrates capitably the compactness of structure and dependence on circumstances unstated in the verse, proceeds as follows:

Setting the English equivalents under the Ojibway words, we get this:

*Keezhoyah’shquandaym baybogin ’shquandaym keezhoyah’shquandaym*

*Warm door in winter door warm door*

Ojibways who understand English told me that this meant "My door is warm in winter time," but not one could give me a hint as to the meaning of his translation. The young fellows sang it with great gusto at all sorts of times and occasions, and not one of them
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seemed to comprehend the difficulty I had in understanding them. I did get an impression that in some way it was a song of hospitality, but it was not until three years after I had put the melody and original words on paper that I found an Indian who enabled me to look at the song from the Indian point of view and grasp its full significance.

"WHEN I was a boy," said he, "I often heard my grandfather tell the story that goes with that song." He then told me the story which, very briefly, concerned a hunter who was lost in a three-days' snowstorm. Just as he was about to succumb to cold and weariness, he heard the sound of a drum. He made his way hopefully toward the sound, but cautiously, too, for the drum beats could not tell him that the singer, whose voice was inaudible at first, was not an enemy. At length he drew near enough to hear the singer, who was seated in his comfortable wigwam. "And this is what the man was singing," says the relator, plunging at once into "Keezhoyah 'shquandaym." The words being Ojibway, the perishing hunter knew that he had found a friend, and the story ends by telling how he of the wigwam entertained the wayfarer and, after the storm, sent him on his way refreshed.

The story presents to the imagination a vivid picture of winter, the sufferings of the lost hunter serving to set forth the terrors and perils of the season, which the man within doors mocks triumphantly in his three-word song.

The song, then, may be regarded as a mnemonic summary of thoughts and impressions. In my opinion it would be doing rank injustice to the Ojibway's imagination if I were to limit the translation of such verse as this to the literal significance of the words. To put the Indian's whole thought in terms of our art it is necessary to state at least a suggestion of what the Indian thought but did not express:

Freeze, ye northern winds!
Blow, ye frosty blasts!
Here within 'tis warm
While the winter lasts.
Whirl, ye driven snow,
Heap in smoth'ring drifts!
Winter here lies low
Nor his cold hand lifts.

There is no rhyme in Ojibway verse, but there are songs wherein the words fall into rhythmic order beautifully. These are usually
the non-dependent songs, those that tell a story, or express more than a single fact. In such songs the melody is always more highly developed and more nearly after the manner of the music of civilization, though always with distinctive Indian characteristics.

Presentation of the Ojibway regard for music would be incomplete without some reference to the proprietary value they set on their songs. The composer is the owner, and wherever ancient customs are still preserved no Indian ventures to sing a song that does not belong to his family. This view, I believe, is common to many tribes, perhaps all, but among the Ojibways the march of civilization has thrown down so many barriers that a great many of the old songs are now widely distributed. It is still a common experience for the investigator, however, to fail of getting a song he wants because the Indian who sang it yesterday refuses to repeat it today on the ground that it belongs to another, and if it is to be reduced to the white man's notes, that other's permission must be obtained. A general sense of proprietorship is also manifested in the extreme reluctance of the people to sing for the white man with his pencil and note paper. As one dusky friend explained to me, "Our songs are the only thing left to us that are wholly Indian. You've taken away everything else that was ours, and now you want to rob us of our songs." It took me many months of patient argument with this man and his neighbors to persuade them that I left behind all I took away, and that my work was the one sure way to preserve the songs from oblivion.

IN OJIBWAY music the general lack of development, speaking technically for the moment, is the chief mark of its primitive character; and it is much the same in Ojibway verse. Often is the poetic impulse plainly manifest, and with equal plainness the inability to work it out. The Ojibway is more gifted in music than in poetry; he has wrought out a type of beautiful melody, much of it in perfect form; his verse, for the most part, has not emerged from the condition of raw material. The spirit of music, struggling for expression through his primitive soul, finds its way to utterance in spite of the words with which he associates it. The Indian, like the average paleface, is incapable of grasping the conception of music as a thing of absolute beauty. Does a melody sing in his head and insist upon vocal utterance, he must forthwith invent a series of words that fit the rhythmic scheme of the tune, for thus alone can he correlate his sense of pleasure in modulated sounds with his habitual regard of other phenomena that appeal to him through the material senses as plain, compre-
hensible facts. We might conceive of an Indian voicing a melody tentatively to meaningless syllables and wondering as to the nature of that tonal entity that comes from he knows not where, that allures his soul, that compels him to sing. He might wonder at it as a hermit who is visited by angels in a vision. It might awaken awe, as if it were a message from another world, the very holiest of holy speech of Gitche Manitou himself. Thrilling with the pure delight that music alone of all the arts and things upon or above the earth can arouse, he might yet hesitate to link it to words lest he offend the Manitou who sent it, lest he misinterpret the message so subtly and convincingly spoken to his heart; and thus, bowing in humility before the mysterious presence manifested in new melody, he might content himself and the visiting impulse with a wordless song, leaving the meaning of it to be revealed at the Manitou’s own pleasure.

The fact probably is that no Indian ever went as far as this in speculation. His process of composition, as far as that process can be manifested, is identically such as I have suggested. He does sing his new melody to meaningless syllables, tentatively, correcting it here and there, but meantime experimenting with words that convey meaning; and the probability is that the precise sentiment of the words finally accepted is established by rhythmic consideration, those that fall readily into the scheme of accents appealing to him as the most suitable vehicle for the melody. And, aside from dependence upon the scheme of accents, the character of the words that suggest themselves to him must depend upon his own character, his mode of life, manner of thought, the exigency of his immediate situation, whatever that may be, and not upon the unborn tune. I am aware that there is room for controversy in this view, and it would give me great pleasure to break the cudgels of argument with any who hold a different opinion; but this is no place for controversy, and I must be content if I have suggested, what so few palefaces comprehend, that there is a warm human side to the redman which demands respect and commands the admiration and affection of those who have been fortunate enough to become intimately acquainted with him. It is no savage who speaks through these beautiful melodies; it is a man, deficient in development, but a man nevertheless who feels as we do, and who gropes blindly and often hopelessly toward that freedom of expression which distinguishes the man of civilization,