

Music of the Vancouver Indians

by J. C. Fillmore (1843-1898)

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MUSIC OF THE VANCOUVER INDIANS.

In further exploitation of his theory, the theory that music develops along harmonic lines, among the uncultivated, Prof. Fillmore read a paper before the Anthropological Congress, August 30, in which he cited the melodies taken down from the singing of the Vancouver Indians. The following was the first of the melodies in question. It belongs to a more primitive state than the music of the Omahas already given. He said: "The notation here given represents approximately, at least, the rhythm of the songs; but the singing was accompanied by rapid patting with the hand, the pats being considerably more numerous than the rhythmical units of the songs. Dr. Boas and myself made several attempts to count the pats in each melodic phrase. I found myself unable in some of the phrases, at least, to count them twice alike. Dr. Boas, who had had long experience with these Indians, felt convinced that there were ten pulses in the song against sixteen beats of the hand. I found myself in doubt, however, and decided to postpone the investigation of this problem until I had solved another which seemed to me of more pressing importance. This problem was: Do these melodies, notwithstanding their aberrations from harmonic pitch, really run along harmonic lines?"

On looking over my notes next morning, it seemed clear enough that if the Indians really meant to give the first song as I had noted it, the harmonization according to the chords implied in the melody was a very simple matter. The first phrase implies two chords—C major and G major; the second phrase embodied the chord of G major pure and simple; so did the fourth phrase; the third and fifth phrases implied the chords of G and D major. Accordingly I harmonized as indicated in the small notes.

Later, upon trying the music with the piano, we were

disturbed by discovering that the Indians generally sang a trifle flat, and for some time we were in doubt whether F sharp might not have been intended. Investigation, however, showed beyond reasonable doubt that G had been intended, since the Indians promptly disclaimed the F sharp when heard upon the piano, and as promptly declared that the chord of B minor (implied by the F sharp in connection with B and D) was not right, while the chord of G was, "as nearly as it could be done" to use their conservative phrase of absolute approval.

Later Prof. Fillmore spoke of the difficult rhythms, which among the Vancouvers reached in one instance a five-part measure, with rests of the first and third, against a four-part measure of the song. This extremely complicated relation the Indians themselves were not able to do without great care and many experiments. The explanation of anything so elaborate having been evolved among a people so little advanced is to be found in the fact that the singing and the drumming are not generally performed by the same persons. The complication easily reduces itself to the collocation of two measures beginning together by their accented beats, but carried out by different performers, each of whom is intent upon his own rhythm only, and its general correspondence of accent with that of the complementary part. This is also probably the explanation of the development of the compound rhythms of two's against three's among the Omahas.

The entire second paper of Prof. Fillmore was of great interest, and it very naturally awakened vivid interest among the scientists present, one of whom went so far as to characterize it as representing the only truly scientific work of the session.

CASUAL.