

Music of the Tlingit First Nations
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE POTLATCH PIECE
Sitka Canoe Song

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Abstract

The Tlingit are a unique First Nations people from Northwest Canada and Alaska whose culture and music in particular has been passed down through generations, achieving great heights of artistry and inspiring many listeners. However, it has never been seen as to *why* their music creates the effects that it does. By analyzing the different aspects of a piece, like form, harmonic trends, melody, rhythm, performance practice and the nature of the lyrics, it is possible to see what makes a traditional Tlingit song 'tick'.

The song for analysis is *Sitka Canoe Song*, a song traditionally used for keeping time when Tlingit paddlers did trips in canoes on the Pacific Ocean. In 1985, it was recorded in Sitka, Alaska as a potlatch piece, in celebration of the efforts of a local group of children performers playing old songs.

The form of *Sitka Canoe Song* has three main divisions; an introduction, a middle section and an end transitional phrase. The song repeats 3 times. Harmonically, the song is played in the key of A flat major, and all 4 notes are part of the same pentatonic scale, meaning there are no notes that are dissonant with each other. Melodically, there are two important features: the lack of large intervals between notes and the use of repeated notes. The rhythm is the backbone of the song, with beats from an accompanying drum each 1st and 3rd beat. Finally, the lyrics have no actual literal meaning; they are equivalent to the English 'tra-la-la', and are just there to carry the melody line.

Sitka Canoe Song combines all of the above characteristics to make a song that is stable and powerful in its simplicity. This demonstrates the capacity and profound beauty of Tlingit music, and hopefully encourages further investigations into their unique culture.

Music of the Tlingit First Nations

Like many indigenous cultures of the Northwest coast of North America, the Tlingit First Nations are a race whose way of life has inspired incredible achievements in artistry, dance and music. Despite influxes in populations, advances in technology and a deterioration of language usage, many traditions remain alive today. Efforts have been made in attempts to preserve old cultural practices, and the music of the Tlingit (along with others) has flourished in recent years, with younger generations inspiring their mentors by singing and dancing songs that are centuries old. However, although these songs have been sung and passed down through generations, it has never really been seen as to *why* these songs have the inspiring effects that they have on groups of people as large as entire communities.

Music played, and still plays, an important and varied role in the life of the Tlingit people. As said by George Emmons in The Tlingit Indians, "Music is characteristic of al [the Tlingits'] ceremonies. Their feasts, dances, cremations, gambling - all are marked by singing and rhythmic motion."¹ It served as a sort of storytelling, with many myths and family histories intertwined with nature being passed on by adults singing around a campfire with their children. "Their songs express their everyday life with the birds, animals and vegetation of land and sea, each of which has some special significance to the tribes and strong influence over them".²

As well, music was also a joyful way to unite entire communities, especially during celebrations, as it was usually played by large groups of people singing, drumming and dancing. This was (and is!) particularly true with what are called potlatches, grand community gatherings for major events, like honouring an important deceased person or celebrating a wedding. During these congregations, there was an exchanging of gifts, a large feast, and singing and dancing. Potlatch music presents a good opportunity to examine Tlingit music, as each song often plays a specific role or delivers a certain message. By taking a potlatch song and analyzing aspects like the form, harmonic trends, melody, rhythm, performance practice and nature of the lyrics, it

¹ George Thornton Emmons/Frederica de Laguna; The Tlingit Indians (page 292)

² Carol Beery Davis; Songs of the Totem (page 44)

can become more clear what exactly makes a Tlingit song “tick”, and what separates it from not being primitive grunting but instead an inspiring, breathtaking showcase of an ancient culture’s artistry.

A counter-argument to this strategy of analyzing is that it is simply not accurate or appropriate to evaluate a traditional native song with westernized methods, as the basic harmonic principles of Western-European music theory had no meaning to the composer when he or she wrote the song. As quoted by Carol Davis, “The theories of civilization cannot catch the native element in the music of primitive peoples.”³ This notion is correct - traditional Tlingit composers really had no knowledge of harmonic theories - except that it isn’t directly relevant to the focus of this work. The focus of this work is not to necessarily see what the composer *meant* to do, since this is pointless from a European theoretical context. The purpose of this work is to see what the composer *actually did do* that created the effects to help the song fulfill the purpose it was meant to fulfill.

The song for analysis is from an audio tape that was recorded by Daisy Jones in 1985, in Sitka, Alaska, a Tlingit village known for its cultural rejuvenation efforts. In Sitka, there was a big push for youth to have more participation in their traditional music, and at one point, the community hosted a potlatch celebrating their children’s progress. The young Tlingit generation played a series of traditional Tlingit potlatch songs, taught by various elders around the community. The first song on the tape, which is called *Sitka Canoe Song*, was the first song they played.

Sitka Canoe Song is sung by a large group of children, accompanied by a single drum, with the purpose of the song being to be used as a way to keep time when traveling in canoes. The Tlingit have always been a water-faring people, mostly in hand-built canoes on the Pacific ocean, and this song, which is generations old, is one of many such songs used to help keep everyone’s paddling strokes in cue. It is a powerful, slow-paced and methodical song, showcasing the vigor of its young performers for the first time in a concert situation. Meaningful, steady and emotional, it gives off a prevailing sense of stability and timing that is suitable for the purpose the song was created for. In order to best see what makes this song accomplish what it does, it is necessary to go in-depth and

³ IBID (page 45)

analyze the different aspects of the song, including the form, harmonic trends, melody, rhythm, performance practice and nature of the lyrics, in order to see how all the pieces come together as a whole.

There are many different features of this song that play significant roles in the aesthetics of the song, and each of these will be investigated further with description and interpretation to see how stability and repetition make the song work. The first aspect is the form (or how the song is structured). In total, there are 32 measures in the song, with all but two having a 4/4 time signature. The song repeats three times, starting with a two measure introduction that repeats immediately, followed by 6 measure section centered mainly on C. After that, there is one measure which, interestingly, goes into 2/4 time for just two beats before repeating the song again. This trend happens three times in total; the 4 measure intro, a 6 measure section and the single measure in 2/4 time repeating three times, except for the very end where the last 2/4 bar isn't played.

There are 2 main features of the form that contribute to the methodical, powerful flow of Sitka Canoe Song; the significance of repetition, and the position of the three sections within each loop. The most important trait of the structure of the song is how repetition creates the feel of continuity, and allows for the drum's powerful rhythm to maintain itself for an extended period of time. The repetition is, really, a necessity for the song's success; one loop is only 10 measures (not including the final one in 2/4), and it wouldn't be the best to have a paddling song that was effective for the first 30 seconds of a trip. On the water it would probably be sung continuously, but for the purposes of the potlatch performance in Sitka 1985, it repeated 3 times.

In *Sitka Canoe Song*, within each loop of the song there are distinct sections, with the placement of each serving an important purpose. The three sections are the 2 measure introduction, which begins each loop and repeats for a total of 4 bars each time, the 6 measure section centered on C and the single 2/4 measure that ends each loop. Analyzing the placement of each is important in understanding the framework of the overall song, and also sets up for harmonic investigations later on that can demonstrate how each part interacts with the others.

The first section, the 2 measure repeating introduction, is important simply for the fact that it starts off *Sitka Canoe Song*. It sets the tone for the entire piece, with two half

notes on A flat accompanied with the tom-tom drum. The A flat is particularly important, as it is a note in the ideal singing range of the children, allowing them to sing it with gusto. This powerful, authoritative beginning exemplifies the introductory measures, making them easily recognizable and also making them effective for re-energizing the song halfway through. The introductory measures occur 3 times - each time the song repeats - and set the tone each time they occur.

The second section is the 6 measure phrase after the introduction, and is the longest portion of the song. The melody of the second section is conjunctive with plenty of repetition, and because of this it develops a strong sense of continuity. Because of its ostinato form and the fact that it is the main bulk of the song, it is important that the second section is headed off by the more distinct introduction and then re-connected by the transition that concludes one repeat of the song.

The placement of the two 2/4 measures is also another important aspect of the form of *Sitka Canoe Song*. These two measures, while only 4 beats altogether, serve an extremely important purpose to keep the dramatic tension and power of the song alive. These two measures appear between the end of the phrasing of the first and second loop and before the beginning of the second and third introduction, serving as a transition that effectively links the 3 repeats together.

A structural analysis gives the reader an idea of how the song is put together, but to go further in depth, it is necessary to see how each individual piece accomplishes what it does by investigating the melodic trends of the piece. Before we can look into each specific note, however, we need to establish some general harmonic guidelines that can apply to the entire piece.

In *Sitka Canoe Song*, there are two broad harmonic features that are characteristic of the whole piece; firstly, there is the key; the entire song is played in the key of A flat major. This is, in a sense, irrelevant, as the composer certainly had no idea that he/she was actually writing the piece in any kind of a set key or scale. As quoted by Frances Delmore, "There are many instances in which a key is established in our sense of the term, and others in which the tones of a key are present, but their [the Tlingit's] sequence is not such as fully to establish the key."⁴ However, for this work (as stated earlier), it is

⁴ IBID (page 41)

important to note the transposition of the song so that we can see how the notes work together.

The second harmonic feature of the piece is that there are only 6 notes in total: A flat, B flat, C, E flat and C and A flat again, with the two A flat and C notes being an octave apart, effectively meaning there that are really only 4 notes in a three minute song. The interesting part of this trait is that each of these notes belongs to the same pentatonic scale, with the only note missing being the F. This means that none of the notes in the song are dissonant against each other, which creates a strong sense of balance between all the different combinations of pitches in the song.

Keeping in mind some of the ground work set by the harmonic analysis above, it is possible to now look into the melody of *Sitka Canoe Song*, another musical aspect that shows how repetition in and between each section leads to stability, which in turn leads to a consistent mix that is appropriate for a song that is intended to keep large groups of people synchronized with each other. There are 2 main features of the melody of *Sitka Canoe Song* that showcase its stability: the range (or lack) of interval quantity between notes and, conversely, the usage of repeated notes. There are also some interesting characteristics worth noting having to do with the harmonic structure of the song.

The first aspect of the melody of *Sitka Canoe Song* that leads to stability is small variety of notes found in the song. As shown by the harmonic analysis, in total, the song has only 6 notes – A flat, E flat, B flat, C, C and A flat, with the latter two an octave lower, effectively rendering the notated range of the piece to 4 different notes. This small span is a natural limitation to the possible variations of the song, and although this isn't truly relevant by itself, combined with other factors, this does contribute to the overall stability of the song.

Another aspect that is closely related to this is the lack of “steps” or “leaps”. There are not many instances when the melody skips more than one or two notes. In general, there is very little interval quantity between notes; notes are repeated, are one or two notes apart and sometimes three. In one loop of the song, there are only 8 instances of quantities of 3 intervals (measures 6, 7, 8, and 11) and only 2 instances with quantities of 4 intervals (measures 2 and 5, with A flat to E flat and E flat to A flat). With such little variation from one note to the next, less tension is created, and which creates a

vibrant, powerful melody that combined with a repetitious rhythm makes for a stable and consistent piece of music.

The second component of the melody that creates a natural sense of stability is the theme of ostinato repeated notes. In Sitka Canoe Song, there are many instances of repeated notes; in total, there are 41 instances where notes are followed by the same note. The song starts off with a powerful repetition of A flat, and a large majority of the song is centered around recurrences of C. With repeated notes, there is very little tension created, and this combined with a lack of many steps or leaps makes for a melody that can be characterized for its stability and consistency.

Now that there are some general melodic grounds established that apply to the whole piece, we can look at how the individual notes fit together within each section, and then how each section relates to the other. The introductory section is characterized by its power and authenticity, beginning with the children right in the prime of their range, on the middle A flat, blasting off two potent ostinato half notes that set the tone right away. Then, the next measure answers this powerful call, starting on the A flat, dropping down 4 steps to the E flat and then quickly returning to the A flat, ending where it started. The lyrics ("*HuWAY, HuWAY, EE-YAH HEY*") are direct and frank and augment the effects created by the notes. Then the two measures repeat, leading into the next section.

The second section, mainly on the lower C, is a very stable section that spends a lot of time repeating notes steadily. This is the biggest portion of one loop of a song, and is a segment that would be great to paddle with, considering its solid consistency. The second section can be split into 4 distinct phrases or melodic motifs, which don't necessarily fall evenly into measures. The first begins on measure 5 on the higher C, going from the powerful A flat to an even higher note. Moving up to the 3rd of the octave naturally raises the level of tension, but for the next 3½ beats of the measure, the melody goes steadily down, back to the A flat, up to B flat, down to A flat, down to E flat and down to C, with the singers ending their phrase on the half beat of the 6th measure. This phrase, although never actually reaching the low C until the next measure, acts as a great transition to the rest of the section which centers around the low C and can be characterized by its ostinato repetition and lyrical phrases where emphasis does not strictly follow the beginnings and ends of measures.

This trend of lyric phrases beginning and ending in the middle of measures happens first at measure 6, as discussed above, with the transition phrase of measure 5 ending on the half note beginning measure 6. The next lyrical phrase starts on 3rd quarter note of measure 6 and continues on the half note beginning at measure 7. This phrase starts on E flat, goes down to C and stays on C for another half note, the low repeated notes contrasting strongly with the higher-pitched smooth transition of measure 5. This also has the effect of bringing down the overall dynamism of the song, due to the repetition of notes. As well, the relatively low pitches are slightly under the childrens' ideal range, making it naturally harder for them to sing with as much zest as the introduction section.

The next phrase continues the pattern, beginning on the 3rd beat of measure 7 and continuing on to the first two beats of measure 8. This phrase is also centered on the low C, beginning there, dropping to A flat and quickly returning to C, followed by another half note on the C. This serves as a sort of answer to the line before it and setting up the next line by ending on the C.

The subsequent phrase is an interesting combination of the last two phrases before it. It begins on the 3rd beat of measure 8, sounding like the 3rd beat of measure 6, and continues on to the C, but uses the same lyrical sounds (“EE-Yah-Hey”) as the phrase in the second half of measure 7, with the only difference being in that it stays on the low C after the first note of the phrase. By using both of the two distinctly different sounds, this combination of motifs is effective in giving the impression of wrapping up the second section. The next measure simply repeats measure 9, supplementing that impression and concluding the second section.

The third segment of *Sitka Canoe Song* is short in comparison to the first and second sections, but is nonetheless important as a link that connects the end and beginning of two loops. It is only one measure long, and with a change in time signature from 4/4 to 2/4, it is only 2 beats. However, its significance is rooted in the pitches of its notes, which illustrate how it connects the two loops together. It starts on the C, and quickly goes up a step to E flat, with the introduction section of the next loop beginning on A flat. This transition works because C and E flat are the 3rd and 5th notes of A flat, and work well in leading in to the next section.

After looking into each individual section, it is possible to see how each contributes to the synthesis of *Sitka Canoe Song*. Now, we can look into other aspects of the piece to see how they fit into the overall scheme of things.

The fourth major element of *Sitka Canoe song* that can be analyzed is rhythm. Rhythm is central to the song's sense of stability. The timing of the song, which is absolutely critical for the reason that the song was written, is kept by a single drum, the sole instrumental accompaniment for the young singers.

Tlingit music is usually only singing with some percussion instruments; mostly the Tlingit used a large rectangular drum, tom-tom drum or rattles. For the potlatch when they sang *Sitka Canoe Song*, the singers used a tom-tom drum, a more common instrument than the longer rectangular drum. Tom-toms have a diameter of about 2 to 2½ feet, are 5 to 7 cm deep, and are made by steam bending poplar wood into a circle and stretching tanned animal hide (usually goat, seal or deer) over one side. The head is beaten with a small stick wrapped in hide.⁵ Tom-toms, especially ones larger than 2 feet, are loud and deep, and are excellent for keeping time with a large ensemble.

Sitka Canoe Song begins with the resonant clap of one such drum, and for the entire song, the powerful rhythm remains the backbone, with beats every 1st and 3rd beat accenting the voices of the children. The song is played *andante*, at about 81 beats per minute, a slow but progressive tempo, with slight variations depending on the group that is paddling and the speed they travel. Although the playing is simple, with a standard 4/4 time for the grand majority of the song, the effects are profound, with the rhythm literally embodying the heartbeat of the performance.

The performance of *Sitka Canoe Song* is an issue that should be investigated, as the potlatch concert in Sitka 1985 was carried out far differently than the original canoeing song was probably intended. There are several fairly obvious points that are nonetheless important when contrasting the possibilities of differences between the two scenarios of singing the song. On the ocean, there would be less people singing (although this depends on the size of the group that was traveling), and while a drum accompaniment would be possible, it would be unlikely, considering most of the people would be paddling. On stage, the only limit of personnel is how many people could fit on

⁵ George Thornton Emmons/Frederica de Laguna; *The Tlingit Indians* (page 294)

the stage. However, there are some restrictions associated with playing in a concert situation - namely, the length of the song. While paddling, the song could repeat as long as necessary until the paddlers stopped traveling or when they finally got tired of the same tune. On stage, this is obviously not possible, seeing as how after 16 repetitions of the same thing the crowd would become exasperated with the monotony of their cultural rejuvenation.

The lyrics are another interesting aspect of *Sitka Canoe Song* that deserves some investigation. The biggest characteristic of the words that the children sing is that the words have no actual meaning; although it sounds to a non-Tlingit speaker like a foreign language, the lyrics have no literal translation, being sort of like the classic Anglophone “*tra-la-la*”. Many Tlingit songs, in fact probably the majority, are tunes with actual lyrics, depending on the nature of the song, whether it is a legend, for a funeral, a story or just a song. In *Sitka Canoe Song*, there is no concrete significance to the words; they are just sung to carry the melody, and to keep paddling time.

In conclusion, we can see how the different aspects of *Sitka Canoe Song*, including the form, harmonic trends, melody, rhythm, performance practice and nature of the lyrics combine to create a piece that is powerful and moving in its simplicity and stability. With a powerful intro, middle section and quick transition measure, *Sitka Canoe Song* links together seamlessly, each section leading into the next effortlessly. Because each note in the song is part of the same pentatonic scale, there is little dissonance in any of the melodic phrases, which when combined with a resonant pulse from the accompanying tom-tom hand drum leads to a progressive consistency that is appropriate for a song meant to keep time for large groups of paddlers. Although as a potlatch piece its performance was different compared to its traditional intent, *Sitka Canoe Song* demonstrates the simple yet profound capacity of Tlingit music.

Although the Tlingit are a race of First Nations whose music and culture has inspired people for hundreds of years, it has never been extensively investigated as to why their works create the effects they do. Hopefully, in light of the analysis of *Sitka Canoe Song*, future inquiries can and will be undertaken to further illuminate the wondrous qualities of traditional northern Canadian and American First Nations music.

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- 3.) Davis, Carol Beery. Songs of the Totem. Juneau, AK: Empire Printing Company, 1939

Appendix

Score for *Sitka Canoe Song*

~Sitka Canoe Song~

The musical score is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of 32 measures, with some measures containing multiple notes. The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some rests. The score is divided into six systems, each containing four measures. The measures are numbered 1 through 32, with some numbers appearing above groups of notes. The first system contains measures 1, 3, 2, 4, 5, and 6. The second system contains measures 7, 8, 9, and 10. The third system contains measures 11, 12, 14, 13, 15, and 16. The fourth system contains measures 17, 18, 19, and 20. The fifth system contains measures 21, 22, 23, 25, 24, and 26. The sixth system contains measures 27, 28, 29, and 30. The seventh system contains measures 31 and 32. The score ends with a double bar line after measure 32. Below the main staff, there are three empty staves.

1, 3 2, 4 5 6

7 8 9 10

11 12, 14 13, 15 16

17 18 19 20

21 22 23, 25 24, 26

27 28 29 30

31 32