



18. Arnhem Land Aboriginal Music

Listening exercises – without the transcription

- 1 For most of this song there are three sounds:
 - a) one pair of percussion instruments,
 - b) one wind instrument,
 - c) one voice.In what order do they begin? Write a sentence describing the sound of each.
- 2 The introduction and verse 1 lasts a total of thirty seconds. What two additional sounds mark the end of the verse at this point?
- 3 How many verses are there in total?
- 4 Outline as many features as you find which this song shares with the example of Sioux song from the United States of America.

Listening exercises – with the transcription

- 1 Compare bars 17–21 with bars 22–28, commenting on rhythmic and melodic recurrences and differences.
- 2 Devise and briefly explain a different method of notating the *didjeridu* part from that shown.
- 3 Compare the sound of the final verse with the transcription of verse 1. Identify as many differences between the two as you can.
- 4 Listen again to the Sioux flag song from the United States of America and look at its transcription. Make a list of differences between that musical style and this one. Then, compare your answer with that for the previous question 4 and decide whether you think these musical styles sound alike or not.

Australia

18. Arnhem Land Aboriginal Music: Birruck

♩ = c.138

Introduction 4 5 10

Male voice

Rhythm sticks

Didjeridu
(central pitch c. A – lowest space of bass clef) etc.

Verse 15

Mnya - ya - ya - ya ya - ya

20 25

ya - ya mnya-ya - ya - ya ya - ya mn - ya - ya - ya mn - ya - ya - ya ma-nay ma-nay

30

mn - ya - ya - ya ya - ya ya mur-bray-mur - bra ba - ra ma - nay

35

mu-bra - ru - bra ma-nay mur-bray - bur - ra ra - ray.

(foot-stamps)

(shout)

(didjeridu)

Transcription Notes

Barlines are used for convenience alone

Transcribed approximately one semitone above the recorded pitch

The verse section is performed four times, with minor alterations each time

The didjeridu plays throughout, stopping only at the very end

∞ vocal ornament or inflection

Arnhem Land Aboriginal Music

Cultural background

Traditional Australian Aboriginal music is intrinsically linked to Aboriginal views of cosmology, religion, ceremony and the general education of society. Australian Aborigines believe that creativity is rooted in the Dreamtime, a mythological period within which the known world was formed. As a result, the creation of songs is ascribed to ancestral beings from the Dreamtime rather than to the people of the present day. These songs are said to be the creation of spirit-familiars, who communicate with their chosen human vessels in dreams.

Unlike in other hunter-gatherer societies, where the most highly-respected person is typically a hunter or food-gatherer, in traditional Aboriginal clans leadership is given to the Songman, or Master of Music. The Songman is responsible for songs containing mythology, folklore, legend and gossip, and the teaching songs that are passed down through generations. The Songman is credited with psychic power, since it is he who is said to learn new songs in dreams and through visitations from spirits.

Arnhem Land is the area to the North of the Northern Territories in Australia. The music of this region falls into three categories: sacred, which includes totemic and heroic cult music; secular; and secret. The song transcribed and recorded illustrates the secular category, which may be performed at any time in camp. Subject matter tends to be commentary on past or present incidents, ballads, natural phenomena and species, and (increasingly) introduced articles such as axes, tobacco, boats and cards. Sung commentary on events or individuals can take a metaphorical form, because Aboriginal society does not encourage the making of direct personal comments. Instead, songs about animals can be used as a veiled means of commenting upon the personality or experiences of a particular individual.

Aboriginal music

Traditional Aboriginal music is primarily vocal, with songs for rain-making, rain-stopping, love-magic and secret incantations. These songs are characterized by non-verbal sounds and syllabic chanting. Non-verbal sounds include grunting, high-pitched falsetto, growling and wailing. Vocal qualities range from low huskiness to high, dynamically-contrasting falsetto. Some songs are for solo voice, others are performed in a heterophonic style, and still more may be sung by different groups simultaneously.

Vocal music can be accompanied by rhythm sticks, drum, and in some areas by striking together pairs of boomerangs. Further percussion instruments are fashioned from bark, seed-pods and fish-skin. The body is also used to provide percussive sounds, such as hand-clapping, or slapping the thighs or buttocks.

An important instrument is the didjeridu, used both for accompaniment and for solo performance. Usually about four or five feet long, and tipped with a mouthpiece of wax or hardened gum, the didjeridu is made from either a hollowed-out branch or a length of bamboo. Performance may require the use of circular breathing (using cheek pressure to exhale from the mouth while quickly inhaling through the nose). The instrument provides a droning sound elaborated by intricate cross-rhythms.



Track 18

Birruck

The birruck is a rock wallaby found in the caves and rocky slopes of Arnhem Land. Ostensibly, *Birruck* tells of a wallaby finding a wild plum tree laden with

fruit, but it is possible that this song was originally intended to comment on some person or event known to the singer. The Songman sings four verses accompanied by the didjeridu and rhythm sticks, with short instrumental preludes before each verse. The text of each verse, like many Aboriginal songs, combines phrases of padding syllables with phrases of actual, meaningful text. The didjeridu and rhythm sticks are played continuously. The rhythm sticks provide a steady pulse throughout the piece, supported by a variable drone from the didjeridu. Although there is a steady pulse, there is no sense of a metre in the Western sense, i.e. a patterned succession of strong and weak beats. Nonetheless, many of the repeated vocal rhythms can be conveniently grouped into the equivalent of simple duple time.

In melodic terms, *Birruck* demonstrates a tendency of Arnhem Land songs: to begin on a high note and descend gradually to a lower pitch. This melodic descent is decorated with falling glides and occasional ornamentation. In this case, a hexatonic (six-note) scale of A, C, D, E, F \sharp and G is used (approximately a semitone lower on the recording). Each verse consists of a gradual fall from G down to A. The verse can be divided into three parts: reiteration of the pitch G (bars 17–21), descent to and repetition of E (22–28) and the fall to and repetition of A (29–37).

India

Music for *Vīnā*

Cultural background

Indian art music is amongst the best known traditional musical styles world-wide, and has been extensively documented, both by Indian scholars and by foreign musicians. Skilled practitioners now reside in many countries, top soloists tour internationally and recordings are readily available. In these respects, the Indian art music tradition quite closely resembles that of the West. The parallel can be taken a little further. In each case, these are elite traditions with historical roots in religious ceremony and court entertainment. They are both primarily urban styles, performed principally at formal concerts where the roles of performer and listener are clearly demarcated. Both require of would-be professional musicians a long period of specialist study and apprenticeship, and are most deeply appreciated by experienced audiences. Both are accompanied by considerable amounts of written and spoken musical theory and terminology. Supporters of each tradition see their music as being substantially different from – and more valuable than – other musical styles occurring within the same area, such as village bands or popular music. Of course, there are important differences in the sounds and practices of Indian and Western art musics. However, the point is that parallels between these two traditions are not accidental or incidental: they arise from their similar social and historical contexts.

Indian art music

Art music in India is divided into two main types, that of the North and that of the South. Within these two broad categories there is a great deal of local and regional variation. Nonetheless, a few general points can be made. First of all, there are certain parallels in the combinations of instrument-types typically found in both North and South Indian art music. Secondly, much of this music