



# ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

## Music of the Cherokee Nation

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### Introduction and General History

Music history in North America begins long before Europeans came ashore; however, because classically trained musicians view music history through the lens of European practices and experiences, it becomes difficult to document an authentic musical experience of the indigenous populations without first understanding the history of the people being studied. To begin, North American Native Tribes can be placed into groups based on geography and shared characteristics; these groups are the Artic, Northwest Coast, Plateau Basin, Southwest, Plains, and Eastern Woodland tribes (McAllester, 1980, p. 308). Each of these groups contains many tribes within, all having distinct cultures and identities while sharing some similar traits.

The Cherokee tribe belongs to the Eastern Woodland group, more specifically the Southeastern Woodland subgroup, due to their original geographic location in the



## **Cherokee National Flag**

Appalachian area and their shared traits with the other tribes of the area (Levine, 1998, p. 4). In 1838, President Andrew Jackson ordered the removal of all Cherokee and other tribes from their native lands to be relocated to the Oklahoma Territories. Known as the Trail of Tears, this move led to the split of the Cherokee Nation as most traveled westward while some managed to stay hidden and remain in the east. Although distinctions may arise when discussing the governments of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, the Cherokee Nation, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee, because musical traditions were well established by this point in history, there is little to no distinction in cultural identity between the groups. When discussing the Cherokee as a whole, I will be referring to the unified tribe as it existed in its ancestral lands of Appalachia rather than their present day location in Oklahoma and North Carolina.

## **Musical Characteristics**

Music of the indigenous peoples of the Americas differs greatly from music following the Western Classical tradition. This is particularly true of the Eastern Woodland tribes of North America, including the Cherokee, as David McAllester (1980) writes, “music of the Woodlands has certain qualities that strike the ear immediately” making it instantly recognizable (p. 309). Vocally, the timbre of the voice is relaxed and open, making heavy use of the middle and lower tessitura (Levine, 1998, p. 5; McAllester, 1980, p.

309). This timbre is reinforced and emphasized by the use of aspirated attacks rather than heavily articulated ones as well as vocal glides and occasional yodeling (Levine, 1980, p. 5). These elements combine to create the relaxed and open sound indicative of the Cherokee people as singing in comfortably low ranges, and using aspirated attacks allows their voice to glide through pitches naturally rather than creating tension and stress through contorting the sound (Levine, 1998, p. 5; Nettl et. al., 2013). For melodic contour, the Eastern Woodland tribes often use a variety of anhemitonic scales, or scales that do not contain semitones, based on four, five, and six notes (Levine, 1998, p. 5) with the Cherokee tribe primarily employing the use of the pentatonic structure (Herndon, 1971, p. 342, Nettl et. al., 2013). While using these scales built on five notes, it appears that they predominantly use only the upper four of the notes with the lowest scale degree acting in a similar cadence fashion as the Western “tonic”, signaling the beginnings and endings of phrases (Herndon, 1971, p. 342). The contour of the melodies usually starts higher and descends roughly an octave in stepwise or terrace like motion over the song (Levine, 1998, p. 5; Keillor, 2013, p. 129; Nettl et. al., 2013), with the exception of ceremonial chant which contains a much narrower range of three and fewer notes (Levine, 1998, p. 5).

Unique to this region is the antiphonal nature of the songs in which a leader sings, with the chorus responding roughly in unison (Keillor, 2013, p. 129; McAllester, 1980, p. 309; Herndon, 1971, p. 343; Levine, 1998, p. 5; Nettl et. al. 2013). Specific to certain dances, the longer the song went on the leader began to improvise longer and more elaborate melodies, another defining characteristic of this musical style (Keilor, 2013, p. 127; McAllester, 1980, p. 309). In the Cherokee tradition, it is common to find songs having seven phrases to be repeated four times as these numbers are sacred to the tribe (Keilor, 2013, p. 129; Herndon, 1971, p. 342-343). In general, Cherokee songs tend to also be strophic (Levine, 1998, p. 5) which lends itself to the

antiphonal nature well, with short very even and symmetrical phrases, alternating between the antiphonal sections (Nettl et. al., 2013). The Cherokee tribe also makes frequent use of sforzandos, metric changes, and syncopation adding into the unique sound identifiable as Cherokee (Levine, 1998, p. 5). As is the style of the Eastern Woodland Natives, the Cherokee place a heavy emphasis on the use of vocables, or “meaningless” syllables with only certain genres having specified text (McAllester 1980, p. 309; Herndon, 1971, p. 343) which will be discussed in more detail later in the article. The use of vocables combined with the relaxed timbre and use of pentatonic structures has become so iconic of Native music that pop culture often associates these elements with all Native traditions; however, it should be noted that the extent to which these elements are used is distinctive of the Eastern and more specifically Southeastern Woodland tribal region to which the Cherokee belong (McAllester 1980, p. 309).

Singing plays a dominant role in the music of the Cherokee people, but is only one of several components that come together to create the characteristic sound of this region. Monophonic melodies primarily form the texture of the music from this region, with singing being the primary form of melody, including a rhythmic accompaniment underneath; although, “a simple type of polyphony naturally arises” from the occasional overlapping of antiphonal and responsorial settings (McAllester, 1980, p. 308-309; Nettl et. al., 2013). Although this certainly was the main presentation of melody, it should be noted that a flute sometimes is used in substitution of a vocal melody, or in conjunction with voice as harmony or melodic embellishment.

Instrumental accompaniment to the melody was performed mostly by idiophones, though as noted above sometimes the cane flute would act as an accompanying instrument (Herndon, 1971, p. 343). These idiophones included a drum, rattles, and shakers. The Cherokee drum is an earthen pot or kettle with animal skin stretched over the top. Before playing, the

musician would place an inch or two of water inside the pot to create a sound distinctive of this region. This water drum is played with a single stick rather than the Western approach of two drumsticks or the hand-drumming approach of many other indigenous cultures (Cherokee.org, 2016). The primary rhythm used in Cherokee drumming is simply marking the melodic beat; this constantly throbbing pulse is very indicative of the sound of the Cherokee, and is very important in regard to their use of metric changes without changing the beat (Nettl et. al., 2013). Rattles and shakers can be grouped together for they are made of similar materials and have similar purposes, the primary difference being the way they are played and who plays them. These idiophones are made of turtle shells, though occasionally hand rattles would be made of gourd, and filled with small pebbles to make the rattling sound (Cherokee.org, 2016; Keillor, 2013, p. 128). Traditionally, men perform with a single hand held rattle while women have turtle shell “shackles” tied to their legs. Because of the integral nature dance plays in the music of the Cherokee, these shackles help reinforce the beat of the music in a similar fashion to the drum as the women dance, often accentuating the many metric subdivision changes while the drums and beat stays steady (Keillor, 2013, p. 128).

The two aerophones found in the traditional musical use of the Cherokee people are the river cane flute and a type of trumpet. The river cane flute is much more common and shares many similarities with the end blown flute from the Plains tribes known as a flageolet (Keillor, 2013, p. 129). Flutes in this tribe traditionally are made with six finger holes, making use of pentatonic scales (Cherokee.org, 2016; Keillor, 2013, p. 129). Flutes were used as courting methods, to accompany story-telling for their folklore, and to accompany singing in certain instances such as stick-ball games (Keillor, 2013, p. 129). The trumpet-like instrument is less common and more ancient in tradition; originally made from conch shells, the Cherokee also made these instruments from long neck gourds, the thigh bones of cranes,

and buffalo horns (Cherokee.org, 2016). These trumpet-like instruments were used as signaling devices during battle in a very similar way that the trumpet was used in the military of Europe and early America. This instrument, unlike the traditional flute of this tribe, is not a melodic instrument and would be used solely for signaling purposes.

## **Cultural uses of Music**

Music in the Cherokee culture has very specific uses, as it plays a significant role in several different aspects of the tribal life. The categories that these uses fit into can be broadly defined as ceremonial and non-ceremonial. Cherokee ceremonial music contains what seems to be the largest repertoire including most dance music, healing chants, and ceremonial games or festivals. Non-ceremonial uses include courtship and lullabies among other aspects of life of lesser importance. Many different ceremonies of great importance to the Cherokee exist, with those of largest importance being the Stomp Dance, anejodi, which is known as the “Stickball game”, and healing chants.

The Stomp Dance is a religious event of incredible importance to the Cherokee Nation, so much so that information is hard to come by as the government of the Cherokee Nation does not wish for the dance to be recorded, nor its meaning analyzed and published (Cushman, E. & Ghosh, S, 2012.). However, the Eastern Band of Cherokee regularly perform and record the Stomp Dance as there is a recording from the Smithsonian Museum of American Indian of these Cherokee performing the dance, explaining its meaning, and inviting others to join in the dance with them (Cherokee Traditional, 2015). Cherokee also used dance and its accompanying music for social events, but unfortunately there are little to no surviving records of the social dances today beyond the fact that they existed (Conley, 1997, p. 367). More information about these social dances can be gathered directly from the tribes themselves; despite Conley’s

assertion that little evidence exists, evidence and practice of so called “social dances” can be found among the Eastern Band of Cherokee (Cherokee Traditional, 2015). Now classified as social, these dances were once ritualistic in nature without the heavy emphasis on prayer and religion found in the Stomp Dance and may not be the same dances to which Conley refers.

Cherokee people place great importance on the playing of the stickball game, similar to lacrosse but played with a pair of sticks about the size of a tennis racket to catch and throw the ball (Mooney, 1890, p. 111). After the Trail of Tears and the relocation of those belonging to the Cherokee Nation the game lost its ritual and spiritual meaning for both the Nation and the Eastern Band of Cherokee, but it is still played throughout the Nation and the Eastern Band against other tribes. (Fogelson, 1971, p. 331). In the East, the game is still exclusively for men, but women are allowed to participate in the Cherokee Nation (Cherokeeheritage.org).

Foundational in this game, as well as in Cherokee society, is the dualism of what they call the “Red Force” and “White Force”(Fogelson, 1971, p. 334, Diamond, 2008, p. 70). They believe that life is divided into pairs of opponents that must be in balance for the world to be in harmony. These pairs are peace/war, passive/active, old/young, internal/external, plants/animals, tame(cultivated)/wild, and male/female and are associated as white/red (Fogelson, 1971, p. 329). This dualism extends into the way the Cherokee Nation was traditionally governed by two separate branches of government, the Red and White organizations, each dealing with the issues respective to their portion of the dualism (Fogelson, 1971, p. 330).

The game, called a-ne-jo which translates to Little Brother of War, was used as often used as a method to settle disputes between clans and even neighboring tribes. Because it prevented all out warfare, winning carried great weight, since the outcome created binding decisions (Fogelson, 1971,

p. 330-331, Mooney, 1890, p. 106-107). The ceremony begins with an all-night dance to transform the players from beings of White to people of Red (Herndon 1971, p. 343).

During the game itself, which is said to have been incredibly violent to the point of “legalized homicide” (Mooney, 1980, p. 331), the true struggle was not between the athletes; rather, the true struggle was seen to be between the groups of men and women acting as conjurers for each team (Fogelson, 1971, p. 331). The night preceding the game, conjurers sang and danced until dawn with each gender playing a different role in the ceremony; the song and dance of the men was to transfer power to their team while the song and dance of the women was to weaken the power of the other team (Herndon, 1971, p. 342). Men danced around their fire in a counterclockwise, dancing backwards on the second song in a set of four while accompanied by a gourd rattle (Herndon, 1971, p. 342). Women danced over large, flat rocks around their fire, singing while being accompanied by a drum (Herndon, 1971, p. 343). As noted earlier, these songs have an overall downward contour, are antiphonal in nature, and primarily consist of vocables (Herndon, 1971, p. 343). The purpose of this ritual is to transfer power from team to team, an action that in Cherokee beliefs requires the use of music (Herndon, 1971, p. 343). This belief that music will be a conduit for the transfer of power is fundamental in the Cherokee’s use of music (Herndon, 1987) and will be discussed in more detail with healing chants. Because of this belief in music’s spiritual power, it plays a vital role in the ceremony as well as the success of the team they supported.

In addition to settling disputes, this game was used to celebrate certain other ceremonies such as the Green Corn Ceremony. This ceremony’s purpose was to call upon the Great Spirit to ensure a fertile crop through the music and through the playing of the stickball game (Salter, 1974, p. 498-499). Here again, music was used to transfer spiritual power to the area



the Cherokee directed it toward during the ceremony. In Cherokee society, the idea of music's ability to transfer and amplify spiritual power and is shown even more in their approach to religious chant music.

Possibly the most important use of music to the Cherokee people is their use of healing chants. Chants are a form of prayer that could be thought, whispered, spoken, or sung each with a varying degree of power (Herndon, 1982, p. 45). Each level from being thought to being sung has added power with singing producing the most powerful form of the prayer (Herndon, 1982, p. 49). Because of this, singing these chants holds great importance among the Cherokee people and is used when extreme measures are needed (Herndon, 1982, p. 49). The prayer for these chants were memorized formulae or text that was thought to have the power to alter life situations, very similar to the way Catholics use memorized prayers as a means of altering certain situations (Herndon, 1982, p.45). Though this text appears to be mostly vocables, these vocables appear to have significance and meaning as a "spirit language" used to call upon the spirits for help (Herndon, 1982, 78-79). This can be compared again to Catholicism where vocables that have no actual definition such as Alleluia but hold religious significance and meaning within the context of the ritual.

Chants can be either of religious significance or specific to healing purposes (Herndorn, 1987, p. 464). Unlike the dance music of the Cherokee, the chants are extremely controlled in form, text, and melodic contour. In the dance music, the leader often improvises and embellishes upon the melody during the antiphonal sections of the dance but in chant music improvisation and embellishments are strictly forbidden (Herndorn, 1987, p. 464). Such strict adherence to the memorized format stems the Cherokee belief that any deviance from the formula would result in disaster striking the community (Herndorn, 1987, p. 464). In addition, these chants do not follow the contour and range typical of other Cherokee music. Songs typically have a downward moving contour covering a range of about an

octave; however, in Cherokee chant music the range is much more narrow with a very level melodic contour similar to that of the Western Gregorian chant (Levine, 1998, p. 5). The scale use also changes with this genre; no longer do the Cherokee use the pentatonic scale that dominates the rest of their music. Rather, in chant music the Cherokee use scales comprised of only three or less notes (Levine, 1998, p. 5). Chants are passed down through oral tradition, like all other aspects of Cherokee music, along with their myths regarding the chants (Herndorn, 1987, p. 464). New chants are “composed” after existing chants fail to achieve the desired result. When a chant fails, general protection chants are said over the patient to begin, then the specialists divine the cause of the chant failure and try a new chant incorporating the solution to the previous failure (Herndon, 1987, p. 465). If successful, the chant is then integrated into the repertoire; however, individuals do not receive credit for “creating” a new chant, rather, it is said that they have “rediscovered the proper way to deal with a particular problem” (Herndorn 465). It is a very interesting, communal take on composers compared to the very individualized approach to composition taken in the Western Classical tradition.

## **Authenticity**

Authenticity is a problem when attempting to teach the music of the Cherokee. Because of the oral tradition of dissemination of the songs and dances of the Cherokee, there is not a record of practices pre-European contact. The earliest recordings of Cherokee traditions are found in the Payne-Brutrick Papers, the diary recordings of missionaries written in the early 1830's who decided that if Cherokee practices were not written down they would be lost. This interaction was the first of many attempts to record the traditions of the Cherokee before contact with colonists, Christianity, and governmental attempts to suppress the cultures of Natives destroyed them. For example, Native American religious freedoms, practices, and holy lands were not lawfully being protected until the American Indian

Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and are often still unprotected as the court cases over disputed sacred land continue to favor corporate and government development of these lands as shown in the 1988 Supreme Court Case *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery* and the recent events regarding the Standing Rock Reservation. These government decisions have power to decide what is truly “holy” or “sacred” to a tribe and where exactly that falls in their right to religious freedom. Because of this, one must examine their definition of “authenticity”. A good measure for authenticity is taking what the tribe itself considers as “traditional”. The three best sources for this are the federally recognized governments of the Cherokee people, the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee, the Eastern Band of Cherokee, and the Cherokee Nation. Typically, these entities consider practices established or in practice during the 1800’s or earlier as traditional. This includes the influence of Christian practices and Pan-Indian events that did not originate within the Cherokee tribe but became an important part of Cherokee music. Thanks to the invention of the written Cherokee syllabary around 1821 by the Cherokee leader Sequoyah, the preservation of language and music became easier; however, as noted earlier, this date is well past contact and influence of the Europeans and their missionaries. Due to this fact, most of the evidence we have of Cherokee traditions post-dates the arrival of Europeans, greatly influencing the idea of traditional, authentic practices. Two practices I wish to include briefly that are not originally Cherokee but are considered tradition are the powwow and the singing of Christian hymns.

### **Cherokee, Christianity and the Trail of Tears**

Though originally used as a way to force the Cherokee people to assimilate to the European lifestyle, Christianity and more specifically the singing of Christian hymns became an important part of Cherokee life. As noted by Cooper in his dissertation on the missionaries beginning in 1817, many similarities existed between the religion of the Cherokee people and

Christianity. The Cherokee worshiped the Great Spirit, the all-powerful deity from which the world was created and prayers could be answered (Cooper, 2011). The Great Spirit could manifest himself in several forms, paralleling the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of Christianity. Hymns as sung prayer also paralleled the use of ritualistic formulas for prayer that was part of the Cherokee religion, made more potent by the belief that singing called upon spiritual power that was so deeply held within their society. Because of these similarities it was easy for many Cherokee to convert, as they saw their religion and Christianity as two sides of the same coin; however, there was also stark opposition from traditionalists. Opposition from this group was based in the integral part Cherokee religion and ritual played in their daily life, as, “Cherokee could not separate the spiritual beliefs from the other aspects of their lives, especially medicine, because almost every aspect of their culture involves calling upon spiritual power and praising the Great Spirit” (McLoughlin, 1994, p. 25)

Despite traditionalists viewing missionaries and Christianity as outside influence, many were won over by the dedication to the Cherokee people displayed by missionaries such as Samuel Worcester, whose actions in Supreme Court case *Worcester v. Georgia* led to the ruling that the Cherokee Nation was a distinct, sovereign nation. True cementation of Christian hymns into Cherokee life came during the removal and the Trail of Tears. This was an extremely trying, difficult time for the Nation bringing much sadness and despair and, as McLoughlin (1994) writes in his essays, “Christianity is a religion of hope, of miracles, of divine support for the weak and oppressed. When a tribe had reached the point of despair, Christianity provided a way out” (p. 17). Thus, the Cherokee found strength and power in the singing of Christian hymns on the Trail of Tears. These songs were so powerful to the people of the Cherokee Nation that *Amazing Grace* has since been seen as the unofficial national anthem of the

Cherokee people (Holmes, R, Smith, B., 1977, p. 12), similar to how Lift Up Your Voices is considered the African American national anthem. These hymns were adopted by the Cherokee people, and often changed with characteristics found in their own music. For example, in the recording of Guide Me Jehovah sung by Walker Calhoun, one can hear the influence of Cherokee prayer chant in the relatively narrow melodic line, low tessitura, and the heavy emphasis on pentatonics rather than the traditional melody used for this hymn (Cherokee Traditional). The Cherokee do not strictly sing these hymns the way Europeans did; rather, they took them and made them their own. Much of this music has survived thanks to the development of the syllabary mentioned earlier used to preserve music and language in such ways as the manuscript explaining Western music notation and containing many hymns written entirely in Cherokee by Lowell Mason. Artifacts like these show us the importance of Christian hymns to Cherokee life, though often in their purest, least acculturated forms.

### Pan-Indianism, and the Powwow

The American Indian powwow is one of the most iconic aspects of Native culture. Most citizens of the United States have heard the term and associate it with all Native cultures when in fact the powwow as it exists today originated with the Plains tribes (Diamond, 2008). Two factors that most influenced the adoption of the powwow are the interactions with the Plains tribes post Trail of Tears and the rise of the Pan-Indian movement in the 1900's. Relocation of the Cherokee tribe to Oklahoma caused them to interact in new ways with different tribes, especially the Plains tribes with whom powwows originated. Often powwows were used by these tribes for inter-tribal gatherings, of which the Cherokee were now included, which caused them to begin using the practice themselves.

The Pan-Indian movement rose out of a need to defend and protect indigenous culture by unifying and creating an identity as an American Indian rather than individual tribes to strengthen cultural identity. Though this movement succeeded in this regard, the results can also be damaging to the identity of individual tribes due to the lack of understanding that not all aspects of Native culture are shared through Pan-Indianism. Because of the popularization of the war-like Plains tribes through Hollywood and the proliferation of wars and conflict between these tribes the United States government until 1924, the Plains tribes became emblematic of Native America as a whole (Krystal, 2012). Many of the things that Pan-Indianism raised up as being part of a total cultural identity came from these tribes, such as powwows and peace pipes, because they already had a strong association with Natives because of the proliferation of the images in our media. As a result, many tribes, including Cherokee, felt a strengthened sense of identity when practicing these traditions that were not originally there, thus cementing the practice as a true part of their culture.

Today, powwows are still used for inter-tribal gatherings, and as competitions for dancers. Typically, there will be one or more dance circles in which groups perform traditional dances of their tribe in traditional regalia with as much diversity in the dances, music, and clothing as there are tribes in attendance (Diamond, 2008). There are two main types of powwow singing, the Northern and Southern styles. Because the powwow did not originate with the Cherokee, singing in this style is slightly altered from their traditional sound ideal; though, the sound ideal of the Southern style of Oklahoma is closely related to the traditional Cherokee sound. This style consists of a very relaxed singing style, low in vocal tessitura, and heavy use of sforzandos (Bower, 2009, p. 137). As evidenced, there are many overlapping characteristics between Cherokee traditional singing and Southern style powwow singing, which aided in the smooth adaptation of the practice into Cherokee society. Serving as a way to continue teaching

traditional dances and the stories they teach, powwows are an important part of the larger identity Cherokee hold as Native Americans, but it must be noted when teaching about powwows that they were not originally part of the Cherokee practice.

In addition, one must also address the issues brought along with Pan-Indianism. It is most often the view of the general public that all tribes share many characteristics and they are unable to distinguish between different tribes. In short, the idea of what it means to be Native in the United States has been greatly stereotyped. Pan-tribalism, another term for Pan-Indianism, though very important for strengthening the legal rights and unity of the tribes, does nothing to combat this lack of education regarding the diversity among Natives. Examples can be found throughout our society; the use of “Chief Illiniwek” and other mascots throughout sports as people believe them to be true representations of Natives is one very specific aspect that Pan-Indianism does not address. In the example of “Chief Illiniwek” at the University of Illinois, people argue that this figure is based on the tribe native to the area, the Ilaniawaki, and are honoring them; however, they fail to note that the Ilaniawaki were not a tribe, rather a political alliance of more than 12 different tribes each with their own culture and customs. In addition, the regalia, dance style, and persona adopted by “Chief Illiniwek” are not reflective of the cultures of the tribes belonging to this alliance as they are based in the traditions of the Plains tribes, specifically the Lakota, rather than the tribes of Peoria and Kaskaskia, two dominant tribes of the Ilaniawaki alliance that were relocated to Oklahoma. (Krystal, 2012) Here, Pan-Indianism may be applied to say all natives identify with these features therefore they are legitimate representations, when in actuality the practice here and elsewhere leads to misinformation about individual tribes and the characterization of natives as a single entity rather than an interweaving web of tribal practices and identities. With careful attendance, we can promote a unified Native

identity while keeping the integrity of individual tribal cultures further allowing Natives to connect with their ancestry as is increasingly difficult in modern times (Kelly, 2015). Music educators must do a better job of helping Natives, like myself, who were raised away from the cultural center in an attempt to escape the poverty found on tribal lands, connect to their culture in a meaningful way. Through carefully studying the music individually, and then presenting it to students in an informative manner, music educators can alleviate the problem Kelly talks about in his book of a disconnect between modern America, the cultural identity Native America through Pan-Indianism, and the knowledge of the traditions and practices of one's specific tribal heritage.



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Studio Jazz Band, and University Philharmonic Orchestra. Following his graduation in May 2017, he will be seeking employment in a Missouri public school district. This paper combines two of his passions, music, and his heritage as a citizen of the Cherokee Nation.

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