

Native American Music

Abstract

While music is the centerpiece of most communities, this research paper does a critical analysis of the Native American music and its influence on the culture of the indigenous people of the region. The research paper looks at the evolution of the music as well as the various ways of its application within these communities. The field of ethnomusicology is dedicated to extensive research on traditional music, and this paper uses the methods from the field to carry out the analysis. The main purpose of the research paper is to analyze and describe the musical developments that have taken place in the indigenous communities of Native Americans.

Introduction

Native Americans' music has developed over the years. The art was primarily vocal, choral to be more precise, as some cultures favored solo singing. This research paper does a critical analysis of the Native American music by looking at its origin, its impact on the society, and the instruments that are used. The music industry of Native Americans is purely melodic, without polyphony or harmony, but there is still an occasional antiphonal singing that involves a chorus and a soloist ("Native American Music and Culture"). The melody of the Native American music has an ascending feature with an irregular rhythm. The music has an uncertain intonation and no absolute pitch, which results in a distinctive technique of producing the voice that involves tension of the muscles of the vocal apparatus, making it possible to produce strong accents and glissandos. The singing of Native Americans is in most cases accompanied by instruments with various types of rattles. Drums are the chief tools. Also, wind instruments such as flutes and whistles are widely used too.

In Native American communities, music has been widely used as a means of communication with the extraordinary and superior powers. It is performed for the following purposes: to cure or heal the sick, to win a war, and call for rain. The Native American music is classed into three types including traditional songs that are passed from generation to generation, medicine and ceremonial songs, and the modern songs, which have a European influence (Diamond). There are also songs dedicated to heroes who have made an impact on the society and are often senior citizens. Such songs are also sung during the ceremonies of initiation of a new hero in the society. Additionally, there are also love songs, which have been influenced by the music of whites. However, they are often regarded as degenerate by Native Americans.

Review of Literature

According to Marcus and Sollors (20-45), America is a continent that has evolved with a lot of historic events, discoveries, and inventions. Numerous speeches, letters, poetry, and most importantly music formed the culture. This book takes into account these various forms of expressions that influenced the culture of the continent. The book consists of several essays and analyses the continent through its numerous voices and looks at the region from the point of view of cartoons, science fiction, and music that represent America.

Perea (99-108) describes how Native American communities have evolved in terms of musical culture and how the music has been applied at the local, national, and international level. The author gives a description of how the traditional sounds have been developed into forms that can be easily recognized, such as Native rock and Jazz. The book examines musical practices of the native communities and provides its detailed analysis and prognosis for its future.

Kristen and Shevy (764-778) in their journal do a comparative analysis of musical concepts between Germany and the U.S.A. The study looks at the evolution of music in the two countries and analyses Native Americans and the role they played in the evolution of modern music. The scientists also bring about an integration of the societal and individual theories, such as massification, while also comparing their differences and similarities.

Pisani (43-65) gives a comprehensive analysis of musical representations in Native American communities. This scholar studies the pre-colonial past in the Western Hemisphere until the present. The book also demonstrates how the European colonists had an impact on the musical culture of Native Americans. There is also a revelation of how specific themes evolved with time and how the native music was idealized and vilified by Native Americans.

(Stowe 22-34) looks in detail at the evolution of native and sacred music as well as Christian hymns. The author explains how the traditions of Native Americans influenced the

Protestant Christianity and how the creativity of music affected the strengthened faith and increased participation in religious activities.

History of the Native American Music

The Native American music dates back to several centuries and may be linked to various techniques of recounting stories, such as archeology, linguistics, and iconography. These techniques of recounting history have existed in most native cultures such as the Inca and Aztec. The Inca, for instance, had historical songs, and the Aztec also carved instructional symbols onto musical instruments to show how they were supposed to be played ("Native American Music"). Native Americans had extensive stories of regional interaction as it is revealed by the traditional narratives and linguistics. This subsequently led to the enrichment of their musical lives over time.

There are some Native American cultures that were engaged in reciprocal participation as a part of their lives for many centuries. This subsequently resulted in the creation of a network of musical exchange, which extended from Ontario in Canada to Florida. Archeological research has revealed some extensive information related to the history of the musical instruments used by Native Americans. There has also been a revelation of some historical art forms that made suggestions about the methods of instrumental performance. Specific instruments have been revealed to have been played by various communities at specific times and places, for instance, the teponaztli and huehuetli were played in Mexico in the pre-Columbian era (Marcus and Sollors).

At the beginning of the 16th century and till the 18th century, Native Americans embraced and adapted various musical instruments and genres from other regions, especially Europe, by means of musical interaction. Immediately after the first contact between the

Europeans and Native Americans, assimilation and mixing of cultures started to progress. The Europeans taught American Indians to compose and perform European music as well as to construct European musical instruments ("Native American Music"). The musical interaction between the Europeans and Native Americans began when the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes reached Mexico in early 16th century. Within exactly a decade later, Mexican Indians were being enrolled for music lessons at mission schools, which even led the proliferation of church musicians. There were so many of them than the churches could engage everyone.

The musical interaction between the Europeans and Native Americans had a huge impact on the former and had shaped the evolution of music in Native American communities. There are some cultures that play musical instruments and genres that were imported from Europe, for example, the Maya people of Chiapas who played music from Spain (Diamond 40-44). At the same time, the European colonists also taught Native Americans to perform dances such as the machines, which involved a pantomime accompanied by instruments such as the guitar and violin. In such a way, the cultures were being assimilated; these forms of music were blended and extensively practiced, cementing their traditional cultures ("Native American Music"). The musical culture of Native Americans was also influenced by the Africans who were transported to the Western Hemisphere by the colonists. The Africans brought musical concepts and instruments such as drums, which were introduced to the indigenous Native American societies.

Interview

The interview involved Dr. John-Carlos Perea, who is currently an Assistant Professor at San Francisco State University. The interviewee graduated with a BA from the same university in 2000 and went ahead to receive his Master's and Doctorate degree in Music at the University of California. The interviewee is interested in the musical cultures of Native Americans,

specifically the Indian and the powwow music. He is also a musician, and he even won a Grammy award and recorded several musical albums.

During the interview, the ethnomusicologist gave a detailed analysis and described how the native traditional musical sounds had developed into other forms of music, which are presently more recognizable such as Jazz and Rock. He gave an in-depth look at how the musical practices of Native Americans are a representation of a single performance that includes sounds and messages. According to him, this has resulted in a brief text that has produced an interconnected dynamic music culture. This is an excerpt of the interview.

Interview Excerpt

Interviewer: What is your thought on Native Music in America?

John Perea: Any sound of Native music with an Indian background that is accompanied with imagery is currently a global cultural phenomenon which is disseminated through various outlets such as cinema, sports, cartoons and literature

Interviewer: Please tell us something about the performances that accompany Native American Music.

John Perea: The repetition of performances of Native American music can lead to the normalization of violence and primitivism of people as even exemplified by students in my American Indian classes who describe the music as harsh, frightening and shrieking.

Ethno musicological Themes

Culture and Music in Native America

The relationship between culture and music in Native American communities has been linked to musical concepts and values as well as the role of the structure and language in music texts. As a rule, most musical concepts and values comprise ideas about the sources of the music, creativity, aesthetics, and transmission. There is a constant development of musical concepts and values through the interaction of social and cultural processes (Kristen and Shevy 764-778). Most of these values give a broader reflection of the modes of thinking, and therefore can give insights into cultural patterns. Discussions of musical concepts within the Native communities have a degree of variance. There is a need to observe their musical practice to study the underlying conceptual structures (Pisani). There is a huge diversity among Native American Indian peoples even though they have varying general features of musical values and concepts.

Native Americans believe that their traditional music has divine origin. Specific songs were given to people when they were created by the spirits and the Creator. Their sacred narratives explain the origins of various musical instruments, dances, and songs. Most believe that some rituals were performed at the time of creation, and therefore they cannot be further recreated (Perea 99-108). The Native American music has been used for various purposes and has performed in a variety of ways. There are cases where some individuals experience dreams and visions where they are taught new songs and dances by the spirits. At the same time, some Native Indian communities have learned new songs from their neighbors and adopted foreign musical practices ("Native American Music").

During specific times of the year, new music is always provided by the communities to mark an important occasion or event. There are cases when an individual can have a dream or

vision where they learn a new song which can either be presented during such events or they can decide to retain the songs for personal use. But in most Native American communities the process of creating songs is always collective and involves the input of several members. This is exemplified by the native Andean people who place an emphasis on collaboration and participation when composing new songs ("Native American Music"). Some genres are always improvised for example the lullabies while some other songs are never composed since they are considered to be complete. The musical creativity largely lies on the song leader, and they have to come up with variations on the song texts and melodies within the required frameworks. This makes the process of composition of music a dynamic process.

The Process of learning or teaching Music

The process of musical transmission comprises teaching and learning, which allows preserving songs and repertoires pass them from one generation to another. Native Americans widely preserve oral tradition to transmit their music. Certain musical genres, such as social dances, are learned through participation or imitation. However, there are some genres that need a formal method of teaching. For instance, in the Suva community in Brazil, boys are taught how to sing specific songs during a process of their initiation (Perea 99-108). The boys are taught the songs under the supervision of adults in secluded places away from the village. There are also ritual songs that require apprenticeship. In such cases, the student has to receive directions and instructions from an experienced adult over some period. Certain communities have even developed systems of music notation, but they are applied not as teaching tools rather as aids for memory for experienced singers (Pisani).

Performance Analysis

With the technological advancement, Native Americans started to include audio and video recordings in their oral tradition of teaching. Technology is also used for preserving traditional repertoires (Pisani 43-65). Native Americans always pay more attention to the feelings that the song generates during its performance than the qualities of the song. However, this concept is very difficult to identify within the musical culture. There are even certain communities that take into consideration the number of people who participate in the performance as the attendance is an indication of the vitality of the culture and the social network.

Communication is also a parameter used to gauge the success of a musical performance if it is specifically meant for transcending the human realm ("Native American Music"). In the cases where music or performance is supposed to show a form of physical and mental strength, the success is judged according to the capability of the performer to demonstrate dignity and a lot of self-discipline while showing some form of commitment to the community and the family at the same time. The musical designs of Native Americans apply repetitions and circularity, which is highly appreciated by the American Indians as they can resonate with their social values.

In Native America, musical performances are extremely important and most instruments are constructed from readily available materials. It is necessary to point out that the materials are available within the environment and can be done by virtually everyone within a short period. Sometimes, it can take weeks or months to make more sophisticated instruments as they need an experienced craftsman who uses specifically designed tools and materials. Most musical instruments are of symbolic significance, and it is evident from the way the instruments are used, handled, named, or even decorated ("Native American Music"). The names of instruments can also reflect social relationships within the community. The decorations of the instruments often

refer to specific narratives, which are sacred or have a spiritual significance. Each community classifies its instruments by organizing knowledge. There are various categories of musical instruments that are used by Native Americans, including idiophones, membranophones, and aerophones among others.

Idiophones are musical instruments which produce musical sound through vibration the moment it is struck, rubbed, plucked or even shaken. It is the most widely used category of instruments in Native America and is designed in various shapes and sizes from highly diverse materials. The various categories of idiophones include scrapers, plucked idiophones and friction idiophones (Stowe). At the same time, rasps are also used as musical instruments in America and are constructed from various materials such as gourds, food graters or even alligator skins. There are some communities which even used human skull bones as a resonator specifically the Mixtec. As opposed to rasps, the friction idiophones have a solid body that has a smooth surface which is constantly rubbed with a stick (Pisani 43-65)

The other musical instrument used by the Native Americans is the membranophones which have a stretched membrane in frame with the musical sound given out by rubbing the membrane or setting it into motion. Drums are also a form of membranophones with most Native Americans making the drums in various sizes from various materials (Stowe 22-34). There are various types of drums that exist in Native America with the single-headed drums, kettle drums, and double-headed drums being the most popular. The single headed drums have a single drum that is also stretched across a frame and is most commonly used by the plain Native Americans as an accompaniment to songs or even games ("Native American Music"). There are also aerophones which require an airstream to give out a musical sound. Aerophones can be blown into to produce the sound or whirled in the air. The other instrument includes the bull-roarers

which are constructed from wood slab which is tied to a string and is then whirled in the air to produce sound. The Natives in southwestern United States applied the bull-roarers in imitation of the sound of rain during the ceremonies for rain-making.

Conclusion

Native Americans are indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere who comprise hundreds of native communities. Each community has its own distinct history, musical traditions, and culture. The music of Native Americans is extraordinarily diverse and has multifaceted performance traditions. This research paper has described in detail the origin of the Native American music and the Europeans influence on their musical culture. It has also discussed the effect of the music on the culture of Native Americans as well as clearly analyzed the musical instruments that they used to produce musical sounds.