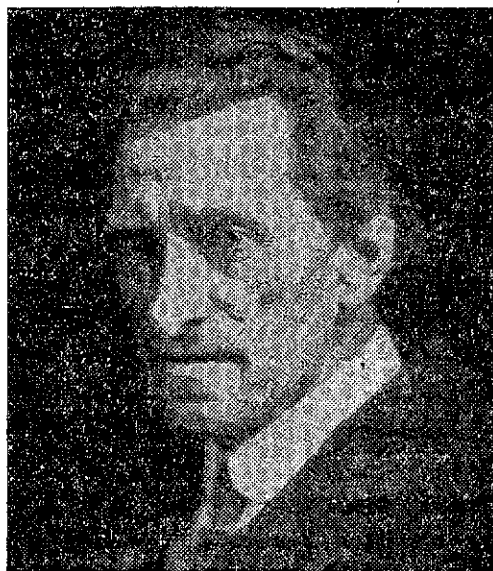


Maori Song and Music

By Johannes C. Andersen



Mr. Johannes C. Andersen, who is undoubtedly one of the world's leading authorities on the Maori. He has written several books, notable on the Maori being "Myths and Legends of the Polynesians." —S. P. Andrew, photo.

It is not easy to arrive at an idea of what the Maori thinks of song; nor is this to be wondered at. For one thing, it is a little late in the day to begin questioning. Again, how many Europeans could give definite or satisfactory replies if questioned on the technique of music or song? Writers like Helmholtz, on the analysis of sound, or Plunket Greene, on the analysis of song, came at a late period in the development of musical taste—at a date when there was something settled and definite in men's ideas of music and their utterance of it. What can be expected of the Maori, who had not yet reached to the evolution of harmony, to say nothing of counterpoint—who had hardly even reached the stage at which our own enharmonic primitive folk-song evolved?

If we can examine an old poem or song that has escaped the modernising touch of a Percy, we shall find the phrases of indefinite lengths. In a modern poem or song the phrases are of fairly definite and equal lengths, the full phrase occupying a full verse of eight or seven beats, usually broken into two lines of four beats, or of four and three—the "long measure" and "common measure" of church hymns. Since music followed the words, the four-bar and eight-bar themes in music have their origin in the four and eight accented lines and verses of poetry.

In the old poems, most of which were songs, the lines and verses were not so definitely regular—the regularity finally crystallising into the stanza of four or eight lines, or of sixteen or thirty-two bars. In singing, the lines took on the character of Gregorian chants, where there are short melodic phrases separated by conventional breves to which an indefinite number of syllables may be sung. The general trend in singing seems to have been towards the evolution of phrases that could be sung in one breath, or in two breaths. In church music the old and the new live side by side in the Gregorian chants, and the hymns ancient and modern.

Even in church music, however, the melody is modern throughout in its definiteness—in its being confined to steps of tone or semitone; in the folk-songs the melody, as the rhythm, and the length of the phrases, was ad lib. throughout. The introduction of metre and harmony resulted in the standardising, more or less, of melody, rhythm and phrase-length.

There is evidence of similar evolution, or trends towards similar evolution, in Maori music. There is also a vigorous survival of what is probably a yet older character—a character that has quite disappeared from modern music. In many, if not all the Maori Karakia, usually sung or intoned in a rhythmical monotone, the whole is delivered on one breath. This would, of course, be impossible for one person, so where two take part one sings as long as his breath will carry the sound, the second takes up the words on the same note just before the breath of the first is expended, so that there is an unbroken flow of sound.

When a company of people is singing one of their monotone songs of welcome the break in the general body of sound is quite perceptible when one or other stops to take breath. The one particular voice ceases for a moment or two, then resumes; another ceases, and resumes, and so on, the general murmur never ceasing till the close, where there is usually a drop in the hianga through one tone to four or more. The breath may be taken at any place—even in the middle of a word; and, in resuming, the singer may start again in the middle of a word. There seems to have been an aim to make the breath last as long as possible, and there were particular songs for practice in holding the breath.

Dieffenbach writes ("Travels in New Zealand," vol. 2, p. 32: Lond., 1843): "A very common sport amongst children consists in opening and shutting the fingers, and bending the arm in a certain manner, when the following words are said, the whole of which must be completed in a single breath: 'Katahi ti ka hara mai tapati tapato re ka rau ua ka rau ua ka noho te kiwi ka pohe wa tautau to pi to pa ka huia mai ka tako te rangi kai ana te wetu kai ana te marama o te Tiu e rere ra runga e tepe ra peke o hua kauere turakina te arero wiwi wawa ke ke ke te manu ki taupiri.'"

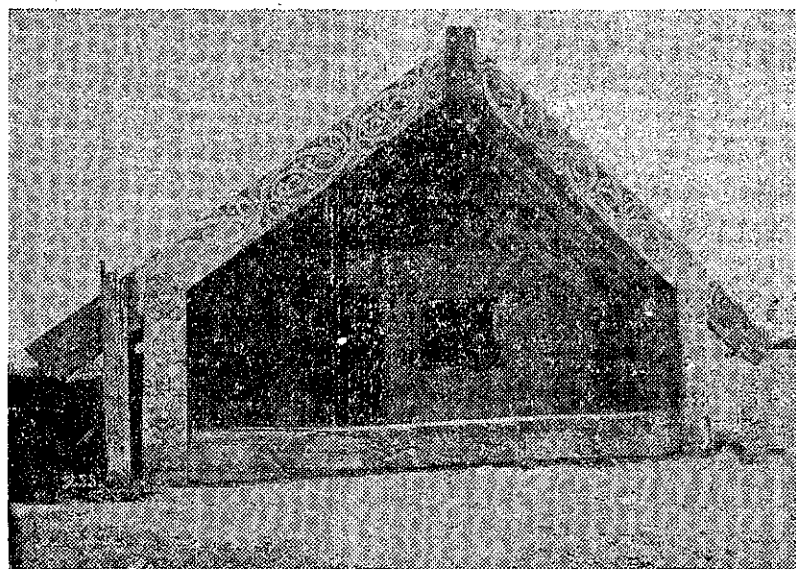
The division of a song or karakia into definite lines, and verses (a definite aggregate of lines), and stanzas (a more or less definite aggregate of verses, usually two or four) is a stage of evolution to which Maori music had not yet attained, but indications of which can clearly be seen. It is a natural evolution to which the poetry and music of all peoples are subject, for the same forms both in poetry and music have evolved independently among the various peoples.

In Maori songs the stanzas are of all manner of lengths, like the old "batches" or "tirades" in songs such as the "Romance of Roland." Among the Ngati Porou these stanzas are known as whiti, the divisions within the stanza, the irregular lines, being each called to upoko: they are heads. Every song has its principal note, or the melody rising and falling a little above and below this note.

The little drops in fractions of a tone are whatinga. There are often, especially in laments and love-songs—waiata-tangi and waiata-aroha—curious and affecting breaks, noticed more often on the letter h; emotional breaks, introducing a grace-note. This break is called hotu ("a heart-note"). It is very noticeable in the songs of Caruso, and with its emotional power behind it it always produces a powerful effect.

The resting-place, or breathing-place, is called whakataanga, and there is here often a slight drop, an incipient hianga.

The act of starting a song is called takitaki or hapai. In a song that is sung on one breath the leader will carry on the dominant part or theme, the tahu, the chorus (Continued on page 45.)



A specimen of Maori art. This meeting-house is exquisitely carved, not only the facings which can be seen, but the whole facade is carefully figured. The white dots represent pawa shell eyes of the figures in the shaded background.

—Dominion Museum, photo.