

Powwow Time for Organ and Flute

Notes by Judith Vander

The intertribal Native American powwow has become one of the most important events, or "Indian doings" as they are called, on the Native American calendar. I have been privileged to experience the powwow firsthand during many years of studying Wind River Shoshone music and culture. The powwow is a time to get together with family and friends, to proudly assert one's Indian identity and heritage through dance and song, and last but not least, to thoroughly enjoy oneself. A tribal community hosts a weekend of dancing and singing. People from many states come, camp, and compete for generous cash prizes in dance contests, which take place primarily on the weekend evenings. Contestants are grouped into categories according to age, gender, and type of dance. Interspersed with the competition dancing (open to contestants from any tribe), are so-called "intertribal dances," which in the powwow refers to dances open to both contestants and non-contestants who are appropriately dressed. Indian song, Indian dance, a good time shared by many local and visiting participants--that, in a nutshell, is the ideal and flavor of Northern-Plains powwows.

"Powwow time" is all of the above, but it is also a reference to the rhythmic character or signature of the most important types of songs at the heart of a powwow. In this composition I have not used

actual songs from the powwow, rather, I have written my own. It has been a balancing act. On the one hand are the musical characteristics of a Flag song, Round Dance song, and War Dance song--their structure, their rhythms, their melodic contour, and the way singers sing them. On the other hand is my own background in Western music. I attempt to blend these two musical skeins into a tightrope and walk across it.

Drum groups provide the musical accompaniment for the powwow dances. The musicians encircle a large drum that has been tipped on its side, and beat in unison on it. They both drum and sing. In the past, only men performed at the drum; this is still predominantly true but nowadays there are some mixed or even all-female drum groups. To complete the ensemble, women sometimes stand behind the drum group and sing the "ladies' part" an octave above the men.

A lead singer sings a high opening phrase, which the rest of the singers repeat: a call and response. Then all sing together as the song continues, always descending to lower phrase levels, a terraced soundscape. A long final note ends the first big section of the song. With the exception of omitting the opening call and response, the second section of the song is a repeat of the first. All three movements of my composition follow the descending melodic contour and two-part form, which are characteristic of powwow songs.

Singing style is another important aspect of all Plains songs. Singers produce a pulsing sound--rhythmic bursts of breath--which ornament long held notes. These long notes often occur at the ends

of phrases or sections. In my piece I have given this task, among others, to the flute, which can mimic the effect perfectly.

The powwow evening begins with the Grand Entry song. This provides the musical accompaniment for the long line of contestants who dance into and around the perimeter of the powwow arena. Then comes a solemn and deeply moving moment: everyone rises and men remove their hats as a war veteran brings in the American flag to the accompaniment of a Flag song. Many tribes have their own special Flag songs. In the powwow, it is the Indian surrogate for the national anthem. There is a distinctive drum pattern for the Flag song: there are two beats in every measure (2/4 time), and the drum is hit only on the first beat. The tempo is slow and measured. These characteristics lend a majestic and stately quality to the music, a sense of time slowed down, of time out of time.

Early in powwow history the War Dance was a primary focus and was exclusively a man's dance (the latter is no longer true). The Plains Round Dance eventually developed into a balancing foil for the War Dance. Wind River Shoshones used to call it the Women's Dance because it was the women's choice: either to form their own dance circle, or to ask men to dance with them--as partners side-by-side, or two women on either side of a man. The drum part in Round Dance songs establishes an underlying three-beat pattern, which distinguishes the Round Dance from both the Flag Song and War Dance, which are in 2/4 time. The drum is struck on beats one and three, with a slight accent on beat one, setting the musical wheel in motion: da __ tuh, da __ tuh, da __ tuh, etc. In their melody, the singers play against this drum pattern,

often avoiding the first beat altogether and accentuating in a variety of ways the second beat, the silent beat on the drum.

The men's War Dance is the climax of the powwow. On the Plains in the 19th century, warfare for horses and hunting grounds elevated the status of the warrior. War dancing was an important part of male warrior societies, and the different tribes all had their own histories and expressions of it. But the Traditional War Dance, the later Fancy War Dance, and the powwow itself, were all strongly influenced by cultures of the Southern Plains. In composing the final War Dance movement, I have tried to evoke the incredible energy and drive of Fancy War Dance performance.

The drumbeat pattern for the War Dance is different from that of the Flag Song and Round Dance: the musicians strike the drum on every beat of a War Dance song. With this steady drumbeat the intensity builds. The War Dance begins at a moderate pace, but with each repetition the tempo increases. Also, the lead singer often "pushes up" the pitch of each repetition by a step. In other words, every repetition of the song modulates to a new and higher "key." This change of tonal center is unique to War Dance songs, and abets its aesthetic of excitement. Higher tonal centers push up the ladies' part ever higher into their penetrating upper range.

Drum accents add to the increasing excitement of the performance. Either by the second or third repetition, musicians add strong drum accents in the middle of the second section of the song. They alternate very light strokes with accented loud strokes. The dancers themselves contribute their own musical crescendo to

the performance as the bells that are attached to their legs respond rhythmically to every move they make. Faster and faster, higher and higher, more turns, leaps, a flurry of feathers. But the dancer must take care: in the midst of this frenzy he must be in control and end precisely on the last beat. An over-step disqualifies the dancer.