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R.M.W. Dixon and Grace Koch. *Dyirbal Song Poetry: The Oral Literature of an Australian Rainforest People*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996. 367 pp. ISBN 0-7022-2593-2 (softcover)

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With the facts of Dvořák's biography and the historical context of his music now laid out in detail in modern academic dress, the time is surely ripe for the study of Dvořák's music to proceed to a more sophisticated level, both in its analysis of the musical scores and its significance as national and international music. None of the analytical essays, for example, ventured into the new-familiar world of Schenkerian analysis, and few attempted to problematize the wider issues surrounding Dvořák's music on a level found in the two articles by Michael Beckerman cited above. The question of Dvořák's harmonic language, its relationship to Brahms on the one hand, and to Wagner on the other, surely needs more detailed discussion. One can only hope that, given these books, Dvořák's music will soon be accorded the kind of intense scrutiny routinely given the music of Schubert, Brahms, Berg, or even Verdi. As they stand, however, they provide not only a timely corrective to long-sending, hand-me-down views of Dvořák, but also point the direction that a new, more deeply considered exploration of his music might take.

Kenneth DeLong

R.M.W. Dixon and Grace Koch. *Dyirbal Song Poetry: The Oral Literature of an Australian Rainforest People*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996. 367 pp. ISBN 0-7022-2593-2 (softcover).

Two hundred years ago few people could have envisaged the impact European expansion would have on a remote continent in the South Pacific. Indeed, in hindsight we might be quick to criticize the objectives of the British Empire in setting out to carry "civilization and humanity, peace and good government, and above all the knowledge of the true God, to the utter ends of the earth."¹ Yet the conquest of distant lands by a dominant civilization is certainly not new and one must wonder how many cultures through the centuries have been assimilated by another society, preserving little recognizable trace of their former identity. We are fortunate that individuals such as R.M.W. Dixon and Grace Koch have taken the initiative to preserve some remnant of this culture in order that we might be able to appreciate a rich heritage that has almost disappeared. This book is the result of a joint effort by Dixon and Koch: Dixon is responsible for much of the biographic and analytic content while Koch worked on the presentation of the musical examples. A compact disc recording of some of the music identified in this study is available and may be obtained directly from the distributor by writing to the address given in the introductory notes (p. xiv).

The present study endeavours to capture the language, music, and traditions of the Dyirbal people of the Cairns rainforest region in North Queensland, Australia, before the last members of the tribe who are fully fluent in the culture pass on to meet their ancestors. Dixon notes that at the time of publication there

¹ Andrew Armitage, *Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 6.

were only two people left who were able to sing the traditional Dyirbal songs. This, then, is a timely publication which offers the reader a truly unique insight into the life of these people, as reflected in their music. Furthermore, the systematic and comprehensive research undertaken by the authors gives this book a value which extends its significance beyond simply recording an almost extinct tradition of music; studies in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy will all benefit from this work.

The scope of this study is broad — Dixon and Koch present 174 songs collected between 1963 and 1993, from nineteen different singers — but such a work is necessary in the absence of any other extensive research into Dyirbal culture. A quick look at the *Bibliography of Australian Music* reveals that a number of studies have been undertaken on the Aboriginal people of the Cape York area, where the Dyirbal people live.² Yet Dixon informs us that although the Dyirbal people are located on the Eastern coast of this area only one other work, by W.E. Roth, acknowledges the distinctive language and music of this group (p. 48). While it is remarkable that such a unique culture and language (including the various dialects of different tribes) could have developed in an area of less than 120 square kilometres, it is more surprising that this group has been completely overlooked in previous literature. This does, however, suggest that one must be very careful when making sweeping generalizations about the cultural nature of the Australian Aboriginal people.

Dixon's prologue to this study provides a short overview of the history of the Dyirbal-speaking people from before the "white invasion," to the time he began collecting and recording songs in 1963, concluding with the state of the Dyirbal people when the last recording was made in 1993. The specialized nature of this book is here made evident by Dixon's almost exclusive focus on the Dyirbal people, to the point that his neglect of other Australian aboriginal groups is quite noticeable. For a reader well versed in the traditions and culture of the native people of Australia this might not be an issue, but for others the absence of comparative information could be potentially confusing or misleading; even the most cursory comparison between Dyirbal music and that of other tribes in the Cape York area is neglected. But while such comparative information might be interesting and useful, it is clearly not the intention of the authors to examine the origins or development of this musical style but rather to present a snapshot of the remnants of Dyirbal culture.

The introduction draws the reader further into the world of the Dyirbal people by focusing on the specific nature of the language and song styles and the relationship of the music to individual singers. Dixon informs us that this collection of verses from the five different song styles "provides a mirror on the way of life of the Dyirbal people" (p. 9). It quickly becomes apparent that the reader must discard any idea of applying parallels from traditions in Western music to these pieces; with the exception of one song style, Burran, word order and melody are left to the freedom of the individual performer and

²Deborah Crisp, *Bibliography of Australian Music: An Index to Monographs, Journal Articles, and Theses* (Armidale: Australian Music Studies Project, 1982).

often operate independently of the strict, unvarying percussion accompaniment. The unifying element found in the song styles is the syllabic construction of the text, and here Dixon's expertise as a linguist is evident, if not a little one-sided. He devotes approximately twenty-two pages to a detailed and "fairly technical" discussion of the vocabulary, grammar and phonology of Dyirbal song poetry. Compare this to the little over two pages of notes on the nature of the musical style. Again, however, one must remember that this is music not derived from Western traditions and, as such, must be considered on its own terms.

A major obstacle one faces when attempting to document a completely oral tradition of music and poetry is that committing a song to paper immediately compromises the unique and intimate character of the spoken or sung word. Walter Ong observes that "though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever ... for most literates, to think of words as totally dissociated from writing is simply too arduous a task to undertake, even when specialized anthropological work may demand it."³ Such limitations, especially when trying to use Western musical notation to transcribe the music, become obvious as Dixon attempts to relate the way the Dyirbal people viewed and portrayed everyday events in their music.

But given the limitations of the pen, Dixon and Koch successfully convey the dialectal essence of the art form. The songs are divided into five distinct song styles: Gama, Marrga, Jangala, Burran, and Gaynyil. Each piece, placed in the appropriate style, is presented in a number of ways: as a linguistic transcription of the language; as a morphemic translation of the text; and as a translation of the poem, line by line, into English. Furthermore, performance markings (i.e., breath marks and instrument interludes), the historical background of a song, the associated dance, and other noteworthy features are meticulously included with each piece. Care is also taken to identify elements which changed in subsequent performances of a song by the same singer and variations between renditions of the same song by different singers. Through this detailed process, which includes quotations taken directly from the performers, one becomes quite familiar with each of the singers, empathizing with their efforts to recall songs which they heard many years earlier and enjoying the stories associated with how each song came into existence. This personal approach to discussing the songs transcends the limitations of a purely technical study and makes this book very approachable to the reader. The intimate, individual, and unique quality of this music is evident.

The musical transcription and discussion of the songs, however, is a little problematic. *Dyirbal Song Poetry* includes nineteen transcriptions of pieces taken from the five song styles in Dyirbal music. Dixon acknowledges that conventional (Western) notation cannot easily cope with the complexities of Australian Aboriginal music and admits that the melodies have been altered to fit as closely as possible to a "tempered" scale (although no indication is given as to exactly which temperament he is referring). From this he "[hopes] the

³Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 12.

reader will be able to gain a general knowledge of the melodies by this practice” and advises that “a true appreciation of Dyirbal songs can only be gained by listening to recordings” (p. 49).

There are some obvious shortcomings with this method of transcription into conventional Western notation. The wide variety of key signatures incorporated into the music are quite distracting; one piece, *Burran-Z*, is notated with the key signature of C-sharp major! *Finale*, the computer program used to create the various transcriptions, is capable of indicating microtonal inflections but no attempt has been made to do this. Furthermore, every piece is notated in the treble clef without indicating the actual octave in which the performer sang. In terms of rhythm, the pieces have also been adapted to suit Western notation, reducing the basic syllabic movement to a quarter- or eighth-note beat. The timbral qualities of the individual singers have been completely ignored. While I appreciate the attempt to convey an idea of the musical qualities of Dyirbal song poetry to the reader/musician, one is left with the impression that Dyirbal music is an unusual derivation of Western tonal traditions. For those without access to the CD recording which is available in conjunction with this book, “a general knowledge of the melodies” is difficult to achieve.

Dyirbal Song Poetry concludes with a sizable vocabulary section which gives a translation of the Dyirbal words used in the songs. The introduction to this section is quite technical but reinforces the importance of grammar as a key structure in the identification of Dyirbal music. While not all grammatical information is given (information concerning in which dialect(s) of Dyirbal each word occurs, for instance), Dixon assures us that a comprehensive dictionary of Dyirbal is in active preparation.

This review must include a few observations concerning the layout and organization of the text. Following an extensive table of contents and the short preface, *Dyirbal Song Poetry* begins by listing definitions and abbreviations to be used, as well as a key to the presentation of the songs and a brief section on the orthographic nature of the Dyirbal language. While these notes will prove extremely useful later on in the book, it is a little confusing to come across such details before any discussion of the people or culture has been undertaken. From a purely organizational perspective, one wonders if this information might be more appropriate as an appendix or integrated into the analytic sections.

The absence of any sort of index is definitely a problem, especially if this work is intended as an interdisciplinary research tool. Care has not been taken to ensure that standardized tables are used to present information concerning the range, pulse, and the inclusion of a mid-sections, vocalizations, and added syllables in the five song styles. One will further question why these tables have only been used for the Gama and Jangala song styles, and not for the Marrga, Burran, and Gaynyil. These are purely aesthetic observations; it is quite obvious to the reader that the tables are very useful for the comparison of individual songs. A final observation is the inclusion of question marks in the map of the location of the Dyirbal language, the use of which is not explained in the key (p. 11).

The highly specialized content of *Dyirbal Song Poetry* is both this book's major strength and unfortunate weakness. Ten references are given in the very limited bibliography given at the end of the introduction, but most of these sources pertain specifically to the language of the Dyirbal people (p. 50). As indicated earlier, there is also no mention of similar studies undertaken with other tribes in Cape York or the rest of Australia which serves to isolate this study from other works on Aboriginal music. Nevertheless, *Dyirbal Song Poetry* is a pioneering work in this field and the efforts of Dixon and Koch should serve to pave the way for more comparative studies in the future.

Richard Hardie

Melvin P. Unger. *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts: An Interlinear Translation with Reference Guide to Biblical Quotations and Allusions*. Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1996. xvi, 776 pp. ISBN 0-8108-2979-7 (hardcover).

Melvin P. Unger's *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts* is a welcome addition to the body of scholarship devoted to placing Bach's cantatas into their original theological context. At the heart of the book are interlinear translations of the cantata librettos, complemented by copious citations of the Biblical passages to which they allude. Unger also includes details such as the Sunday each cantata was composed for, the biblical readings for the service, and the librettist. Although the translations will be most helpful to those whose German is not excellent, the Biblical citations will serve as a convenient reference for those with varying degrees of familiarity with the repertoire.

The underlying premise of the *Handbook* is that because the cantatas were "placed between the Gospel reading and the Sermon of the Lutheran liturgy ... [they] sought to teach and persuade the listener" (p. xi). Thus, cantatas were used "for the proclamation, amplification, and interpretation of scripture" (p. xi). The problem, as Unger sees it, is that whereas cantatas teem with theological references, "many of these remain enigmatic to the twentieth-century musician for they presuppose a much closer familiarity with the Bible than is common today" (p. xi). Unger's central purpose, therefore, "is to reconstruct something of the receptive framework for Bach's cantata texts; to identify the significant biblical themes that, in Bach's day, would have informed and illuminated listeners' perceptions as they heard these texts on a Sunday morning" (p. xi).

Unger peripherally treats the issue of whether the theology of the cantatas necessarily reflects the theology of Bach himself, and he appears to embrace the intentional fallacy wholeheartedly. Unger concedes that "because Bach composed so little sacred music after his first five years in Leipzig, some scholars conclude he had little personal commitment to the vocation of church musician and probably only wrote church works to the extent his position of Cantor required it" (p. xi). Unger, however, argues that Bach took theology very seriously, his primary evidence being that Bach "added underlinings,