

SPIRIT AND SONG OF THE MAORI  
OF AOTEAROA {NEW ZEALAND}

ANN CLEMENTS



“Kei a te Po te timatatanga o te waiatatanga mai a te Atua.  
Ko te Ao, ko te Ao marama, ko te Ao turoa.”<sup>1</sup>

It was in the night that the gods sang the world into existence.  
From the world of light, into the world of music.

**MAORI** are the indigenous people of Aotearoa (island of the “long white cloud”) or New Zealand. According to Maori mythology, music called the world into creation. As soon as the gods turned night into light, they turned light into music. The connotation of this story is that when life first appeared, it brought with it the complexities of living experience, including emotions that are most easily and genuinely expressed through music. All Maori songs (*waiata*) stem from the emotions that the gods displayed during creation. “There are songs of sorrow, anger and lament; of loneliness, desire and joy; of peace and love.”<sup>2</sup>

These aesthetic attributes of music echo music’s functions and uses globally. Humans use music to define, represent, symbolize, and unify or disrupt society. Music is an expression of our social, political, spiritual, and self and group identity. Within Maori culture, music plays all of these roles—from its imperative position in sacred (*tapu*) ritual to its unifying task in the preservation, creation, and demonstration of group identity. Music is a primary social adhesive that has sustained Maori culture and heritage for hundreds of years.

Ann Clements  
Associate Professor of Music Education  
The Pennsylvania State University School of Music  
acc13@psu.edu

# SPIRIT AND SONG OF THE MAORI

This brief encounter with Maori music will provide an interweaving of culture and musical knowledge. It intends to serve as a *kūaha* or gateway for choral conductors and performers to explore Maori performance practice. Learning to navigate the intersections of music's sonic and cultural relevance in Maori life provides the foundation for a more complete realization of the rich and complex role music plays in Maori society.

## MAORI HISTORY

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people! It is people! It is people!

—Maori Proverb

While the exact date that the Maori discovered New Zealand is debatable, it is largely believed that they arrived on the islands just prior to and during the thirteenth century. Navigating a long voyage originating in Eastern Polynesia in the open Pacific, their large canoes (*waka*) were guided by expert navigators who used ocean currents, the winds, and stars. The ancestors sailed on vessels such as Te Arawa, Tainui, Takitimu, Mamari, and Horouta. These vessel names live on as the names of the tribal groupings (*iwi*) with which Maori associate themselves genealogically. Many Maori can trace their family genealogy (*whakapapa*) back to the specific navigator and canoe from which they are descended. "During the voyage they displayed remarkable powers overcoming many dangers, and on their arrival they introduced valuable resources such as the kumara (sweet potato) and karaka tree."<sup>3</sup>

Over several centuries in relative isolation, these Polynesian settlers refined a unique language (*te Reo*), a rich mythology, distinctive crafts, and complex performing arts. While many modern Maori take pride in the collective name "Maori," which is loosely translated as natural or common, it is important to recognize that Maori were not a united indigenous population until colonization, when non-Maori settlers (*Pakeha*) called for a distinction between the indigenous population and the Europeans. Tribal affiliation, when known, still plays a dominant role in genealogical self-identity.

The first European explorer to sight New Zealand was Abel Tasman on December 13, 1642,<sup>4</sup> but he was unable to come ashore because of the "hostile natives."<sup>5</sup> Captain James Cook, who reached New Zealand in October of 1769 on the first of his three voyages,<sup>6</sup> was the first European able to negotiate with the Maori, allowing him to circumnavigate, survey, and map New Zealand. From the late eighteenth century forward, explorers and other sailors, missionaries, traders, whalers, and sealers arrived with the largest wave of settlers arriving in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century. For many inland and highland Maori, there was limited cultural disruption or change beyond the appearance of new goods. For the coastal and lowland Maori, however, change was occurring at an unprecedented speed due primarily to the introduction of the musket and the conversion of many Maori to Christianity.

In 1840, Maori chieftains entered into a compact with Britain called the Treaty of Waitangi in which they ceded sovereignty to Queen Victoria of Great Britain while retaining territorial rights. That same year, the British began the first organized colonial settlement. A series of land wars between 1843 and 1872 ended with the defeat of the Maori. The British colony of New Zealand became

an independent dominion in 1907 and supported the United Kingdom militarily in both World Wars.

In recent years, the government has sought to address longstanding Maori grievances stemming back to the Treaty of Waitangi. Among the disputes are that the signed Maori and English treaties are different and that many of the rights guaranteed to Maori were ignored. To help rectify this, the Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975. It has ruled on a number of claims brought by Maori tribes, and compensation has been granted in many cases. While disagreements over the terms of the treaty continue to this day, it is still considered New Zealand's founding document.<sup>7</sup>

Today, New Zealand is home to over 4.4 million people. According to data from a recent national census,<sup>8</sup> approximately 71 percent of New Zealanders identify themselves as being of European descent, with just over 14 percent identifying as Maori. The remaining people identified themselves primarily as being of Asian and Pacific descent. A disproportionate number of Maori face significant economic and social obstacles. With lower life expectancies and incomes compared with other New Zealand ethnic groups, they face higher levels of crime, health problems, and educational under-achievement.<sup>9</sup> Socioeconomic-based initiatives have been implemented aimed at closing the gap between the Maori and other New Zealanders.

## MAORI MUSIC

Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou ka ora ai te iwi.

With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive.

—Maori Proverb

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Music is a universal phenomenon. There is not a single culture on the planet that does not manifest musical traditions. One must bear in mind, however, that the concept of music as we commonly consider it to be is not universal. All music is sonically and culturally specific. Ethnomusicologist John Blacking, in his highly influential text *How Musical is Man?*, defines music as "humanly organized sound."<sup>10</sup> In this definition the sonic elements of music such as timber, meter, mode, melody, harmonic structure, and form weigh equally with the cultural meanings embedded within the music by its creators and performers. For Blacking, the meanings of music are as much cultural as they are sonic. Defining music in this way provides a meaningful framework for understanding the world's musics and the challenging yet copious path conductors and performers must take to make the most of all the music they encounter.

Prior to colonization, the Maori had no formal written language. The great quantity of mythology, stories, genealogy, and cultural knowledge was carried forward to future generations through weavings, carvings, song, and chant. "Just as the universe took its physical shaping from the singing of the gods, music can be perceived as creating shapes in the silence."<sup>11</sup> The analogy of making music as pleasing shapes brings the musical process closely in line with the process of carvers, weavers, and other visual artists in terms of forming and reforming the physical world.

Maori are prolific musicians. The styles and subgenres of Maori music are vast. Consequently, this article will focus on only a few song styles that are most easily accessible and appropriate for western choral performance. Specifically, brief descriptions of 1) traditional waiata, 2) modern waiata and waiata a ringa, and 3) haka will be provided. The full texts are available in the notes

section and provide additional sources of information on a broader variety of song styles.

## TRADITIONAL WAIATA

Traditional waiata, both sacred and secular, come in principally three forms: lullabies (*oriari*), love songs (*waitata aroha*), and laments (*waiata tangi*). They are sung as solos, in unison, or at the octave. Early European documents indicate that the singing was originally microtonal.<sup>12</sup> Melodically, traditional waiata incorporate the small range of a minor third. Within this range, however, there are shifts smaller than semitones, and melodic contours are enhanced through the use of ornamentation and embellishment such as *glissandi* and the bending of the pitch.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, waiata end by falling away vocally at the end of the final line. It is considered a bad omen, and certainly bad form, for a song to be interrupted by breath. Groups singing traditional waiata practice staggered breathing, while soloists strive to maintain the full line within one breath. Modern renditions of traditional waiata are influenced by western tonality and microtonal singing, which is a rare ability these days. Microtonal elements have been maintained to some degree through the continued use of vocal slides and ornamentation.

A popular example of a traditional waiata is the *karanga*. Karanga are brief poetic statements that are melodic chants. They are regarded as treasured or precious (*taonga*). According to cultural protocol, older women of the tribe typically sing them. Karanga are wailing calls of welcome that are performed by women to signal the start of a gathering (*hui*) or formal welcome ceremony (*pōwhiri*). Particular forms of karanga may be appropriate for stage

presentation and can create a unique introduction to a set of Maori songs in concert. Other forms of karanga such as those intended to be sung at funerals



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are the more difficult to perform and are generally not appropriate for stage presentations. They often take years of study to learn and are a means of honoring the deceased and the bereaved family and remain common within Maori culture. Karanga are a meaningful part of the formal Maori welcoming ceremony, which signifies two groups coming together and negotiating the terms of their engagement, finishing with guests joining their hosts as one. It is a religious journey where the earthly and the spiritual are acknowledged, ancestors remembered, and kinship ties reinforced.<sup>14</sup>

Traditional waiata remains primarily an aural and oral art, resulting in few formal transcriptions. This should not be viewed as a discouragement. Due to the easy access to material culture through the internet, videos, transcriptions, and audio of traditional waiata are widely available. One such resource is the karanga *Haere Mai*,<sup>15</sup> which translates into “come here” or “welcome.”<sup>16</sup>

## MODERN WAIATA AND WAIATA A RINGA

Waiata a ringa (song with hands), commonly known as action songs, were first utilized during the Maori cultural revitalization in the early part of the twentieth century. While there is debate over the originator of this form of song and dance, the role of Sir Apirana Ngata (1874–1950) was unquestionably vital, and some call him the “father of the action song.”<sup>17</sup> Action songs are a combination of movements, often physically describing the lyrics being sung, with the use of western or westernized tunes. In some cases popular western tunes, such as songs that were heard in dance clubs and on the radio, were literally translated into Maori; but just as frequently, the tunes were used as a vehicle to share a distinctively Maori lyric, story, legend, or message. During the First World War,



Traditions live on through school girls performing a modern waiata a ringa<sup>18</sup>

Ngata popularized action songs by featuring them in concerts across the country to benefit the Maori Soldiers Fund. Accompanied by modern instruments such as the guitar, action songs break away from a primarily unaccompanied singing tradition.

Waiata a ringa follows a combination of western harmonic influences and Maori musical sensitivities. First, it must be made clear that Maori men sing. Unlike many modern western societies such as the mainland of the United States, where singing is often viewed as a feminine pursuit, singing in Maori culture is equally executed and valued by both genders. This is due in part to the long history of specified male and female musical roles in combination with traditional and modern musical forms such as waiata a ringa, which have specific roles for each gender to play. Harmony can occur in four to eight parts, often with the melody housed in the alto line with harmony created above and below it. Even children’s choirs sing harmony with multiple parts.

As singing remains, to a large degree, a way of cultural life, harmonic singing

occurs naturally. Observers of Maori singing have described the effect of these layers of vocal harmony as being hit by a wave of sound, and some have jokingly stated that the two main dynamics of Maori singing are loud and louder. The cause of this sonic wave-like characteristic is more accurately caused by the melodic line being placed in a chest voice register, the highest male part frequently singing at the top of their range, and the Maori preference of singing in very close harmony.

There are several modern waiata and waiata a ringa that are easily available to western choirs. *Hine e Hine*, a modern Maori lullaby written by Princess Te Rangi Pai (born Fanny Rose Porter) in 1907, has been arranged for SSATB choir by New Zealand composer David Hamilton.<sup>19</sup> The text *Maori Action Songs: Words, Music, Action, and Instruction* by Reupena Ngata and Alan Armstrong<sup>20</sup> is an unprecedented collection of waiata a ringa that includes vocal transcriptions and detailed drawings of all movement.

Since the 1930s, action songs have been propagated by Maori clubs and Kapa Haka ensembles that operate

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throughout New Zealand. A major activity for these clubs and ensembles is participation in festivals and formal competitions. Since 1972 a biennial New Zealand Polynesian Festival, now named the Aotearoa Maori Performing Arts Festival, has been held at various locations. In order to compete at this festival, Kapa Haka ensembles must have won a regional competition.

Kapa Haka festivals contain multiple forms of Maori music, including “*waiata tira* (a warm-up song), *whakaeke* (entrance song), *waiata ā ringa* (action song), *haka* (challenge), *pou* or *mōteatea* (old-style singing), *poi* (coordinated swinging of balls attached to cords), and *whakawātea* (closing song).”<sup>21</sup> Full performances can last up to forty minutes and may include multiple selections in the same style of song and dance. Festivals are leveled by age, and many school children, both English-speaking schools and in Kura Kaupapa Maori (Maori language immersion schools), participate in school Kapa Haka ensembles as an extracurricular activity.

## HAKA

Easily the most recognizable song style of the Maori is the *haka*. “Ha” meaning breath and “Ka” meaning fiery, Haka means fiery or scorching words. Haka is a posture-dance with shouted vocal chanting accompanied by hand actions, foot-stamping, and facial expressions. The movements during an impassioned haka are extreme, and dancers can injure themselves by striking and scratching their bodies. The vocal timber of the haka is equally severe, and performers must use strong breathing and vocal technique to support their sound. A large performance group lowers the risk of vocal strain. Though many people associate haka with men and war, there are also forms of haka performed by women and children.

There are many forms of haka used in a variety of situations, including the welcoming of visitors to a meetinghouse (*marae*), formal meetings, on significant cultural occasions, for military purposes, and at funerals.

The most well-known haka is *Ka Mate*.<sup>22</sup> Part of its enduring popularity is due to it being performed prior to the start of every All Blacks (the New Zealand national rugby team) game.<sup>23</sup> *Ka Mate* is attributed to Te Rauparaha, war leader of the Ngāti Toa tribe. The *Ka Mate* haka is classified as a haka taparahi—a ceremonial haka—and is about the cunning ruse Te Rauparaha used to outwit his enemies. It tells the story of being on the precipice of life and death, not knowing which will be your fate.<sup>24</sup>

## MAORI MUSIC TRANSMISSION

The famous ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam has stated that the simplest form of learning music is imitation.<sup>25</sup> He suggests that in many societies, most members learn in this way. In educational circles, this method of informal teaching and learning is often referred

to as whole song immersion. A singer or group of singers begin the melody, and as the tune or text of the song become familiar to the learner, they join in. Merriam also makes note that “the future specialist must always undergo some form of formal instruction.”<sup>26</sup> Certainly both of these approaches are utilized in Maori culture.

Informal learning practices within Maori culture have been sustained throughout time. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, before mass media and recordings and when many more Maori lived near or in their ancestral homelands, it is probable that most Maori learned simply by listening to others sing.

An informal teaching technique called “prompting” is widely used to encourage the learning of songs. In this technique, the lead soloist will sustain the end of the line (to drag the line), allowing for another singer to prompt the lyrics of the next verse aloud. In particular forms of song when no drag is provided, the lead singer will sing out the first word prior to the start of the verse and repeat it with the choir as it enters. Both of these techniques are part of rehearsal and performance practice.

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## CONCLUSION

Whāia te iti kahurangi Ki te tūohu koe, me he maunga teitei.

Pursue excellence—should you stumble, let it be to a lofty mountain.

—Maori Proverb

The Maori are a proud people with a long history to which they are deeply tied. Experiencing Maori music is to experience Maori culture, and the two should never be divided. While sensitivity to issues of authenticity is strongly encouraged, it should be noted that authenticity is a spectrum and not a definitive determination. When performance practice is based on culturally inclusive music research, and when it is approached with a sincere desire to understand and apply musical culture, issues of authenticity should not stand in the way of exploration and experimentation. There is a tremendous spirit of hospitality (*manaakitanga*) in Maori culture. A traditional saying states, “He tangata takahi manuhiri, he marae puehu.” Translated it means “a person who mistreats his guest has a dusty Marae (meeting house).” Maori understand that if you want visitors, you must invite them in. This inviting Maori spirit welcomes all of us to explore Maori culture and music and to bring this performance practice to life within our choirs.

He waka eke noa!

A canoe that we are all in with no exception! (We are in this together!)

—Maori Proverb 

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Brian Flintoff, *Monga Puoro Singing Treasures the Musical Instruments of the Maori* (Nelson, New Zealand: Craig Potton Publishing, 2005), Reprint Second, 12.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Orbell, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Maori Myth and Legend* (New Zealand: Canterbury University Press, 1998), 6.
- <sup>4</sup> John Wilson, *European Discovery of New Zealand—Abel Tasman in Te Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, last modified July 9, 2013, accessed April 18, 2014, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/european-discovery-of-new-zealand/page-2>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Captain James Cook, *Cook's Endeavour Journal*, available through the National Library of Australia, accessed April 18, 2014, <http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17691007.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> “Treaty of Waitangi,” *newzealand.com*, accessed April 19, 2014, <http://www.newzealand.com/us/feature/treaty-of-waitangi/>.
- <sup>8</sup> “CIA Facebook—New Zealand,” *New Zealand—The World Factbook*, accessed May 8, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nz.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Maori Extreme Disadvantage—UN Report,” *New Zealand Herald*, accessed May 2, 2014, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10707993](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10707993).
- <sup>10</sup> John Blacking, “How Musical Is Man? The John Danz Lectures” (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 3.
- <sup>11</sup> Flintoff, *Monga Puoro*, 23.
- <sup>12</sup> Mervyn McLean, *Maori Music* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996), 1-24.
- <sup>13</sup> Dorothy Buchanan and Keri Kaa, “Traditional Maori music in Discover:Te Kohanga Taonga,” accessed May 2, 2014, <http://discover.natlib.govt.nz>.
- <sup>14</sup> “Pōwhiri,” Pōwhiri—The Maori Welcome on *Newzealand.com*, accessed May 3, 2014, [http://www.newzealand.com/travel/en/media/features/maori-culture/maoriculture\\_powhirimaoriwelcome\\_feature.cfm](http://www.newzealand.com/travel/en/media/features/maori-culture/maoriculture_powhirimaoriwelcome_feature.cfm).
- <sup>15</sup> “Haere Mai,” Karanga of the Maori on *Folksong.org.nz*, accessed May 1, 2014, [http://folksong.org.nz/haere\\_mai/](http://folksong.org.nz/haere_mai/).
- <sup>16</sup> *Folksongs.org.nz* has provided a transcription of the melody, the lyrics, an audio track field recording of a performance, and a brief description of the role karanga play in welcoming ceremonies. The site also lists four additional karanga with transcriptions and audio tracks.
- <sup>17</sup> McLean, *Maori Music*, 387.
- <sup>18</sup> Photo by Tony taken on February 6, 2012. Creative Commons Copyright: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/> Photo found at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/42371658@N00/6826684977/in/set-72157629193003259>.
- <sup>19</sup> “Hine e Hine,” by Princess Te Rangī Pai, arranged by David Hamilton, (Corvallis, OR: earthsongs Publishing, 1997).
- <sup>20</sup> Reupena Ngata and Alan Armstrong, *Maori Action Songs: Words, Music, Action, and Instruction* (Auckland, New Zealand: Reed Publishing, 2002).
- <sup>21</sup> More information about Kapa Haka Festivals can be found through the Te Matatini Kapa Haka Aotearoa website <http://www.tematatini.co.nz>.
- <sup>22</sup> A step-by-step guide to performing Ka Mate can be found at *Folksong.org.nz* [http://folksong.org.nz/ka\\_mate/](http://folksong.org.nz/ka_mate/) I chant.html.
- <sup>23</sup> More information about the All Black's rendition of Ka Mate can be found on the All Black's website <http://www.allblacks.com/Teams/Haka>.
- <sup>24</sup> More information about haka can be found at <http://www.newzealand.com/us/feature/haka/>. There are also many texts and articles available in English from a variety of sources and media such as video and audio available through Youtube and other online sources.
- <sup>25</sup> Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 150.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.