

# BORN TO SING: FIJI'S "SINGING CULTURE" AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION IN CANADA

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**ABSTRACT.** The first part of this paper describes the singing practices of selected Fijian communities, and identifies some of the social conditions that support widespread and skillful singing. Next, in order to interpret Fijian musical practices, it proposes a cultural grammar – a set of guidelines or rules that define what individuals within a society, community, or group have to know, produce, predict, interpret or evaluate within a given setting or social group in order to participate appropriately (Heath, 1982; Heath, 1983). In the second part of the paper the proposed cultural grammar is used to generate suggestions for developing a singing culture in a Canadian school.

**NÉ POUR CHANTER : LA "CULTURE DU CHANT" À FIDJI ET LES IMPLICATIONS POUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA MUSIQUE AU CANADA**

**RÉSUMÉ.** La première partie de ce rapport décrit la pratique du chant de certaines communautés fidjiennes tout en mettant en évidence quelques unes des conditions sociales contribuant à répandre l'art du chant. Pour interpréter les pratiques musicales fidjiennes, l'auteur propose une grammaire culturelle, à savoir un ensemble de directives ou de règles définissant ce que les sujets d'une société, d'une collectivité ou d'un groupe doivent connaître, produire, prévoir, interpréter ou évaluer dans un milieu ou un groupe social donné pour y participer pleinement. (Heath, 1982; Heath, 1983). Dans la deuxième partie de ce rapport, la grammaire culturelle proposée sert à émettre des conseils en vue de l'élaboration d'une culture du chant dans une école canadienne.

**Scene One:** On a hot Sunday morning in Namake, a village not far from Nadi, the small Methodist church is packed. Friendly people guide me to a seat near the front. As the choir and congregation sing the opening hymn in Fijian, I recognize the hymn, a well known tune from the vast repertoire in the Protestant, Christian tradition, and I realize that I am witnessing something special. The skill and conviction with which the congregation sings are remarkable. The richness of the sound makes me think that I am hearing an organ. I glance around surreptitiously, looking for the organ, but there is none. All around me, people are singing – sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. Each voice has a place in the harmony. Especially notable is the

power of the male voices, providing the bass notes of the chords. The rich harmonics reverberating off the church walls account for my impression that I am hearing an organ. I join in the singing and immediately find a “place” for my voice. I am an insider in a familiar culture and an outsider in an unfamiliar culture (Bresler, 2001). Fijian language, ethnicity and social structures, such as views on land ownership and commercial and political practices, are unfamiliar to me. What is familiar, however, is the musical experience itself: the order of service, the hymn tunes, the nature and intensity of feeling that come from singing in harmony with men and women, with no instruments to obscure our voices. On this, my first visit to Fiji, I have not set out to investigate Fijian singing practices. I have come as a visitor and, as Geertz (1995) might say, *the project finds me*.

Scene Two: Darkness falls quickly and early at the equator, regardless of the month. In villages along the Korolevu coast of Viti Levu, there is little in the way of commercial entertainment, electric light is dim and the long evenings offer villagers opportunities for indoor social activities. On this, my second visit to Fiji, it is a quarter to eight on a Thursday evening, and I am crossing the darkened field between my hotel and the little village of Vatualalai. I am going to choir practice. In the receiving room at the home of one of the villagers, some choir members have already arrived, others will drift in later. We sit on the floor, a large space, devoid of furniture, but furnished with soft mats. A standard feature of Fijian house design, the receiving room is an ideal space for gatherings. We chat as we wait for the choir leader to arrive. This rehearsal is particularly important: in villages and towns all over the Fiji Islands choirs are getting ready for the big choral festival to be held a few weeks hence, in Suva. We are going to rehearse an anthem that has changes of key, tempo and metre. Although I will not be in Fiji for the festival, I am anxious to immerse myself once again in Fijian singing.

As I chat with a choir member, I tell him that as a music educator I am interested in helping my student teachers to sing with greater confidence, to believe that they can teach their students to sing. I explain that many of my students are embarrassed to sing, that they claim that they can't sing, a phenomenon that I know is due not to lack of ability but to lack of experience. I mention Fijians' ability to sing, and to sing well. I note that singing appears to be a widespread activity, practiced by many. I tell him that the power of Fijian voices singing in harmony has moved me to return to his island just to experience Fijian singing once again. I ask him for an explanation. His reply, “We were born to sing!” resonates with my own belief, which comes from my experience as a child in a singing family.

The larger picture: As I travelled around Viti Levu and Vatulele – two of the more than 300 islands – I heard boys and girls, and men and women sing with skill and enthusiasm. I noted that they sang without self-consciousness.

Except for elementary school-aged children who sang in unison, the singing that I heard and participated in was always in harmony, whether it was two people singing at a bus stop or group singing in more organized contexts. How is it, I asked myself, that so many people are able to sing in harmony, and are disposed to do so? I began to ask questions. I concluded that for Fijians, singing expresses and embodies Fijian culture, that in Fiji there exists a "singing" culture. My ongoing research interest in Fijian singing culture (Russell, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1997, 1999) has led me to conclude that a range of socio-cultural, economic, historical and geographic factors contribute to the fostering of widespread skillful singing.

During my second visit to Fiji, in 1998, I went with the intention of learning more about Fijian singing practices and the Fijian social structures that support widespread, skilful singing. In this paper I describe the features of Fijian singing culture, and I suggest how others might adapt these features to create a singing culture in their own social contexts.

Group singing is important for a number of reasons. Many educators consider the voice to be the primary instrument in music education (Atterbury & Richardson, 1995; Campbell, 1998). Indeed, the entire system of music education in Hungary is based on the pedagogy of Zoltan Kodály. His vocal approach to teaching music literacy has produced a population of musically literate singers (Choksy, 1974). Group singing has important educational value from musical, cultural and social perspectives. Singing immerses us physically in a musical language and lays the foundation for musical development (Russell, 1996b). Furthermore, it fosters group identity, helps us to know ourselves and others, and alleviates alienation. Singing transmits the cultural values and products of a culture; it serves as a "personal and communal reminder of roots, heritage, and tradition" (Boyea, 1999) p. 31.

Much is known about the technical aspects of voice production and song interpretation. Collections of song repertoire are readily available for singers of all levels of expertise and interest. Yet little is known about singing as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Little is understood about the relationship between the musical practices and attitudes that characterize larger communities and what goes on in Canadian schools.

Unfortunately, not all of our communities value group singing, and not all of our schools provide opportunities for group singing. In Quebec, ministry directives do not demand singing in schools. Music specialists meet with resistance to singing especially from students in early adolescence. Classroom teachers tell me that they lack confidence to sing with their students, or they say that they have a music specialist in their school, so they don't have to sing with their students. Because of our school policies and practices, many students emerge from our school systems with limited, or no experience of singing. Some emerge with memories of negative experiences.

In my university classrooms too many students for my liking claim to be unmusical (Russell, 1996a). These students express trepidation at the prospect of having to sing, yet they enjoy singing. Unfortunately, their lack of confidence in their singing ability inhibits them and slows the pace of their musical progress.

My Fijian acquaintance's confident assertion, "We were born to sing" fueled my conviction that singing ability is more than a biological gift: it is a human behaviour that develops under favourable socio-cultural conditions. The comment suggests that there is a relationship between the desire, the will, and the ability to sing and the values, beliefs and practices of an identifiable group – whether it is as small as a family or as large as a classroom, school or community (Erickson, 1986). It suggests that in a singing culture group members believe that they are singers, and have the conviction that singing has value. It supports the notion that singing is a socio-culturally embedded phenomenon. Surely, students are more likely to develop singing abilities, confidence in their abilities, and to learn song repertoire, if they are part of a culture where group singing is widely practiced and is perceived to have social and personal value.

A newspaper article a few years ago reported on a social event attended by university students from different countries. The students had participated together in an international project and this was their last evening together. One of the organizers invited the students from each country to sing a song from their country. The Canadian students could not think of a Canadian song to sing. As a music educator with a love of Canadian music, I found this distressing. The incident contributed to my belief that music educators in Canada must look to thriving musical cultures to learn how these cultures support the development of song repertoire and singing skills.

What could be learned from the singing practices of a rural, agrarian, geographically isolated society that could possibly be relevant to music education in an urban, industrialized society with global interests? Mead (1928, 1955, 1961) addressed a similar question: What could be learned from studying the behaviours of adolescent Samoan girls that could be relevant to understanding the behaviours of adolescent girls in the United States? Her study led her to conclude that adolescent behaviour is not biologically pre-determined, but is a result of socio-cultural processes. At the time of Mead's study this was a conclusion with important implications for the way we understood behaviour. If I could learn about the sociocultural conditions in which a singing culture flourishes, perhaps it would help my own work as a music teacher educator. If I could generate a cultural grammar as Heath defines it, perhaps it could be a source of inspiration for music educators.

This is the reason for my choice of focus in this paper. It describes the singing practices of selected Fijian communities and identifies some of the social conditions that support widespread and skillful singing in order to propose a cultural grammar -- a set of guidelines or rules that define what individuals within a society, community, or group have to know, produce, predict, interpret, evaluate within a given setting or social group in order to participate appropriately (Heath, 1982; Heath, 1983). With full recognition of the cultural differences involved, the extracted grammar can nevertheless be used as a guide to generate ideas for the development of a singing culture in a western school.

The inquiry asks a number of questions: What are Fijians' singing practices? What role does singing play in social life? How is singing woven into the fabric of social life? What values do Fijians express through their singing? What are the social contexts of their singing practices? How do individuals learn to become singers? How do these practices relate to Fijian social structures? Could answers to any of these questions be relevant to music educators in western institutions?

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two conceptual perspectives frame this inquiry. The first is a semiotic concept of culture (Geertz, 1973; Geertz, 1983; Geertz, 1995). In Geertz's view, humans are cultural beings and culture is a context within which symbols, or systems of construable signs can be intelligibly and "thickly described" (Ryle, 1949). Geertz states that culture denotes an "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973, p. 89). In the present inquiry the construable signs that I examine are the singing practices of the Fijians with whom I had contact during my two visits. Singing behaviours are understood as strands in a "web of (musical) significance" that humans create and in which they are suspended (Geertz, 1973).

The second conceptual perspective is derived from Blacking's (1995) assertion that if organized sounds (*i.e.*, musical sounds) are to affect people's musical actions they must first "acquire certain habits of assimilating sensory experience" (p. 174). The concept of assimilating sensory experience is relevant to this inquiry because it suggests that music learning, specifically the development of musical skills, is a culturally-embedded social process (Campbell, 1998; Jorgensen, 1997; Russell, 1997; Veblen, 1996). Just as children assimilate the idioms and logic of language through participation, children similarly assimilate the idioms and the logic of a musical language.

In this paper Fijian singing practices are conceptualized as behaviours that express and embody Fijian values. These behaviours are social acts, construable signs that are symbols of deeply held beliefs and values that can be intelligibly and thickly described in the context of historically-transmitted, culturally-specific patterns, and structural regularities of Fijian social life. These surface behaviours are interpreted as manifestations of Fijian beliefs and values. Several communities on Viti Levu and Vatulele that share musical practices are treated as a cultural entity. A deeper inquiry would no doubt reveal differences within communities and within families. However the focus here is on singing, which, at the level of surface behaviours, consists of some general patterns.

### METHODOLOGY

The epistemological foundation for the methodological approach embraces perspectives from educational anthropology (Heath, 1983) (Spindler & Spindler, 1992) (Wolcott, 1975; Wolcott, 1992); qualitative research in education in the arts (Bresler, 1998) (Campbell, 1998) (Jorgensen, 1997) (Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991); and ethnomusicology (Campbell, 1998; Rice, 1996; Veblen, 1996).

Adopting an ethnographic posture, I used the tools of ethnography – participant observation, interview, and document analysis. I asked ethnographic questions, and viewed events as cultural processes. I drew on Wolcott's three pillars of ethnographic enquiry: I experienced (observed & participated), enquired (intruded/asked), and examined (reviewed the evidence). By these means I sought to learn either directly or by inference the names of the practices I observed and participated in, their structure and function, the rules and habits of their use, and the value in which these practices were held.

There are constraints on my inquiry which must be freely acknowledged. I come from a different culture, was visiting for a relatively short time, not living and working among Fijian families, and lacked knowledge of the Fijian language. Not being able to speak Fijian was problematic; it placed restrictions on what I could discover and what I could subsequently claim. The first language of indigenous Fijians is Fijian, but all Fijians learn to speak English. While this facilitated my movements and my contacts with Fijians, because English is not a first language in Fiji, and is not used when Fijians speak among themselves, there were subtleties of meaning that I could not convey or have access to. These constraints limited what I could learn of the meanings that events held for participants (Geertz, 1995) (Germain, 1998). I could only describe surface behaviours and speculate on their meanings. On the other hand, I was able to interpret events from my perspective as a musician from a musical family, with considerable organized

and spontaneous singing experience, in church and out of church, as well as formal musical training. In this sense, I brought an insider's experience and viewpoint to the task. To prepare myself for two visits to Fiji – 19 days in 1989 and 7 days in 1998 – I read books about Fijian life, language, history, house design, economy, social organization, rituals, beliefs and practices (Clunie, 1986; Good, 1978; Ravuvu, 1983; Schütz, 1984; Veramu, 1992; Wright, 1986).

Singing is conceptualized as a “practice,” an aspect of a sociocultural whole (Herndon & McLeod, 1995). I describe singing events, interpret them in functional terms, place them in relation to their wider social context, explore links to other events, and write descriptions that reveal the generic in the particular (Erickson, 1986). By these means, I seek to arrive at a holistic understanding of the broader social contexts within which Fijian singing practices are embedded. From the interpretation of the data I propose a preliminary cultural grammar which is generated through the presentation of a series of vignettes.

#### EXPERIENCE

I traveled on local buses, ate at local eateries, strolled the streets and browsed the shops and marketplaces in Nadi, Singatoka and Suva, and visited Fijian families. On the main island of Viti Levu, I slept in hostels and budget hotels in Nadi, Tagaqe and Vatualalai and Suva. On Vatulele Island I stayed overnight in the home of “Captain” Ulai's family.

I sang with Fijians and/or witnessed spontaneous and organized singing in a variety of social contexts. I sang hymns with congregations in five Protestant churches and attended three choir rehearsals in two churches. I taught a music lesson to Fijian school children in Tagaqe District School, listened to their singing, and watched their performance of ritual *meke*, a traditional action-dance, based on chanted texts and accompanied by music and prescribed movements. One afternoon, on a hillside in Suva, I sang for more than an hour with Maciu, while his wife Ta prepared the evening meal. We sang our way through a book of songs whose words I did not know, but whose melodies used familiar musical patterns, idioms that I was accustomed to hearing in western vocal music. This commonality of musical knowledge made it possible for me to harmonize *ad lib*.

Whereas many of my experiences were unplanned and serendipitous, my encounters with singers in the communities of Vatualalai and Tagaqe were organized. On a Sunday morning in July I attended a service at the tiny Methodist church in Vatualalai, a small community on the Korolevu coast. This community has clan connections to the island of Vatulele, which I had visited previously. After the service, I asked a young man if he could take me to the home of the village chief. As it turned out, the young man was

the son of Spiro, chief of the village. Spiro invited me to join him on the floor where he was sitting with friends on soft hand-woven pandanus-leaf mats that covered the concrete floor of the receiving room. I explained that I had been to Fiji before, that I was a music teacher, that I had written about the singing that I heard in Fiji and that I was interested in learning more about Fijian singing. I asked for his permission to attend the church choir rehearsals and I told him that I would like to learn about the singing in an elementary school. Spiro gave me permission to attend choir rehearsals, assigned Kalawa, the assistant choir director (who had no formal music training) and lay preacher, to be my liaison and instructed him to arrange a visit to Tagaqe District School, a school for Grades 1-8. With the granting of this permission, I had access to the village and felt comfortable about walking there and speaking to people. I was confident that the village grapevine would quickly ensure that villagers knew who I was and why I was in their midst. Indeed, during the week, various staff in my hotel came up to me and identified themselves as the mother, husband, or sister-in-law of a church choir member, or a child at Tagaqe District School.

On Tuesday morning Kalawa and I joined the school children on the bus. Kalawa introduced me to Samuela, the headmaster, explained who I was and why I wanted to visit the school. Samuela talked to me about the organization, financing and administration of the school. He explained that students usually sing at morning assembly, and at the end of the school day. He informed me that there are no music teachers in Fijian schools, and classroom teachers, who lead the singing, are not trained in music. Samuela invited me to return in the afternoon to give a music class and to come again on Friday afternoon to watch the students perform traditional *meke* for tourists. I videotaped the Friday performance and showed the film to the children.

### *Inquiry: Conversation*

When I spoke with people who were in positions of musical leadership, I asked pointed questions, probing for information about specific musical practices (who sings, when do they sing, how do they learn to sing, what types of music do they sing? and so forth). I also sought information about the social structures that support these practices and the family and community values that underlie these musical behaviours. When I talked with people who were not in such positions, my conversations were more personal, and I attempted to learn something of their social lives, to discover what they value, and to understand the part that singing plays in Fijian communities.

I sought individuals who had an outsider's perspective with an insider's experience, and those who had an insider's perspective with an outsider's experience (Bresler, 2001). I had conversations with three such informants. Ueta, Epi and Brother Théophile. Ueta, a Solomon Islander,



ethnomusicologist and head of the music department at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, had an outsider/insider perspective. He informed me that there are no music specialist teachers, and pre-service elementary teachers do not receive training in music methods.

Epi, the Fijian director of the Royal Fiji Police Band that participates in international music events outside the country, had an insider/outsider perspective, having received his music degree at a Canadian university. During my visit to the band's rehearsal I saw the respect that band members accorded him, and I heard the skill with which the band members sang and played.

Brother Théophile, a European who spent most of his life in Fiji, had an outsider/insider perspective, as the choir director at the Marist School for Boys in Suva for most of his long career. Although he had retired, he continued to be active with the choir. Brother Théophile noted the intensity with which Fijians sing, especially those in the Methodist church, which converted Fiji Islanders to Methodism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He claimed that it is not unheard of for church choirs to practice well beyond midnight. (My own experience suggests that this claim is not exaggerated. I left choir practice at 11 pm – at the suggestion of the choir director – but members stayed on for further choir business and additional singing.) Brother Théophile's comments on the singing practices of Fijians were an invaluable source of insight. His observation that "Singing is the religion!" encapsulated for me the importance of singing as a social act with deep personal meaning in the lives of Fijians.

*Inquiry: Field Notes.*

On both visits I wrote field notes during and after my stay. I described the people I met, the contexts of our meeting, the quality and type of our interaction and our topics of conversation. I sought to obtain and note the perspectives of my Fijian contacts insofar as language and cultural differences permitted. I described the musical events that I participated in or observed, noting who was singing, the quality of the singing, the performance practices and the musical genres performed. I noted the purpose of the singing and whether the context was formal or informal. I reflected on my observations and experiences, proposed interpretations, suggested alternative interpretations. I raised questions which I attempted to address through further experiencing and questioning, and by researching the scant literature available.

*Inquiry: Artifacts*

I audiotaped & videotaped musical events; I bought compact disks and audiocassettes of Fijian singing. I examined the contents of two school song books, and identified the dual notational systems in the Methodist Hymn

Book and the single notational system in the choral anthem that I had rehearsed. These documents provided concrete examples for reference and analysis. I analyzed the dance configurations and musical components of four *meke* (Russell, 1992)

A few books provided important background information. Veramu's (1992) *A case study of participatory education in a rural Fijian school and community* taught me that "non-formal education" describes how skills and knowledge are transmitted in Fijian communities, Ravuvu's (1983) *Vaka i taukei: The Fijian way of life* and Wright's (1986) *On Fiji Islands* were useful sources of information about Fijian family relations, values, belief systems and social practices. Schutz's (1984) *Let's say it in Fijian: An entertaining introduction to the language of Fiji* gave me a rudimentary understanding of the rules of pronunciation so that I could sing the hymns, the anthems, and other songs. Good's (1978) ethnomusicological study *Fijian Meke* provided invaluable information about the musical, textual features of *meke* as well as insights into Fijian social conventions and the values and beliefs associated with the practice of *meke*.

#### *Interpreting the evidence: Phase 1*

The interpretation of the data was in two phases. The following questions both guided and emerged from the first phase of the interpretive process: Who sings? What do they sing? When do they sing? How do they sing? Why do they sing? How do they learn to sing?

I studied my field notes, the audio- and videotapes, the hymn books and the school song books. I raised questions, proposed interpretations, returned to the data for further checking and was alert for emerging patterns. I noted the style, form, genre, context of performance, gender and age of the performers. I was attentive to how the various categories related to one another. For instance, I noted who sings hymns, when they sing them, how they learn new ones, and how they sing them. A presentation of the results of this analysis is in Russell (1997). I examined the notational systems used in the hymn books and anthems. I describe here what I saw, read about, was told, heard of, or participated in.

#### *Findings: Phase 1*

*Who sings and what do they sing?* Men and women sing choral anthems, young people and adult men and women sing western choral literature, men, women and children sing Protestant hymns and western-style secular songs. Men and women (and sometimes adolescent boys and girls) in adult performances sing and chant the poetry of traditional *meke*, and boys and girls in school chant *meke* poetry.

*Where do they sing?* They sing hymns and choral anthems in church, "school" songs and hymns in schools, western art music in choral competitions and

festivals, school songs, hymns and other simple songs in private homes and in public places (such as a bus stop and a boat). Men in the Royal Fiji Police Band sing regularly in sections of works scored for band.

*How do they sing?* School children sing in unison but others sing in harmony (combinations of soprano, alto, tenor, bass). Accompaniment on melodic instruments is used by entertainers who perform for tourists, but is also found in the large churches in Suva, the capital. They sing confidently, without self-consciousness, accurately in terms of pitch and rhythm, and at times very loudly, with great enthusiasm. Adults and children who know the songs carry the singing for those who are not sure, modeling singing styles and a positive attitude.

*Why do they sing?* They sing to worship, to entertain, to show respect to visitors and to pass the time. Custom and tradition, rather than exploration and development, are the dominant values; whether this is by circumstance (isolation, lack of contact with other cultures, lack of cash, etc.) or by cultural values (resistance to change, e.g.) is a topic for further inquiry.

#### *Interpreting the evidence: Phase 2*

The second phase of the analysis consisted of an attempt to interpret the musical behaviours that I observed as socio-culturally embedded processes. I examined my experiences and my field notes and identified the activities of different social groups, the form of these activities, their function, their relationship to status maintenance, and the role behaviours expected of the participants (Green & Bloome, 1983). The socio-cultural contexts were constructed from my memories, my experiences recorded as field notes, my conversations with Fijians, and from the literature on Fijian history, culture, language, social organization and musical practices. The twelve vignettes that follow have been selected as exemplars that represent the experiences that shaped my understanding of what it means to shape and be shaped by a “singing” culture, and what kinds of conditions foster a singing culture. Following each vignette I extract a strand of a cultural grammar.

**VIGNETTE #1** At Captain Ulai’s family village on Vatulele I spent an afternoon, evening and morning with his extended family. At the invitation of Sami, the village chief, I sat, with a companion, and two Fijian men whose name I do not know, on the floor of a newly-constructed *bure*. The structure, made of natural materials entirely without nails or power tools, serves as a community meeting place. In the morning, Sami, the village chief, and other villagers turned out to oversee our departure. Captain Ulai explained that Sami had sent word to the parents the previous night that they should bring their children to our boat the following morning. The children were instructed to sing for the Canadian visitors. I interpreted the meanings of these events as an indication of the power relations between the chief and village members, of the respect with which visitors are treated, and of the

civic duty to entertain visitors with singing. As we sailed down the coast to the neighbouring village where the children went to school, the children sang "school" songs. Their singing was enthusiastic, accurate, and unself-conscious, and they knew all the words. The presence of the chief indicated the value that was placed on showing hospitality and on the importance of singing as a way of marking the importance of being hospitable to visitors. *Singing is a social obligation, and adults ensure that children meet this obligation.*

VIGNETTE #2 At Tagaq District School children and teachers start each day with an assembly that includes announcements, prayers and ensemble singing. On the morning of my first visit, the words to a new hymn were written on the board. The children sang in unison, referring as necessary to the written text. Their teachers and headmaster joined in the singing. Children add to their repertoire of songs-for-the-group, thus co-constructing group knowledge and building group solidarity. *Children who have a shared repertoire of songs are prepared to sing as a group as the occasion permits or requires.*

VIGNETTE #3 When I returned to TDS on the afternoon of my first visit the children were assembled and ready for me to teach them a song. Some 150 children from grades 4-6 were packed tightly into the assembly room, seated on the floor. Samuela sat on a chair at the side of the room. I suggested that they sing something they knew, and I promised to teach them a new song afterwards. An older child chose a song and they began to sing. Apparently Samuela did not think that their singing was sufficiently enthusiastic, for he barked a command and immediately the volume level increased significantly. *Actions that are important must be seen to be important. Singing is an important action and it must be carried out with enthusiasm.*

VIGNETTE #4 I taught the students at TDS to sing Li'l Liza Jane, and then developed a music lesson based on the song. Tasks included including walking to the beat, using the silent voice, and clapping the rhythm of the lyrics. The students responded with enthusiasm and learned the song quickly. Afterwards they sang it to me whenever they saw me around the school or village. *Children who are used to singing develop confidence and competence in their ability to sing. Children who are accustomed to singing learn new musical materials and tasks quickly. Children who enjoy singing are predisposed to learn new material.*

VIGNETTE #5 My attempt to have the students improvise some movements while singing Li'l Liza Jane was less successful. They seemed puzzled at my instructions to express themselves individually. *Children who are trained to replicate the behaviours and artifacts of a culture may be less predisposed to improvise.*

VIGNETTE #6 On Friday afternoon, students at TDS perform regularly for visitors. On the day that I visited, six girls aged about 10-12 performed *meke*,

while the remaining students – some 150 or so -performed the accompanying chant (adult versions typically contain at least 4 different voice parts). Afterwards, four boys performed a “war” *meke*. Brandishing clubs and spears they engaged with mock ferocity in false combat with one another. The chanters of the text chanted the rhyming couplets at the top of their lungs with a power reminiscent of the *haka*, a genre of chant, performed by Maori men which is intended to intimidate opponents and impress allies or visitors. *Students who are accustomed to performing do so with little self-consciousness. Performing as a member of a group is less intimidating than performing alone.*

**VIGNETTE #7** Church choirs lead the congregational singing, introduce new hymns to the congregation and perform anthems and other service music. Every church that I visited, from the smallest village structure to the largest city building, had a choir of men and women. I heard singing in a small church in Namake, a village far from any large-sized town, that was outstanding in richness, balance, precision, and intonation. In all of the services the congregations usually sang about four hymns, the typical number of hymns for protestant churches. They sang with voices that were sure and strong. All congregational singing was in harmony. There is no Sunday School: children remain in church for the whole service. *Children absorb the hymn repertoire through regular and frequent exposure. They do not sing church repertoire written especially for children. Their relatives and neighbours, and other, older members of the community model singing style, skill and attitude.*

**VIGNETTE #8** Choir practices in Vatulalalai were scheduled to begin around 8 o'clock but members, all adults, drifted in throughout the evening as they became freed from their other tasks. The choir was preparing a choral anthem, containing many musical challenges, namely changes of metre, tempo and key, for a choir competition which was scheduled to take place in Suva a few weeks hence. Choir members followed the leader who set the tempo and established the key. They learned their parts by reading the solfa syllables that were pencilled in under the text. Solfa is a system invented by an Englishman, John Curwen, and developed into a full-blown method of teaching music literacy by Zoltan Kodály, the Hungarian composer and pedagogue mentioned earlier. In this system pitches are indicated by syllables (do, re, mi etc), and the relationship between notes is constant, regardless of the key. I am not aware of any formal sessions for training individuals in reading solfa notation, and although it is possible that choir directors help singers to develop this skill in a systematic way, my observation of the non-formal ways in which music learning takes place leads me to doubt it. Moreover, I am not aware that choir directors have formal training in music although it is possible that some do. I hypothesize that the skill of reading solfa syllables is learned non-formally, by immersion in the experience with others who have acquired some competence. *Singers are motivated to learn the solfa system in order to participate more fully in choir experiences.*

VIGNETTE #9 As I made my way through the darkened village to the house where the choir was going to rehearse, I passed by a house where about 20 people had gathered for their regular Thursday evening “family” worship. They were seated on the floor of the large receiving room. Through the open windows came the sounds of adults and young people singing hymns in harmony. *Singing together promotes family cohesion. Children are immersed in the sounds of harmony in their own homes, with members of their extended families. Singing is associated with family values.*

VIGNETTE #10 During an informal visit to the Royal Fiji Police Band rehearsal, the band musicians first sang a song of welcome and then performed a band piece that had a singing section, which they sang with strong, sure voices, in harmony. Epi, their leader, explained that all of their band performances include pieces that incorporate singing. *In a singing culture, instrumentalists are expected to sing as well as play.*

VIGNETTE #11 Students from the Marist School for Boys sing voluntarily with Brother Théophile in an after-school choir, and participate in festivals where hundreds of Fijians gather annually to sing works from the western choral repertoire, including works by Vivaldi and Handel. *Teenaged boys, raised in a singing culture, enjoy, and are able to handle sophisticated choral repertoire.*

VIGNETTE #12 Kalawa and I had several opportunities for conversation. He escorted me to two choir practices during the week, introduced me to choir members, accompanied me on the bus to TDS and introduced me to the headmaster. He escorted me back to my hotel after choir rehearsals. On these informal occasions that enabled us to have leisurely conversations, I learned something about community, social structure, and the nature and scope of the authority vested in village chiefs. He told me that if an individual does not attend the family worship he or she can be obliged to attend. He explained that “If he (the chief) tells a person to come, he has to come.” Also, if the chief tells a person that he or she has to sing in the choir, or come to church, that person must do so. *Participation in singing is not a matter of choice; social pressure ensures that members conform to the norms of community behaviours, which includes the responsibility to sing. Participation in singing ensures the continuing maintenance of social institutions such as family and church.*

## DISCUSSION

Singing is necessary to the maintenance of the well being of Fijians both as individuals and as a society. One of the important ways in which Fijians assume membership in the culture is through singing. The act of singing is conceptualized not as a matter of personal choice, but rather as a require-

ment for group membership. Singing is not a vehicle for demonstrating special individual talent, but is a significant means by which individuals take their place in the group. Group singing practices provide satisfying, uniquely human experiences that promote social cohesion and ensure group acceptance. Children are assimilated into a singing culture where social contexts support the expression of group identity. At the same time, these practices ensure the development of the singing voices of large numbers of Fijians. Through singing, personal, spiritual, and social needs are taken care of and group membership is reinforced. Learning is non-formal. Rote, assimilation, absorption and learning by repetition are the main modes of learning to sing.

**OBLIGATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES.** Children, as well as adults have social obligations to maintain family and other social institutions. To maintain their position in the group, members attend church, worship as a family in homes, participate in choir, and perform for visitors. Fiji is a communal society where individuals are responsible for the well-being of the group and vice versa (Wright, 1986) Singing embodies and expresses this communality.

**MASS PARTICIPATION.** No auditions are held for choir or *meke* to separate the more skilled from the less skilled: all are expected to participate. There is, however, recognition that some individuals have more skills than others. For instance, when the children at TDS to sing something for me, they turned to one of the older girls, who obliged by choosing a song and starting it off. Some choirs are also recognized for their impressive skills. When I asked an attendant at the hostel in Nadi where I could go to hear "good" singing, she told me without hesitation to go to the Methodist church at Namake.

**THE GROUP AND THE INDIVIDUAL.** I heard no solo singing, and of the dozens of cassette tapes available at music shops, I saw none in 1989 that featured a solo singer and, nine years later, only two. Ensemble singing is apparently valued over solo singing. This value is consistent with the communal values of Fijian society. It is evidence of stability insofar as singing practices are concerned.

**VOCAL MODELS.** Children take their vocal models from the adults in their communities. Church attendance is expected, and congregational singing is a feature of church services. Church provides a locus not only for worship and singing but for cementing social relations. In hymn singing, for instance, which is a regular community activity, children assimilate the vocal tone quality, style of singing, and the practices of ensemble singing in parts, as sopranos, altos, tenors and basses harmonize all around them. Thus, children assimilate not only the musical language of the culture but singing practices (including style) as well.

**ABSENCE OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.** The voice is the primary instrument. Most singing is unaccompanied by instruments. The absence of organs or other keyboards, which cover the voices and provide harmony, ensures that expertise in part-singing continues.

**SPIRITUALITY.** Brother Théophane's observation that "Singing is the religion" points to the deeply spiritual, holistic experience of group singing. A feeling of personal well-being, of self-knowledge, is a dimension of the experience of group singing, a highly social experience, that inspires us to want to experience it again and again. In Fiji, about 85% of the indigenous population is affiliated with the Methodist church, and church attendance is high. The institution of church, where singing is central to worship, plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of Fijian singing culture.

**LIMITED ACCESS TO TELEVISION, RADIO AND THE INTERNET.** In villages there is either no electrical power, or power of low wattage. Material possessions are few, and although people work, little cash is available for extras such as televisions, cassette players and batteries. (In 1989 there was no television reception in Fiji. In 1998 reception was limited.) The commercial products of other cultures are therefore not widely available. As a consequence, communities must look to themselves to provide emotional, cultural and spiritual sustenance.

### **A CULTURAL GRAMMAR**

A partial cultural grammar is proposed here, based on the evidence presented above. This grammar consists of a set of guidelines or rules that define what individuals within a society, community, or group have to know, produce, predict, interpret, evaluate in order to "participate appropriately" (Heath, 1982; Heath, 1983) in a singing subculture. The guidelines, or rules, refer to issues of semiotics, reciprocity, ability, need, membership, stability and change. Each guideline may be thought of as one strand in a tapestry of a cultural grammar which is evolving as the research on singing cultures continues.

**Semiotics.** A semiotic perspective is important because it looks at the meaning of musical behaviours. Singing is construed as a sign that embodies and expresses a group's values, maintains the individual's membership in a group, contributes to the formation of individual and group identity, and affirms social relations within and outside the group.

**Reciprocity.** The issue of reciprocity is important because it lets us view a musical culture as a force that both shapes the musical lives of participants and is in turn shaped by the actions of these participants. A singing culture



may be described as a musical “web of significance” (Geertz, 1973) that group members spin, and in which they are suspended.

**Ability.** In a singing culture, ability is a given, and large numbers of people of all ages sing regularly and frequently. The issue of ability is particularly important for education because of the belief among many westerners that only special people have musical ability (Gagnon, 1999). This belief results in many young people being denied opportunities to exercise their human birthright, which is to sing. Musical ability is an innate human characteristic (Blacking, 1973; Blacking, 1995). Singing expertise develops as much a consequence of social experience and attitude as of genetic gifts. Musical languages are assimilated and the skills of musical expression are practiced. These languages, inseparable from their social contexts, become the group’s “tones for us” (Elliott, 1995). From an educational standpoint, these languages form the foundation for more formal music study.

**Need.** Musical experience is not only an innate human characteristic, it is a human need (Fowler, 1996) (Wesleyan Symposium, 1985), and singing provides an outlet for social, emotional and spiritual needs.

**Membership.** Singing skills and performance practices are culturally-embedded, value-laden behaviours that are assimilated and passed on in the context of larger socio-cultural processes. These behaviours arise in contexts of sharing with and responsibility for one another. Singing behaviours embody and express the relationship of individual to the group, membership in which is deemed essential for personal and group well-being. Singing is, therefore, not an option for the individual; it constitutes a significant moral ingredient in one’s social obligations. Social pressure is applied, as required, to ensure participation, thus fostering group cohesion. At the same time, musical development – singing skills and repertoire knowledge - is assured.

**Stability and change.** Children learn the musical repertoires of the group and assimilate the vocal qualities and styles of singing that are essential for the maintenance of a musical culture. Through the learning and singing of traditional materials in traditional ways and contexts, children ensure the stability of a musical culture. Through acts of group singing children learn and perpetuate community values. Through the learning of new materials and ways of behaving musically, singers have the potential to ensure change. However, in remote, isolated communities, change occurs slowly.

Further research into singing cultures elsewhere in the world, some perhaps within our midst, will reveal what singing cultures have in common, while the identification of differences will reveal what is unique about each one. The accumulation of this knowledge will contribute to our knowledge of group singing as a socio-cultural process and will strengthen the framework

of a cultural grammar of singing. Such a cultural grammar may be used to inform our own educational practices.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION.

The values, attitudes, expectations, assumptions and practices of at least three nested socio-cultural contexts converge in the music classroom: the micro (classroom/personal), the meso (institutional/teacher) and the macro (larger community) cultural contexts (Bresler, 1998). From a socio-cultural perspective, the musical education of young people is a shared project of the community and the school, with the larger community preparing the disposition and the school providing the structure and expertise. A long-term strategy would help teachers to create a singing subculture within a school community such that their students would want to enjoy the benefits that accrue to group members. Subject matter itself is a context, defining behaviours and circumscribing the use of space and time (Russell, 2000).

What follows are implications of this inquiry for music education. Discussion is organized under the headings of values, vocal models, repertoire, and the notion of the school as both a reflection and a shaper of culture.

**VALUES.** In a singing subculture group membership and the experience of group singing are so compelling at a social and personal level that there should be little need to persuade people to sing. A school where there is a singing culture is a school where singing is valued. That value is evident in the support one sees in terms of time allocated, attitudes of adults (teachers, parents, administrators) and who participates in singing activities. Activities that adults participate in enthusiastically are activities that are seen to have value.

Individuals are more likely to learn to sing if they are members, or wish to become members, of a group that sings regularly in contexts that are socially and personally meaningful. In a singing culture the whole community would participate – students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, visitors. On occasion this type of participation occurs at end of term concerts when adults are invited to sing with the students. When such events take place, group identity is promoted, community bonds are strengthened and a favourable predisposition towards making music is nurtured.

The valuing of group identity and needs is in tension with the valuing of individual identity and needs (Lee, 1999; Lee, 2000). This is a tension that we are conscious of in western, particularly American, society. Whereas Americans, for example, encourage individualism, innovation and independence, other societies such as the Korean society that Lee describes, and Fijian society, encourage communal practices, cooperation and sharing. The

potential for identifying oneself as a group member through group singing offers a balance to the promotion of individual growth at the expense of the formation of social responsibility. It offers a context for the healthy development of interpersonal connections.

**VOCAL MODELS.** The importance of providing appropriate vocal models cannot be overemphasized, from the points of view of vocal and social development. Children take as their vocal models the voices of the people around them, with whom they need, or wish to be identified. The vocal styles and genres of popular music are an ever-present influence that young people try to copy, often without success as popular songs are usually written specifically for the range, style and colour of a particular voice or group. In a singing subculture where children sing with each other and with significant adults in their school community, they are likely to emulate and to value the voices of those members who are important for their social adaptation. Children who are part of a singing subculture have alternative and, ultimately, more appropriate models because the repertoire that they sing consists of materials that are meant to be sung by ordinary, untrained voices. The resulting performance is more likely to be more musical in terms of accuracy and expressiveness.

**REPERTOIRE.** For singing to become an act that embodies and expresses the values of a group (Elliott, 1990, 1995) it has to be a regular, taken-for-granted practice, with ritual and personal meaning. A repertoire of songs and practices that are specific to a school has to become the property of that school's population. Each school community can develop a distinctive repertoire over which members can come to feel a sense of ownership – a sense that these are “our songs.”

The question arises: whose music shall be sung? To accommodate the cultural diversity of a school requires a sensitive and knowledgeable teacher. There is no reason that “our songs” cannot include songs in many languages from many different traditions. Students love to sing songs in other languages. However, in order that the activity remain a musical one, the primary values for inclusion should be musical, (e.g. melodic and/or rhythmic interest, within the range of students' voices and abilities).

**SCHOOL REFLECTS AND SHAPES MUSICAL CULTURE.** If the school is seen as not only a reflection of a community's musical culture, but also as a shaper of its musical culture, then it is possible to imagine the creation of a singing subculture in a school community could have a long-term influence on the values, traditions and expectations of a community. Such a development would not unfold quickly, nor could it be imposed by decree. It is unlikely to happen with short-term projects so favoured by some of artists-in-the-schools programs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the cultural grammar proposed earlier, I propose the following ideas as a point of departure for developing a singing subculture in a school: (1) establish singing as a regular feature of school rituals such as assembly. This may entail the establishment, or re-establishment of rituals such as the daily assembly. (2) develop a repertoire of "our songs"; (3) introduce singing at random moments. Field trips, for example, are informal social occasions where group singing would be appropriate (4) incorporate planned singing into the curriculum. Song texts are relevant, for example, to social science topics and second language learning; (5) widen the field of involvement to include adult members; (6) sing in parts; (7) proceed cautiously when introducing instruments; (8) provide intensive music training for elementary teachers. (9) show classroom teachers and music specialist teachers how they can work together for the benefit of all students. It is conceivable that the social climate of a school would benefit immeasurably from the implementation of a singing culture.

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## NOTE

The Fijian population is made up of two major racial groups separated by culture, language and religion. Approximately half of the population are descendants of the original inhabitants of the Fiji Islands, a group who are thought to have come from Melanesia and Micronesia some thirty-five hundred years ago (Clunie, 1986; Wright, 1986). These indigenous Fijians represent a more or less coherent cultural group in terms of language, value and belief systems and social practices. The remaining half of the population are of Indian subcontinent origin, descendants of people brought to the Islands by the British to work in the sugar cane industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This paper focuses on the former group.

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