Ancient Hawaiian Music

by

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The music of the ancient Hawaiian permeated his civilization. The origin of the islands, the trips between Tahiti and Hawai'i, the glories and tragedies of the gods, of the people, the whole life cycle, including death, were recorded in the ancient Hawaiian's form of music. The ancient utilized his music in all of his endeavors; invoking favors from the gods, in farming, fishing, building and in manufacturing, in religion, in war and peace, passion and recreation; no matter what the activity, music had a part in it.

Music of the period in Hawaiian history before and during the time of the great Kamehameha could be classified into two areas, vocal and instrumental. Vocal music was the characteristic feature of ancient Hawaiian music while musical instruments served primarily as rhythmic accompaniments to the *mele,* (vocal music). The texts of the *mele* were drawn from the people's mythology, history and daily lives. When the absence of a written literature in the ancient Hawaiian order is considered, the importance of the role of music in ancient Hawaiian culture can be appreciated. Through the *mele* all knowledge was handed down from generation to generation. By word of mouth pride was generated in *na ali'i,* the chiefs; *ke 'ohana,* the family; and *ka lahui,* perpetuation of the race.

The *mele* was sung in the form of the chant. The tonal pattern of the chant was dependent upon two things: (1) the division into which the particular *mele* fell and (2) the text. Although the tonal range was limited in the chant, it did not, however, cause all chants to sound alike. Although the tonal pattern was always secondary to the poetry of the chant, nevertheless the chanter was skilled in applying to his chanting an individual dynamics, which gave each performance an individuality, even though the chanter was confined to a tonal range of between two and five notes.

The *mele,* as vocal music, could be divided into two classes: (1) *oli* and (2) *mele hula.* The *oli* was a chant, that might be best described, as a recitative enjoying a tonal range of two or three notes. Although generally performed as a solo, certain religious rituals required the use of group responses in the *oli.* Another feature of the performance of the *oli* was that it did not employ the use of a musical instrument as a rhythmic accompaniment, nor did it require the performance of a dance. The *mele hula,* on the other hand, was a dance chant; *mele* meaning chant and *hula,* dance. Its primary function, as its name implies, was

to provide the vocal musical background for the folk dance of the Hawaiian people, the *hula*. In the *mele hula* the tonal range was wider than in the *oli*. More often than not, the intoning of the *mele hula* was done by a chorus of singers, identified in the *hula* schools as the *ho'opa'a*. Here musical instruments were used as rhythmic accompaniments, which added greatly to the whole performance.

Under the main division of vocal music termed *oli*, there were specific styles of chanting. Generally these styles were given such names as *oli, ho'ae'ae, kepakepa, kanikau* or *ho'uwe'uwe*. Other names have been given to such styles of chanting but written aacounts have most often used the names listed.

The *oli* method of chanting was characterized by reciting one or more phrases of the chant in one sustained breath, thus producing a free and fluid sound to the performance. Characteristic, also, of the *oli* was the *'i'i*. The *'i'i* was a technique developed by all chanters, in which the attempt was made to train the voice to produce a deep trilling sound; and this sound was injected throughout the recitation, very often at the end of phrases. The *'i'i* was a technique greatly admired and the high regard for a chanter was often determined by the quality of his *'i'i*. The subject matter of the chant done in the style of the *oli* included religion; prayers were recited in the *oli* style. The *mele inoa*, name chant praising an individual might be done in the *oli* style.

The *ho'ae'ae* method of chanting was very similar to the *oli* method, though not as deliberate in the total effect. The main feature in the performance of the *ho'ae'ae* was the generous use of the *'i'i*. The poetry in this form of chanting commonly concerned itself but not exclusively with the emotion of love. And this combination of text and heavy usage of *'i'i* made for an emotionally-charged performance for both chanter and audience.

Still another method of chanting in the *oli* division was the *kepakepa*. Many sources have described this style as rhythmic conversation. What was desired in the *kepakepa* was a clearness of speech, enunciation. Because the admired *'i'i* had a tendency to cause the chanter to run syllables or even words together, it was only slightly in evidence here. Chants of a topical nature were well suited for the *kepakepa* method. The *paha* or improvised chant common in the legends found in a Bishop Museum publication,* was probably recited in *kepakepa*.

Finally in the *oli* division, we find the method of chanting termed *kanikau* or *ho'uwe'uwe*. This method of chanting was characterized by the outbursts of wailing throughout the recitation of the chant. For the *kanikau*, the *ho'uwe'uwe* were designed as dirges and lamentations. Very often the *ho'ae'ae* method of chanting became so intense, that the performer found himself in the *ho'uwe'uwe*. This situation was not objectionable and is illustrative of the power of the poetry of the Hawaiian chant to thrill the performer and listener into an emotional state, which could be stemmed only by the shedding of tears and a compassionate cry.

The second division of vocal music was the *mele hula*. Here the performance of the dance chant did not include a variety of styles that characterized the *oli*. Because of a wider tonal range, however, each *mele hula* was individualized almost into a definite melodic pattern. In the performance of the *mele hula*, oftentimes, a musical instrument contributed a rhythmic accompaniment, which gave a breathtaking third dimensional quality to the whole performance. Sometimes

the rhythmic accompaniment was achieved without the use of a musical instrument, but rather by the dancer slapping his hands on his body or thumping his feet on the ground.

Although performed occasionally as a solo, when the performer was dancer, chanter, as well as instrumentalist, the chanting of the *mele hula* was more often done by a group of chanters. Although it is not within the range of this paper to discuss the *hula*, it is appropriate to mention here, that in the *hula* schools, there were two areas of study, which were group-centered activities. There were: (1) the *'olapa*, the dancers and (2) the *ho'opa'a*, the *hula* drummers and chanters. The performances of the *hula* schools were group performances and the emergence of an indivudial performance was left to the tastes and emotional state of each member of the audience.

The texts of the *mele hula* were concerned with the whole gamut of life. Here, again, emphasize needs to be given to the importance of the poetry of the *mele* and its influence on the tonal pattern of the chant. The *mele hula* told a story and it was the duty of the dancer to attune his body to the theme of the chant; likewise, the chanter sang his *mele*,always being aware of the poetry, and manipulating the sounds of his voice to communicate, to the very best of his ability, the very essence of the story. Thus, he received a thrilling compensation of pleasing the gods, who were ever present and he rendered delight and great satisfaction to his audience.

A person or persons who composed a chant were called *baku mele; baku* meaning to compose and *mele* meaning chant. Anyone could be a composer; a chief, a priest, or a commoner. However, the great centers from which flowed the significant old and new compositions were in the courts of the ruling chiefs, who engaged the services of the *kahuna*, (priests) and who maintained a *halau hula*, dance school, supervised by the *kumu hula*, dance master. At these centers, great care was taken and much thought given to the composition of the *mele*. Being lovers of nature, the ancient Hawaiian in his compositions veiled much of his poetry in a figurative language, which generously used names of geographical locations, winds, plants, and flowers to describe man, his activities, and his emotions. Sometimes the *kahuna* or the *kumu hula* were favored by the gods and a new chant would be revealed to the individual through a dream.

Very often the poetry of the *mele* included a charming technique, which enhanced the euphony and rhythm of the chant. Here, the sounds of a word or words ending a line or couplet, would be repeated exactly or nearly exactly to begin the next line or couplet. This bit of poetical sophistication was not at all unpleasant to the ear; and, it is certainly a testimony to the skill of the ancient Hawaiian poet, the *baku mele*.

Certain beliefs concerning the ancient Hawaiian's *mele* were strongly adhered to. One was the belief in *kaona* or the hidden meaning; this meant that certain words in the chant possessed a double meaning and could bring good or bad fortune. Not all chants had *kaona* and only the most knowledgeable *baku mele* had the *'ike* (insight) to detect and explain the *kaona*. The power of the *kaona* was so great, it was believed, that intervention came only by appealing directly to the gods. Because of this attitude towards *kaona* and the strong belief of the power of words with double meanings, all *baku mele* were cautious indeed, in

choosing the words for all of their chants. How terrible it would be if the word used brought misfortune or even death to the person for whom the chant was dedicated or to the composer, when this was not the intention at all. The writer has observed remnants of this ancient Hawaiian belief today. In his opinion, the reluctance of some modern Hawaiians, who are fluent in the language, to compose songs in Hawaiian, stems from the old belief in *kaona*. At least the comment, "I had better not because, you know, Hawaiian words have all kinds of meanings," seems to suggest it. Then again, Hawaiians are usually embarrassed to deny the request of another and, perhaps, a reason smacking of *kaona* makes it easier to say no. We get into more trouble this way!

Another belief respected by the ancient Hawaiian concerned the ownership of a chant. When a chant composed by a *haku mele* to honor an individual was recited, be it an *oli* or *mele hula*, it no longer was a possession of the composer but rather it was considered in the "legal" possession of the person for whom it was composed. These honorific chants were inherited by the individual's family, whose descendants either retained in the chant the name of their glorified ancestor or they revised it slightly and substituted the name of a family member of the times. Many chants that we recite today in our families, for the *ali'i* and others of the monarchy, and for the founder of the Kamehameha Schools, the high chiefess, Mrs. Bishop, had their origins in remote antiquity.

We have mentioned the use of ancient Hawaiian instrumental music, as a rhythmic accompaniment to the *mele hula*. This rhythmic accompaniment was its most important function in ancient times. There were instances, however, when the instrument was played for the sole enjoyment of its sounds or when the sounds emitted served as a communicator. The musical instruments known to the *kupuna*, ancestors, fell into the well known three major groups: string, wind and percussion. Let us first consider the only string instrument of ancient Hawaii. This was the *'ukeke*. It was fashioned from a strip of wood, ranging from fifteen inches to perhaps twenty-four inches long, and about an inch or so wide in the middle, tapering slightly at the ends. The piece was slightly bent and two or three strings ran the entire length of the instrument being secured at the ends. The *'ukeke* was strummed with the thumb or a pick as it was placed firmly against a slightly opened mouth. The performer chanted, as he strummed and the mouth cavity served as a resonator. To the initiated ear, the poetry of the *mele* was clear. Our ancient Hawaiian lover delighted in the use of the *'ukeke* and its muted sounds, for he could compose ditties of "sweet nothings" to serenade the object of his affections, without fear of serenading and thus revealing his secret feelings to the entire village.

In the area of the winds, the most important and really the only true wind instrument was the *ohe hano ihu*, the bamboo nose flute. The flute was fashioned from a piece of bamboo, its length being determined by the space represented between two nodes of the bamboo. This might be from ten to perhaps twenty inches long. One node was kept intact and the other cut off. Near the edge of the remaining joint, a hole was punctured on the side to serve as the nose hole; at the other end, two or more holes were made for finger holes. As air was expelled from the performer's nostril into the instrument, the performer's fingers closed or opened the finger holes to play his tune. The pleasant sounds from the

flute made the *ohe* another favorite amongst the "smitten," who serenaded those from whom they desired, that grand Hawaiian institution called *aloha*. Legend says that Kauakahiali'i, an attractive young man of supernatural stock, invented the nose flute. The circumstances leading to its invention are not told to us, but from Kauakahiali'i's wonderfully constructed home of flowering lehua branches and gorgeous bird-featheres, at Pihanakalani above the Wailua river on the Island of Kaua'i, the magical sounds of the nose flute are wafted down to the beach at Kapa'a and to the home of the beautiful chiefess, Ka'ililauokekoa. Hearing the beautiful music of the nose flute, Ka'ililauokekoa falls under its romantic spell and into the anxious arms of Kauakahiali'i. The story gets even better, as it develops with intrigue and passion around every coconut tree. However, for the purposes of this paper, legend credits Kauakahiali'i as the inventor of our bamboo nose flute.

In addition to the nose flute, the Hawaiian family of winds included the *pu*, the triton or cassis shell trumpet, which was blown to attract attention. There was also the *ipu hokiokio*, gourd whistle; the *pu la-i*, ti-leaf whistle, *oeoe*, bull roarer. Before leaving the wind instruments, we might mention that except for the *ohe* and *pu*, these contrivances were more playthings rather than musical instruments.

Percussion instruments included the *pahu*, drum, of which there were two classes: (1) *pahu hula*, a drum used for rhythmic accompaniment in the *hula* and (2) *pahu heiau*, a drum used for religious ceremonies in the *heiau*, temple of worship. The *pahu* was fashioned most often from a section of a trunk of the coconut tree, although breadfruit and other woods were used. The top of the section was hollowed out to form a resonance chamber; then the bottom end was hollowed out, leaving a thick wall to divide the two hollowed out areas. The sides of the bottom end were cut out into openwork patterns, which varied, and through which ran the cords that were fastened to hold the sharkskin drumhead at the top. It has been said that these cut out patterns were significant, in that, they housed the *mana*, spiritual strength, of the drum. Hawaiian tradition states that La'amaikahiki of Tahiti introduced the *pahu* to Hawai'i and placed it in his father's *heiau* on Kaua'i. La'a from Tahiti was a patron of the dance and after awhile the *pahu* was used for the *hula* and this began the differences in classes, the the short drum, *pahu hula*, for dancing and the tall drum, *pahu heiau* for religious ceremonies.

Another percussion instrument was the *pu niu*, drum fashioned from the shell of the coconut. The use of the *pu niu* accompanied the playing of the *pahu hula*. The *pu niu* was fastened to the right thigh of the performer and with the *ka*, a thong of braided fibre or dried ti-leaves, he struck the drum with short, precise beats, while his left hand sounded the *pahu hula* with alternating beats. The contrast of sounds between the two drums gave a superb rhythmic accompaniment to the *mele hula*.

Perhaps the most popular of percussion instruments was the *pa ipu* or gourd drum. It was fashioned by joining two gourds together, the top gourd was called the *heke* and the bottom gourd, the larger, was called the *'olo*. As a convenience for drumming and handling, the drum was furnished with a handle of tapa strips, near the seam of the two gourds. Because the drum was dropped to the ground

and then raised by the performer, who slapped it and then dropped again to the ground, two distinctive tones were produced, which gave an interesting accompaniment to the chant and dance. Throughout all of Polynesia, this double gourd drum was known only to the ancient Hawaiian.

Fashioned from various lengths of bamboo, the *ka'eke'eke,* sometimes called *pahupahu,* were played by the performer thumping the bamboo on the ground. The length of bamboo, which varied in size, retained the node on one end, while the other was cut off. The *ka'eke'eke* served as an accompaniment to the *mele hula.* Another interesting use of the *ka'eke'eke* was for the awakening of the *ali'i.* Some of the *ali'i* were too *kapu* (sacred) to have an inferior awaken them from sleep by touching them. It was acceptable, however, to intrude upon the slumber of an *ali'i,* with the chanting of the *mele ho'ala* (awakening chant) or by the *ka'eke'eke.*

Another group of ancient Hawaiian musical instruments might be classed as solid instruments, of which there were three forms. All three used to add to the enjoyment of the *hula.* First were the *ka la'au;* these were two lengths of wood, held in the hands of the performer and struck together to give time to the *hula.* The *papa hebi* or treadle board was about an inch thick, twelve inches long, and about seven inches wide in the middle and tapered to about five inches at either end. As the dancer chanted, he rocked the *papa hebi* with his foot over a cross piece and with the *ka la'au* in his hands, he struck the two sticks. The *'ili'ili* were two pairs of smooth lava rock. Pairs of pebbles were clicked together, as they were held in each of the performer's hands during the dance.

Adding to the rhythmic accompaniment of the *mele hula* were a series of rattles. There was the *'uli'uli* a coconut or gourd shell filled with seeds and to which was fitted a handle of dried, long leaves, ending in a circular top of feathers. This colorful and delightful sounding instrument was held in the hand of the performer, as he chanted his *mele hula.* The use of two *'uli'uli* by a single performer is believed to be of modern origin; its innovation being credited to the famous dance master, Antone Kaoo. Another rattle was called the *'ulili.* Here three gourds were pierced by a stick. It is thought by some, that the outer gourds, made fast on the stick, were filled with seeds. The loose center gourd covered a length of cord attached to and wound around the center of the stick; the loose end of the cord was brought through a hole in the side of the gourd. When the cord was pulled, the stick revolved, causing a rattling from the end gourds. Whether the *'ulili* had its origin in Hawaiian antiquity is moot. Specimens of the instruments are in the collection at Bishop Museum and are described as toys.

A few *hula* schools today employ the *'ulili* in their *hulas.* The *pu'ili* was a bamboo rattle. The *pu'ili* was fashioned from a section of bamboo about twenty inches long. The sides of the bamboo were split down and around its sides, leaving a very narrow space between each section. When struck or shaken against the performer's body or on the ground, a rustling sound was achieved, adding to the presentation of the dance and to the *mele hula.* Still another item which gave a rhythmic accompaniment was the *kupe'e,* or anklet. The *kupe'e* might be of dog's teeth or shells. As the *mele hula* provoked the *'olapa* into a dance, the movements of the dancer caused the *kupe'e* on his ankles to click.

Whatever the limitations were in the vocal and instrumental music of ancient Hawaii, these limitations can be seen only through the eyes of a foreign culture. The ancient Hawaiian adapted himself admirably to his island environment; he created, with the help of his gods, his music, he used it and he enjoyed it.

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