

# Black, Sara

## Baroque Influence in Tongan Church Music

Faculty Mentor: Larry Shumway, Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

In Tongan culture, music is very much a part of the natural expression of the people. In the Western tradition, musical experience is often limited to a setting in which an isolated group of performers presents a work to the general public, who observe as an outside audience. In Tongan culture, members of the general public are both audience *and* performer. Large groups of people are gathered together to present a work of both music and dance. In this setting, performance is not so much dependent upon isolated skills developed by a few, but it is a more democratic experience in which all are invited to participate in making music. In particular, this sort of musical experience is significant to the religious life of a culture in which Christianity is a very dominant force. Congregations in Tongan churches have a higher regard for their congregational singing as a performance event. Because of this, the traditional music sung in services for the various religious denominations is a dynamic and very specifically Tongan experience. However, there are some very strong Western influences.

Much has been made of the fascination that Western composers have with “exotic” music. In contrast, I became interested in the fascination that the “exotic” culture may have with Western music. It had been noted that Tongan choirs such as the influential King’s Choir have a particular love for the choral music of Bach and Handel. Native Tongan music has certain structural elements in common with early Western church music; for example, the use of a melody sung over several static parts that form a tonal harmonic base. Although the upbeat style of Tongan performance is a stark contrast from the rather austere choral music of Bach and Handel, Tongan musicians have sensed a kinship between their native music and the work of the Baroque masters. It was my intention to look into the relationship between native Tongan music and the particular works of Western music that have been embraced in their culture since European contact.

My study involved travelling to Tonga and living for three months in various communities on three different islands. I found the Tongan communities to be very welcoming and particularly interested in having me participate in their own musical events by attending and participating in choir rehearsals and performances. Although very few of those I interviewed knew the technical words to use in a musicological discussion of their music, they were anxious to convey their enthusiasm.

Originally, my intent was to conduct both informal and formal interviews, to gather information as a participant observer, and to make recordings of Tongan choir music. I made nearly two and a half hours worth of recordings at various church meetings and conferences. However, formal interviewing was successful only to a certain extent. On closer acquaintance with Tongan culture, I discovered that a more informal approach would be most successful. In the end my interviews were all informal, and my experiences included learning to read Tongan notation on a straw mat in a Tongan home, singing in a choir rehearsal (while attempting to read that Tongan

notation), performing for various congregations on my violin, and listening to and recording large church conferences.

Church conferences proved to be the most valuable experiences for me as a researcher. I was intrigued by the fact that there was no division between musical performance and worship service. Members of the various local congregations sat together and took turns singing musical numbers. Sometimes a token sermon was given between rounds of choral singing, but for the most part the worship service consisted entirely of music.

I observed that the music sung by Tongan choirs principally fell into two categories: Tongan-composed anthems and Handel. A common heritage connected the two, as the influence of Western hymn-singing was obvious even in the Tongan anthems. In contrast to the tight motivic unity of Western music, Tongan anthems were characterized by a loose formal structure, essentially a series of short, unrelated musical sections. However, those loose sections were obviously derived from the Western church music tradition, featuring homophonic four-part hymn textures and a style of polyphony which seemed to be a hybrid of Western baroque polyphony and traditional call-and-response forms in which one section of the choir sang a melody which was punctuated at critical harmonic and rhythmic junctures with chords sung by the full choir. In one particularly fascinating blend of Tongan and Western music, a choir sang the Irish folk song “Danny Boy” arranged in distinct Tongan anthem style.

Aside from Tongan-style anthems, the most prevalent choral works were from the Baroque Era. I observed that church and government choirs such as the Royal Ma’apa Choir form the primary venue for classical music in Tonga; however, because church singing is so prominent—in some areas, some choir is singing somewhere in earshot at any given time of day—the influence is strongly felt within the culture. The king’s favorite composer is Handel, and his music is considered to be the height of great music. In particular, Tongans have a great love of “The Messiah.” Therefore, nearly any choir has many “Messiah” choruses in their repertoire.

Watching choirs rehearse Baroque music using Tongan methods was fascinating. Very few Tongans read standard musical notation; instead they use a system in which numbers represent notes similar to the use of solfege syllables. Rooms where choirs practiced would often be equipped with a chalkboard or overhead projector displaying entire anthems written out in Tongan notation. Even the most exact Baroque ornamentations were converted into strings of numbers. Standard Western musical terms were sometimes written into the music, and were positioned on the page in the exact ways that they would have been written onto a standard music staff. Tongan culture has relied on memorization and oral transmission of information for centuries, so Tongan choirs not only executed but memorized the complicated Baroque anthems with remarkable skill.

This experience opened up a vast field of potential research. I discovered that Tongan society presents a wealth of musical talent and experience that has been almost completely undiscovered by musicians elsewhere. I hope to return soon, and I hope that other musicians will take an interest in doing similar work.