

# Ethnomusicology: developments of māori music



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Music in Context A: Ethnomusicology**

### **Discuss some of the more recent social, cultural and technological developments that have informed studies in ethnomusicology**

#### **Introduction**

For this essay I will be focusing on the Māori people of New Zealand, and looking at the changes and developments in both their traditional music and that of their modern popular culture, much of which is adopted from American and European sources. I will include the work of several ethnomusicologists who have experience in the areas of Māori music, modern New Zealand popular culture, and American rap music and its sphere of influence.

The Māori people have had their own traditional songs since they first inhabited New Zealand. However, there have been changes to the cultural situation of the music and how it is received by both the white public and Māori youth. In this essay I will focus on three points, the transcendence of Māori traditional music, the changes made as a reaction to this and the influence of other modern genres and styles, specifically American rap, to discuss these changes and how they have informed ethnomusicology either positively or negatively. In doing so I hope to show that a vibrant musical continuum is working in New Zealand youth culture, informed by both their traditions and outside influences, and yet is making original new music because of this.

#### **Song loss and researching traditional music**

The Māori have inhabited New Zealand since the 14th century when they arrived from other Pacific islands seeking new lands to migrate to and

cultivate. It is hard for an ethnomusicologist to find or have found any songs surviving from the earliest parts of Māori history, for several reasons. Firstly, as many Māori songs are to do with traditions and practices, when those traditions or practices become obsolete or go out of use, then the songs will be lost with them. For example, when canoes started to be replaced with sail ships, all songs about canoeing were either lost, or modified to talk about sail ships instead. Secondly, because of superstitious beliefs, many songs have restricted performances, where only certain members of the tribe or community are allowed to attend and listen or join in. This also limits the number of Māori who will learn these songs, as they are taught purely by oral tradition.

The teaching itself is a point of interest, as traditionally the folk songs of Māori are taught in a very strict sense, as they are not meant to change organically or be re-interpreted, apart from if the community as a whole learns a new version in line with a new meaning, as with the canoe/sail ship example above. In most cases, the songs will be passed down through generations, preserved as accurately as possible, which would in fact make it easy for an ethnomusicologist to discover these antiques of folk song.

However, these traditions were cut abruptly short by the intervention of European missionaries. The missionaries were accepted to a degree by Māori curiosity, and arrived decades before the treaty of Waitangi in 1840, which signified the taking of New Zealand by the English under queen Victoria and the official surrender of the Māori as a people (though conflict did continue for years). These missionaries took it upon themselves to educate the seemingly primitive Māori tribes in every aspect of Christian and European

ideals. This included their music, as the Europeans found their traditional folk chants ' idolatrous', ' indecent' and even ' lascivious'. The missionaries set about their task quickly, so much so that by 1830, a letter sent from a missionary to his brother-in-law at home in England read;

Quietness and good order has succeeded to their native wildness...; we never hear anything of their songs or dances.

In place of their traditional music, the missionaries taught them hymns and church music. In doing so, they also taught the rudiments of western music theory, which they encouraged the Māori to adopt as their new musical language. This meant that many new Māori songs were created, using traditional words and stories, but with diatonic harmonies that made them listenable and distinguishable to a European ear. Though this was widely acknowledged and followed through to the Māori's own teaching, some traditional songs were kept hidden and secreted in both Māori text collections and those of curious westerners. One such was John McGregor, a guard of captured Māori warriors held in a beached hulk at Auckland harbour. John ' collected and later published a large number of songs written down by the captives'. He could be said to have been one of the first to research and record Māori traditional music, yet this white interest in the music did not start to reappear until the twentieth century.

This change occurred on a grand scale over the next century, and to this day Māori music is seen as synonymous with hymns and European-based melodies. This view has been widely held by the white general public for all of the twentieth century, though many Māori know it not to be entirely

accurate. Ethnomusicologist Mervyn Mclean stated that ‘ among the public at large, however, such songs are a mostly hidden tradition’. A revival of the Māori culture began in the 1960s, dubbed the ‘ Māori renaissance’, and with it came both the technology and the motivation to record and preserve the traditional songs that were left among the populace. This made the job of collecting and studying Māori music a lot easier for ethnomusicologists, as up until this utilisation of new recording technology, they had been hard pressed to source singers and songs out. Mclean mentions that ‘ preparations for fieldwork took an inordinate amount of time’ in the late 1950s, and mentions that without the ‘ huge advantage’ of meeting several willing Māori Elders ‘ I would not have had the resources to survive in the field’.

### **Changes and modern learning**

The traditional Māori song forms, as well as being non-diatonic as previously stated, were in fact completely incompatible with western tonal language. Though the melodies sung could be transcribed into musical notation, they were not in a fixed time signature or particular key as we would understand it. The lack of harmonic movement mystified witnesses to performances in the nineteenth century, as the Māori music relied more on repetition, both rhythmic and harmonic, and different performance approaches by different singers, for the colour and variety in their music.