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Review of Ojibway Music From Minnesota: Continuity and Change

Kenton Bales

University of Nebraska at Omaha, kbales@unomaha.edu

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Ojibway Music From Minnesota: Continuity and Change. By Thomas Vennum, Jr. Minnesota Musical Traditions. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989. Photographs, notes, audio cassette/LP. 15 pp. \$9.95.

According to an old Native American axiom cited by Jamake Highwater, "An ear of corn is a very complicated organism. But for the corn plant, it is simple." Likewise, much Native American music seems mysterious and exotic, since it comes from a culture vastly dissimilar to that of Anglo- and Afro-Americans. This book and the accompanying tape do a great deal to clarify the role of music among the organism we call the Ojibways.

It is always difficult to provide an adequate representation of the music culture of any people, but Vennum gives a representative sampling of secular historic and contemporary Ojibway music in good style. He sensitively omits any discussion or recordings of sacred music, "In deference to the religious sensibilities of the Ojibway people" (9). The short monograph is divided into eight sections. The first section, "American Indian Music," provides the reader with a good background and acknowledges the accomplishments of pioneering researchers of Ojibway music, notably Frances Densmore and Alice Fletcher (2). "The Anatomy of a Powwow: Bemidji" gives a detailed account of the First Annual Bemidji International Indian Fair and Trade Exposition in 1988. Vennum supplies the reader with a vivid portrait of the event and emphasizes its intertribal nature. A paragraph

entitled "Continuity and Change" reveals a real strength of this book—a comparison of songs sung by Ojibways around 1900 with the same songs as performed by Ojibways today. The first to be compared is a pair of "Dream Songs" recorded in 1910 and 1971, respectively. The second is a similar pair of "Moccasin Game Songs" recorded in 1899 and 1988. A second exceptionally interesting feature of the book is the section on "Story Songs," which illustrates the genre with a recording of a song in the context of a story in the Ojibway language as told by James Littlewolf. A discussion of Ojibway "Love Songs," in which another historic recording is compared to a contemporary one, precedes the final section of the book, "Contemporary Urban Popular Music." Ojibway musician Keith Secola performs two of his compositions on the accompanying tape.

Vennum's book is an excellent introduction to the music culture of the Ojibways, sensitive to both historical and contemporary issues. In 1906 Frances Densmore wrote of her work, "Long ago I invented the phrase 'archeology of the mind.' . . . The idea was that my work was digging down into the *minds* of old Indians . . . until I got down to what they remembered of the oldest traditions." Vennum's book not only excavates these traditions but also helps to give the reader an understanding of how contemporary Ojibway music "maintains a lively connection to its past" (18).

KENTON BALES
Department of Music
University of Nebraska at Omaha