

Australian Indigenous Music

Some of the best and most widely-recorded examples of indigenous music come from the peoples of northern Australia, including those from the Kimberleys, Port Keats, Cape York and Arnhem Land. The music of Central Australia has also been recorded and documented. The example to be discussed here is the musical tradition of the Yolŋu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. (Each discrete group of people with their own language have specific musical terms – the musical terms used below are specific to Yolŋu-Matha, the group of languages spoken by the Yolŋu.)

Australian indigenous music in general is primarily a vocal genre which is closely tied to its accompanying dance styles. The instruments used throughout northern Australia are the *yidaki* (didjeridu) and *bilma* (paired sticks). In songs there is often only one singer, who also plays the *bilma*, but there may be more. This singer is the leader of the performance and cues the other performers through patterns played on the *bilma*. Sometimes vocal choruses will be sung underneath the main tune performed by the leader. Songs (*manikay* items) are usually short and are sequenced into a song series (*manikay*), where each song contributes information about the overall subject. They have clear phrasing with a melodic contour which, usually, is able to be clearly discerned. Vocal techniques such as pitch-bending and vocables, and text settings such as speechlike rhythms and melismas can also be observed. Heterophony is often evident when more than one singer is performing.

When describing indigenous musics, the elements that are most often easily discussed are: form, melody, instrumentation and rhythm. Although it is not possible to generalise across the many musical traditions, the following list presents some core ideas which are present in many musical examples from northern Australia.

Form: derive a structure by listening to the differences and similarities in the vocal phrasing.

Melody: descending melodic contour, small pitch set of about five notes, stepwise motion, repeated notes at the ends of phrases, use of semitones.

Instrumentation: voice – uses a combination of sung notes and vocables, and can be both syllabic and melismatic; *yidaki* – fundamental drone, with overblown hoots and voiced calls, *bilma* – plays intricate, cyclical rhythmic patterns.

Rhythm: the rhythm of the melodic line is generally complex and speechlike. It can be unmetred. The *bilma* can either provide a pulse or play polyrhythmic interlocking patterns with other *bilma*. The *yidaki* pulsating drone provide another interlocking rhythm in the overall texture.

Didjeridu / Yidaki

- Classificatorily it is a (wooden) trumpet as it has a cylindrical bore, and sound is produced by vibrating lips.
- *Yidaki* are made from eucalypt branches hollowed by termites. The Yolŋu use long and narrow ones, as opposed to in eastern Arnhem Land where they are shorter and broader.
- *Yidaki* are painted with *garma* (public) liturgical designs which are part of an estate, as are songs and dances.
- Circular breathing is used to provide a continuous sound from beginning to end.
- There are three main playing techniques – a fundamental drone, overblown hoots and voiced calls.

Bilma / Paired Sticks

- Two hewn sticks made from resonant wood.
- Two boomerangs may be used instead in some parts of Australia.