TWO NATIVE SONG-STYLES RECORDED IN TASMANIA

(with six musical examples)

By

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Since the war, developments in portable recording equipment have greatly assisted anthropologists, musicologists and other deeply concerned with the need to collect and preserve recordings of indigenous singing before it has been forgotten.

In Australia and adjacent islands, commencing with the Australian-American expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948, increasing numbers of field recordings have been made.

Musicological interest has been aroused and as a result several early collections of wax cylinder recordings have been recovered from oblivion.

In 1955, part of Spencer and Gillen's first recordings of central Australian aboriginal music, made in 1901, were located in Adelaide. In 1957, the remainder of this collection and a later set made in the Northern Territory were successfully re-recorded on tape in the National Museum of Victoria[1].

Other collections, made some thirty years ago in Australia, Ontong Java and New Ireland, were dubbed on tape in the Archives of the University of Sydney, last year.

Elsewhere in this volume Mr. M. J. Longman has dealt with the origin and re-recording of the wax cylinder collection in the Tasmanian Museum. Though they are not as numerous as Baldwin Spencer's recordings, they nevertheless have the distinction of being a year or two older. And, because the chances of hearing any other Tasmanian singing are very remote, the recordings are of considerable historical value.

As one might expect, the sound-quality of early Edison phonograph recordings compares unfavourably with the more faithful results obtained by electrical recording on tape. The loss of high and low frequencies and the pronounced noise level in the playback leave much to be desired.

But even from cylinders which have badly deteriorated, with voice signals close to inaudability (and the Tasmanian samples are well above this standard) it is still possible to extract some musicological information.

One has no difficulty in distinguishing two markedly different styles of singing in each of the two groups of cylinder recordings made by Mrs. Fanny Cochrane Smith in 1899 and 1903.

The first, which will be called here the "corroboree" style is in fairly regular triplet, or triole, rhythm and is syllabic. That is to say, as far as the ear can judge, each tone is allotted one syllable of the song-text (Examples 1, 2 and 3).

Th second style, the "Birds and Flowers" song, which for brevity will be called the "legato" style, is not syllabic, but melismatic. It is slower in tempo, has long phrases, non-periodic rhythm and considerable ornamentation. It is in marked contrast to the "corroboree" style of singing and the tones of longest duration are produced in a bleating or pulsating manner (Example 5; indicated by dots . . . .).

Compared with the Vedda songs of Ceylon, often quoted as being among the most primitive musical atterances, these Tasmanian songs show considerably more musical organisation. In each there is a compass of an octave and seven or eight appreciably different tones. The melodies proceed upwards as well as downwards and the phrases follow in recognisable sequence. Neither style has less than four different note-values or durational signs.

In the "legato" style the phrases are balanced above and below a tonal centre, as in a plagal mode. This suggests a more musically advanced style than the "corroboree" song, which accumulates phrases without producing melodic symmetry.

The "corroboree" song has been recorded in three different versions.

A comparison of the first two versions (on cylinders No. 1 recorded in 1899, Example 1 and No. 4, recorded by Horace Watson in 1903, Example 2) shows melodic differences which might be regarded merely as "improvisational". In both cases Mrs. Fanny Smith is singing the same song-type and, allowing for the four-year lapse in time, her musical memory is good. It will be noticed that the ascending phrase in Example 1, bars 10-13 and Example 2, bars 14-18, is almost identical.

Apparently Horace Watson was able to record for a longer duration on his machine. In his recordings Fanny Smith sings more of each song than in 1899, when she performed before members of the Royal Society of Tasmania.

The third and longest version of the "corroboree" song, not transcribed here, is recorded on cylinder No. 6. A duplicate of this, more clearly audible, is to be heard on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's disc-dubbing (16-inch) in the Federal Historical Library, Sydney.

There is no reason to doubt that the "corroboree" style was widely known in Tasmania about 100 years ago. Evidence for this is to be found in a transcription arranged for voice and piano accompaniment by Mrs. Logan. A copy of the voice part made from the original manuscript in the Tasmanian Museum appears in Example 3.

(1) Sir Baldwin Spencer's recordings of Australian Aboriginal Music (*Mem. Nat. Mus. Vict.* No. 24), 1959.

Mr. Longman has already pointed out the correspondences between words of the "corroboree" song which Mrs. Smith sings and those of the "Song of the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land", which was sung to Mrs. Logan by "Mifs", an aboriginal woman living in the Bothwell district between 1840 and 1850.

Both Fanny Smith and "Mifs" sing a melody which ascends, then descends to a reiterated ground tone. Triole rhythms and time-patterning are similar and the relation between words and melody syliabic.

Where there are marked divergencies, one is inclined to question the manuscript adaptions of an amateur pianist, rather than the memory of Fanny Smith.

Attention must be drawn to the fact that neither the "corroboree" nor the "legato" song styles, as recorded by Mrs. Smith, corresponds to descriptions of Tasmanian native singing by J. Bonwick[3]. He refers to rudimentary polyphonic effects, such as singing in thirds; also, songs which do not exceed the compass of a third. One can only speculate as to the nature of the occasions on which these apparently elementary song styles were performed. It may well be that they were reserved for the sacred ceremonis in contrast to which were secular, or "popular" songs, of a more florid nature—songs which Fanny Smith preferred to sing. Or they may have been the songs of a different tribe with another dialect.

In tribal Australia, women and children are permitted to join in the "camp" or corroboree singing round the fires in the evenings. It may be that Mrs. Fanny Cochrane Smith learnt her songs when she listened as a child to singing and dancing among the native communities on Flinders Island.

An argument in favour of the authenticity of Mrs. Smith's native singing is the free style into which she lapses after what is, presumably, a European hymn. This is recorded on cylinder No. 8 (not transcribed). The wayward, improvisatory style, here, may be due to a reluctance, or inability, on the singer's part to proceed with a less familiar tune.

In the Federal Historical Library of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, there is a recording of a discussion between Norman B. Tindale[3] and an interviewer, Bob Lange, regarding possible descendants of the Tasmanian aborigines. Relevant to the discussion is a remark by Mr. Tindale that the first song (Example 1) is reminiscent of one of the Australian aboriginal songs heard on the West Coast of South Australia.

Despite the differences noted above between the two Tasmanian song styles, it is possible, I think, to isolate certain common features and to compare these with three selected Australian aboriginal songs, two of which were recorded on, or near, the West Coast of South Australia.

Scale tables, or reductions after the method suggested by Hornbostel[4], appear in Example 6 to assist in making this comparison. Consequently, some explanation of these and of signs in the transcriptions will first be given.

The durational values of each note in the scale indicate the relative frequency of the tones, i.e, the number of time these tones occur in the tune. The note judged to be the tonal centre, or key-note, usually occurs most often in the song and the melodies have been transposed so that each "tonic" appears as "middle c". A pause, or fermata, indicates the final tone; an inverted pause, the initial tone.

It will be noticed, for example, that in Example 6*b*, which is a reduction of the "Birds and Flowers" song, the beginning and ending tones coincide, whereas, in Example 6*c* they occur at opposite ends of the scale tabie.

In the transcriptions, an inverted "V" indicates Mrs. Smith's intake of breath; the "O" with horizontal line is for a hummed, or closed-mouth effect; small arrows indicate pitch deviations of less than a semitone and a diagonol line represents a vocal gliding, or glissando, effect.

Some deviations from the original pitch, during singing, cannot escape notice. For instance, in Fanny Smith's performance of the first song there is a gradual fali in pitch amounting to at least a semitone (100 cents). Such a situation is familiar to all who have listened to amateur performances by unaccompanied choirs. As it is not serious enough to conceal the intended melody, I have not shown the lapse in pitch in the transcription (Example 1).

The songs which have been reduced to the scale tables in Example 6 are as follow:

6*a* Tasmanian "corroboree" song (Example 2).

6*b* Tasmanian "legato" song (Example 5).

6*c* The Ship Song sung by an aboriginal woman from Yardea, Eyre's Peninsula, South Australia and recorded on wax cylinder by Professor E. Harold Davies[5] during expeditions 1927-29. A transcription of this song appears in Example 4.

6*d* A song by a Wirangu native from Denial Bay recorded in South Australia by Geoffrey O'Grady[6] in 1958.

6*e* A Kangaroo song sung by a Pidjindjara native and recorded in Central Australia by T. G. H. Strehlow[7] in 1952.

Regarding the two Tasmanian reductions, (6*a* and 6*b*) the central "tonic" clearly emerges, also the slight prominence given to the notes of the triad "A", "C" and "E". In contrast to this triadic base, the Australian songs give greater prominence to the fifth note above the 'tonic'.

(2) The daily life and origin of the Tasmanians, p. 30-32.

(3) Curator of Anthropology, South Australian Museum.

(4) Hornbostel, Erich M. von, and Abraham, Otto, Vorschläge zur Transcription exotischer Melodien (Sammelb. der Intern. Mus. Ges. XI), 1909.

(5) Aboriginal Songs (Oceania, II No. 4), 1932.

(6) Assistant to Dr. A. Capell, Reader in Oceanic Linguistics Univ. Sydney.

(7) Reader in Australian Linguistics, Univ. Adelaide.

Un-Australian characteristics in the two Tasmanian songs include Fanny Smith's frequent intake of breaths. Records of Australian aboriginal soloists, male or female, and some of them well past middle age, demonstrate that singing "in one breath" (until the singer is silent through lack of it) is peculiar to Australian aboriginal singing.

The rising penultimate tone (see Example 1, bar 18; Example 2, bars 18 and 22; Example 5, bar 17) does not appear in the Australian examples shown here, though it has been heard, occasionally, in chants on the north-east coast of Arnhem Land[8]. The F sharp in Example 5, bars 8 and 13, need not be interpreted as a leading note in a major key, but rather as a lower, inflectional note.

Both the Tasmanian styles and the Australian "Ship Song" (Example 4) belong to the semitoneless pentatonic order. But songs which share in the pentatonic order can differ markedly in their melodic habits.

The general descending nature of th Australian song contrasts with the Tasmanian varieties which ascend as well as descend. An important similarity, however, is the addition of a subordinate descent at the close of the main song-descent. These tail-pieces or "codas" are to be seen in Example 1 commencing at bar 14; Example 2, bar 18 and in the Australian Ship Song, Example 4, bars 7 and 28.

The Tasmanian samples, with their central tone, emphasis on a triad and upward thrust in the initial phrases, lead one to compare them with island styles further north.

The embellishments which cluster about the triadic base of the "Birds and Flowers" song bring to mind some of the singing styles heard in north-easterly New Guinea, also in New Ireland. Moreover, the "legato" example has that typical New Guinea division in its structure (compare bars 1-4 with 5-6) which prompts the use of such Western terms as "binary form", full or half close.

In the "legato" style the second part of the binary division recurs, after the manner of a refrain. If it had been possible for other Tasmanians to accompany Mrs. Fanny Smith, this song may have been sung in antiphonal, or responsorial style.

On one of the cylinders Horace Watson talks of the Tasmanians beating skins and sticks in accompaniment to their corroboree singing. Some faint percussive sounds—beating two against the singer's three—are to be heard on one or two places on these cylinders. Baldwin Spencer was more successful in his field recordings of accompanying instruments.

Even with the aid of available texts, my own efforts to fit the sung syllables to the sung tones was very soon abandoned. Apart from certain pairs of speech-sounds, such as the "ng-ya" which settled on the short-long (quaver-crotchet) tonal sequences in the "corroboree" style, and the first word "Popela", or "pappela" (which sounded contracted), I was unable to check consistently the words as Fanny Smith sang them.

Finally, it should be noted that bar-lines employed in the transcriptions do not imply regular metre, though this is often the case in the corroboree style. They are used chiefly to assist in identifying certain elements, rhythmic or melodic. Transposition signs at the commencement of Examples 1, 2 and 4 do not indicate "key". In the recording, Example 5 sounded about a half-tone flatter, but was raised in the transcription to reduce transposition signs.

CONCLUSION

In its syllabic manner and additional descents, or "codas", the Tasmanian "corroboree" style resembles Australian aboriginal singing, particularly in South Australia and in the Centre. But the rising penultimate tone and triadic emphasis in the Tasmanian examples are not typical of Australian singing styles in general.

The "legato" Tasmanian song, with its central tonic, binary division and triadic base has more affinity with some New Guinea and possibly other island styles.

It may be concluded from these fragments, and from written reports by observers in the last century, that Tasmanian song-styles were widely varied. It seems that they ranged from monotone reiterations to songs of a relatively sophisticated nature such as the "legato" or "Spring" song.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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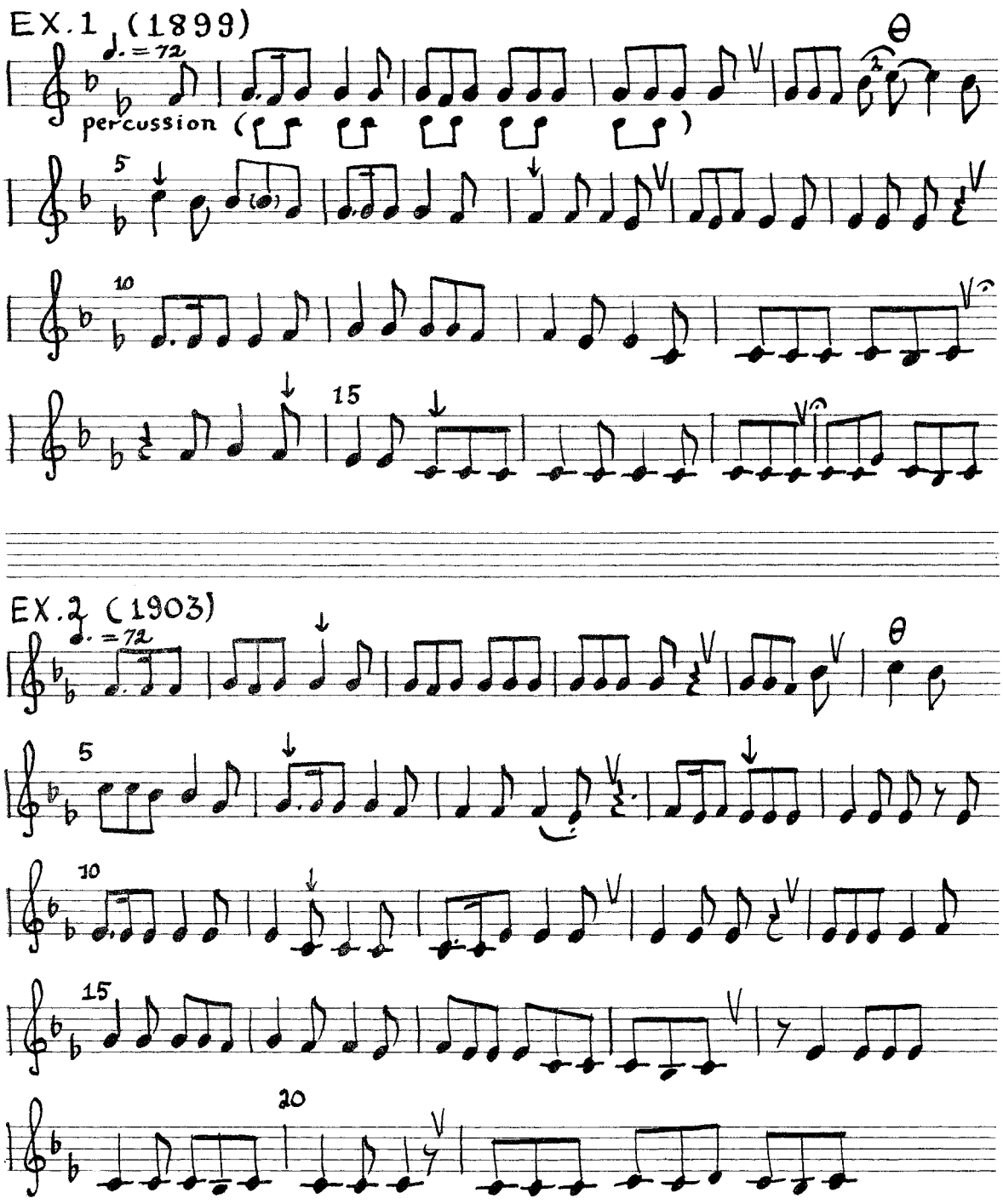
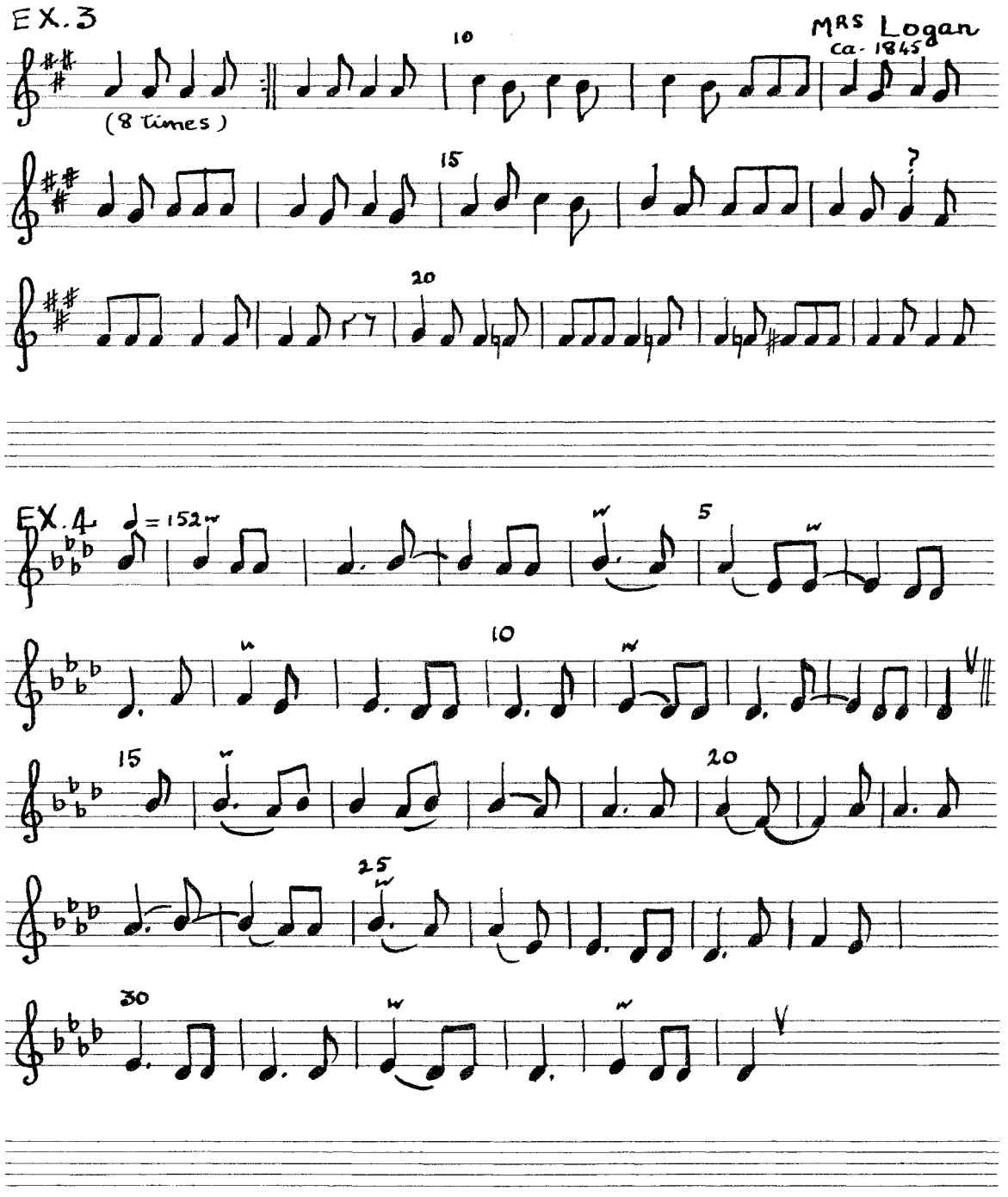
(8) Jiritja chants recorded by Professor A. P. Elkin (Sydney Univ. recordings).



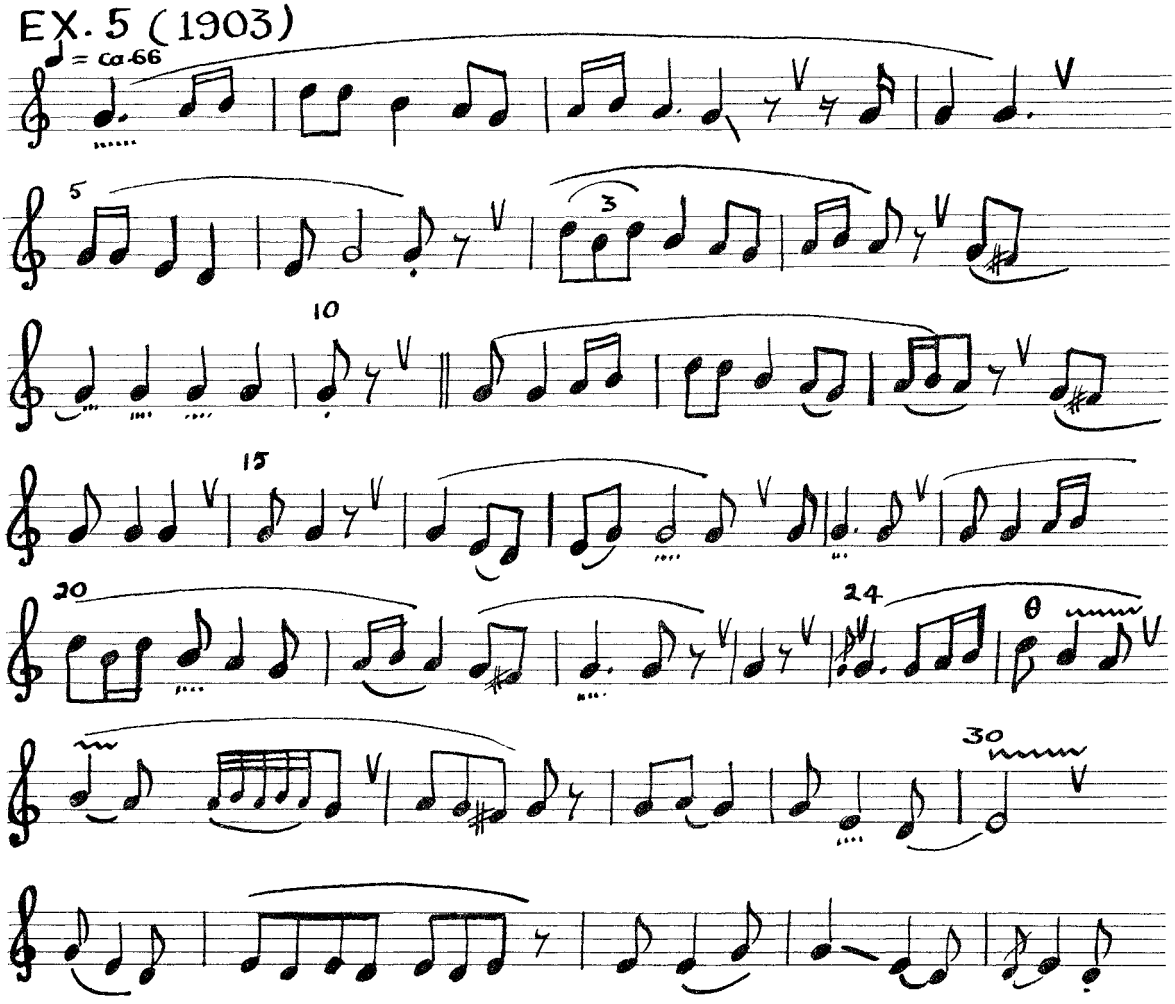
EXAMPLE 1.—Transcribed from Cylinder No. 1. The first version of the "corroboree" song style sung by Mrs. Fanny Cochrane Smith before members of the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1899.

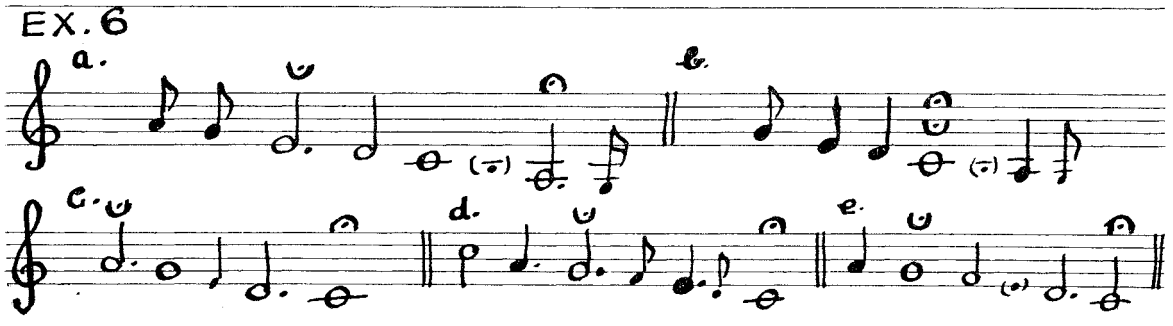
EXAMPLE 2.—Transcribed from Cylinder No. 4. "Dance Song", or second version of the corroboree song style sung by Fanny Smith and recorded by Horace Watson in 1903.



EXAMPLE 3.—Copied from Mrs. Logan's transcription of " A Song of the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land " sung to her by " Mifs ". Piano accompaniment has been omitted.

EXAMPLE 4.—" Ship Song " sung by an Australian aboriginal woman at Yardea, Eyre's Peninsula, S.A., and recorded by Professor E. Harold Davies on a phonograph in 1928. For re-recording on disc see Columbia (Aust.) P.R.X. 9-11.





EXAMPLE 5.—Transcribed from Cylinder No. 7. The song about "Birds and Flowers", or the "legato" song style sung by Fanny Smith and recorded by Horace Watson in 1903.

EXAMPLE 6*a-e*.—Scale Tables, see page 2, second column.