

Hula as a Way of Knowing: A Personal Journey toward Musical and Kinesthetic Understanding



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Abstract: This article describes the author's personal journey as a trained classical musician beginning from early childhood. The subsequent study of hula as an indigenous Hawaiian form of communication is further examined against the backdrop of Western musical knowledge and ways of doing. Hula as an ancient art form is discussed with regard to its classifications, uses, and multiple layers of meaning communicated through gesture.

Keywords: hula, Hawai'i, Hawaiian, dance, gesture, movement, music, chant, indigenous, instrument

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The piano arrived without notice. A hulking specimen of Victorian-era engineering, the recently inherited upright grand stood among my toys, its ivory keys and mother-of-pearl inlays looking too expensive to touch, yet invoking that very desire. Seemingly out of place in a family space dedicated to children's amusements and Saturday morning cartoons, the piano piqued my four-year-old curiosity, and drew me to explore it further, my tiny fingers plinking out melodies and experimenting with the sonic possibilities. It was these informal encounters with the piano that set me on a lifelong course of making music and using music as a way to understand and interact with the world.

As my parents noticed my interest in the piano, they arranged for formal study to begin at age seven—and mercifully end at age nineteen. For years, I sat at the piano, practicing the scales, etudes, and repertoire issued by my teacher during my weekly pilgrimage to her home. Formal flute study began at age ten thanks to the procurement of an aunt's cast off instrument last used during the Nixon

administration and weekly band lessons provided by my school. These childhood beginnings set the stage for more advanced involvement in music, with my middle school and high school activities revolving primarily around band, piano, and church-related musical pursuits. I eventually decided to pursue music education as a career, and I enrolled in a large, state university to do just that.

Upon graduating with a degree in music education, I taught general and choral music in an urban Catholic school. There were many challenges, behavioral and monetary, that accompanied this position, and it came as a bit of a relief when the school closed and I was free to leave the area to pursue graduate music education studies, somewhat, guilt-free. I returned to the academic environment, fiercely determined to make an impact through effective teaching, quality research, and meaningful music-making. It was during this time I decided to pursue further graduate studies at the doctoral level with the intent of training the next generation of music teachers. I had reached the pinnacle of focus, determination, and purpose. It was at this point that I felt that music was my way of knowing, my way of expressing. It was so integrated into me that I felt compelled to have a larger impact on the field by training those who would bring music to children and youth in schools.

Music was and continues to be a way of knowing for me, but, despite my advanced study, I did not realize how limited this way of knowing really was. My story is likely similar to many others who do what I do: early childhood interest, parents with the disposable income to provide lessons and training, high school music nerd, college music major, etc. Western European Art Music dominated my musical upbringing, providing rigorous training and theoretical understanding, albeit with a limited cultural viewpoint. Music was my language, but I only spoke very little of what was possible. I do not regret this background or training – only how long it took to realize I wanted and needed more.

Fast-forward to my years of doctoral study. I attended an institution well-known for its unique blend of music education and ethnomusicology. Prior to my matriculation, I barely knew what ethnomusicology was. Intimidated by the possibility of immersing myself in the music of another culture, I watched from the sidelines, hesitant to join in. It was during this time that I attended an ethnomusicology conference in Hawai'i. What started as an excuse to get some sun and sand, ended up significantly altering my musical life and my ways of knowing through that medium. While the conference offered many fascinating paper presentations, I decided to attend a hula dancing workshop. I was not sure what would happen in that ninety-minute period, but, in a rare instance of

extroversion, I decided to give it a try. What happened was that I fell in love with hula.

Hula often conjures up images of grass skirts, coconut shell tops, and other images that might be more related to tourism than the actual ancient art form. Polynesian themed restaurants and resorts frequently portray hula and its related accoutrements in either inaccurate or incomplete ways. Hula, however, is itself a way of knowing, of channeling the past and shaping the future, a way of knowing that has existed for centuries using chant and movement.

For centuries, the indigenous people of the Hawaiian Islands had no written language, yet they had an extensive body of knowledge to pass on to future generations. The Smithsonian Folkways (n.d.) archive notes that:

Early Hawaiians recorded their literature in memory, not writing. They composed and maintained an extensive oral tradition, a body of literature covering every facet of Hawaiian life. Chants, called *mele*, recorded thousands of years of ancient Polynesian and Hawaiian history. Chants also recorded the daily life of the Hawaiian people, their love of the land, humor or tragedy, and the heroic character of their leaders.

The transmission of stories and information was vital to a culture with no written language. Early ethnographer, Nathaniel B. Emerson (1998) notes that “listening was equally as important as speaking if the traditions were to accurately survive” (2) and, further, that “when a *kupuna* (elder) dies, a library has burned to the ground” (3), speaking to the importance of transgenerational passage of information within the Hawaiian traditional culture.

The Islands’ inhabitants practiced hula for centuries until the arrival of missionaries in the nineteenth century. The missionaries misunderstood the purpose and interpretation of hula, leading to the repression of this indigenous cultural expression. Their misinformed perceptions of hula and their disapproval of its practice forced hula to be transmitted in secret for many years (Harden 1999). It was with the installation of King David Kalākaua in the 1870s that hula experienced a rebirth of sorts. Kalākaua—known as the Merrie Monarch for his affinity for socializing—encouraged the Hawaiian people to resurrect their hula practices as an expression of pride in their heritage and an attempt to preserve a vital aspect of their culture. These efforts faded with his death and the fall of the Hawaiian monarchy, but the 1960s and 1970s saw a return of hula practice once again (Harden 1999).

Hula consists of chanted text and movement. Hula as a way of knowing cannot be entirely separated from text as “...the spoken word is transported by breath, and breath is life, then words, the ancients believed, are charged with a powerful mana of their own” (Harden 1999, 126). However, “the chant tells the story, and the hula sets the story in motion” (Harden 1999, 126), suggesting that the movements of hula are integral to the communication of information. There are two overarching forms of hula: *kahiko*, the ancient form, and *‘auana*, the contemporary form. [Kahiko](#) has been practiced for centuries and is accompanied by chanting and various traditional instruments such as the *ipu heke* (double gourd drum), *pahu* drum (shark skin drum), and *‘uli ‘uli* (gourd rattles) (see figures 1 and 2). Practitioners of *kahiko* are likely to wear a *pa’u* skirt, a traditional form of hula clothing (see figure 3). [‘Auana](#), or contemporary hula, seems to be the more well-known form of hula, featuring modern instruments such as guitar and ukulele, as well as more contemporary costuming.

Figure 1
Ipu Heke



Figure 2
'Uli 'Uli



Figure 3
Pa'u Skirt



Hula (with the exception of *hula noho*, or seated hula) involves coordinated motions of the feet and hands that bring a story to life. Emerson (1998, 176) observes that

gesture is voiceless speech, a short-hand dramatic picture. The Hawaiians were adepts [sic] in this sort of art. Hand and foot, face and eye, and those convolutions of gray matter which are linked to the organs of speech, all worked in such harmony that, when the man spoke, he spoke not alone with his vocal organs, but all over, from head to foot, every part adding its emphasis to the utterance

Further, in hula,

there is a basic vocabulary of hand gestures. The dancer depicts the world around him as he sees it in relation to himself. For example, some motions for things of the sea place the hands near the waist. The motions for sun, moon, stars and clouds are placed above the head. The gestures for rain would start high and gradually be lowered in much the same way that rain really falls (Ho'omāka'ika'i Staff 2007, 72).

[Motions](#) carry with them particular literal meanings. One might see a hula dancer depict ocean waves, a rainbow, or the sun. However, it is important to recall the multiple layers of meaning found within hula. For example, a *pali* motion (see figure 4) might depict a cliff of a mountainous region, but could more deeply represent “the precipice, stand[ing] for any difficulty or obstacle of magnitude” (Emerson 1998, 177). Likewise, a *pua* motion (see figure 5) might represent a variety of flowers, but, under the surface, means something precious and valuable. For example, at a social gathering, one might notice a small child running around and inquire, “Whose *pua* is this?” indicating the preciousness of the little one. In these ways, the gestures of the hula practitioner communicate many meanings. Emerson (1998, 176) refers to the fluidity and beauty of *hula*, stating that the dancer’s “...whole physique is a living and moving picture of feeling, sentiment, and passion.”

Figure 4
Pali motion



I truly launched my hula journey when I returned home from the ethnomusicology conference. I wanted more and I found it when I enrolled in a hula class at a local community arts center. My expectation was that I would take the class, learn a lot, and conclude at the end of the term. What I did not expect was that I was to become part of a *hālau* (hula school) that transcended the administrivia of registration dates and times. It was at *hālau* that I learned the basic steps, hand gestures, and the accompanying drum rhythms. I learned both *kahiko* and *‘auana*, as well as Hawaiian language and culture lessons. I learned Hawaiian songs and how to strum a ukulele. I crafted my own *pa’u* skirt as well as my own *ipu heke*. I reveled in each new thing I learned and felt extremely fortunate that this precious information was given so lovingly to a *haole* (foreign, white person) like me. Our *hālau* was a confluence of both native Hawaiians and persons of diverse backgrounds. I was definitely a cultural outsider, but always treated like family.

Figure 5
Pua Motion



I ignorantly went into my hula study thinking that, surely, my Western musical training would give me an advantage. I was sorely mistaken. While I was quite adept at sitting behind a flute and decoding notation, I had never experienced a whole-body musical endeavor such as hula. My unfortunate early efforts were more akin to marching band maneuvers and were described by my *kumu hula* (hula teacher) as a “train wreck.” But, I persevered, learned to trust my body as an instrument, and learned to trust my ear more than ever before. I thought that my Western training would help me in hula, but the complete opposite occurred – my musicianship soared after being given the gift of hula instruction. My train wreck days behind me, I began taking classes twice per week, improving my skills, and participating as fully as I could in the true meaning of hula.

I am thankful for that old piano that materialized among my Cabbage Patch dolls that day in my early childhood. It set in motion a musical life and gave me a way to share and express. It led to many meaningful musical encounters and even allowed me to experience the beauty, the depth, the love – the *aloha* – that is *hula*.

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To view Dr. Watts’s ICIK seminar on Hawai’ian hula, [visit the ICIK website](#).

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