

# Jana Haimsohn c. 1920

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530 Canal St.

Jana Haimsohn danced with fearless ease in each of the series of sound-movement projects that comprised her evening-long work, c. 1920. Some of the projects consisted of a gesture which slowly grew to the point where it went out of control and burst into a totally different form. Haimsohn opened the performance this way with a small hip rotation that grew into a huge front-to-back wave through her body that finally pulled her violently forward to sudden stretched stillness.

In another project of this kind, Haimsohn walked with swinging clasped hands, making clicking noises with her mouth. The walk became a fierce run and the clicks were overtaken by rhythmical, rasping panting. She then leapt and grabbed a trapeze hanging in the center of the space and swung quietly, eyes closed. In her first singing section, breath-long phrases tumbled from a kind of speaking-in-tongues to cries and wails. The strength of these projects lay in the elusiveness of the moment at which it became clear that the explosion was imminent—the moment when we stopped watching or listening and started waiting for the inevitable.

In other sections of the performance a defined set of options was presented, either by Haimsohn alone or by her and musician Antonio Zepeda, who sang and played whistles and

Mayan drums. Most projects, including those that did not end in explosions, had the sense of waxing and waning intensity. The focus of both Haimsohn's and Zepeda's attention seemed to be on powerful presentation of the unusual material, not on exploring fine relationships among its elements.

In an example of the second kind of project, Haimsohn and Zepeda played whistles and she shrieked. The air was thick with the overtones of the resultant sound.

The whistle Haimsohn played in this section was a water whistle. She rocked it back and forth with a rotating motion. It appeared that as the water flowed from one chamber to a second, air flowed back from the second chamber to the first, creating a whistling sound as it passed by a flute-like opening. Haimsohn rocked the whistle with not just her hands, but her whole body. It was clear in that moment that not just singing and dancing, but instrumental music as well, are the result of vibrations passing through the human body.

Haimsohn held with whistle before her like an offering. Her ecstatic pose, the ritualistic intensity of the performing style, the name of the concert, the whimsical flyer photographs of a Polynesian dancer and Haimsohn similarly costumed (both in grass skirts, the former with a musical instrument, the latter with a boot, on her lap), the tape of traditional Polynesian music played as a prelude to the concert, all underscored ideas of superimposition and juxtaposition of another time and place with here and now.

In the doing of the dance and music—in the separating and sectioning off of material—these ideas were not clear until Haimsohn's final improvisation which ended with the beginning of the first movement of the evening. The ending was thus superimposed on the beginning and the performance completed one turn on a spiral. I wonder if it could have spiralled further by more intensive and extensive consideration of possible relationships among the material.

Haimsohn, as a performer, at times seemed to undercut Haimsohn the composer by precious pouting and puffing of cheeks. These mannerisms occurred not just between sections, but also sometimes while she was performing. This activity directed our attention to the difficulty rather than the beauty of her feats. The traditional artist, alluded to in the flyer and the musical prelude to the concert, can afford to be casual even in the most serious performance she or he must do. It is because she or he *must* do what they do—because the acts of the traditional artist are absolutely essential to the psychic and perceptual survival of a people—because the acts have been and will be repeated ad infinitum—that the artist can afford to surround that perfected core with a casual atmosphere. The modern artist must examine her or his situation carefully to determine if and what kind of mixture of casual and serious is appropriate, or if one belies the other.

Stephanie Woodard