The Oneida hymn-singing tradition

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The Oneida hymn-singing tradition
…their singing exceeded anything of the kind that I remember to have heard, the voices of the squaws were truly melodious…

—James Emlen of Philadelphia, 1794

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documentary record is replete with favorable comments about the Oneidas’ hymn singing. The historical and cultural significance of Oneida hymnody is discussed in *The People of the Standing Stone*.

But what did it sound like?
We can get some idea by listening to the following recordings made in 1998 by the Oneida Singers. Based in Wisconsin, the Oneida Singers continue to preserve the Oneida-language hymn-singing tradition.

Click in the boxes to hear these hymns. The Oneida-language hymnal currently in use appears on the next page.

*Amazing Grace* (John Newton, 1725-1807)

[Audio]

*Rock of Ages* (Augustus M. Crosby, 1740-1778)

[Audio]

The singers on this recording are: Bev Anderson, Alberta Baird, Marge Broberg, Carol Cornelius, Dellora Cornelius, Josie (Cornelius) Daebler, Melinda Doxtator, Prudence Doxtator, Madelyn Genskow, Rose Johnson, Betty McLester, Lorraine Metoxen, Mary Parkhurst, Lois Powless, Theresa Powless, Carol M. Robelia, Marie Scott, Delores Skenandore, Opal Skenandore, Archie Archiquette, Benjamin R. Cornelius, Franklin L. Cornelius, Gerald E. Cornelius, Harry Cornelius, Leonard Cornelius, Terry A. Cornelius, Gordon McLester, Kirby Metoxen, Daniel A. Summers. Readers of *The People of the Standing Stone* will find many of these surnames familiar.
176 Amazing Grace

1. das gwa ni gu has se la go
   ji ni gal lo no da
   ji wa dwa gya du go da gwe
   ji wa gli wha ne la

chorus

   yo dlac\d\ do wa ga dya da du
   ok na sa gya do lau
   de wa gat ga gwe gu yo dlac\d\ ok nu wa gat' gat to

2. la wa ni yo la o cha sta sl\i
   la gli hu ya ni i
   ha gwe li ga li wi yo stak
   ha gwe lya ne sga na

chorus

   yo da sgact lo o cha sta sl\i
   wa ha gya do la ne
   ne ji ne ga wi sta ecks ne
   dwa ge da gw\a ni i

Contemporary Oneida hymnal
The Oneida Singers are the subject of Terence O’Grady’s “The Singing Societies of Oneida,” *American Music* 9 (1991): 67-89. They were included in the 2004 Smithsonian Folkways CD, *Beautiful Beyond*. In 2008, they were awarded a National Heritage Fellowship Award by the National Endowment for the Arts.

My thanks to Gordon McLester for making these recordings and hymnal excerpts available.