

# Introduction

In our era the timeworn Eurocentric curriculum is being challenged by an evolving curriculum that has been called multicultural, inclusive, and transformational. Quite rightly, our current vision of our world and the resulting appropriate curriculum, its scope, theory and implementation, have compelled many educators to enrich their classroom experiences with topics that have previously not been deemed worthy of inclusion. The creativity, artistic expression, ingenuity, thought and wisdom, and performance aspects of cultures outside the Western cultural tradition are thus no longer as neglected in many of our classrooms.

Our generation is seeking to enfold these marginalized forms of cultural expression in a thoughtful way without endangering the reasonable central place of Western culture in our curriculum. In this way, the intent of this book is to facilitate as well as demonstrate that the inclusion of unfamiliar, cross-cultural music—in this case that of the Lakota—provides a more stimulating and legitimate curriculum than its precursors.

In addressing the area of music experiences in the classroom, the challenge to broaden and enrich the music experience of students becomes particularly challenging in the area of Native American music. A history of omission and distortion haunts Native American musical forms. Cross-cultural aesthetic conventions often prevent appreciation of artistic expression and performance by anyone who is not at home with such conventions. Vocal styles sound “funny” or unpleasant, rhythmic accompaniment is puzzling or unfamiliar, melodies are different from the norm in one’s own culture, and non-verbal expression, audience attitudes and participation patterns appear exotic or foreign.



*Smoke/Young Bear family. R.D. Theisz Collection*

Yet, when considering Native American musical expression, this rather typically human response to unfamiliar cultural expression has been reinforced and intensified by historical events since European colonization. The contact with Native American music and dance by European colonial powers and later European immigrants has produced a history of opposition and negativism toward tribal music. With rare moments of exception, Europeans have considered music as a central dimension of stereotyping the indigenous people of the Americas. As such, when the stereotype was benign or utopian—such as Rousseau’s glorification of the noble savage—the natives of the Americas were imagined as simple, pastoral, poetic children of nature who spend much of their time in singing and dancing in a pastoral lifestyle. On the other hand, when the stereotyping turned malicious and natives were seen as heartless, bloodcurdling, primitive, painted savages, their music and dance was interpreted as bestial chanting and howling around ominous fires. The Western musical tradition has, with very few exceptions, found little use for American Indian music, and although some Native Americans have participated in Euro American music, the latter had little influence on composition or performance of traditional tribal music as well.

The perpetuation of these two main tendencies of stereotyping was augmented by the missionizing fervor and educational agenda of the assimilation efforts of the last five centuries which stressed that Native American forms of ceremonies, songs, and dances were devil worship in one way or another. To document the case of the Lakota, which will be our focus in this book, several examples can be cited. After outlawing the Sun Dance, the central form of public religious worship of the Lakota in 1881, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ruled in 1891 that Indians might dance but only the “side-step” and not after eight o’clock. Furthermore, all dances which required the use of paint or feathers were prohibited. In 1907, W. L. Belden, the agent at the Standing Rock Agency, in North Dakota, instructed that feasting and dancing be prohibited. Other documented prohibitions of music and dance, and the related practices of feasting and giving-away were pronounced repeatedly by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the 1920s.

The late Severt Young Bear, Sr. from Porcupine District on the Pine Ridge Reservation in *Standing in the Light. A Lakota Way of Seeing* shares a personal reminiscence of such policies and their effects:

*“I think of two of my grandfathers. I used to hear them every time they would go someplace; right away they’d start tapping a chair or box or the wall and there would be a sound like soft whistling or they’d actually be singing a song softly to themselves. Even after they got to be very old men, they were still there tapping, whistling and singing. We used to want to sit beside them at church, at Christmas, Easter, or any Sunday, because here the preacher would be preaching up there: “It’s devil worship to dance and sing Indian and you have to be a Christian in order to get to heaven, and so many Indian things are sinful, and you have to watch how you live and save yourself from the eternal fire!” He would point fingers at people and say, “Don’t be sinners! Those Lakota dances and songs are for the devil!” All of a sudden Grandpa would start tapping the pew seat and be whistling a song. He used to make us kids laugh because singing was always so much a part of his life.*

[SEVERT YOUNG BEAR, SR.]

Thankfully, church and government policies have changed considerably in recent years, and the vitality of their traditional music has been demonstrated by many Indian nations in addition to the Lakota.

Nevertheless, now that we find ourselves in a period of revising the curriculum, we encounter additional difficulties as we seek to bring Native American music into the classroom. Most music teachers have no or very little exposure and training in tribal music. Practicing singers from local Indian communities, where these are available and are called upon, often lack the experience of presenting their music other than as a customary performance, which may be memorable but does not often reflect the necessary structured and sequenced nature of

ongoing, measured, integrated classroom instruction which ideally teaches musical concepts such as melody, rhythm, timbre, and form.

Another pedagogical obstacle to classroom implementation of Native American music is the much heralded variety and diversity of Native American cultures. There is no such animal as “Indian music.” What exists instead is a great wealth of diverse music expressions and performances which are intimidating if teachers are resolved to have students experience Native American music in a broad, comprehensive manner. The remedy here is to be selective and to specialize in one or very few tribal styles and repertoires. This issue will be explored further below.

A final obstacle for teachers who wish to incorporate Native American music in their music curriculum is the issue of restrictions and prohibitions. Partly as a result of the historic patterns of omissions and distortions, but predominantly as a consequence of tribal values and beliefs, many song and dance performances are totally inappropriate for classroom study. The teacher who wishes to adhere to these cultural restrictions and to transmit such respect to his or her students will find it to be a constant source of concern about whether a song or dance may be studied and performed in the classroom setting. Although the general benchmark may be that sacred or ceremonial music is not to be brought into the classroom whereas secular music is more suitable, considerable tribal variations exist regarding family or individual ownership, the proper season for performance, or the authority of the performer.

Most of these concerns can be resolved and dealt with by the music teacher who is culturally respectful, committed to doing the research into the chosen tribal culture(s), and willing to spend the time to get to know the tribal communities, the events and the contexts where these musical forms occur, and finally the performers who enjoy the respect of their communities.

For these dedicated professionals this book should be a welcome resource. For the many others who have little opportunity to undertake such an intense commitment, this book will provide a crucial tool. The

selected songs avoid all of the above prohibitive concerns. They were selected by the author in keeping with tribal values for their accessibility for young learners. They are available for the public domain of the classroom without fear of violating tribal restrictions. The occasion and manner of their performance is explained. The songs are performed by recognized Lakota performers who support the sharing of their rich music heritage, and the author and copyright owner encourage duplication of all materials for standard classroom use. Finally, the following pages are very compatible with contemporary music pedagogy, particularly, in my view, with the Orff-Schulwerk theory and practice.

In spite of the legacy of neglect and denigration sketched briefly above, scholarly evidence has been accumulating regarding the nature and centrality of traditional music in Indian life. Music enveloped the Indian’s individual and social life like an atmosphere. There was no important personal experience where it did not bear a part, nor any ceremonial where it was not essential to the expression of religious feeling.

*The songs of a tribe were coextensive with the life of the people....In fact, the Indian sang in every experience of life from his cradle to his grave.*

[ALICE C. FLETCHER]

*Music is no mere diversion from the Indian point of view; it is not separated from ordinary experience by being classed as an art, but is a feature of daily, homely use and necessity. The Indian has a song for everything;...I believe it to be true that among no people, the world over, is music so loved and so generally used as among the North American Indians.*

[FREDERICK R. BURTON]

*Music is a source of pleasure to Indians, and skill according to their standards is appreciated and honored, but music to them, in its highest sense, is connected with power and with communication with the mysterious forces that control all human life. In that, even more than in the sound of singing, lies the real difference between the music of the North American Indian and that of our own race....The Indians do not play with music. It is a gift from the spirits to be used with due respect and a definite purpose, which usually concerns the welfare of the tribe or an individual. In the old way...the question was not the quality of his voice, but whether it could do things. The acid test was will it work. Many Indian songs are the unwritten classics of the tribes, and the Indians consider it a pleasure and a privilege to hear them.*

[FRANCES DENSMORE]

*While there is music without associated movement, and dance without melodic accompaniment, the two are for the most part so closely related as to demand joint analysis. A large proportion of ethnic music calls for the knowledge of “physical expression in visual form” because of the mutual dependence of the two arts.*

[GERTRUDE P. KURATH]

*There is no question that Indian choreography is not a simple matter of the monotonous beating of a tom-tom and yelping cacophony combined with frenzied hopping about in a circle as seen in so many motion pictures. Rather, it is the expression of a disciplined body achieved through years of training, which glories in the beauty of rhythmic movement, enhanced by colorful costumery, which emphasizes liberal aesthetic use of environmental resources. The Indian dances not only for war, but for peace; not alone for his god, but equally for his friends; and he expresses his joy as well*

*as his tragedy through physical experiences manifested in the graceful or powerful movements of his body.*

[FREDERICK DOCKSTADER]

*Today (1992), dance and dance events—including the songs, dance dress, and gatherings of the people—are among the strongest overt expressions and measures of the perpetuation of Indian life and culture among the people of the Northern Plains tribes. Although the powwow is the most visible public dance complex shared by Northern Plains people, participation in the ceremonial Sun Dance has increased in some areas and winter social dances are still held in community halls and some homes.*

[LYNN F. HUENEMANN]

This cross section of scholarly perspectives in our century, we should remind ourselves, has not been shared by the music educators who have continued to restrict the music choices to the Western tradition, if not the classical.

Before we proceed any further, it is necessary to clarify that the focus of this study is what Indian people themselves generally refer to as “traditional music” or “singing Indian.” The songs performed as traditional music may have origins in the obscure past or may be recent compositions following a variety of time honored expectations of traditional song forms, texts, melodic contours, as well as vocal style and other performance aspects. Although Indian performers participate in other forms of music such as folk, country and western, rock, and “Indian contemporary,”—which is a combination of tribal melodic structures, vocal styles, and vocables from tribal songs—these are usually considered outside forms of music or as excursions into Western forms of music. The Indian audience also is exposed to and enjoys a variety of intercultural musical experiences. The music with which we are concerned here, however, is the oral tradition of songs which has persisted in tribal communities for centuries without radical changes. Most Indian people, as performers, dancers or as audience, can readily

identify Indian music performances as opposed to non-Indian examples, and can also distinguish between the intertribal, plains-based, so-called generic powwow music in comparison to their own, tribally specific musical expression. As Marcia Herndon advises us, the efforts of outside scholars to define a single Indian music may turn out to be eternally elusive or accompanied by difficulties and miscomprehension.

Following Herndon's reasoning, we may have to agree that Native American music as an entity or concept ultimately does not exist. Instead, we may only be able to deal with many variants of the music of the many Native American cultures. Thankfully, narrowing the focus to the traditional music of a particular tribal culture becomes much more manageable and gratifying. To be sure, even within a tribal culture's treasury of music further variations among different bands, clans, families, and, of course, individuals may exist, but these will generally be minor. As we seek to summarize certain common elements of Indian music, we should therefore remember that we are engaging in an artificial activity for the sake of an introductory overview of indigenous American music, the music of this continent's first inhabitants. For valid study, as suggested earlier, we need to focus on the music of one tribal group or that of a select few.

The voices of Native Americans themselves regarding the nature of their own tribal music have in recent decades become more and more compelling:

*On this day, I want to speak about what is already known. The Lakota don't sing for just one certain thing. The first thing they sing about is the sacred ways. Some songs were given to the holy man, the medicine men, the holy men. And then through the songs, men and women, boys and girls ask things for themselves. That is for recreation and they will be happy. And then again they sing songs of sorrow. These are the different kinds of songs and if someone sings, he will learn to like singing very much.*

*That is why I, singing from the age of twelve, love singing. That is me.*

[BEN BLACK BEAR, SR.—LAKOTA]

*The song poems of the Anishinabe are intuitive lyrical images of woodland life.... The Anishinabe hears music not only in the human voice, but in the sounds of animals and trees and ice cracking on the lakes. The people are surrounded by life. They are not alone.*

[GERALD VIZENOR—ANISHINABE]

*What is needed in America, as it has always been needed, is an awakening and re-orienting of our total spiritual and cultural perspective to embrace, understand and learn from the aboriginal American what it is that motivates his musical and artistic impulses.*

[LOUIS BALLARD—CHEROKEE AND QUAPAW]

These representative Native American voices regarding the centrality of music in Native American societies will receive further reinforcement in the comments of Lakota people in the section to follow entitled: "Basic Elements of Lakota Music."



*Benjamin Wilkinson Black Bear, Sr., left, and Grover Horned Antelope, 1960, in costume on the set of A Man Called Horse. Sandra Black Bear Collection*

To conclude this section on the general overview of Native American music, I would like to summarize the pioneering work of Louis W. Ballard as he analyzes the characteristics of traditional Native American Music:

- A. Oral tradition. No known form of indigenous notation.
- B. Simple repetitive melodies, linear form.
- C. Use of many non-Occidental scales and scale combinations.
- D. Absence of chordal harmony and fixed counterpoint.
- E. Accompaniment is mainly percussive.
- F. Instrumental development is in the primitive stages.
- G. Functional music. Indian music always serves a purpose and does not exist for itself alone.
- H. Indian chant [sic] contains many vocables (no-meaning sounds) as well as words that relate a story.
- I. Metric values are primarily in common meter, seldom compound, and rarely irregular.
- J. Predominant intervals in Indian tribal music are fourths and thirds, with the octave as “backbone” to the form.

*from Lewis Ballard  
“Putting American Indian Music in the Classroom”*



*Ben Black Bear, Sr. 1974. Sandra Black Bear Collection*