

Native Music of the Northwest: A Columbia River Plateau Perspective

by Loran Olsen

As we prepare for the 1993 MTNA convention in Spokane, Washington, it seems appropriate to explore the musical lives of the region's native population. The homeland of the Spokane, or "Children of the Sun," rests on the east-central portion of the Columbia River Plateau. This isolated and unique aboriginal cultural region is nestled among several mountain ranges, and blessed with recurrent food resources, including salmon, game, roots and berries. The Spokanes are Salish speakers, as are their immediate neighbors to the east, north and west. Nearby to the southwest, Sahaptin speakers have shared with the Salish the serenity of these river highlands in relative peace since time immemorial.

Eastward across the Rocky Mountains unfold the great prairies, home of the Plains Indians, who have interacted both cooperatively and competitively with plateau peoples for hundreds of years. South of the Columbia Plateau lie high deserts and, at an extended distance, the arid lands of the Great Basin. Inhabitants here were traditional enemies of many plateau groups prior to European contact.

Directly westward across the Cascade Mountains are the many Salish-speaking people who inhabit the rich coastal areas of Washington, Puget Sound and southern British Columbia. To the northwest is the vast Canadian and Alaskan interior, inhabited primarily by Athabascan language speakers. Farther north and west, in

Loran Olsen is Professor Emeritus of Music and Native American Studies at Washington State University, and is the recipient of grants in research on topics including North American Indian music.



present-day British Columbia and southeast Alaska, live the seafarers—the Nootka, Kwakiutl, Haida, Tlingit and riverine Tsimshian. At the greatest distance northwestward live the Aleuts and Eskimos, including the Yupik speakers of the Bering Straits and the Inupiat near the Arctic Ocean.

At present, there are twenty-six Indian reservations in Washington, five in Idaho, seven in Montana and seven in Oregon. In British Columbia there are 196 reserves and bands, each owning a land base in excess of 1,000 acres. Fourteen formalized Athabascan Indian bands inhabit Canada's Yukon Territory. Alaska's native villages and communities total 215.¹

As music teachers, we should know about indigenous northwest native musical cultures because of their accessibility, uniqueness and resilience. If we are teachers serving near Indian communities, it is imperative to be conversant with the forms and functions of traditional song and dance. Unfortunately, many dimensions of the efficacy of music, as employed by aboriginal peoples of America, are no longer in our ken or experience. From the perspective of the "First People," music is more than the reiteration of instrumental or vocal repertoire for the purposes of entertain-



Nez Perce-Cayuse dancer Frank Halfmoon performs at Spalding Park, Idaho.

Photo by Loran Olsen © 1972.

*"It is the Grandparents who
prepared a child for the seeking
of the Great Spirit for the Indian
Medicine Powers."* — Clara

Covington, Spokane²

ment, excitement, personal enrichment or self-expression. Aboriginal song and dance have served as prayers, accessories to the forces of nature, powerful resources for healing, vehicles of prophecy, nonverbal languages, improvisational lessons, historical records, honoring devices, community-wide recreations, intertribal bonding agents, proofs of lineage, and personal gifts of the highest value. Is it possible that we could learn something from Native Americans about the full function and power of music?

Throughout 1993 and beyond, Native Americans in this vast territory will hold celebrations of renewal, festivals, naming ceremonies, worship services, wakes, feasts, dances, competitions, games and visits—all central to the native traditional way of life. Singing, drumming and dancing have not died but have flourished, proving the persistence of oral cultures and the reflection of their existence in song and story. Adapting to changing surroundings and serving contemporary needs, they reflect a rootedness in a proud heritage. Some ceremonies that were never outlawed by externally imposed governments date back to a time of prehistory; others are in various states of renewal and revitalization, emerging from periods of persecution and resultant disuse. A few religious and secular activities reflect a synthesis of ancient practices with the Christian and European influences of the 1800s; but for the most part, the aboriginal songs and dances that are still functional have remained separate from music of the mainstream population.



Photo by Loran Olsen ©1979.

Tulalip Salmon Ceremony (Coast Salish), Tulalip Indian Reservation, Marysville, Washington.

Renewal ceremonies of thanksgiving that celebrate the return of the salmon, chant the sharing of vegetal foods, placate the spirits of sea mammals who sustain human life, reverence the forces of creation for the gift of the cedar tree, or relive the protocols for hunting success have always permeated the cultures of the Pacific Northwest. Song and dance were central to these rites before contact with Europeans. Song and dance have sustained individual and group identities through devastating epidemics, skirmishes, wars and upheavals of every kind. Song and dance remain focal for many of the native people of today as they prepare for the twenty-first century.

Music of the Plateau in 1800

Among oral cultures, the preservation of identity and folkways through song and story vocalization was imperative for survival. Songs and dances carried from previous generations by the elders were passed to certain youngsters who demonstrated responsibility and a bent for memorizing. In the plateau, children embarked on personal guardian spirit quests in order to gain life-supporting powers for their adult years. Each quest, enhanced by fasting, resulted also in a personal power song, bestowed

upon the youngster by a benign animal spirit. Since songs were powerful, certain medicine men or women seeking to be healers gathered additional songs through cumulative quest experiences as they grew older. Some religious songs and dances were given by spirits to prophets who died and returned to life, with messages for the welfare of the people. Some recreational songs were improvised or composed.

The aboriginal education system was based upon alertness of the senses, concentration and imitation. Children copied their elders, birds, animals and the sounds of nature. They memorized and reiterated stories and songs in a holistic approach in which melody and rhythm were absorbed as a unit. The environment for learning always included respect for the elders and the response to all nearby adult relatives as parents or grandparents. Ideally each young person was valued and loved by the extended family members and received support throughout the village.

Personal songs might be used for success in hunting, gambling prowess, success in love, or the ability to provide well for a family. They might allow access to spiritual protection for an individual in danger.



Songs among plateau people were integral to healing rituals and were requisite for visions. Seasonal renewals began with winter spirit dances such as the “Jumping Dance,” still held annually among traditional Flathead and Spokane people to publicly share the past year’s joys and sorrows, and to enter into the new year communally strengthened. These were followed by dances celebrating the end of winter, by spring and summer root feasts, by ceremonial acknowledgment of protocols for successful hunting and fishing in summer and fall, and by sweathouse rituals throughout the year. Among the Salish, powerful shamans could call buffalo and control winter weather.

Song marked the relationship from mother to baby before birth; and among care-givers and instructors, song remained integral for the nurturing of children from birth through childhood in various capacities. Naming, puberty, courtship and marriage activities required vocal music, as did the grandparents’ story-songs in legends, designed to impart lessons to the young. Death and the passing of one’s being to the spirit world were accompanied by song in this transition.

Although plateau people were mostly peaceful among themselves, there were times in which hostilities required retaliation. In these instances, groups sang and danced in preparation of a foray against an enemy, recruiting members for a war party and singing farewell songs at the departure. Personal songs might protect the warriors in battle. Victory songs and scalp dances (or songs of mourning) followed the return of the war party, and at later celebrations veterans and war leaders were likely to be honored and remembered in public dances.

Recreational music occurred during summer gatherings, feasts and pageants. A popular gambling game, the “stick game” or “bone game,” still permeates the plateau and the northwest coast; it is a guessing game in which fast tapping rhythms accompany energetic vocal melodies, as pairs of bones are hidden by one team and located by another. In most plateau aboriginal cul-

“The stick game or bone game . . . fast tapping rhythms accompany energetic vocal melodies.”

tures there were few children’s games, but they played miniature versions of adult games and dances. A healthy community demonstrated continuous and varied involvement in social gatherings that employed singing and dancing.

In most languages on the Columbia River Plateau there is no word for “music.” “Song” and “singing” are the closest counterparts. Solo song and group monophony with occasional octave doubling are common. The vocal quality traditionally was varied, depending upon the song’s function, and frequently included a cutting, powerfully projected male timbre developed to reach out over large groups of people or to lead dancers.

Although certain sacred songs were to be sung unaccompanied, others required percussion to supply a “heartbeat” or a rhythmic counterpoint to the voice. Percussion instruments included rattles of deer hooves or of rawhide-enclosed pebbles. As a rhythm instrument to support dancing, the rasp or notched stick preceded the advent of the hand-drum among several plateau groups. Since motion naturally accompanied song and pulse, Indian people conceived of dance to be an integral part of musical expression.

Before the time of European contact, the standard melody instrument used in the plateau was the six-finger-holed endblown flute. Sometimes called a flageolet, this courting instrument had no thumb-holes, and therefore is more properly a fipple-flute. The instrument was most commonly made of elderberry wood or bird wingbone, although smaller single-pitch whistles were fabricated of any convenient tubular material.³

The Thompson, Lillooet, and Shuswap Indians (inhabitants of the upper reaches of British Columbia’s Fraser River drainage) shared many Columbia Plateau musical characteristics. They exhibited unique practices of miming dance and song improvisation. Women and men were equally important in the preservation of musical traditions among the people. “While they sang they acted out all their old stories and ceremonies. An old woman sang the song...to cleanse women who had borne twins. She took bundles of fir branches and hit her shoulders and breasts with them while she danced. The song imitates the growl of the grizzly bear because they believe the children [twins] derive from the grizzly bear. An old man sang an old religious song to the sun, a prayer. The gestures were very expressive. He raised his

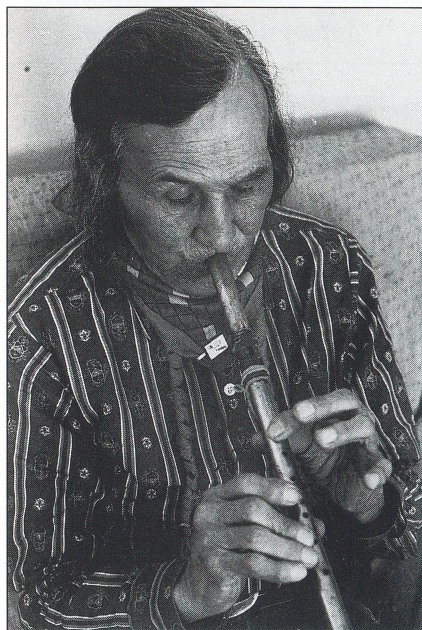
hands up high and looked at the sun. Then he lowered them slowly, pressing them against his chest while he looked down again.”⁴

Much music from the greater plateau region is pentatonic non-tempered monophonic song. Soft and mellow vocal styles are employed in love songs, and in flute imitations of those love songs. Although some melodies carry texts, most employ syllables termed vocables, such as “a, hey, ya, o, yo, ha.” Pulsed accompaniment added to a vocal line frequently results in a composite polyrhythm, such as drumming in duples while singing in triples. Improvisational techniques include the repetition, expansion and reordering of motives and the irregular grouping of phrases. Physical movement is part of music making and a natural response to it.

When the people of the upper Columbia River region first encountered Europeans in 1805 to 1840, their musical acculturation began through explorers, traders, trappers, missionaries, settlers, and miners. Each of these groups brought novel types of music and musical instruments. Although some combinations resulted (such as Christian hymns translated to native languages, or English words sung to aboriginal tunes) the two strains of musical expression—native and European—remained fundamentally separate. The first printing press in the Northwest at Lapwai, Idaho, produced a Protestant hymnbook in the Nez Perce language in 1842. Many more followed in other locations, representing various church denominations. Later religious practices among nativistic Seven-drum, Feather, and Indian Shaker Church spiritual people produced separate song literatures unique to each group.

Music of the Far Northwest

In the early 1800s, entrepreneurs near the mouth of the Columbia River spoke an accessible and functional trade language called Chinook Jargon, combining **Chinookan** and neighboring Indian tongues with English and French words. Syncretic Jargon songs both secular and sacred sprang into use.⁵ Farther up the coast, music was used as important property. Indeed, the persistence with which the



Jerome Vanderburg, Flathead, playing his flute.

Makah and **Quileute** of the Olympic Peninsula and the **Nootka** of Vancouver Island would dance to their family songs at public occasions insured them continued possession rights to these valued resources. Painted blankets, rattles, shredded cedar bark headdresses, wooden carved masks and elaborate dance aprons—all part of the pagentry—were requisite adjuncts to music and dance. Songs were used as significant gifts among wealthy chiefs on Vancouver Island and farther north, and served as memorable dowry items for chiefly marriages. To knowledgeable elders, they were legal and historical proof of a great person's lineage, material wealth and chieftainship.

Long before European contact, the **Straits Salish** and **Puget Sound Salish** held spirit dances in large cedar longhouses throughout the winter. Youthful initiates traveled all season to distant locations, reiterating new spiritual songs acquired in the practices of self-deprivation and separation from family, as they prepared for adult life. These spirit dances still occur every weekend in wintertime, new initiates appearing with their supporters at sites extending north from Washington's Skokomish River

to Vancouver Island and the mainland nearby.⁶ Ceremonial items utilized with dance include mountain goat wool clothing, scallop shell rattles, longhaired headdresses that cover the wearer's face, decorated hand drums, and “pop-eyed” *Swaixwai* spirit masks.

In 1883, at the southern tip of Puget Sound, a new nativistic-Christian religion was born among the **Squaxin** and **Twana** people, employing full-voiced hymn-like Salish song, stomping rhythms, handbells, altars, candles, healing and shaking—a singular combination of the old and the new. Relying upon revelation rather than the printed scripture, John Slocum's Indian Shaker Church served illiterate native people and spread swiftly over much of the Northwest and as far south as California. Many such congregations function today throughout the Pacific Northwest, with an intense and active song tradition.

Kwakwaka speakers of North Vancouver Island and the mainland opposite held *potlatches*—great “give-aways” in which a wealthy noble passed along names and privileges to his children, and would demonstrate his power and chiefly heritage by inviting other chiefs and their villagers as guests, to be showered with presents of every kind. Hidden during the 1920s and 1930s because of governmental proscription,⁷ their theatrical winter ceremonies featured the legendary monster figures of the aboriginal forest, the spirits of the sea, fish, sea-mammals, animals, birds and even insects. Here the “song-maker” or “song-carrier” was of great importance, and the inheritance of songs and dances governed by strict protocol. Feast songs, *Hamatsa* or cannibal spirit songs, totem pole songs, animal songs, head-dress songs, ghost songs and medicine songs were sung. In the main **Kwakiutl** potlatch song, the chief called in other nobles, telling them of his might, his ancestry, his magnanimity and his accomplishments.⁸

North among the feared sea-farers of the Queen Charlotte Islands, the cedar tree was a major resource for housing, transportation, clothing and carving artistry. The **Haida** developed dugout war canoes to fifty feet in length, plank houses, massive to-



Photo by Lorain Olsen © 1977.

Nick Wongitillin, Siberian Yupik from St. Lawrence Island, in Nome, Alaska. Nick displays two drums he recently finished, made of driftwood and walrus stomach membrane.

tems, bentwood boxes, fancy masks, helmets and raven rattles. Together with the complex ceremonies that accompanied their distribution and use, all required appropriate songs and dances.

Among the **Tlingit** speakers, scattered along narrow strips of seacoast from Cape Fox, British Columbia, to Yakutat Bay, Alaska, each village strives to reinforce the dancing privileges and inherited songs of old. Consisting of fourteen "subtribes," the Tlingits overall have a matrilineal society, which is then divided into Raven and Wolf moieties, each with many subgroups. All interact according to the requirements of a complicated ceremonial life directly connected to these relationships. Potlaches and the exchange of wealth were the norm among Tlingits at the time of European contact, with shamanic spirit power at the heart of religious practices. Russian influences appeared early here and among the **Aleuts** further north. Lending variety to the music of the Tlingit are songs employing harmonic triads progressing in parallelism, much as in choruses from the Russian Orthodox Church. Noteworthy are "peace"

*"As long as there is Indian,
there shall be song; As long as
there is song, there will
be Indian." — Cliff SiJohn,
Spokane/Coeur d'Alene¹¹*

songs, a multiple-voiced literature, and the practice of "lining out" long texts phrase-by-phrase, with solo leader echoed by chorus.

In the central interior of British Columbia, along the Nass and Skeena Rivers, the **Tsimshian** people live in small villages. Every home of substance has its cedar pole reaching skyward to record the richness of a lineage from legend times, and each totem owned is accompanied by its songs and dances, its privileges of geographical access and of resource exploitation. Today the newly reconstructed cedar longhouses in the village of **'Ksan** remain a model center for visitors to experience the elaborate ceremonialism of the past, with intricate songs and drum-patterns, animal dances, clothing of mountain goat's wool, carved cedar masks and rattles.

The vast forested interiors of British Columbia, Yukon Territory and Alaska are inhabited almost exclusively by **Athabaskan**-speaking people. Their music reflects the difficulty of life in harsh environments and the constant pursuit of moose, caribou, fish, fowl and other game. From time immemorial, animals and natural forces have given individual people the songs so necessary for success in hunting. The people inhabiting the outer areas of this territory tend to reflect musical traditions of their neighbors—the Tlingits on the west, the Eskimos on the north. Music types include personal songs, animal dances, songs for feasts, and "stick dance" memorials in honor of the dead.

Among the **Yupik** people of Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers, song and dance are

communal activities. Male dancers kneel and move their upper bodies vigorously in time with the low, gong-like sounds of the great tambourine-drums. Women dancers stand behind and move fluidly, eyes down-cast, dance wands flowing, bouncing at the knees in time with the men. The drummers are seated on the floor with feet outstretched, beating the tops of large round drums with long wands that can vary the volume impressively. The drumheads, now made of plastic, were once fabricated from sea mammals. Female elders seated behind the male drummers sing along and move in time with the complex pulses, some interspersed with silences that undergird dramatic or humorous points in the story-dance. Each dance motion imparts necessary details to the knowledgeable viewers around the room.

Siberian Yupiks of St. Lawrence Island, in the Bering Strait, tap with long wands upon the tops of pear-shaped drums fashioned from walrus stomach membrane and driftwood. Women and men dance in celebration of the rich sealife and bird resources that constitute their livelihood. The annual Walrus Carnival, Whaling Feast, and "Joe E. Brown Day" (a celebratory anniversary of a visit by the American comedian) are replete with story-dancing, skin-blanket tossing, joking and string-game songs.⁹

The **Inupiat** Eskimo drummers sit in long rows and bang the undersides of their circular drums made of driftwood and whale liver peritoneum. These are the whalers of the Arctic Ocean who inhabit the north slope of Alaska. Choreographed fixed-motion dances alternate with expressive free-motion interpretations. Male dancers stomp, clench fists and pose in muscular stances; demure female dancers move with fluidity. Five eight- and seven eight-meter drum patterns undergird driving melodies over nasal "nga-nga" vocables and text syllables in **Inupiaq**. Story-dances here tell of whaling, hunting or the foibles of village dogs and people. In Anaktuvuk Pass, the songs are of caribou hunting and the drumheads made of caribou hide. Before contact with Europeans, the shaman was a powerful figure, and his singing was requisite for

Other References and Suggested Reading

many functions, particularly those ameliorating animal spirits to ensure the return of migrating sea and land mammals and birds. "Music permeates the Eskimo life; every facet of the Eskimo's life is expressed musically—his hope, his joy, his fear, his sorrow. From it he derives pleasure and through it he gives pleasure to others; from it he derives power and courage; through it he exercises or appeases spirits and brings good fortune upon the hunt. Song is a major element in Eskimo ritual and daily life."¹⁰

Pacific Northwest native musical traditions have stood the tests of time. It is appropriate to look with favor upon them as true "American Musics," exemplary of the many vigorous native societies that have not lost sight of their past. Now in resurgence, revival and reconstruction, the ceremonies and celebrations of old can bring to light ancient values: sharing, healing, maintaining physical and mental wellness, holding pride in heritage, celebrating individuality, and expressing reverence for nature. The ownership of song, the power of song, and the proper use of song constitute significant concerns of traditional Northwest native people today, as they did long ago.

AMT

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For recommended recordings, movies and videos, see page 76.



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Native Music of the Northwest *Continued from page 21.*

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