

Caroline Shaw (b. 1982)

NAWM: Excerpts from Partita (2009-2011),
Allemande

- 8 Voices (SSAATTBB)
- written for the a cappella vocal group Roomful of Teeth
- RoT in residence at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams in northwestern Massachusetts (group comes together there each year to study singing styles and traditions from around the world)



Assessing Power and Possibilities?



From "Cultural Appropriation in Classical Music" by Brent Michael Davids 21 November 2019

<https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/cultural-appropriation-in-classical-music/>

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The recent cultural venture by the non-indigenous vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth (RoT) into the world of Inuit music might serve as another case in point. It appears that RoT employed Inuits to teach them a remarkable Inuit activity known as “throat singing”, a musical game structure between two Inuit singers. Then RoT employed one of their members, Caroline Shaw, who is herself non-Inuit, to use Inuit throat singing as part of her composition *Partita for 8 Voices*. The striking work so excited the award panel that they honored the composer with a Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2013. But in 2019, the prominent Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq accused Shaw and RoT of cultural appropriation using Inuit throat singing without proper acknowledgment or compensation.

Because the winning work was perhaps a mixture of many styles, including Inuit throat singing, it would be a difficult task to determine if any legal copyright infringement occurred without delving deeper into all the influences of the composition, and determining what percentage was culturally borrowed. Avoiding the individualistic legal copyright issue, and setting aside the “indigenous intellectual property” issue (an effort by the United Nations to protect the cultural knowledge and collective intellectual property of indigenous people), it does seem to my ears that some measure of cultural appropriation as likely as not occurred with respect to the Inuit culture. In his UCLA doctoral dissertation, Joshua H. Saulle identified Shaw’s partial use of “Inuit throat-singing” as one ingredient in a cultural and musical mix he characterized as “gumbo”:

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Brad Wells, RoT Founder and Artistic Director, answered Tagaq's accusation with an anecdote published in Indy Week (Dan Ruccia, 2019) that inferred there is no distinction to be made between a mutually equitable exchange of culture versus America's unrestrained use of forced cultural change against indigenous people, missing the genocidal backstory of Inuit life specifically, and Native American life generally:

"I remember, a few months ago, talking to an anthropology professor who had studied textiles on some Southeast Asian island about how the textiles responded to Westerners coming through from the fifteen-hundreds on. The artists on those islands immediately started to take advantage of Western art aspects, sometimes subtly, sometimes less so. The question of cultural appropriation assumes that the powerful culture is the only one that is involved in the exchange, but in fact these exchanges are happening constantly. There's an arrogance in our role, thinking of ourselves as the powerful culture and handpicking little things to use to our profit. These exchanges happen everywhere all the time, and you can't stop them. They can enrich everybody."

From his assertion, it appears that Wells insisted all cultural exchange is of the mutually equitable variety that is "happening constantly." Yet Wells has failed, ahistorically and aculturally, to respond to the stern warning that forced culture change teaches. A quick look at the RoT website reveals the ensemble is "dedicated to mining the expressive potential of the human voice. Through study with masters from singing traditions the world over, the eight-voice ensemble continually expands its vocabulary of singing techniques and, through an ongoing commissioning process, forges a new repertoire without borders." Respectfully, considering their mission from an indigenous point of view, and acknowledging America's long term genocidal undertaking against Native Americans, I wonder where cultural acknowledgment and respect—and collaborative equity—might fit into the RoT approach, given Tagaq's objections. Growing a toolkit of vocal techniques gleaned from cultures around the world sounds a bit acultural to me. And combined with an effort to commission works by folks not from those cultures does sound a bit like cultural appropriation.

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Once, I was invited to perform throat singing onstage with Lois Suluk in Albuquerque, but as a flutist. I sometimes perform extended flute techniques on my handmade quartz flutes, including whispering, singing and playing, and vocalizing with inhaled-exhaled breathing effects. So, in 2010, I had the privilege and honor to partner in a throat singing exchange with an Inuit singer at the El Rey Theater, and I have the picture to prove it! To this day, Lois remains my colleague and friend. As a Native American myself, and as a professional composer of some experience, I absolutely affirm that relationships with indigenous people are wholly necessary for doing indigenous music of any kind, where true American Indian voices are heard. Indigenous and non-indigenous people, alike, might encourage each other in meaningful collaboration with living, changing, vibrant cultures in ways that remain dynamic. And conversely, misconstruing and twisting Native American music into something less than authentic is a blunder that can no longer be ignored. As further explanation, I've been extremely lucky to have worked firsthand with two renowned ensembles, **Chanticleer** and **Kronos Quartet**, who both carried out processes of cultural exchange and commissioning that were artistically enriching and entirely respectful.

I'm grateful to composer Chen Yi, who first introduced me to Chanticleer. Chanticleer then invited me to teach them about indigenous singing styles, exploring those techniques on their own voices, and having in-depth discussions about Native American cultures, especially my own. I explained to Chanticleer much of what I've written above, about existential postulates, forced culture change, song-ing, and the life-and-death reciprocity of indigenous cosmologies. Afterward, and subsequently through the years, they have commissioned several works from me; Chanticleer felt it was especially important to contract with me as a Mohican-Lenape composer to create the indigenous-inspired works they would later perform. Chanticleer's modus operandi was to collaborate directly with indigenous composers for their indigenous-inspired commissions.

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My Kronos story is very similar. David Harrington's mother, Hazel, read a newspaper article that peripherally compared my music to her son's ensemble. She clipped out the article and sent it to him. David visited me, and after several hours of talking over most of the explanations I've included above, he commissioned a new work from me that very afternoon. And over the years, I have composed three works for Kronos that intersect Native American aesthetics and Western music. Even more, I'm not the only indigenous collaborator with whom they've worked; Kronos has invited new commissions from celebrated Diné composer Raven Chacon and the distinguished Inuit throat singer herself, Tanya Tagaq. Kronos Quartet's modus operandi was to collaborate directly with indigenous composers for their indigenous-inspired commissions.

It is my firm belief that by championing a respectful cultural process as an artistic standard we not only achieve important cross-cultural understanding, but we form important intercultural relations with each other. With cultural respect comes a deeper historical context for approaching the quality of music. In order to approach composers and compositions, we must engage in genuine relationships that do not diminish or erase cultural realities in favor of some questionable aesthetic of neutrality. We must admit that quality is measured with cultural understanding, not through detached vocal craft or objectified technique. Music may be well crafted, but what is the music saying? Where are the relationships in the process? What communities are involved? What lives beyond the Western musical hegemony? Can we jettison the impossible acultural neutrality narrative in Western classical music to discover a mutually enriching exchange of culture?