



# Native Sounds

Film and concert composer Brent Michael Davids, a citizen of the Mohican Nation, is among the artists whose works are being increasingly commissioned and performed by orchestras.



*Guardians of the Canyon*, Brent Michael Davids' score evoking the Indigenous people who have lived in the Grand Canyon for centuries, was performed with Havasupai dancers at the Grand Canyon Visitors Center Plaza in June 2019.

**Music by composers from Navajo, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and many other tribes is increasingly being performed and commissioned by orchestras as they seek to broaden the range of music they perform. While these artists are working in a classical European tradition, they embrace their cultural heritage and see music as a way to express Indigenous worldviews.**

by Rita Pyrellis

The physical beauty of the Grand Canyon has inspired countless artists, but when concert and film composer Brent Michael Davids was asked by the American Composers Forum (ACF) in 2000 to create a work celebrating the national park, he sought inspiration and input from the people who have lived there for millennia: the Havasupai.

“There are all sorts of pieces written about Grand Canyon that are landscape-driven and devoid of people,” says Davids, a citizen of the Mohican Nation. “I wanted to let the people of the canyon speak.”

When Grand Canyon National Park was created in 1919, the voices of the Havasupai were not heard, Davids says. Swaths of their traditional lands were taken for public use, resulting in historically tense relations with the National Park Service. Davids knew that building trust would require more than a few phone calls. He made several trips to the Havasupai Reservation, which is located at the bottom of Havasu Canyon and is accessible mainly by foot. It’s an eight-hour hike one way. There he met with tribal officials and members of a dance troupe called Guardians of the Grand Canyon. They told him about a healing ceremony called the Ram Dance that was revived after tribal members discovered two slaughtered bighorn sheep along a trail. The sheep are sacred to the Havasupai, and the incident rattled the small community. They performed the dance for Davids and agreed to let him incorporate it into his piece, which is called

*Guardians of the Canyon*. It premiered in 2000 at the Grand Canyon Music Festival as part of the Continental Harmony Project, a nationwide community arts program marking the millennium. The project, which was funded by the ACF and the National Endowment for the Arts, created commissions and residencies for 58 composers to create musical works celebrating

Creating meaningful partnerships with Indigenous composers and communities takes time to develop, but an increasing number of orchestras are eager to try. Spurred by a desire to diversify institutions that are among the least racially diverse, orchestras are looking for ways to bring underrepresented voices into the field. As a result, Native American classical compos-



The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra and the Porcupine Singers in front of Crazy Horse Memorial after a Native Americans’ Day performance of the Lakota Music Project at the Memorial in 2010.

unique cultures nationwide. *Guardians of the Canyon* is a chamber-scale score for metal flute, crystal flute, wood flute, two percussionists, and Havasupai traditional dancers.

“They brought back this dance to heal the canyon, but in the process it was healing for them too,” Davids recalls. “The collaboration had a real impact on the community.”

**A Note on Nomenclature:** The terms Native American and American Indian are used interchangeably in this article. Native people prefer to be identified by their tribal affiliations, but when speaking of all of the Native Americans in the continental United States, the above references are acceptable, according to the Native American Journalists Association. Tribal affiliations of individuals in this piece sometimes appear in parentheses next to their names. In Canada, Indigenous peoples are called First Nations. The term “Native” is used as an adjective to describe art, music, and fashion. There’s no consensus on the term “Indigenous,” which is also used in this article, but it generally refers to culturally distinct ethnic groups native to a particular place and should be capitalized.

ers such as Davids, Jerod Impichchaacha’ha’ Tate, Raven Chacon, Michael Begay, and Barbara Croall, one of the few Native women composers, are busier than ever. Major organizations including the San Francisco Symphony, Spokane Symphony, South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, and Toronto Symphony Orchestra are increasing the number of commissioned works by Native artists, and smaller orchestras and university ensembles are also commissioning and performing more pieces. Davids recently completed a live film score for the Dartmouth College Wind Ensemble and has several other projects in the works.

While there has been steady interest in works by Native American composers since at least the 1970s—when Louis W. Ballard, a Cherokee-Quapaw composer (1931-2007) who is considered the father of contemporary Native American composition, wrote *Incident at Wounded Knee*—



Tracy Salazar

Bryan Akipa, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe, danced before the start of the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra's Lakota Music Project events at the Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. in 2019.

some say that social-justice movements have fueled the current surge. Protests over oil pipelines, police violence, the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19

pandemic, and missing and murdered Indigenous women, have put Native communities in the media spotlight.

In the 1970s, the struggles of the American Indian Movement brought attention to Indigenous issues and inspired Ballard to write his groundbreaking piece, which

**"We need to move beyond stereotypical ideas of what Native American music sounds like," composer Charles Shadle (Choctaw tribal affiliation) says. "It's not just a brief moment of Indian exoticism that we bring into the concert hall."**

was given its premiere performance in 1974 by Minnesota's St. Paul Chamber Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Dennis Russell Davies. *Incident at Wounded Knee* reflected on the 1973 conflict between the FBI and tribal members on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, as well as the massacre of hundreds of Lakota people by the U.S. Army at Wounded Knee in 1890.

Recently, the historic confirmation of Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) in March as U.S.

Secretary of the Interior has brought renewed hope for relations between Indigenous peoples and the federal government. Haaland, a citizen of the Pueblo of Laguna, is the first Native American woman to lead a cabinet agency. The Department of the Interior is responsible for managing treaty obligations made to tribal nations, as well as overseeing the nation's natural resources.

"Issues involving Indigenous people are increasingly in the public consciousness and interest in Native American artists is heightened at the moment," says composer Charles Shadle (Choctaw), who teaches music composition and theory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "What's more important to me is that if there's attention on contemporary classical composers in this community, it creates possibilities for the younger generations. It makes for a tradition that looks not just backward, but forward."

Shadle says that contemporary classical Indigenous music is at a crossroads, just as music by African American composers was in the 1950s, when orchestras and audiences expected to hear compositions based on spirituals. "We need to move beyond stereotypical ideas of what Native American music sounds like," Shadle adds. "There is a spectrum of composers that are explicitly whatever tribe they are and others who are implicitly that, and those differences are going to be interesting to audiences. It's not just a brief moment of Indian exoticism that we bring into the concert hall."

Fascination with Indigenous cultures is nothing new—White composers have been incorporating Native American themes into their works since the late 1800s with the rise of the Indianist movement. While contemporary classical Native composers are writing for Western Eurocentric orchestras, their works are often an expression of their cultural heritage and tribal worldviews.

Ballard, who grew up on the Quapaw Reservation in Oklahoma, fully embraced his culture and incorporated its music into his compositions. He paved the way for Native American artists who embrace their cultural identities through their orchestral music, like Chickasaw composer Jerod Tate, who calls Ballard "the Rosetta Stone of Native American classical composition."



San Francisco Symphony

Jerod Tate conducts San Francisco Symphony musicians in the orchestra's recent *Currents: Thunder Song* episode, which explores the intersection of American Indian and classical musical cultures, with music by composers Louis W. Ballard and Rochelle Chester, and from the Pomo tradition.

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San Francisco Symphony



San Francisco Symphony

“I never thought my Chickasaw identity and my classical music identity would have anything to do with each other,” says Tate, whose ten-minute *Talowa' Heloha* (*Thunder Song*) was recorded by the San Francisco Symphony for its *Currents* video series and released on April 1. Tate curated music and artists for the video, which includes works by other American Indian composers and from the Pomo tradition. “Composers who identified with their cultural identity were my role models,” says

Performers in the *Thunder Song* episode of the San Francisco Symphony's *Currents* video series included Thomas Leon Brown aka Machuchuk and Ron Montez from the Pomo Elem Indian Colony, seen here in a behind-the-scenes photo.

Tate. Tate was recently commissioned by Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts to create an opera in the Chickasaw language. The piece, called *Shell Shaker*, is scheduled to premiere in March 2022.

It's been a busy time for Tate. In 2019, the Oklahoma City Philharmonic, located

in his home state, performed *Lowak Shoppala* (*Fire and Light*), an eight-movement orchestral suite that interprets traditional Chickasaw storytelling. Recently, he worked closely with the Oklahoma City Philharmonic to bring the newly discovered works of classically trained Oklaho-



Shevaun Williams and Associates

In February 2019, the Oklahoma City Philharmonic performed “Scene 4: The Clans” from Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate's *Lowak Shoppala*, an eight-movement orchestral suite that interprets traditional Chickasaw storytelling. The work was commissioned by American Composers Forum and premiered by Oklahoma Youth Orchestra and the Chickasaw Nation in 2009.



Taking a bow at the Oklahoma City Philharmonic's 2019 performances of Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate's *Lowak Shoppala*, from left: textile artist Margaret Wheeler, OKC Phil Music Director Alexander Mickelthwate, Tate, and dancers.

ma composer Jack Kilpatrick to the stage. Kilpatrick grew up in a Cherokee community, married a Cherokee woman, and incorporated Native American music into his compositions. While he was not born Cherokee, Kilpatrick's contributions to Indigenous music are no less valuable, ac-

cording to Tate. The Oklahoma City Philharmonic presented some of Kilpatrick's works during its 2020-21 season as part of the orchestra's "Oklahoma Stories" series.

Conductor Alexander Mickelthwate, who joined the Oklahoma City Philharmonic as music director in 2018, says that

**"It's not good enough to have Native artists out in front but with someone else in control behind the scenes," says Oglala Lakota composer, visual artist, and violinist Suzanne Kite. "You have to give Indigenous artists the reins and then trust them."**

he is committed to placing the stories of Indigenous peoples center stage—a passion that grew from his time as music director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra in Canada, where he worked with many First Nations composers and musicians. Mickelthwate, who was born in Germany, says that, for him, the notion of music bringing people together is more than just a cliché—it's the story of his life. "I really don't have a political agenda, but both my parents grew up in East Germany before the Wall," he points out. "I witnessed reunification from both eastern and western relatives, so the idea of unity is part of my being. And to use music to do that is beautiful."



Kiowa drummer John Hamilton was a soloist in the Oklahoma City Philharmonic's September 2019 "American Stories" concert featuring Jack Kilpatrick's *An American Indian Serenade*.

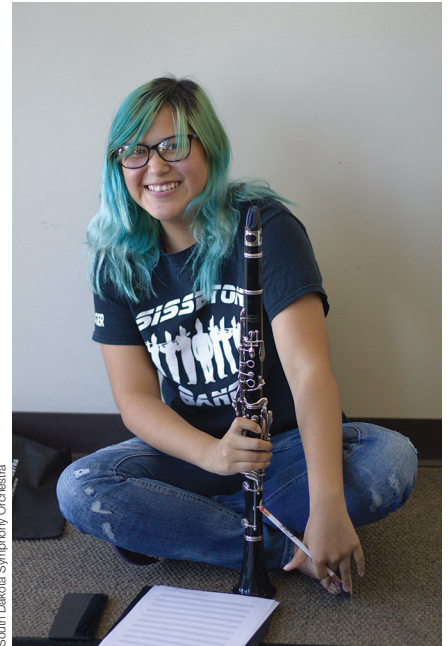
### Ongoing Artistic Exchange

Delta David Gier, music director of the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, was inspired by a similar sentiment when he co-founded the Lakota Music Project in 2005. Gier, who had joined the orchestra the year before from New York City, where he was assistant conductor at the New York Philharmonic, wanted to use his platform to address racism in South Dakota. It was a steep learning curve.

"My first lesson was to shut up and listen," he says. "In my training you build programs and execute them, but you can't do

I got it," he says. "The racism out here is bad. I wondered, what could we do to help from our little bubble on the reservation? I believed that when the outside world sees who we are in our element of song and dance, they will forget the negative stereotypes and see us in a different light."

In 2017, the South Dakota Symphony launched, under Jerod Tate's direction, a weeklong summer composition academy for Native and non-Native high school students. While symphony performances on the main stage can foster cultural understanding, it is in a classroom—where



South Dakota Symphony Orchestra

Teagan Bollonger participated in the South Dakota Symphony's Music Composition Academy for Native and non-Native high school students in 2019. "The emotion spilled out of me and into the music," she says.

ing deeply complex works, says Diné composer Michael Begay. He is an example of that promise. He began his career as a student in the Native American Composer Apprentice Project (NACAP), which was founded in 2001 by Davids in partnership

**Diné composer Michael Begay began his career as a student in the Native American Composer Apprentice Project. Today, Begay is an instructor-in-residence with the project, and his scores are performed by orchestras nationwide.**

with the Grand Canyon Music Festival, and today Begay is an instructor-in-residence with the project. Orchestras around the world have performed Begay's works, which range from string quartets to more experimental scores. Among his most recent projects is a micro-opera titled *Sandstone* for soprano, cello, and percussion. It was commissioned by Shelter Music Boston, which brings classical chamber music concerts to homeless shelters, for a series of concerts by NACAP students called



Tracey Salazar

South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Music Director Delta David Gier was conductor of a 2019 Lakota Music Project performance at the Washington National Cathedral featuring the Dakota String Quartet, Dakota Wind Quintet, Emanuel Black Bear, and Bryan Akipa.

that here. It takes time and trust to build those connections. I didn't want to create a program and plop it down on a reservation and say, 'here, this is good for you.'

Together with Lakota community leaders and musicians, Gier developed the Lakota Music Project more than a decade ago to help advance cultural understanding between White and Native American musicians. Its first commissioned piece was *Black Hills Olowan*, a concert work by Brent Michael Davids in 2009 featuring the Porcupine Singers, a revered Lakota singing group from Pine Ridge.

Emanuel Black Bear, a singer and keeper of the drum for the Creekside Singers on the Pine Ridge Reservation, was initially wary of Gier's idea but eventually came around and joined the project. "It took me a while to understand his vision, but after the first couple of performances

aspiring composers hear their music played for the first time—that healing seems possible. Teagan Bollonger, an 18-year-old member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate who participated in the composition academy in 2019, recalls the first time she and her family heard her composition *Stolen Sisters* played by a professional quartet. It was written in memory of her auntie who was murdered at age 18, before Teagan was born. "It was very emotional," she says. "My mom couldn't listen to it at first. I didn't know the whole story, but my mom told me my auntie was running along of the road and some guys picked her up and beat her and dumped her body on the road. I was afraid that could happen to me, or my sister. The emotion spilled out of me and into the music."

Young Indigenous composers with little to no formal training are capable of creat-

**“How can relationships between orchestras and Indigenous cultures exist in an equitable way?” asks Sandra Laronde, executive and artistic director of Red Sky Performance, which is collaborating with the Toronto Symphony. “How do we as Indigenous people ensure that our aesthetic doesn’t get lost in the process?”**



*Voices of the Land* performed by the Shelter Music Boston ensemble. Begay recently finished a piano solo for Carnegie Hall’s “Voices of Hope: Artists in the Time of Oppression” virtual series, which addresses social justice issues and features works by several Indigenous composers, including Davids and Croall.

Begay knows first-hand the obstacles

that young Indigenous composers face in getting their music heard, particularly on reservations where formal music education is scarce. His first teacher was the car radio, where he listened to everything from classical to country western to heavy metal as his family traveled around the Southwest while his father looked for work. He first heard orchestral music at the movies and was enthralled by the film scores for *Star Wars* and *Conan the Barbarian*. Begay understands that for his students at NA-CAP and at the South Dakota summer program where he taught for two years, music is an emotional outlet.

“I let the students to speak and tell their stories because what you hear in the music is just the tip of the iceberg,” he says. “The bloodline of their stories is deep and

it can’t be contained. Whatever is thrown at that kind of spirit has to come out. Yes, there are limitations—of the instrument,



The four Indigenous music creators participating in the recently announced Red Sky/Toronto Symphony Orchestra collaboration (clockwise from top left): Bryden Gwiss, Lancelot Knight, Mali Obomsawin, Stan Louttit.



Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra

Tanya Tagaq, an Inuk throat singer and artist from Cambridge Bay (Iqaluktuuttiaq), Nunavut, has appeared with Canada’s Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, including at the orchestra’s 2014 concert at Carnegie Hall in New York.

**“Orchestras can be very hierarchical places,” says Toronto Symphony Orchestra CEO [Matthew Loden](#). “We are trying to take a page from Indigenous learning, which is more collaborative.”**



Christopher Wahl

### Authentic Commitment

Given the orchestra field’s increasing commitment to tapping the talents of under-represented communities, Begay and other Indigenous composers may have reason to be optimistic about the future. The challenge will be for orchestras to learn how to create partnerships with Native American composers and musicians that are equitable and respectful, according to Matthew Loden, CEO of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. “When you ask people to enter a culture modeled after nineteenth-century European armies, they will flail around whether they are jazz musicians, rock musicians, or Native musicians,” he says. “Orchestras can be very hierarchical places. We are trying to take a page from Indigenous learning, which is more collaborative.”

The Toronto Symphony is currently working with Red Sky Performance, a

of the Navajo Nation, of my town, of my high school—but you have to build with it. Take those things that are your struggles, put them under your feet, and stand up.”

Begay, who is 38, has no degree in music or composition but that will soon change: he will study composition at the Johns

“We have always been music creators, that’s nothing new,” says Sandra Laronde (Teme-Augama-Anishinaabe), executive and artistic director of Red Sky. “The bigger question is, how can relationships between orchestras and Indigenous cultures

**While there has been steady interest in works by Native American composers since at least the 1970s, some say that social-justice movements have fueled the current surge.**

exist in an equitable way? Not where one dominates the other. And how do we as Indigenous people ensure that our aesthetic doesn’t get lost in the process?”

Oglala Lakota composer, visual artist, and violinist Suzanne Kite, 30, says that audiences are hungry for “Indigenous sounds” but worries that many orchestras don’t understand how to collaborate with Native artists. “I grew up in an orchestra culture and it’s not always giving and reciprocal,” says Kite, who uses new media and digital technologies to explore contemporary Lakota epistemologies through performances, sculptures, and sound installations. “Coming out of the classical music world, they could really do with some radical voices and experimental practices. I personally don’t want to hear Beethoven again and again.”

Kite, who teaches music cultures at the Herb Alpert School of Music at CalArts in Valencia, California, is a Ph.D. candidate at Concordia University in Montreal. Her work was performed at the 2019 Toronto Art Biennial and she is currently collaborating with Chicago-based quartet Third Coast Percussion on pieces for their next season.

“It’s not good enough to have Native artists out in front but with someone else in control behind the scenes,” she said. “It’s really about putting them in charge of the work. You have to give Indigenous artists the reins and then trust them.” [S](#)

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Barbara Croall

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra has performed works by Odawa First Nation composer Barbara Croall since 1996. Her piece *Innenohr (Inner Ear)* was presented by the TSO as part of a livestream on March 11, 2021. In photo: Croall during rehearsals with TSO Music Director Gustavo Gimeno.

Hopkins Peabody Institute starting this fall. Having a degree brings him closer to his dream of being commissioned to create large symphonic scores. “It’s been 20 years since I was first brought into this field,” he says. “I knew I had a spark back then. I even knew when I was a kid that I’d be doing all this. But I want do bigger things.”

Toronto-based company that produces contemporary Indigenous dance and music performances. The project, a filmed performance of one of Red Sky’s signature pieces, *Mistatim*, will bring together four Indigenous music creators and eight TSO musicians. It’s scheduled to premiere in September 2021.