



# NATIVE

AMERICAN

by Kyle MacMillan

# JOURNEYS



Amy Mills led the April 2008 world premiere of Bill Miller's *The Last Stand* with Wisconsin's La Crosse Symphony Orchestra, the Battle Point Singers (right), Miller (left, playing drum), and performer Lance Tallmadge (with spread arms center stage). In March 2009, Miller became the first Native American to perform with a symphony orchestra in Israel, when he joined the Israel Kibbutz Orchestra for six performances of the work.

National Museum of the American Indian and David J. Marcou

IN MARK GREY'S *Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio*, ancient Navajo cleansing rites fuse with contemporary classical music. Based on the Navajo Enemy Way (Anna'ji) Ceremony, the 70-minute oratorio portrays the spiritual struggle and eventual reconciliation of a returning war veteran. "Nihiyázhí nílí (You are our beloved child)," cries the chorus, representing the community. Grey offers distant echoes but no direct quotations of the tribe's music, sculpting a suitably sacred musical setting for Navajo poet Laura Tohe's eloquent libretto.

At the work's premiere by The Phoenix Symphony in February 2008, projected photographs of Navajo sacred sites by Deborah O'Grady added a visual dimension. "I did cry several times during the oratorio, because although the music was very different from what I listen to, it told a story with which I am very familiar," wrote Marly Shebala, a reporter for the *Navajo Times* who had never attended a classical-music concert before. The performances drew non-Navajo and Navajo audiences alike, with one tribal leader calling it one of the great experiences of his life.

Cross-cultural works like *Enemy Slayer* are becoming increasingly common in the symphonic world, as more composers seek to draw on the rich, largely untapped well of traditional Indian music. (Many Native Americans currently use such terms as "Native American" and "American Indian" interchangeably.) At the same time, such pieces allow orchestras to reach out to neglected segments of their communities and provide mainstream audiences a musical bridge to a still little-known, often-overlooked part of America. Classical works that in some way engage Native American themes and musical idioms date back to the nineteenth century, as composers sought to answer Antonín Dvořák's call

**Can a symphony orchestra embrace music of this nation's indigenous cultures? It's a proposition based on mutual respect, and composers of European and Native American heritage are making the attempt.**



*Enemy Slayer*  
composer Mark  
Grey and librettist  
Laura Tohe



Georgia Wettlin-Larsen, program director of the First Nations Composer Initiative, has been performing and lecturing on American Indian music since the 1970s.

## The recent surge in works with Indian themes can be attributed to factors that include composers' hunger for new, unusual sounds.

for a uniquely American musical aesthetic. He urged them to draw on such innate traditions as American Indian music, but the harmful results of such appropriation became clear with the romanticized musical stereotypes that often resulted. Most non-Indian composers today are more sensitive to the Indian cultures they embrace and strive for authenticity, but the dangers of stereotyping and cultural violation remain.

If interactions between classical and Indian music are not exactly new, recently there has been an unprecedented burst of such works. In addition to *Enemy Slayer* and such pieces as Jerod Impichchaachaaha's Tate's *Nitoshi' Imali*, Randall Craig Fleischer's *Echoes*, and Bill Miller's *The Last Stand*, there's also Robert Kapilow's *Summer Sun, Winter Moon*—which is expected to be spotlighted in a documentary later this year on public television—and the Peruvian-born conductor Miguel

Harth-Bedoya's *Caminos del Inka* project, which premiered at the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in 2007. Harth-Bedoya's project is not focused specifically on indigenous music, but draws inspiration from the ancient Inca trails that crisscross six contemporary South American countries.

The past five years have seen the rise of significant Indian composers who, following a trail blazed by Louis Ballard, focus on the classical realm. Among the best known is Tate, a member of the Chickasaw nation, whose works have been performed by the Philadelphia Classical Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, and Minnesota Civic Orchestra. He makes a point of expressing his Indian heritage in everything he writes. "Debussy was definitely focused on being French," Tate says. "He was very clear about it in his writing. So, I'm just doing the same thing that he and Bartók, and even Liszt, were doing. Beethoven was very specifically German.

I'm just being very on-the-sleeve about doing it."

The recent surge in works with Indian themes can be attributed to a combination of factors, beginning with contemporary composers' hunger for new, unusual sounds. Internet sites such as iTunes have made it easier for them and their counterparts in other genres to jump back in time or circle the planet in search of raw materials for their music. More and more composers, such as Fleischer, are realizing that some of the richest and least tapped sources for such material are the diverse, centuries-old musical traditions of American Indians. "I'm profoundly moved by the honesty and intensity that I find in Native American music, the intensity of the chant, the drum music, the haunting beauty of the native flute, and the whole nature of the way music functions in Native American culture," says Fleischer, whose Indian-inspired work, *Echoes*, was premiered in October 2008 by the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra, where Fleischer is music director.

For symphony orchestras, commissioning and performing such works is part of a larger, ongoing effort to connect with under-served groups of all kinds, including African Americans and Latinos. These organizations realize that they have to go beyond their traditional constituencies and build an audience that more closely matches the ethnic and racial make-ups of their communities. To mark its 60th anniversary, The Phoenix Symphony commissioned *Enemy Slayer* from Grey, its Music Alive composer in residence, and surrounded the performances with multiple events devoted to Navajo culture. (Music Alive is a residency program of the League

of American Orchestras and Meet The Composer.) The piece drew favorable coverage in a series of articles in the *Navajo Times*, and at least 100 Navajo attended the performances. “I had never seen so many native people in the symphony hall, and for some of them, it was the first time they had ever been to any kind of a performance like this,” says Laura Tohe.

### Crossover Challenges

This cross-cultural music exchange has also been helped by the increasing visibility of Indian performers in mainstream society, a trend bolstered by the eleven-year-old Native American Music Awards or “Nammys.” High-profile Indian performers such as singer and guitarist Joanne Shenandoah, flutist R. Carlos Nakai, and Bill Miller, a Grammy Award-winning Mohican singer-songwriter, can be found in folk, alternative rock, and world music. In addition, all three have performed with symphony orchestras, and Miller, working with two collaborators, wrote an orchestral work commissioned by the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra in Wisconsin. Titled *The Last Stand*, it commemorates the Battle of Little Big Horn and includes the composer as soloist on the tiny bird flute and low-pitched double-drone flute.

Organizations such as the First Nations Composer Initiative, a branch of the American Composers Forum in St. Paul, Minnesota, promote such crossover. Since its founding in 2004, the FNCI has provided funding for more than 35 new Indian works in genres ranging from classical to hip-hop. In addition, it helped spawn the Coast Orchestra, an ensemble of thirteen classically trained Indian musicians founded in 2008 by White Mountain Apache violinist Laura Ortman. Education Through Cultural and Historical Organizations, a six-member consortium, supplied the impetus and funding for Fleischer’s *Echoes*, a 27-minute piece that drew on the Indian culture and heritage in the consortium’s main geographic centers along historical whaling routes in Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Alaska.

The challenges of blending Western classical traditions and Indian traditions were perhaps no more evident than when the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Carlsen Center in Overland Park,

Kansas, chose Robert Kapilow to write a symphonic work to mark the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 2004. The New Jersey composer first thought he would base his composition on the explorers’ diaries. When that idea did not pan out, he opted instead to follow the advice of historian Robert Archibald, head of the bicentennial commemorations, and explore the landmark undertaking from the American Indian perspective.

In 2003, Kapilow traveled to Montana to meet with the Circle of Tribal Advisers, which Archibald had assembled. They quickly made it clear that their ancestral stories belonged to them and they did not intend to share them. “I had the sudden realization that, in a weird way, I was Lewis and Clark all over again,” Kapilow recalls. “Once again, I’d be another white guy taking their stuff and using it for my own purposes without even realizing that this was in fact what I would be doing.” Chastened but nonetheless intrigued by the people he encountered, he set aside his desire for source material and stayed for the rest of the gathering simply to learn more.

During several subsequent visits to the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in Montana, Kapilow became good friends with Blackfoot writer and poet Darrell Robes Kipp. Kipp ultimately supplied the composer with what would become the principal text for the resulting half-hour work, *Summer Sun, Winter Moon*. “In the end, if you’re respectful and you’re authentic, people end up trusting you,” Kapilow says. “It’s no different there than anywhere else.”

Non-Indian composers who try to incorporate Indian elements into their music face a host of challenges, starting with simply avoiding what Tate calls the “cheese factor.” Rather than present native

music and themes in an authentic, sensitive way, he says, some works “over-romanticize and over-mystify” such elements and can wind up offering a kind of stereotyped version of how outsiders think Indian music ought to sound. “At the end of the day, the music speaks for itself, and bad music is bad music,” Tate says. “Artistically, I keep my ears open and I try to keep an open mind.”

To avoid such stereotyping, Fleischer worked hard to maintain the integrity of



Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, composer of *Nitoshi' Imali*, premiered by Civic Orchestra of Minneapolis in October 2007

Alana Rothstein



Finale at 2008 world premiere of Randall Craig Fleischer's *Echoes* with the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra and performers from Hawaii, Alaska, and Massachusetts, led by the composer. Right: Dancer at the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra's world premiere of *Echoes*



the Indian music he borrowed for *Echoes*, such as a traditional Yupik drum song. To convey its essential rawness and intensity, the composer incorporated electric guitar, electric bass, and a drum set into his orchestration. "So, finding a harmonic language," he says, "finding something that the orchestra can do to complement that

but not in any way make it sound like it is being Westernized, that was the challenge. It didn't come off sounding like watered-down John Williams. The Yupik songs sounded like Yupik music with orchestral accompaniment."

Kapilow took a very different tack, following the example of minimalist com-

poser Steve Reich, who has been strongly influenced by Asian gamelan music. Kapilow cites Reich's advice to visit a culture, absorb what it has to offer, and come back changed. Then be who you are and allow the experiences to filter into your music in your own way. "I think that's what I did," Kapilow says. "A lot of the textures, the sounds, the rhythmic feel, might be influenced by Indian music, but I tried really hard not to just do a graft, just take something from one world and smash it into another world."

Mark Grey, composer of *Enemy Slayer*, says that because all Indian music has a ceremonial or other specific societal function, the sound becomes all too easily stereotyped when it is snatched out of context. For him, the challenge is to find ways to fully integrate indigenous music and the cultural meanings essential to it. Grey's first idea for his oratorio was based on the Navajo story of the world's creation, but red flags immediately went up among tribal elders, because such stories are sacred and can only be told at certain ceremonial events. So, working with Tohe, who grew up on the Navajo reservation, the two created a story based on the Enemy Way Ceremony, which is meant to bring healing to a physically or spiritually wounded war veteran. "It's grounded in Navajoness," Tohe says of the work. "I've used the ideas of what Navajoness is and how one heals through these ceremonies. What I wanted to bring across in this is how we as people heal our own people. We have these ceremonies, and we've always had these ceremonies. And these ceremonies connect to

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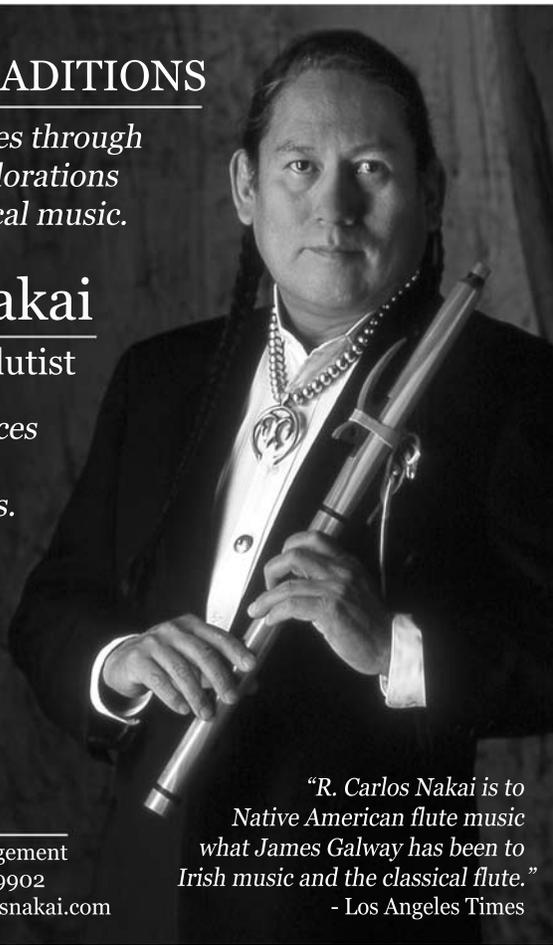
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- Los Angeles Times



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Miguel Harth-Bedoya leads the Fort Worth Symphony's 2007 world premiere of *Caminos del Inka*. The work is not what would typically be thought of as "Indian" but explores three centuries of music influenced by the Incas.

Fabiana van Lente

our mythic stories, and they're very powerful stories."

To help tribes protect the sanctity of certain ceremonies and provide guidance to non-Indian composers seeking to use traditional music in their pieces, the advisory board of the First Nations Composer Initiative plans to develop a code of ethics, an overarching set of protocols that individual tribes could then adapt to their specific cultural traditions. "We're not the music police, but we know that there have to be some standards and protocols in place so that sacred music, for one thing, is not misappropriated or stolen," says Georgia Wettlin-Larsen, FNCCI's program director.

While non-Indian composers aim to gain credibility within a skeptical Indian world, Indian composers struggle to be taken seriously by the classical world. "To be quite honest with you, there is a very clear racism of low expectations," Tate says. "That's an enemy to anyone from any culture, actually. I have to be really careful about how I explain what I do, because when non-Indians say 'Native American,' there's a lot of low expectations that go with that." Miller says he felt he was running the risk of not being taken seriously, or of losing his musical identity, when he set to work on his first classical work. But he realized he had already overcome similar barriers in the folk and alternative rock scene, where he toured with Tori Amos and Pearl Jam in the 1990s and now headlines his own band. The secret for him has always been to wear his Indian identity openly and proudly. "My favorite foods are Thai and Vietnamese and ethnic foods,

with a mix of a lot of spices," he says. "With me, I don't downsize my spices. I don't take away from my culture."

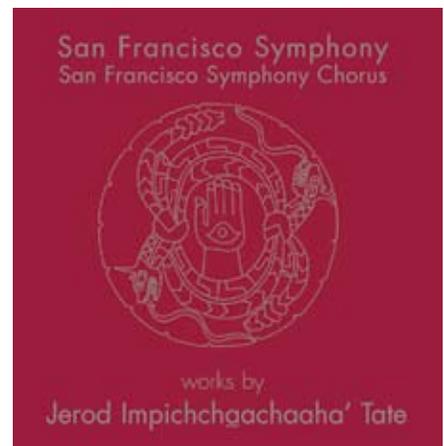
### Historical Perspectives

Antonín Dvořák arrived in New York City for a three-year stay in the United States in 1892, and he soon began talking about the country's lack of a nationalist movement akin to what he and Bedrich Smetana were doing with Bohemian folk music. "America can have her own music, a fine music growing out up from her own soil and having its own special character—the natural voice of a free and great nation," he said in a *New York Herald* interview. He claimed to have followed his own advice, incorporating spirituals and American Indian melodies into his Symphony No. 9 ("From the New World"). Some listeners supposedly heard the story of Hiawatha in the piece. Dvořák later recanted his remarks and denounced such associations, calling the work "genuine Bohemian music."

Regardless of how American the Symphony No. 9 was, Dvořák's call for a distinctively American brand of classical music resonated with composers at the time—and still does. Among those from the turn of the last century who took up his call was Henry Purmort Eames, who studied piano with Clara Schumann and later lived in Nebraska between 1898 and 1913. He wrote *The Sacred Tree*, an opera based on Omaha Indian themes. Another American composer, Charles Wakefield Cadman, spent a summer on the Omaha Reservation around 1909, which inspired

the creation of his Indian-themed opera *Daoma*. Despite their best efforts, the idealized use of Indian motifs in these now-forgotten works comes off as hopelessly stereotyped to contemporary ears.

Excerpts from both operas were featured in "West Meets West," a milestone program that took place in 1992 at the



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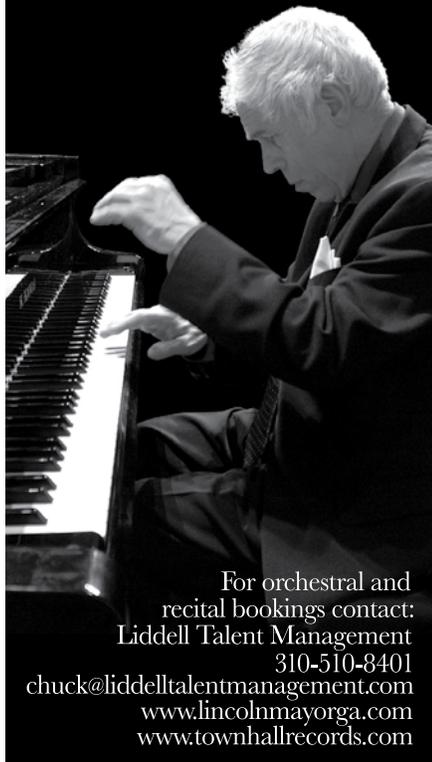
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Blackfoot writer and poet Darrell Robes Kipp (left) with composer Rob Kapilow. Kipp and Kapilow collaborated on *Summer Sun, Winter Moon*, a co-commission by the Carlsen Center, Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, and the Louisiana Philharmonic for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It was conceived by Bruce Hangen, then music director of the Omaha Symphony, as a way to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas and the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nebraska’s statehood. He commissioned what became the concert’s centerpiece, Douglas Hill’s *Ceremonial Images*, based on the Helushka Ceremony of the Omaha Indians. The work combined the Omaha Symphony with the Rough Riders, a tribal drumming and singing group from the Omaha Reservation. “I brought the drum, the players, and the singers into the symphonic realm,” says Hill, a professor of music at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. “That was really my main idea: to combine the two cultures, and combine them through music.” The work, which was later repeated in Omaha and featured on CBS’s *Sunday Morning*, set the stage for similar musical fusions that have followed.

If there is a downside to some of the recent Indian-themed works, it might lie in their tribal or geographic specificity. Will orchestras, for example, in the Northeast—more than 2,000 miles away from the Navajo reservation—want to perform a work such as *Enemy Slayer*? The answer is probably yes, if the compositions are musically compelling enough. Under Music Director Michael Christie, *Enemy Slayer*

was repeated at the Colorado Music Festival in Boulder in 2008, and The Phoenix Symphony recorded it for the Naxos label, which released it in March. Posing even more performing challenges are works that call for the involvement of specific tribal music groups, who cannot easily travel to other parts of the United States. That is a big reason why Hill’s *Ceremonial Images*, which incorporated the Omaha Indian drumming ensemble, has sat on the shelf since its last performances in 1993.

Whatever the ultimate fate of these recent works, the trend shows no sign of slowing, especially considering that Indian involvement in classical music is just in the beginning stages. Three of the Chickasaw and Navajo students Tate has tutored are college music majors, and a fourth just received a scholarship to study composition at Oklahoma City University. “The Indian presence in classical music is growing very naturally,” says Tate, “and I think it will continue to grow.” **S**

KYLE MACMILLAN is a staff columnist at *The Denver Post*, where he covers classical music.

To listen to samples of music by Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate and Mark Grey, visit the *Symphony* area of [americanorchestras.org](http://americanorchestras.org) and click on “Symphony online exclusives.”