

# **SEARCHING FOR THE AUTHENTIC: THE TRUE NORTH AND THE TRUE COMPOSER**

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## **ABSTRACT / RESUME**

In this evocative paper, the author, a professional composer, examines the process of self-discovery in and through music. He concludes that Native musics in North America are essentially musics in their original sources, that Native composers thus truly know themselves just as non-Native composers strive to know themselves.

Dans cet article, l'auteur, un compositeur professionnel, étudie le processus de la découverte de soi dans et à travers la musique. Il conclut que les musiques autochtones en Amérique du Nord sont essentiellement des musiques dans leurs sources originales, que les compositeurs autochtones se connaissent vraiment ainsi tout comme les compositeurs allochènes s'efforcent de se connaître.

In this article I would like to explore issues and concerns linking experience, creativity and education. Years ago, I used to think that I would at some point want to produce scholarly articles dealing with the music of Canadian Indians. I had spent a lot of time in the bush and I had close relationships with Native people...another middle class white liberal to be sure, but also an innocent for whom the silence and space of the bush was not an abstract value but a galvanic force. I harbored certain conceits, chief amongst these being the notion that I encountered the music of Native peoples in Canada in ways that were distinctly different from those that are normative for scholars in the field, namely ethnomusicologists. Not being anthropologically very sophisticated, and viewing what I knew of the intense, deeply felt debate on philosophical and methodological issues in anthropology as inflated and suspiciously precious, I saw anthropology/ethnomusicology as a fundamentally flawed, and morally blind pseudo-science. Like the anthropologists, I had spent time with some Native people - but only because I happened to be where those particular people were - mostly in the bush. They were my friends. I was not then, am not now, nor could ever become an "expert" in matters of Native music. While I could not claim understanding, I could, like the ethnomusicologists, transcribe songs, could make statements regarding intonation and style, "under inspiration" wax theoretical regarding system, structure, function, and even include the odd gestaltist-type analytical/contextual observation. I certainly felt technically competent to do such things. As a composer, however, I felt that I lived in music in ways that were fundamentally different in character and direction from those of scholars with their tape recorders, charts and peculiar anxieties about "getting it right." And while I protected and stroked the collected memories of my own experience with Native people and their music, I wasn't at all sure of what was to be done with them. I did not fall into the trap of understanding my experience as property which could be processed into fodder for academic consumption, but I was aware of the incongruity posed by my strength of feeling surrounding this experience and my apparent inability to do other than live with it in mute reflectivity. While I had deep impressions and, I thought, my own understandings of Native people, their life and their music too, I had not arrived at conclusions that I felt were documentable, or even expressible for that matter, and though motivated to do so, found it impossible to formulate research plans that would be congruent with the entrenched style, interests and expectations of the scholarly community. Over the years, though, a kind of understanding of this situation began to emerge. That long-hidden understanding seems to me now so perfectly self-evident that I hesitate to even make the admission: that my suspension of action was bound-up in the issue of intent. I did not encounter Native culture with the intention of acquiring, collecting, or transmitting. I had no subjects and no informants. I did not deny or mask intention for myself or for the people who might have been and, I think now

fortunately, never became my "subjects." I did not measure, analyze, or record. However my intentions be defined, they were not those of an academic. I skinned a moose when there was a moose to be skinned, danced when people thought it appropriate to dance, sat in silence when people were silent. Finally, however, I was to realize a value in this experience that I could never have imagined, and for which I am now really very grateful. In what follows, I will attempt to clarify the nature of this value and to suggest a role for the university in translating such experience into terms that are both powerful and salient for education.

Now, I am a composer. In the context of the dominant middle class culture, a composer of so-called "serious" music and, while that term is quite foreign to my normal vocabulary, I know well that one of its meanings is that the world of musical values I inhabit lies beyond even the most distant borders of market-driven yuppie catholicity. Suffice it to say that my music is not a consumer product, has no connections to anyone's industry, and is understood by myself to be a statement, encoded within a rational, linguistically-rooted system that serves as both a functional and theoretical abstraction as well as a dynamic that both embraces and reveals expressive and personal content. To put it a simpler way; I know how music works or at least I have a lifetime of study and several degrees that indicate that I ought to know; I have something to say and I am impelled to say it in the mode that is for me no less primary than language itself. That mode is music.

When I look through old program notes, I find statements that now make me squirm uncomfortably. "I wrote this piece with my blood" was for me one of the most effective and often used images in the 60's and early 70's. The music was often topical and deliberately outrageous in its technical/aesthetic means and methods as well as in the sense of its value as an act dedicated to a kind of therapeutic sensitization to selected moral outrages of the time for those who listened, and also, I unabashedly admit, because being outrageous in either and preferably both senses was a currently favored position for composers, one which flowed without separation or prompting from the social/political milieu in which I found myself. Actually, my music then was plainly inconsistent stylistically because, inserted unpredictably between the "outrageous" pieces - the works that were either "about" or that deliberately provoked outrage - were other pieces that cleaved to models of cool abstraction, paying penance in ratiocination, as it were, for the sins of impetuous egotism. Contemporary music has traded in these extremes for a very long time. It still does. I have to admit to my own blind side in not having been memorably discomforted by my awareness of my ready disposition to slide blithely along this "aesthetic" scale from work to work. There was only the weakest intimation of another scale, a "personal" scale, in which, unbeknownst to myself, I had an incalculable investment. Here, the values of the aesthetic scale, to which I had so passionately been dedicated and from which there

appeared to be little need or opportunity for escape, were transposed and integrated with new knowledge, with self-definition, in all of its historical and spiritual dimensions but also in its less accessible subliterate, prephilosophic, ahistorical dimensions as well, to illuminate and renew creativity at its source.

Now, of course, there may appear to be nothing special about that. But my notion of self-definition here has nothing whatever to do with the kind of ethnic revivalism that's been such an effective tool for successive federal governments in this country, but, rather, is engaged with all that rich and murky pre-ethnic stuff below it; below cuisine and costume, below events and their meaning, below language and below self-awareness. I refer here to an area of primitive cultural/psychological process wherein the ontological bases of cultural homogeneity are formed, not where we learn how to dress, cook, and dance like Crees, Japanese, or Jews, but where we learn how to see, hear, evaluate and respond to our experience in ways that make of such group identities something profound and mysterious.

The apperception of this scale comes with no directions for either exploration or use. While knowledge of it is pre-experiential, it requires the power of experience to thrust it into our frame of awareness. The experience to which I refer is not transfiguring, it can not be monitored, and it is not validated by reflection but rather by the action that is consequential to it. It is in this action that the elusive self-definition to which I have referred is confirmed. This is experience that functions as a catalyst to action and the new knowledge and understandings that are its product. It is in this linkage that the purposes of education and, more specifically, the role of the university become vital.

In the university, the experience-action-knowledge process is ideologically and practically reversed, the operant thesis being that new knowledge and understanding makes possible action that is beneficial and progressive. I am reactionary enough to cleave to the old dogma that it is precisely in this process that the traditional values and purposes of the university are confirmed. The most precious property of a university continues to be the knowledge and understanding of its faculty which becomes powerful in its transmission to students and in its translation by students into action. Theoretically, generations of disciples and masters should generate knowledge leading to action, a disposition guaranteeing "relevance" and contemporaneity in the university and the grip of the best minds on the most challenging issues.

That action which is consequent to experience has for me been composition in the sense in which I earlier defined it. Composition in this sense is not ornament, display nor entertainment, nor is it a cryptic or arcane statement directed at initiates. It is a moment in time within a frame of silence containing memorable and powerful information encoded in aural patterns which reach beyond their abstraction to personal meaning

of extraordinary potency. I take an extreme position in my conviction that the expressive act defined as art or otherwise is not only critical to life but necessary for life, and that its value in a life and in the life of a people transcends measurement in a way that empirical studies never have and never will. I believe that art can and that it *must* enter into a life and, further, that it can and must change that life. That is perhaps naive and I've been told that such a view has the odds stacked against it, but for me it is not an abstract issue; I am brazen enough to understand my own music as an oath of dedication to this view or, more properly for me, this reality. I remain egocentric enough to place myself and my aforementioned *self-definition* at the centre of my music; not that the music is about myself, but that it flows without intention or calculation from that definition and reflects constantly, in its compositional strategies, its expressive frame, and, occasionally in symbolic and in concrete musical terms, that personal scale that I have identified as the bounty of experience. One does not turn bashfully from self-knowledge, one acts on it, perhaps even with real passion. But it is hard for middle-class whites, with their thick blanket of denial and obsession, ready-made symbols and identities, and "fill-in-the-blanks" life styles, to recognize authenticity including their own authenticity which, painfully, often lies defeated and silent, buried under mountains of delusion. The very existence of the thing we call western literature documents this condition, the white man's primal frustration.

So, my not-so-neat little construct posits that self-definition, which I've described as problematical, remote, and elusive, but also as the source of creativity, is accessed through experience and that such experience leads to *action* yielding knowledge. I've suggested that this process is reversed in the university learning experience but, most importantly, the process in either of its directions holds action at the centre. I've identified my action as composition. I've described this action as both inseparable from and reflective of self-definition in a number of ways and have suggested that art conceived within such a nexus is an acritical value and an agent of fundamental change and growth; one required for anything other than organic survival. I have not identified the nature of the experience that has guided my artistic path from what I've described as an aesthetic scale to a personal scale nor the nature of the self-definition nor its conjunctivity with an awareness of group membership and its meaning and just how all of this impacts on composition. Not wishing to prolong the tendentiousness, I want to confirm what must by now be perfectly obvious: the bush, my sharing with and learning from Native people, limited as it was, my exposure to the ways of Native people, constituted a seminal if not immediately compelling experience; one with a powerful linkage to my composition in the sense in which I understand it to be action consequent to experience. My music sounds nothing like Native music and has no identifiable intersection with the music of any Native peoples of Canada. There was no romantic nativism in my experience with Native people, no

need to be anything other than what I was capable of becoming. The key to "becoming", of course, was in discovering who I already was. What could be more formative than to frame the process of such a discovery within a context which reflected nothing of "who I was?" This adventure was not, I hope, another tacky 60's identity crisis that was solved by a couple of transcendental nights in a tent. There was no crisis and there was no resolution sought. There was no moment of realization, no moment of new awareness. There was, on the far side of this adventure though, a new and rare calm; a preparedness to hear with my own ears and to see with my own eyes...connecting to the world in ways long dimmed, long frustrated but confirming in many nameless ways. I found also an energy, and a freedom of access to reservoirs of memory and understanding that had no clear origin and less clear purpose. I read and I studied and developed quickly the powerful conviction that I must draw the images out of the shadows, that I must understand why Jacob wrestled with the Angel, and why Miriam sang, and why my nation was the "nation that dwelleth alone," must understand, must internalize this as had my Dene friends understood and internalized what it was that made the river sacred and the earth live.

Access to source in this sense is, of course, the access of source to self and to the representation of self in phenomenal terms which for me was music, music which, at last, flowed from a source known and treasured. If this "saga" has a point, it must just be the obvious; the old cliché that we learn about ourselves by learning about others. I am still anthropologically unsophisticated, but a little less so now than twenty years ago. My argument with anthropology is restrained by my knowledge of anthropology's argument with me; neither argument is based on rash assumption. For me, it's more of a regret than an argument: the regret that because anthropology must define intention if it is to be social science, i.e. a discipline and not the ideological poetry it has been in the past, anthropologists must overcome the power of lived experience in the transmission of its wisdom. Awareness must be processed into finely articulated abstraction never to be reconstructed. Of course, I've been happily cutting the most glorious of lived experience into "finely articulated abstraction" myself for many years in my teaching of music theory. There are, however, vast differences in the range and penetration of these analytic disciplines arising from their structure and function as language systems. While the data of musical analysis, logically deduced within the framework of a constructed analytical system, are desiccated bits as well, their singular reward to the analyst is the capacity to spring back in immediate, aurally confirming reconstruction, often intensifying awareness and resulting in a paralleling of experience, not a property shared by social science data.

Ethnomusicology is all of anthropology, cultural history, psychology, performance, music history and theory, and everything between these

categories. Insofar as ethnomusicology deals with sound as a dialect in the multilingual complex of social organization, it is in a position to make subtle and penetrating statements about human beings generally and, more specifically, to develop an understanding of music as a complex human activity and as art in terms of socially determined meaning, value, and function. From the broad perspective of ethnomusicology, meaning is extracted from virtually any point in the horizon of human experience, but access is gained through musical culture, and that *musical* culture is conjunctive with areas of human experience with which we would have only the most limited access. Of course, as I discovered as a non-ethnomusicologist and as a classically trained musician amongst Native people, it can also open or reopen closed access to ourselves.

Native people know "and I know" that music which has never left its source, like the life that has never left its source, is powerful beyond measure.