

MUS4104 – Musics of Canada’s First Peoples

Boozhoo Manoomin: A Song from the Ancestors

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My musical suite *Boozhoo Manoomin* came from a desire to set to music my experiences and contemplations about manoomin (wild rice), the traditional food of the Anishinabeg (Ojibway people). “Boozhoo” is a greeting in Anishinabemowin (Ojibway language). Manoomin is a sacred food that is linked to the Anishinabeg in our oral history, teachings and traditional practices. My paper will examine my own place in the Anishinabeg world view as an adoptee and imperfect learner about one aspect of my ancestors’ way of life and how this has influenced me as a composer.

I will situate my development of *Boozhoo Manoomin* in Kim Anderson’s (2000, 15-16) self-identification framework. She proposes that Native women go through four steps of formation identity (Who am I?) in order to counteract the negative effects of colonialism. She combines these steps with lifelong questions posed by Sylvia Maracle, one of her interviewees:

1. Resist (Who I am not)
2. Reclaim (Where have I come from?)
3. Construct (Where am I going?)
4. Act (What are my responsibilities?)

As an Anishinabe woman removed from my Indigenous community by the child welfare system and adoption, pursuing knowledge about manoomin fits nicely into that framework. In defining “Who am I” and what drove me to compose *Boozhoo Manoomin*, I will examine how each step described in Anderson’s framework has affected me and my goals as a composer.

The composition of *Boozhoo Manoomin* has provoked me to visit some difficult themes and navigate their presentation and how they relate to my own experience. The story of

manoomin is encompassed within Anishinabeg oral history and worldview. It was necessary for me to reflect on my own place within that history and the ecological and sociological issues associated with manoomin. Algonquin multidisciplinary artist and scholar Spy Dénomme-Welch speaks about self-reflexive ethics that compel him to “honor a set of protocols and values that always shift and develop, yet do not necessarily compromise my imagination and knowledge” (2008, 64). As an Anishinabe woman who was removed from my community as an infant, reconstructing that history and worldview and deciding what I wanted to say about manoomin through music and storytelling has been problematic. For example, I could easily talk about the harvesting of manoomin, but not so easily about its place in the Anishinabeg oral history. However, separating the two was not an option.

Resist (Who I Am Not)

The first step of Anderson’s self-identification framework is resistance and defining who I am not. Pertinent to this step is my status as an Indigenous adoptee. My mother’s family is from Obishikokaang (Frenchman’s Head) on Lac Seul First Nation near Sioux Lookout. She and her siblings attended Cecilia Jeffery Residential School in Kenora, Ontario. I was adopted at age four and raised in a non-Indigenous home in Northwestern Ontario. I did not realize until much later that I was one of many Indigenous children apprehended in disproportionate numbers and placed into non-Aboriginal homes by the Canadian state as a post-residential school program between 1960 and the early 1980s - a phenomenon now referred to as the “Sixties Scoop” (Sinclair 2009).

Sinclair’s research showed that Aboriginal identity only became relevant for adoptees when they were confronted with negative stereotypes and treated poorly due to their Aboriginality. Indigenous adoptees had difficulty acquiring self-esteem due to racism and social

exclusion, internalized racism and racial profiling. While it is impossible to deny my Aboriginality due to my appearance, as a youth my development as a musician was a mechanism to help me counteract stereotypes and gain acceptance. I did not have enough self-confidence to pursue education or music as a potential career until much later in life. *Boozhoo Manoomin* is my first foray into composition and I had a great deal of mentoring from the local jazz community who treated my work with interest and respect.

I don't consider myself to be a political person, yet composing *Boozhoo Manoomin* has taken me to some political places. The nine-movement work for flute, piano, cello or viola, and voice can stand alone for listening purposes, but it can also provide the opportunity for composer and listener to engage in varying degrees of dialogue on a number of subjects. My work addresses broad themes of preservation of traditional knowledge, ecology, identity and reconciliation. The intensity of interaction between me and my audience is dependent on their interest and familiarity with these issues. In discussing "classical Native music", Dawn Avery (2012, 149-153) defines "contemporary music of the twentieth and twenty-first century as sound, with intention, that reflects the physical, psychological, spiritual, cultural, and intellectual world of its creator/composer and those who participate in and with those sounds." In her study of classical Native American composers, she proposes that Native musicians "are part of the process of decolonization, dispelling stereotypes and representing Indians as living, innovative artists, and often they have cultural, political, economic and social agendas." *Boozhoo Manoomin* is unabashedly about my love of manoomin and my experience as an Anishinabe woman claiming my ancestors' history, traditional knowledge and future.

Reclaim (Where Have I Come From?)

Composing *Boozhoo Manoomin* has been a personal act of reclamation of Anishinabe traditional knowledge and recognition of what it means to me. I don't have extensive knowledge about manoomin but I do have a deep-abiding love and respect for it, going back to my childhood love of a casserole that was popular in Northwestern Ontario. I was fascinated by the plant and read as much as I could find out about it. I came to realize that manoomin occupies an important place in the oral traditions and teachings of the Anishinabeg.

Edward Benton-Banai (1988) tells of seven visionaries who came to the Anishinabeg to tell them of Seven Fires or eras that the Anishinabeg would have to undergo. Benton-Banai also describes the Seven Grandfather Teachings – Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, and Truth – values for a good life given to the Anishinabeg by the Seven Grandfathers. The first movement of *Boozhoo Manoomin* depicts a time prior to the Seven Fires when the Anishinabeg were living in accordance with the Seven Grandfather Teachings on the eastern seaboard of North America. The next three movements refer to the arrival of the visionaries and the migration of the Anishinabeg to find “the food that grows on the water.” My personal participation in the manoomin harvest and processing steps informed the next four movements. There are also allusions to the dark times of the Fifth and Sixth Fires predicted by the visionaries, which were manifested in prohibition of ceremonies and breakdown of family units. The final movement is my reflection on the intergenerational effects of residential schools, child welfare systems, ecological damage and recovery. Many speculate that we are in the time of the Seventh Fire, which was to be a time of reconstructing knowledge and ceremonies that were hidden away. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, 371) cautions that “none of us can recognize every piece, let alone carry it all. We need each other, to take a song, a word, a story, a tool, a ceremony and put it in our bundles.”

Construct (Where am I Going?)

My goals when I set out to compose *Boozhoo Manoomin* were simple: to learn something about composing and create awareness and understanding about manoomin. This was partly spurred by reports of conflict between First Nations manoomin harvesters and landowners in the Kawartha Lakes region (Sachgau 2015). It was also fuelled by the realisation that my own reserve had been flooded in the 1930s for the construction of a hydroelectric dam. A plaque on the reserve commemorates the flooding of Obishikokaang and the impacts to the community, including the decimation of the manoomin beds. The musical work demanded more of me to explain my understanding of manoomin and came to involve many participants in its development. Individual pieces were workshopped during three sessions of a summer jazz camp that I attended. I vetted the scores with instrumentalists to ensure that what I was writing was playable for their instruments and I sought advice from other composers.

Once the music was scored, I wrote a narrative to explain the purpose and meaning of each piece. The narrative evolved into storytelling during my November 2018 residency at the Weesageechak Begins to Dance developmental festival at Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto. In a collaborative process with a dramaturg and the musicians in my ensemble, I reworked the narrative into a story told from the point of view of an elderly woman looking back on her childhood experiences of travelling to a new place, learning about manoomin and reflecting on the changes that had happened. She is speaking metaphorically, as the events recounted probably took place over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. The story is still relevant today, as I see myself in the role of the old woman reflecting back on what has happened to bring me to this point in time and understanding of the history of my ancestors.

Leanne Simpson (2011, 40) tells us that “every Nishnaabeg has our own personal stories or narratives that communicate their personal truths, learning, histories and insights.” Simpson’s

elders have taught her that the knowledge must be lived in order to be known. She explains that storytelling elicits different meanings from the experience of each listener (104). With each new group of listeners to *Boozhoo Manoomin*, I gain new perspectives. At the Weesageechak residency, three of the five musicians were non-Indigenous with recent family histories of immigration to Canada. They all spoke movingly of feeling at home in Canada, which echoes the migration story of the Anishinabeg who travelled in search of safety and a new homeland. There were other confidential revelations as we discussed each piece and its layers of meaning.

Act (What Are My Responsibilities?)

What are our responsibilities to the manoomin? This nutritious grain that has sustained many generations of Anishinabeg is facing many threats. Activist Winona LaDuke (2005, 167-190) relates some of these. The wage economy prevents people from being available for the seasonal harvest. Competition from large producers who grow rice on paddies using patented seeds and chemicals undermine local harvesters. Domesticating manoomin and genetic engineering threatens manoomin's biodiversity. Damming and wetland drainage projects affect manoomin, which is sensitive to water levels. Manoomin crops are susceptible to toxic contamination by paper mills, wood-processing facilities, mines and pipelines. Consumers need to be aware of false advertising when purchasing manoomin. They may in fact be purchasing paddy rice instead of "wild rice". The survival of manoomin may be bound up with our own destiny.

Boozhoo Manoomin may be able to contribute to the Truth and Reconciliation's Calls to Action, in particular 62 and 63, relating to development of age-appropriate curriculum on Indigenous history and knowledge. Katie Tremblay Beaton (2017, 14-17) outlines a number of ways to introduce Indigenous pedagogy into music education. She cautions that it is not enough to include Indigenous music in the classroom under the guise of multiculturalism or

inclusivity. The use of storytelling in music rehearsals and more collaborative opportunities are examples of Indigenous styles of learning.

It is my hope that by sharing *Boozhoo Manoomin* with Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, they will have a greater understanding of Anishinabeg history and culture that is embedded in respect for the land. Composing *Boozhoo Manoomin* has helped me to explore troubling personal issues, develop my understanding of Anishinabe world view and to celebrate what I have learned about manoomin.

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