

# Native Seattle in the Concert Hall: An Ethnography of Two Symphonies

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**Abstract.** Musical collaborations between Native North American tradition bearers and non-Native musicians are no longer rare events, but such encounters continue to involve the dynamics of cultural hegemony and negotiations between different modes of musical thinking. Two projects involving the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, Western art music composers, and Coast Salish tribes of western Washington State exemplify the complex processes of intercultural relationship in the composition and performance of two works, “The Healing Heart of the People of this Land,” and “Potlatch Symphony.” In this paper I focus on the strategies employed by local Native participants to maintain traditional protocols for the distribution and performance of Coast Salish songs.

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The Seattle Symphony program notes of May 20, 2006 report: “Not long after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Vi Hilbert, a nationally respected spiritual elder of the Upper Skagit tribe, had a vision” (Kim 2006:15). This vision, which had been preceded by several years of soul-searching, led Vi Hilbert to commission a symphony as a gesture toward “healing a sick world” (Yoder 2007). Hilbert was 83 years old, accustomed to her role as Washington State’s high-profile representative of “the First People” and nationally known as a storyteller and for her role in the revitalization of the Lushootseed language. A fortuitous meeting with Canadian composer Bruce Ruddell developed into a relationship of mutual respect and trust, leading Hilbert to turn over to him a cassette recording of two Lushootseed songs. He was to listen to their teachings and then put them aside and compose a symphony. The result was the May 20, 2006 premiere of Ruddell’s “The Healing Heart of the First People of This Land,” performed by the Seattle Symphony and conducted by then-Music Director, Gerard Schwarz, as part of the “Made in America” festival.

Seven years later the Seattle Symphony again premiered a work inspired by music of the First People of the Pacific Northwest. This time the Education and Community Engagement staff of the Symphony initiated the project: a collaboration involving Seattle composer Janice Giteck, a small group of Seattle Symphony musicians, and Native musicians from several western Washington State tribes. The resulting premiere of the “Potlatch Symphony,” conducted by Associate Conductor Stilian Kirov, was part of Seattle Symphony’s “Day of Music,” September 22, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I explore the many levels of intercultural relationship embodied in these two projects. The symphonic works they produced were inspired by and generated from different impulses, one to heal sickness and the other to promote mutual understanding, but in their enactment, both demonstrate contemporary strategies for the expression of Coast Salish<sup>2</sup> practices and values. Because both projects culminated in public performances in the heart of Seattle’s cultural landscape, I address historical and cultural issues regarding the significance of place, the dynamics of cultural hegemony, and the nature of music itself. The processes of composition and performance in a collaborative context also offer a useful pathway for considering the negotiations of two contemporary Western art music composers with Native ways of musical thinking and cultural protocols.

In their introduction to *Aboriginal Music in Contemporary Canada: Echoes and Exchanges*, Anna Hoefnagels and Beverley Diamond delineate the kinds of “meeting points” (2012:4) that take place in the postcolonial environment between the scholarly and indigenous communities as well as in musical practice involving interaction between indigenous and non-indigenous players. They observe that “intercultural contexts are the norm, not the exception, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (2012:215). The language used to describe such interactions—cultural exchange, collaboration, hybridity, and cross-cultural negotiation, for example—implies a range of social and power relationships. In the case of the two symphony projects, involving disparate musical genres, these interactions occur at several levels and in several combinations involving Native culture bearers and musicians, Western art music composers and musicians, and a symphony orchestra.

There are many contemporary examples of compositions resulting from collaborations of various kinds between non-Native and Native musicians in the United States and Canada. Fascination with Native songs among classical music composers goes back at least as far as the late nineteenth century to the symphonic and operatic works of the so-called Indianist composers, whose works generally exhibited a distorted, often romanticized representation of Native musical expression (see Browner 1997 and Smith 2011). The twentieth century saw the emergence of Native composers of classical music such as Jack Frederick

Kilpatrick (Cherokee) and Louis W. Ballard (Cherokee, Quapaw) and, more recently, Brent Michael Davids (Stockbridge Mohican) Jerod Impichchachaaha Tate (Chickasaw), Dawn Avery (Mohawk), Steven Alvarez (Mescalero Apache), and many others. Contemporary “intercultural” collaborations have included those of R. James DeMars with Carlos Nakai, Tomson Highway with Melissa Hui, and the Vancouver Opera’s Coast Salish adaptation of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, which included the participation of First Nations artists in the creation of the production (see Robinson 2011).

## Place

Benaroya Hall is the imposing downtown Seattle home of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra (SSO). Its 2,479-seat S. Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium offers “architecture and acoustical considerations . . . melded into a seamless aesthetic experience” (Seattle Symphony 2014a), and the Watjen Concert Organ, with its towering bank of pipes along the front of the hall, adds to one’s perception of the room as a place where serious, important music is performed.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Small describes the common features among concert halls such as Benaroya: “. . . first, that they convey an impression of opulence, even sumptuousness. There is wealth here, and the power that wealth brings” (1998:25). Like many American concert halls, Benaroya rents out for non-symphonic events (Steve Martin, Emmylou Harris, Boz Skaggs, and “A Midsummer’s Night with the Monkees” were among the performers during the 2013–14 season), but for most local concert goers, not to mention those who’ve never set foot in the hall, it represents the heart of “high art” music performance in Seattle.

To local Native tribes, downtown Seattle has the additional association of historical displacement and loss. At the center of the Puget Sound basin, this site linked inland and coastal people via land trails and waterways and thrived as a center for indigenous trade for centuries. Numerous village settlements, organized around watersheds, populated the Seattle area. The name of one group located south of Seattle, the <sup>3</sup>Dua’-bc or People of the Little Cedar River, was later anglicized as “Duwamish” and generalized to refer to all the groups on this stretch of the Puget Sound shore (Waterman 2001:48).<sup>4</sup> By the early 1850s, the remains of a traditional longhouse within a mile of the present-day site of Benaroya Hall were among the last signs that a Duwamish village had once been there (Thrush 2007:229, citing Waterman 1922:188).

The city of Seattle was named for *si’at* (ca. 1786–1866), son of a Duwamish mother and a Suquamish father (from the Suquamish settlement across Puget Sound at Agate Passage) and a respected local leader who helped bridge the divide between his people and American settlers with his skills at diplomacy and oration (Hilbert 1991:259–261). The town of Seattle was named for him in 1853,

but by the time of his death in 1866, he'd been mostly forgotten. Unless needed for the local labor force, Native people were unwanted, and both federal treaties and local ordinances attempted to legislate them out of town, with only limited success (Thrush 2007:52–54). It is this painful historical legacy that projects like “The Healing Heart” and the “Potlatch Symphony” attempt to address.

In addition to its cultural significance, Benaroya may also be seen as sacred space. Titon writes of space becoming sacralized both visually and aurally (Titon 2011:1). Visually, Benaroya is cathedral-like in its grandeur, the effect accentuated by the dominant presence of the organ, but its function is ostensibly to be “a place for hearing” (Small 1998:26). “All other considerations are subordinated to the projection and reception of the sounds” (ibid.). “Sound sacralizes space through co-presence. That is, one senses the presence of something greater than oneself through sound” (Titon 2011:1).

Attending a performance at Benaroya, one is aware of leaving ordinary space behind: “It [the building] isolates those within it from the world of their everyday lives . . .” (Small 1998:27). Much the same occurs when one enters a Coast Salish longhouse for a ceremonial event, a parallel that did not escape the notice of some participants in the “Potlatch Symphony” who, according to one SSO staffer, referred to Benaroya as “the longhouse.” If “The Healing Heart” and the “Potlatch Symphony” both brought an indigenous sensibility to Benaroya Hall in terms of performance, it was also there in terms of co-presence. Standing near the site of a pre-contact village, tribal representatives delivered a formal welcome to the land of their ancestors at each performance, conveying to their audiences a still deeper sense of sacralized space and creating an opening for the



**Figure 1. Seattle waterfront, ca. 1892 (photograph by Frank La Roche, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, NA897).**

shared musical experience to come. This awareness was to become integral to the development of the “Potlatch Symphony,” as composer Janice Giteck recognized when she asked, “Are we performing on Salish land or in Benaroya Hall?” (Becker 2013:12).

## The Healing Heart Symphony

Vi Hilbert’s personal history enabled her to successfully negotiate the Native and White worlds for most of her life, and she was in a unique position to imagine an integration of the two in artistic expression. Vi *taq<sup>w</sup>šəblu* Hilbert was born in 1918, the daughter of Charley and Louise Anderson. Her first language was Lushootseed, the Coast Salish language of the Puget Sound area. She grew up listening to the old stories and absorbing the teachings of the elders, but she was encouraged to pursue an education and live a modern life. According to a note in her personal papers, her education included two years at the Chemawa boarding school in Salem, Oregon, 1932–34, and she graduated from Franklin High School in Portland in 1936. During World War II she supported two children while working as a welder in the Tacoma, Washington shipyards.

When linguist Thom Hess met Vi Hilbert in 1967, she had a thriving hair-dressing business and had begun making cassette recordings of the few surviving Lushootseed speakers. She and Hess were primarily responsible for the revival of interest in Lushootseed language and literature through teaching and publication. In addition, Hilbert developed an international reputation as a storyteller and was the recipient of many honors and awards (Sercombe 2003:83).

Hilbert’s boarding school years included exposure to Western classical music. She later recalled her memory of this experience with characteristic directness:

[W]hen I spent many years in boarding school, we were required to come for one hour every day and listen to classical music from Europe. The classical music from Europe was symphonic . . . It was music that I did not understand. Nor did I feel anything from the music that we had to listen to . . . We were given all the background for why this music was important. So I listened as carefully as I could. But I could never really say that I enjoyed the classical music that came from Europe. (Yoder 2007:3)

Hilbert’s commissioning of a symphony for “healing a sick world” came not from her personal response to the symphony as an expressive form but from her belief in its cultural capital and its potential for reaching a large, receptive, mainstream audience. To achieve her aim, she looked to the teachings of her Lushootseed elders. These teachings came in the form of two songs, the power song of *si’at*, Chief Seattle, and a prayer/blessing song of Isadore *pətius* Tom (1904–1989). She believed a symphony could convey the healing power

of Lushootseed songs, not by quoting them explicitly, but by revealing their underlying spirit and potency.

Although Hilbert often described her impulse to commission a symphony as a response to 9/11, the idea did not originate with the attacks of that day. Vi Hilbert first met Canadian composer Bruce Ruddell in July 2001, and at that time she had already been thinking about the symphony project and talking about it with friends and at public events for at least a year. A composition by Ruddell, “13 Soundbytes for Spring,” had been premiered by the Bremerton Symphony (across Elliott Bay from Seattle) in November 2000, and two symphony members who were also friends of Hilbert’s felt that Bruce and Vi should meet. Ruddell was known to have had previous experience working with First Nations cultural and song traditions. His composition for chorus and orchestra, “The Spirit of Haida Gwaii,” was created in collaboration with Haida artist Bill Reid, premiered in 1998 at The Orpheum Theatre in Vancouver, and performed at the opening concert for Canada’s 2010 Cultural Olympiad (Ruddell 2010).

A meeting to introduce Hilbert and Ruddell was arranged to take place at her home. Ruddell recalled the meeting:

She took out two beat-up little cassettes and she put them on the table and she said to me, I had a dream, this is what she told me, I had a dream—I had a dream that these healing songs . . . one was a healing song of Chief Seattle and one was I’m pretty certain her uncle [her cousin]—one was called the healing song and the other is [sic.] called the thunder spirit power song. And she said, I had a vision that these two healing songs needed to inspire a symphonic work so that their magic and their healing power could once again go into the world and begin to do the work that they needed to do.

So, she said, you can’t use any of the rhythms—you can’t use any of the melodies, but you’re going to write me a symphonic work AND the Seattle Symphony is going to play it! Ok! So I went home after that and I thought—how am, you know like—what am I going to do here—I just put them away, I didn’t listen to them at all.

Then there’s a mountain, a small mountain on Salt Spring called Reginald Hill, and I took a cassette player up there—you know, a Walkman kind of thing and went up there one day and put them in and I listened to each of them once, just once, I didn’t need to hear them any more than once. And then I came back down, I mailed them to her. (Interview, 5/3/14)<sup>5</sup>

The songs Vi Hilbert gave to Bruce Ruddell were the prayer or blessing song of Lummi healer (and Vi’s cousin) Isadore Tom and the power song of Chief Seattle. As a healer, Isadore Tom would have acquired several spirit power songs during his life for use in his work. This song had come to him late in life, and during his last years it was one of the songs he gifted to Vi Hilbert: “It’s a song that is a prayer song. It’s a red paint song. He said, ‘Use it when you need it.’ He sang. He and his wife came to Seattle and sang this song for me to use, to take care of” (Yoder 2007:2).<sup>6</sup>

A Suquamish woman, Amelia Sneatlum, had recorded Chief Seattle's Thunder spirit power song in 1954, during linguistic field research by Warren A. Snyder (Snyder 1954). Hilbert explained: "So his song was a song of power. It was in our world, a black paint song that was powerful" (Yoder 2007:2).<sup>7</sup> Sneatlum was born after the death of Chief Seattle, but her family apparently inherited his song. Her daughter Lucy Mulholland sang it at Suquamish Treaty Days back in the 1940s, according to her brother Charles Sneatlum, who also knew and sang the song (Hilbert 2005).<sup>8</sup>

Coast Salish songs, which may be received directly in relationship with a spirit power, gifted, or inherited, are subject to rules of ownership and are under the control of the individual or family to whom they belong. Spirit power songs are only to be sung by the legitimate owners in the appropriate context. In this case, the songs had been "gifted" to Vi Hilbert, entrusted to her, not for use in the longhouse during the winter ceremonial season as was traditional, but for purposes of teaching and preservation for future generations.

Vi Hilbert had, in fact, brought out Chief Seattle and Isadore Tom's songs at a public event in 1992 on the occasion of the Seattle Art Museum's dedication of its new permanent Northwest Coast exhibit. Hilbert asked Isadore Tom's family, led by his son Dobie Tom, to present the two songs. Following Isadore Tom's song, Amelia Sneatlum's son, Charles Sneatlum, introduced Chief Seattle's song. He explained the protocol for the public presentation of the song:

And also, you know, in spirit power songs . . . you'd have to watch it through the years, you know, 'cause spirit powers was respected by the Puget Sound tribes . . . it belonged to individual family groups and, you know, you can't just sing it without, you know, some sort of an authorization or something. The older people, well, they had the burning yesterday for Chief *si'a't* and that helped calm the spirit powers, you know, and like we're gonna bring it out today. (Hilbert 2005)

Public performance of Chief Seattle's song required a ritual burning in order to safely present it. Similar precautions were not necessary for Isadore Tom's song, which is considered, as Jay Miller described it, a "family-sponsored all-purpose song" (personal communication, 8/22/14) meant for use at "weddings, dedications and namings," according to Dobie Tom (Hilbert 2005); however, it still belongs to the family and would only be sung with the permission of the family.

Vi Hilbert, entrusted with their caretaking, had recordings of both songs in her collection. The rules of ownership must be respected, even when a song has been fixed in a sound recording, and when she gifted copies of the two songs to Bruce Ruddell, it was for a specific purpose. She was explicit in her instructions: "I wanted him just to find the spirit in each song and not to have the songs violated by replicating the sound of each song as it has been sung. Only the spirit needed to be recreated" (Yoder 2007:3).

Ruddell was familiar with Coast Salish cultural protocols and took Vi's instructions seriously. Hilbert described her conversation with him: "I said to Bruce, 'You know the rules of our music. Each song is private. It's owned by the living members of each family. They own the right to the song. No one is ever to violate that right. Otherwise, as the words have been said, "the shit would hit the fan!" That's exactly what would happen . . . But I know you understand that'" (ibid.).

Ruddell began work on the symphony in January 2002. He described his compositional process and ongoing working relationship with Vi Hilbert over the following months:

And I just sat at my piano and I thought, how do I get into this . . . and so I wrote a movement—it's called Prepare . . . And so when I finished the Prepare movement, I thought, I don't know if I'm even up for this . . . I have no idea.

So I went down to Seattle and I . . . handed out scores. She said, there'll be some other people in the room—of course Vi was in the middle of the room—and there were quite a number of people, and I played it—I was shaking—I remember shaking, I was so nervous about this. I played just a MIDI version, you know, of the first movement . . . And she really liked it—I mean, it was what she was imagining, how it was working.

Then the second movement was the Thunder spirit power song inspiration. Third movement was the healing song inspiration. And then the fourth movement I called the Journey Forward. It was—how do I come out of this experience myself and move forward with this phenomenal experience, because it was a phenomenal experience for me—extremely rare for a composer to have this kind of situation.

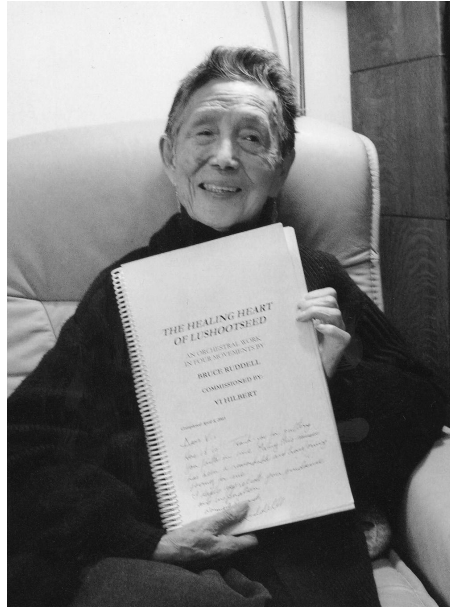
Each time I finished a movement, I would take it down and play . . . the new movement. And the room got bigger and bigger . . . with people . . . until the end. And I started to feel ok after the third movement, after the healing heart movement . . . and, you know, I relaxed at that point, I felt ok.

I've never felt, in a situation, so much love. I mean, that's the word to use, you know, from everyone that was in the room all the time and from Vi, and I'd get these notes from her, these scribbled little hand notes. (Interview, 5/3/14)

The symphony was completed in 2003 and given the title "The Healing Heart of the People of This Land" by Hilbert. Each of the four movements, titled "Prepare," "Thunder, Spirit, Power Song," "Healing Song," and "The Journey Forward" "describes a unique journey along the bridge of healing" (Ruddell 2006:14). The fourth movement includes a solo for counter-tenor (sung in the 2006 performance by a mezzo-soprano) employing a Lushootseed text that translates, "Honor the spirit; Know the sacred. It will help you." Ruddell employed a variety of percussion instruments in his orchestration, including drums, shakers, rattles, rain stick, cymbals, gongs, and water phone.

Vi Hilbert was determined from the start that "The Healing Heart" should be premiered by the Seattle Symphony and conducted by Maestro Schwarz in Benaroya Hall. She developed a close relationship with Patricia Costa Kim,





**Figure 2. Upper Skagit elder Vi Hilbert holding the score of the symphony she commissioned from Bruce Ruddell (from the collection of Hilbert's granddaughter Jill La Pointe).**

then SSO Director of Education and Community Programs, who became an advocate for the project within the organization. Hilbert talked to everyone she knew about her vision, she raised money for the symphony commission, she challenged those who doubted the feasibility of such a project, and she never tired of exclaiming, “This WILL happen.”

Ultimately she got her way, and “The Healing Heart of the First People of This Land” was performed by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, with Gerard Schwarz conducting, on May 20, 2006. Johnny Moses (Tulalip) laid “a carpet of spiritual understanding” (Hilbert in Yoder 2007:6) with songs in the lobby before the performance, which was attended by a near-capacity audience. Following the performance, an on-stage “recognition” featured conductor Schwarz, Vi Hilbert, Bruce Ruddell, Johnny Moses, soloist Jenny Knapp, and Barbara Brotherton (curator of Native American art at the Seattle Art Museum) in a discussion about the work and its creation.

### **Potlatch Symphony**

The “Potlatch Symphony” was the result of the Native Lands Community Composition Project, initiated in early 2012 when Kelly Dylla, SSO Vice President of Education and Community Engagement, was exploring ways for the SSO to connect with local Native communities. She and her staff decided to invite Seattle area tribes to be part of a collaboration to produce a symphonic work

for the SSO to perform.<sup>9</sup> Seattle composer Janice Giteck was invited to join the project as composer-in-residence. As was the case with Bruce Ruddell, Giteck had previous experience working with Native artists. Among other works, she wrote the music for the soundtrack of “Teachings of the Tree People: The Work of Bruce Miller,” a documentary about Skokomish artist and teacher Gerald Bruce *súbiyay* Miller (Katie Jennings, Producer/Director, 2006).

Beginning in October 2012, a series of meetings took place at SSO’s Sound-bridge Music Discovery Center with Giteck and representatives of the SSO and several local tribes. As Giteck describes it, “From the beginning, the intention was to listen to each other, to share musical expressions” (Keogh 2013:1). These meetings were followed by two “cultural exchanges” at local tribal centers. The first was hosted by the Squaxin Island Tribe, located at the southern end of Puget Sound, on April 8, 2013. After a spaghetti dinner in the large community kitchen, Squaxin artist Joe Seymour led an evening of songs and stories from groups of Native youth from Squaxin, Snoqualmie, and Puyallup, as well as the “Shooting Stars,” a small string ensemble (including drum, triangle, and rain stick) made up of students who identified themselves as Puyallup. Alternating with these group performances were solos by three Seattle Symphony musicians, Paul Taub (flute), David Sabee (cello), and Wesley Dyring (viola). Composer Janice Giteck, members of the symphony education staff, and a few observers (myself included) were also present.

Near the end of the evening, Giteck gently pushed this musical exchange in the direction of improvisatory collaboration. At the end of the performance by the Shooting Stars, she invited the symphony musicians and members of the other groups to join in a circle as the Shooting Stars began their piece “Promises.” The director of that ensemble described what happened:

Our piece, ‘Promises’ provided the common ground for improvisation. All drums, rattles, rain stick, triangle, violin, viola, cello, bass flute, saxophone, singers, and dancers came together. We played ‘Promises’ together loud, quiet, slow, fast, solo and tutti. We moved as one voice. We became a new form: together. We became new music: together. Most importantly, the hearts and minds of ALL our Youth who participated tonight were heard: together. Our Ancestors and these Native Lands were honored. (Laura Lynn, email, 4/9/13, forwarded to me by Thomasina Schmitt)

Giteck had been waiting for an appropriate moment to get the symphony players and the tribal groups playing together: “I just got the idea right then. It was not pre-conceived—what was pre-conceived was that wherever there might have been an opportunity for that to happen, I was going to try it . . . I really had no idea what potential there was going to be for actually making something together that wasn’t just a side by side” (interview, 7/29/14).

The second musical exchange took place June 21, 2013 at the Duwamish Longhouse and Cultural Center in Seattle. The Duwamish are not a federally

recognized tribe, but as the original inhabitants of Seattle and descendants of Chief Seattle, they are a visible presence in the Seattle area. The Duwamish event (which I was unable to attend) appeared to move the project away from an “exchange” interaction and closer to a shared collaborative experience. Several accounts described its transformative quality: “Well, we ate a meal together. It was important because we were all mixed together, and it was quite magical actually. To me it felt very pure, very . . . people inquisitive of each other and of this idea of making something together” (Janice Giteck, interview, 7/29/14). “It was an incredible afternoon. Native flutist, Paul Wagner along with Seattle Symphony musicians shared music and stories. Storyteller, Roger Fernandes, shared a story about fear and then Paul Wagner and some of the Symphony musicians recreated this story through music. It was amazing to watch them improvise together” (Thomasina Schmitt, email, 6/27/13).

As with “The Healing Heart” symphony, two Native songs became essential to the collaborative composition of the “Potlatch Symphony.” In this case, however, the songs were to be part of the performance rather than spiritual inspiration for the composer. Both were introduced at the Duwamish exchange event. The songs, identified as “The Changer” song and “Chief Dan George Song,” were considered “public” in the sense that tribal members, following protocol, could sing them in the context of a performance.

“The Changer” song, with words in Chinook Jargon (Chinook Wawa),<sup>10</sup> came to Skokomish elder Gerald Bruce *súbiyay* Miller. The “Changer” is a myth-era being called *duk<sup>w</sup>ibəł* who transformed the world into the form it is today. Miller told me, “I fasted for ten days for that song” (interview, 6/18/99). He later gifted the song to Tom *shalpan* Brown, a Chinook tribal member active in the Tribal Canoe Journeys (*Lak<sup>w</sup>‘əlás*, Thomas R. Speer, email, 9/8/14).<sup>11</sup>

According to Kate Elliott, another Chinook tribal member who was part of the “Potlatch Symphony” performance:

The Changer [song] . . . may be considered Public Domain, since groups like the Grand Ronde and Chinook Canoe Family and 10 Wolves have put it on CD. Apparently *súbiyay* gave the song out to many different people, and *súbiyay* recorded many versions of the song. Others feel that it is one of the family songs, private songs, or even ceremonial songs. I respect this for I would not presume to interpret *súbiyay*’s wishes beyond what I know personally, that he gifted it to *shalpan* (Tom Brown) and the Chinook. (Kate Elliott, email 10/2/14)

“The Changer” song is “public” in a sense that the songs of Chief Seattle and Isadore Tom are not. Protocol, however, still requires an understanding of the underlying rules regarding song ownership:

[M]any do not feel they have the right to sing this song unless *súbiyay*’s family, or a Chinook is around. That is how I became involved with the Potlatch Symphony. Paul Wagner [Wsaanich] and Ken Workman [Duwamish] asked if I would be willing

to sing The Changer . . . with them after it was suggested . . . that it be part of the Potlatch Symphony . . . [This was] a project I could endorse because it upheld the wishes of *súbiyay*'s family to share but not profit from the song. (ibid.)

Dan George (1899–1981), a chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Coast Salish Nation in the Vancouver area of British Columbia, became a well-known actor in his 60s and at 71 was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in “Little Big Man.” He was also known as an author and an orator who inspired and influenced First Nations activism in the 1960s (*New York Times* 1981:September 24). Duwamish cultural leader *Lak<sup>w</sup>’əlás* (Thomas R. Speer) explained, “The . . . song, known today as the ‘Coast Salish Anthem,’ was a gift to the International Tribal Canoe Journeys community from *siyám gəswanouṭ slahoot* (Thunder-Coming-Up-Over-The-Land-From-The-Water, Chief Dan George).” Vi Hilbert told *Lak<sup>w</sup>’əlás* that it was originally a power song that had been “fixed (altered in spiritually-critical areas)” by Chief Dan George “to protect both the singers and the listeners from harm.” Ownership of this anthem is shared by the Canoe Families who gather each summer for the Tribal Canoe Journeys (*Lak<sup>w</sup>’əlás*, Thomas R. Speer, email, 9/8/14).

Composer Giteck began working on material for the symphony within a few months of her first meeting with tribal representatives:

I waited as long as I could. I was waiting to see what kind of interface there was going to be and at a certain point . . . I just decided I have to start writing notes down . . . even though I didn’t know if there would be Natives involved in the music-making of that thing I was writing or what. (Interview, 7/29/14)

My expectations were that it was going to be very challenging of me to walk gently and leave a huge amount of openness and space for an exchange and that I was not going to push it or pull it in any way. I was going to try to guide it very gently and as a collaboration, whenever possible. (Seattle Symphony 2014b)

It became clear to Giteck that protocols for including Native songs would affect her compositional process: “Actually early in the project I knew there was not going to be any appropriation, that I would not ask to appropriate anything, and I kind of enjoyed staying with that boundary and seeing how I could write something original but that was very sort of stately and—I don’t know—it came as a challenge, a sought after challenge” (interview, 7/29/14).

In the end, the work was made up of elements of both musical exchange and collaboration, including Native songs sung by tribal members, composed music, and improvisation. The first section, “Lone Eagle Spirit,” was a solo for Native flute<sup>12</sup>; the second, “Meeting,” was a composed movement for fourteen instruments; the third, “Quartet Exchange: Improvisation,” most directly embodied the “exchange” concept as an improvisation by two SSO musicians and two Native musicians; the fourth, “Dance Catcher,” was again composed for fourteen instruments. As the work took its final form, “The Changer” song and Chief Dan

George's song took their place as processional and recessional, framing the four movements of the symphony. (Janice Giteck withdrew an additional composed movement to make room for the Native music portions of the work.)

Several crucial elements of the symphony only came together in the last few weeks before the performance. The improvised "exchange" section required Native participation as well as SSO musicians Paul Taub (flute and bass flute) and Laura DeLuca (clarinet and bass clarinet). Paul *Che oke ten* Wagner (Wsaanich), Native flute player, had attended the exchange at the Duwamish Longhouse and was enthusiastic about the project. Giteck then invited Swil Kanim (Richard Marshall, Lummi) to be the second Native soloist, after listening to recordings of him playing his own works. She asked him to lead off "Exchange" with material from one of his compositions. Giteck also introduced material from her movement "Meeting" into the rehearsal of "Exchange" that took place in the weeks before the performance.

A title for the work was finally arrived at when Kate Elliott (Chinook) suggested "Potlatch Symphony."<sup>13</sup> Elliott came to the project late but played a key role in the final weeks of preparation for the performance. Kwaxwadadachi (formerly known as the Blue Heron Heritage Family), an intertribal dance group of which she was a co-founder, joined forces with adults and youth from the Duwamish, Squaxin, Puyallup, Snohomish, Chinook, and other tribes to provide the frame for the four movements of the symphony with the processional and recessional.

It poured rain all day on September 22, 2013, the Seattle Symphony's "Day of Music," a free event featuring thirty-five classical, jazz, rock, and hip hop performances in various areas throughout the Benaroya Hall complex. Despite the weather, the lobby was packed with Seattleites: couples and families, members of local tribes identifiable by their cedar hats and jackets bearing tribal logos, and even a couple of anthropologists. The "Potlatch Symphony" was to be performed twice, at 2:00 and 3:15, preceded by Native American storytelling in the lobby outside the symphony hall. A few minutes before 2:00, a near-capacity audience entered the hall and was surprised to see that before the "Potlatch Symphony," we'd be treated to a performance of Borodin's "Polovtsian Dances" from *Prince Igor*, conducted by SSO conductor Ludovic Morlot, with full symphony and chorale. After its rousing finish, SSO Associate Conductor Stilian Kirov and composer Janice Giteck took to the stage and briefly introduced the "Potlatch Symphony."

From the back of Benaroya Hall, up the two main aisles, came a stately procession of adults, children, and young adults from several tribes singing and drumming "The Changer" song. The two lines moved slowly up the aisles to the front of the hall, drums powerfully resonant in Benaroya's acoustics, and up onto the stage where they were seated along the two sides. Soloists Paul Taub, Paul *Che oke ten* Wagner, Laura DeLuca, and Swil Kanim sat in one row with a small group of orchestral musicians seated behind them.



**Figure 3.** The Benaroya Hall stage at the conclusion of the performance of the “Potlatch Symphony,” 9/22/13 (photograph by Ben Van Houten).

Duwamish Tribal Council member and great-great-great-great grandson of Chief Seattle, Ken Workman, delivered a welcome and blessing. Parts 1–4 of the symphony followed, with a recessional concluding the performance with singing and drumming of Chief Dan George’s song and the tribal members exiting back down the two main aisles. The audience response was loudly enthusiastic.<sup>14</sup>

### **Aesthetic Encounters**

The Western classical symphonic tradition and the indigenous song tradition of the Coast Salish people reflect two distinct systems of “musical thought,” to use Bruno Nettl’s term (Nettl 1989:51). Unlike the symphony, a composed instrumental (usually orchestral) musical work attributed to an individual author, Coast Salish songs are thought to result from the relationship between an individual and a spirit being. Songs “come down” from spirit powers into human possession as the result of questing, illness, inheritance, or following rigorous training (Sercombe 2001:30). A song is owned by the individual who received the song in relationship with a spirit being, and ownership remains with the individual’s family after his/her death and may be passed on to members of the next generation. It is more common now to inherit a song than to acquire it through ritual means, but inheritance was a way of acquiring a song as a source of power historically as well (Amoss 1978:53).

Songs are considered personal or family property but may be transferred to someone outside the family or from one tribal group to another as a gift. Coast Salish protocols for public sharing and singing of songs are dictated by these rules of ownership, a sort of “Indian copyright.” Personal songs are “danced” in the smokehouse during the winter season, when the spirit powers are believed to be in close proximity. Those present support the singer by singing and drumming the song, but otherwise only the song owner has the right to sing it.

Other cultural practices continue to be present in contemporary Coast Salish contexts. Today, songs are still acquired as the result of a regime of strict physical and spiritual training undergone before entering the smokehouse but are more often inherited or gifted, as mentioned above. Elders who gifted songs to Vi Hilbert over the years did so because she was trusted to be a responsible caretaker of them. By calling on a power song and a prayer/blessing song as inspiration for the “Healing Heart,” she was employing traditional teachings through the medium of the modern expressive form she felt would reach the largest audience. It’s important to remember that she did not set out to teach the symphony audience about Coast Salish culture, but rather to contribute directly to a healing process she believed was necessary for the entire world.

The Native Lands project, on the other hand, did aim to teach the symphony audience about Coast Salish culture, with the stated objective of building “cultural understanding and respect through music between the Seattle Symphony and tribal nations in the Puget Sound region” (Seattle Symphony 2013). In his essay about intercultural performances of First Nations, Inuit, and Western art music in the form of early music, Dylan Robinson asks, “Might we understand the social encounters occurring within the collaborative process and performance event, and the aesthetic encounters taking place within the meeting of musical forms, to model or enact artistic modes of reconciliation and redress?” (Robinson 2012:224). Keeping in mind the differences as well as the similarities between “The Healing Heart” and the “Potlatch Symphony” projects, the question may be addressed from several perspectives. There is no doubt that intercultural collaboration took place in both, but to what end? For both projects, the final objective was a performance of a symphonic work in an orchestral concert hall, a context with powerful hegemonic ramifications. The danger that “[t]he colonizing impulse of assimilation is . . . enacted under the aegis of inclusion” (ibid.:246) must be recognized. If reconciliation has occurred, collaborative change must have been bi-directional, not uni-directional; that is, the encounters must have changed players and artistic forms on both sides of the intercultural divide.

Language reflecting the need for reconciliation was heard often from the participants and organizers of the “Potlatch Symphony” collaboration. Flutist Paul Wagner (Wsaanich) reflected, “The Native Lands project for me has been

an experience of mutual respect and understanding between two cultures that, for the most part, approach music from different places—yet we have discovered a common root of passion, beauty, and spirit which lives in both worlds” (Becker 2013:12). Ken Workman (Duwamish), who delivered the welcome and blessing, commented, “And so, Chief Seattle, you know, he tried to bring people together and so I think that’s still true today, it’s not just me and you . . . it’s us” (Seattle Symphony 2014b).

That the Native Lands project would result in the creation and performance of the “Potlatch Symphony” was not, however, a forgone conclusion. Early meetings at the SSO headquarters were not altogether encouraging. Kelly Dylla and Janice Giteck both emphasized that these meetings were all about building trust, “. . . looking at each other’s faces wondering, can we just play for each other, and find moments of overlapping?” (Giteck in Keogh 2013:1). At a meeting early in the process, one tribal member who later supported the project voiced his skepticism about the possibility of combining such different musics and questioned the likelihood of a collaboration that would not involve appropriation. Representatives of several tribes came to one meeting and then disappeared.

It was Dylla’s idea to get the meetings out of the SSO environment and into tribal centers, where musical exchange could be explored on less compromised ground. By the end of the second event, at Duwamish, it appears that exchange had transformed into collaboration. As the tribes became more involved in the process and Giteck limited her own compositional input, the final form of the musical work began to emerge, accurately reflecting the complex relationships involved: a combination of exchange (Native songs sung by Native people and composed music performed by orchestra) and collaborative improvisation crossing musical borders (performed by two Native and two SSO soloists). Meshing of cultures was, by mutual agreement, viewed as unfeasible and undesirable.

The encounter enacted by the Native Lands project and the resulting “Potlatch Symphony” appears to have been a positive one for many participants. Kate Elliott (Chinook) acknowledged the effectiveness of Janice Giteck’s composition: “I could just see in my mind, while we’re sitting there onstage and all the kids are, you know, mouths open, gaping at the musicians . . . and I could just picture in my head the composition in different events . . . it was creating the picture in my mind, the music was, you know, of our history . . . So she really hit the mark” (interview, 1/24/14).

Karen “Corn Woman” Condos (president of Natives United in Journey) commented on the effect the performance had on the children who participated: “Many of our elders have been quieted through the years and so it’s very difficult for the kids of today to understand their heritage and who they are.



But the pride that these kids had coming down the aisles was phenomenal—to look out and see that they make a difference” (Seattle Symphony 2014b). Ken Workman (Duwamish) appreciated the overall effect of the combined forces: It was a whole bunch of different tribes coming together in addition to modern society in a great big house, a *hik<sup>w</sup>?al?al*—a great big house, full of sound. This is a very good thing (Seattle Symphony 2014b).

Stilian Kirov, who conducted the work, commented on the unique nature of the project:

I was curious what it will end up being if it's nothing like a traditional symphony that—you get the score, you know, you work on the details and then you give it to the musicians—it was much different than only music—the improvisation between the Native musicians and our symphony musicians, we were creating it while we were rehearsing. Everybody brought what was in their hearts and this is how this piece came to life. (Seattle Symphony 2014b)

At the same time, while members of at least six local tribes participated, many tribes were not represented, and longstanding hostile relations among them may have affected this self-selection. Dylla reported that at least one SSO musician complained about the seating arrangement onstage that had the symphony musicians behind the other performers, but a “handful” of SSO musicians who had attended the exchange events felt the event had “transformed their lives” (interview, 8/20/14). About a month after the performance, a “debrief” meeting was held at SSO’s Soundbridge with about 25 people who’d been involved with the project. Seated in a circle, each attendee voiced what they felt were the strengths of the project and then the “areas for improvement” (the former list was longer). There was strong sentiment for follow-up to build on the momentum of the project and to plan for future performances of the symphony. As of this writing, the next performance is scheduled for April 2015.

The collaborative process and aesthetic encounter embodied in the composition and performance of “The Healing Heart” involved a different set of relationships, but as with the “Potlatch Symphony,” the project ended up in the concert hall performed by a symphony orchestra. The most distinctive feature of the project was the agency of its initiator, Vi Hilbert, who conceived the project, enlisted the support of her (mostly non-Native) students and followers, hired a composer, gave him parameters within in which to work, and convinced the conductor of the SSO to conduct the work himself.

On the one hand, Hilbert’s overall control of the situation may be seen as an instance of “Indigenous modernity” in which she has chosen to “modify traditional cultural expressions” (Hoefnagels and Diamond 2012:5) in a new performance context in order to impact a new, broader audience. On the other hand, she relied for her inspiration and the implementation of the project on core values and practices of her Coast Salish heritage: the healing power of

song, respect for song ownership, careful handling of esoteric song content, the spiritual gifts received by listening, and the profound importance of compassion, strength, and sharing in the maintenance of community bonds (Miller 1999). Most importantly, Hilbert believed that she had been assigned this task by the Spirit to bring the wisdom of Lushootseed to bear on a suffering world and offer a gift of healing compassion.

In her choice of a symphony to express Coast Salish values, Hilbert turned the hegemony of Western art music to her own advantage. “Music is the healer . . . and not just any music: high brow, classical music is the answer” (Kim 2006:15). Composer Bruce Ruddell was a willing collaborator, committed to helping Hilbert fulfill her vision. Wrestling with the tension between the private nature of Coast Salish songs and Hilbert’s wish to share their healing power with a large, mainstream audience, he noted: “I think that that was part of the challenge . . . it was like, I think she was searching for somebody who she felt could somehow channel those pieces of music [the two songs], you know, without the shit hitting the fan! Right? And somehow create something that . . . was inspirationally expressive enough . . . [to] empower those two pieces of music” (interview, 5/3/14).

Apart from the presence of a Northwest Coast frame drum in the percussion section, the uninformed audience member would probably not have noticed the intercultural nature of “The Healing Heart” until the final movement. Ruddell recalled, “When I got to the fourth movement and I played it for Vi, she said she’d had another vision and that certain texts had to go into it . . .” (ibid.). Hilbert had written three lines in Lushootseed, which Ruddell was able to work into the closing movement, “The Journey Forward.” The Lushootseed text and its English translation—“Honor the spirit. Know the sacred. It will help you!”—were included in the concert program, leading the listener back to the theme of healing.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Recent studies in ethnomusicology reflect the move to a more inclusive perspective demanded by the realities of the postcolonial world. Over the past thirty years North American and European scholars have re-defined field research as a collaborative process, and non-Western ethnomusicologists study not only their own music traditions but popular, folk, and indigenous traditions of other cultures. The contemporary study of Native American/First Nations song traditions may be seen as a microcosm of this global trend, as non-Natives share authorship with their consultants, and Native scholars bring an insider’s perspective that challenges traditional ideas about the nature of music and musical ownership. These changes in scholarship reflect life in the postcolonial world

itself, where members of indigenous communities increasingly assert control over the construction and representation of their own identity.

The success of “The Healing Heart” and “Potlatch Symphony” projects (and I would argue that they were successful) rests on the many levels of intercultural relationship they embody, from cross-cultural negotiation and exchange to collaboration. What really matters is that these relationships became, ultimately, interpersonal, based on trust and a spirit of cooperation. Without that transformation, reconciliation and healing are not possible. The tribal members who helped create the “Potlatch Symphony” and Vi Hilbert, who saw her vision realized with “The Healing Heart,” have taken control of their own image and representation, thereby becoming key players in the creation of something new and important for Native and non-Native communities in the Pacific Northwest. Composers Bruce Ruddell and Janice Giteck were essential not only to the creation of the two symphonies but to the “de-colonization” of the projects. They not only understood the politics of aesthetics but, through their own agency, balanced their artistic voices with the distinct voices of their collaborators. The additional crucial relationship in both projects was that of Native and non-Native participants with the Seattle Symphony. The key point to be made here is the shift in institutional ideology to the extent that individuals within the organization (Patricia Kim in the case of “The Healing Heart” and Kelly Dylla in the case of the “Potlatch Symphony”) were able to reach outside the concert hall and negotiate meeting points that led to meaningful intercultural encounters. Did the audiences who experienced these encounters get the message? Vi Hilbert believed it was possible: “If you have listened with an open heart and an open mind, the music has done its work . . .” (Yoder 2007:6).

## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to express my appreciation to my teachers Philip Schuyler and William R. Seaburg for reading and critiquing this paper to its great benefit when they should have been out enjoying Seattle’s sunshine.

## Notes

1. Unfortunately, the recording of the Seattle Symphony performance of “The Healing Heart” has not been made available. Recordings of the “Potlatch Symphony” performances, from several sources, may be found on YouTube.

2. Coast Salish refers to “Peoples of the river and coastal areas of western British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, speaking related languages of the Salish linguistic stock” (Smith 1949:343).

3. When Sir Mix-a-Lot performed with the Seattle Symphony in June 2014, his reaction to the organ suggested its potential as an intimidating presence in the hall: “I had never seen one of those pipe organs up close before . . . Oh my God! Scary! The next time, I’ll bring a cross and a lot of garlic” (De Barros 2014:26).

4. Thrush (2007:23–24) also describes pre-contact Native communities on the site of downtown Seattle, citing Smith 1940:17. Jay Miller describes the physical environment of the Puget Sound area in Miller 1999:15–17.

5. Bruce Ruddell and I conducted a conversation about his composition, “The Healing Heart of the People of This Land” and his relationship with Vi Hilbert as a session at the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Music Library Association Annual Meeting, May 3, 2014, Vancouver, B.C. Much of the session was conducted as an interview, which I recorded and transcribed.

6. Vi Hilbert described Isadore Tom as “a *x<sup>w</sup>da<sup>əb</sup>*, a Medicine man, a healer” (Hilbert 1995:4). As a Christian, Tom’s ministry combined prayer with the traditional use of songs for healing. The literature on Coast Salish doctoring in western Washington includes coverage of shamanism as well as the healing practices of the Indian Shaker Church. (See Amoss 1978, Miller 1999, and Smith 1940.)

7. Spirit powers and the songs associated with them were believed to belong to either the red paint or black paint category. Spirit dancers wear the color paint associated with their power in the longhouse during the winter season. In Lushootseed territory, according to Miller, “fierce (‘black paint’) warrior partnerships were uniquely saltwater, while gentle (‘red paint’) power relations were symbolically associated with the mountains and deep lakes” (Miller 1999:24). One of Amoss’ consultants told her, “. . . the red paint songs are gentle and the black paint ‘kinda rough.’ He also maintains that the red paint dancers can help people who are sick, but the black paint dancers cannot” (Amoss 1978:72).

8. On May 29, 1992 the new permanent exhibit of Northwest Coast art at the Seattle Art Museum was dedicated in a ceremony that featured Vi Hilbert introducing the families of Isadore Tom and Amelia Sneatlum for the presentation of Isadore Tom’s and Chief Seattle’s songs. A video recording of this presentation is included in the Vi Hilbert Collection in the University of Washington Ethnomusicology Archives (2005–1.1937), and I have transcribed portions of it for this paper.

9. The Native Lands Community Composition project developed from Dylla’s discussions with Elena Dubinets, SSO Artistic Planner, Michael Felt, SSO consultant, and Thomasina Schmitt, SSO Community Partnerships Manager.

10. Chinook Jargon was a trade language used by early fur traders, missionaries, and settlers as well as by indigenous groups throughout the Northwest. Much of its vocabulary came from Lower Chinookan, a language spoken on the north and south shores of the mouth of the Columbia River (Thompson and Kinkade 1990:41, 50).

11. The Skokomish Indian Tribe is located on Hood Canal, about forty miles southwest of Seattle. Historically the Skokomish were among several groups of speakers of Twana, a Coast Salish language. Community and family ties with the southern Lushootseed area are common. The Chinook Indian Nation, consisting of five groups in the lower Columbia River region, is outside the Coast Salish linguistic and cultural area, and the Chinook presence in the “Potlatch Symphony” project is the result of relationships that have developed among members of tribes in present-day western Washington.

12. Today it is common to hear the unaccompanied “Native American flute” at gatherings in the Puget Sound area, but there is no evidence that it was present historically.

13. The name “Potlatch Symphony” was well received by the participants of the project, with its suggestion of sharing and celebration. “Potlatch,” a Chinook Jargon word, refers to a gathering

found in a variety of forms throughout the Northwest Coast to validate and maintain social relationships. In the Puget Sound area it was called *sg<sup>w</sup>ig<sup>w</sup>i*, meaning “inviting” (Miller 1999:27). It “. . . linked elite families, their resources, and their spirit powers over great distances through the public performance of a spiritually sanctioned sharing ethic, often on occasions such as funerals . . .” (Thrush: 2012:131). Local tribes continue to hold potlatches, often called giveaways, to acknowledge landmark events.

14. For the second performance of the “Potlatch Symphony” at 3:15, the audience was smaller and, after the big build-up to the first performance, some participants reported that they felt it was something of a let down, less powerful and exciting. The work was received warmly by both the 2:00 and 3:15 audiences.

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