



An American Sound

*Celebrating Native American Music
through the “Indianist” Movement and
the American Piano Composer*

After gaining independence from Great Britain at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783, the newly labeled “Americans” sought to forge a distinct identity for themselves in all areas including music. Since its inception in 1876, Music Teachers National Association has encouraged immigrant and native-born American composers. It wasn’t until 1893, however, and with the urging of the visiting Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904), that American composers started to take seriously the task of creating music that could be identified as uniquely American (Hitchcock 1969, 143). Along the way, a group of composers came together and formed what would be known as the “Indianist” Movement for their use of songs of the Omaha Tribe in their compositions (Browner 1997, 265–266). These composers left behind a collection of piano pieces that can be used to introduce intermediate and advanced piano students to a sample of Native American melodies.

Dvořák’s Challenge

In 1892, Dvořák was invited to serve as director at the National Conservatory of Music in New York (Struble 1995, 66). During his residence in the United States, Dvořák wrote in the *New York Herald* that American composers should be encouraged to create a national sound using available folk music (Horowitz 2005, 224). He believed the future of American music must be founded upon the rich resources of the Native American, African American and Creole American melodies and rhythms (Browner 1997, 272).

Adrienne Fried Block (1990, 141–142) explained that for a national school of composition to develop, there needs to be a sense of national identity, the availability of a useable musical past that was collected and published, and above all, composers would need to be convinced that the creation of a national style was desirable. Dvořák’s comments helped convince American composers they should look to the folk music of America’s Indigenous populations as inspiration for their compositions to assume a distinctly national identity (Block 1990, 146). This represented something of a turning point in the development of American composition; prior to Dvořák, there was little interest in American folk or popular music as a compositional resource (Zuck 1980, 59). That changed as American composers recognized the need for their music to be clearly distinguished from European music. Materials and techniques would have to be drawn from the indigenous musical sources to represent the peoples that made up America (Hitchcock 1969, 143). Charles Rosen (1995, 410) stated, “Folk music is always considered a good thing. There is a catch, however: It has to be ‘real’ folk music, anonymous, evoking not an individual but a communal personality, expressive of the soil.” Composers set out to create music that would be identifiably America by using or replicating melodies of Native Americans, African Americans and Creole Americans.

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“Indianist” Movement

Inspired by Dvořák’s urgings, a small group of composers became part of what would later be called the “Indianist” Movement, the name stemming from their use of Native American melodies in their compositions (Browner 1997, 266). The goal of these composers was to incorporate Native American musical ideas with Western romantic traditions to create an entirely new, truly American national music (Block 1990, 148). Most of the Native American melodies and rhythms used were based on ethnologists Alice Fletcher’s (1838–1923) and Francis LaFlesche’s (1857–1932) published transcripts and wax cylinders recordings of Omaha Indian songs (Browner 1997, 274).

One of the most important composers and the person at the forefront of the “Indianist” Movement was Arthur Farwell (1872–1952), who founded Wa-Wan Press in 1901. Wa-Wan, an Omaha word that means “to sing to someone,” was a company dedicated to publishing the works of the American “Indianist” Movement composers (Chase 1955, 396). Farwell encouraged American composers to use all manner of folk music sources as a means to replace German Romanticism in America (Block 1990, 148). For his own compositions, Farwell used Native American melodies in a way that preserved their integrity and dignity such as in his piano work *American Indian Melodies*, Op. 11 (1901), a set of 10 piano pieces. Farwell was careful not to overwhelm the melodies with complicated harmonies and, instead, wrote simple harmonies to accompany them. Selections include pieces such as “Approach of the Thunder God,” whose driving rhythmic patterns suggest a terrible storm that is progressing closer. This piece’s dynamic swells allow a student to explore a wide range of dynamics while playing.

Approach of the Thunder God.

Harmonized by
ARTHUR FARWELL.

Mysteriously, with suppressed agitation. $\text{♩} = 69$.

Contrasting the first selection is “The Mother’s Vow,” a piece depicting the feelings of deep remorse when a mother grieves as she surrenders her child to the Thunder God to fulfill a vow. Farwell instructs the performer to play this piece with rubato to mimic the grieving quality of the human voice.

The Mother’s Vow.

Harmonized by
ARTHUR FARWELL.

With deep feeling and flowing rhythm. $\text{♩} = 54$.

On the whole, this set of 10 pieces is suitable for the mid- to late-intermediate student and gives a snapshot of some of the melodies that were part of everyday life in the Omaha tribe.

Amy Beach (1867–1944) was another American composer who was inspired by Dvořák to use Native American melodies and rhythms in her compositions. In her piece *From Blackbird Hills (An Omaha Tribal Dance)* Op. 83 (1922), Beach used an Omaha children’s ring game melody called “Follow My Leader” (Block 1990, 147–51).

From Blackbird Hills

(An Omaha Tribal Dance)
op. 83

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In the A section of this piece, Beach used the melody in multiple octaves and keys to paint a musical picture of different personalities following a leader. In the slower lyrical B section, Beach took the same melody but elongated it creating the feeling of a respite in the middle of a child's game. The A and B sections are then repeated and the piece ends in a rousing coda. In this later-intermediate work, Beach added to the melody the dissonance and chromaticism found in Romantic era harmonies.

In addition to Omaha melodies, Beach also employed melodies of the Indigenous people of Alaska in *Eskimos* Op. 64 (1907), a set of 4 mid-intermediate teaching pieces for children. Here, Beach also used later-19th century compositional techniques to embellish the original melodies. After several attempts to include Native American melodies in her works, Beach ultimately came to the conclusion that such music was too remote. She believed the American composer should use music he or she was brought up with (Block 1990, 146).

Harvey Worthington Loomis (1865–1930) studied with Antonín Dvořák and took his teacher's suggestion to heart. He wrote *Lyrics of the Red Man*, Books 1 and 2, Op. 76 (1903–1904), a series of 13 pieces for piano depicting scenes from a Native American village. Loomis included the original melodic line at the top of each piece as a point of reference for the performer. In these later-intermediate pieces, Loomis stayed true to the melodic line and often used the left hand to represent drums. Astute teachers may recognize the melody used for his third piece in Book 1 "Around the Wigwam," is the same that Beach used for "From Blackbird Hills." In "Around the Wigwam," Loomis also stayed true to the original intent of the melody which was to mimic children imitating each other's frolics. In doing so, Loomis created a play-

Around the Wigwam
Op. 76, No. 3

ful piece for the later-intermediate student. Students may also enjoy the opportunity to compare and contrast Beach's and Loomis' different interpretations of the same melody.

Originally, Edward MacDowell (1860–1908) took offense at a Bohemian telling American composers how to be "American" and thought Dvořák's involvement was inappropriate (Struble 1995, 43). However begrudgingly, he nevertheless took up Dvořák's challenge to compose music based on folk melodies. He chose the melodies of Native Americans because he believed these melodies showed a heroic past, an unspoiled landscape and an independent spirit, while the folk songs of the African Americans evoked the horrors of slavery (Browner 1997, 267–268). MacDowell's composition *From an Indian Lodge* (1896) is part of a larger work that refers to American landscapes, the *10 Woodland Sketches*, Op. 51. After a proud and dramatic introduction, MacDowell instructs the performer to play the main theme "mournfully." In this section, the composer created a song-like melody in the right hand and included a steady drumbeat in the left hand.

From an Indian Lodge.

EDWARD MACDOWELL.
Op. 51.

Sternly, with great emphasis. (♩ = 63)

Mournfully. (♩ = 84)

The accompaniment detached throughout

While MacDowell struggled to find an American sound, he believed the music composed in America should be judged on its craftsmanship and beauty and not necessarily on the origins of its melodies.

Henry F. Gilbert (1868–1928) worked with Farwell and the Wa-Wan Press. He was adamant about what should define American music and recognized folk tunes

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as a never-ending source of inspiration for composers. He was a prolific writer for *Musical Quarterly* and lamented about how Americans did not have a composer equal to the American writers Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau and Twain—those who portrayed the American spirit in their works (Zuck 1980, 76). For his part, Gilbert used Native American themes for the five character pieces entitled *Indian Scenes: Five Pieces for the Pianoforte* (1912) suitable for the later-intermediate/early-advanced students. He embellished them with his own unique style, painting vivid musical pictures. In his piece “By the Arrow,” Gilbert used open fifths and octaves that suggest the image of wide open majestic Northern Plains. The composer instructs the performer to play “risoluto” suggesting a proud hunter.

BY THE ARROW

Henry F. Gilbert

Risoluto M.M. ♩ = 96

Early in the 20th century, American composers turned away from using Native American melodies as sources of inspiration for their piano pieces. Instead, the folk melodies and rhythms of the African Americans grew in popularity in the United States and around the world. During its existence, the “Indianist” Movement’s composers created beautiful works for the piano that evoke the spirit of Native Americans and are worth exploring with intermediate and advanced piano students. 🎹

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