



# Beyond DrumBeats and Open Fifths

## Indigenous Compositions of the Americas for the Piano Studio

*By Stephanie Mercer, Penny Lazarus, NCTM, and Sue Ruby*

Piano teachers often encounter pages in method books with titles such as “Indian Drumbeats” or “Indian War Chant.” Accompanied by drawings of teepees and baskets, this music generally uses a pentatonic scale in the right hand and open fifths in the left, beating time in 4/4, appropriating “Native American” sound. Even as students advance, “Indianist” themes by Arthur Farwell, Edward MacDowell and Amy Beach continue to present an outsider’s view of American Indigenous music. Beginning in the 1890s, these “Indianist” Movement pieces were composed when musicians ruminated about what constitutes national sound. American Indian music by white composers romantically lamented the disappearance of Native American culture, disrupted by government policies that drove First Americans

from their own land onto western reservations (Browner 1997, 267).

Is there American indigenous music for piano that can be considered inclusive? Yes! Contrary to popular opinion, most American Indigenous composers do not create music using the open fifth interval to emulate drums, since the piano is not a traditional instrument for ceremonial purposes. Yet, composers of the Americas grew up with pianos in their homes and use all manner of instrumentation, genre and style, ranging from classical to hip-hop to convey their ideas and honor their identity. The following composers and their works comprise a small sample of available repertoire written by Indigenous composers of the Americas and are accessible to the intermediate piano studio.

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## Connor Chee

Connor Chee, Navajo pianist and composer, was in the fourth grade when he was accepted into Cincinnati's School for Creative and Performing Arts. When he graduated from Eastman School of Music, his professor advised him to "find the music from your culture." Chee determined that music of his culture was not accessible and resolved to do something about it.

Inspiration came from the intricate weavings of Chee's grandmother as well as recordings of his grandfather, a medicine man, singing traditional chants and songs. Chee's compositions evolved from consultations with tribal elders about how to preserve Navajo music and culture.

Chee's first album of piano pieces, *The Navajo Piano* (2014) demonstrates the spiritual significance of the number four in Navajo culture. There are four cardinal directions, four sacred gems, four seasons and so on. *The Navajo Piano* moves through key order by descending fourths: for example, C minor to G minor. Most of the album's melodies feature melodic and/or harmonic fourths with main themes repeated four times. Although typically Navajo music has no harmony, Chee often sets these melodies with quartal harmonies, chords built largely of fourths (or inverse fifths). Most notably, Chee recorded all 12 pieces in just four days before ever transcribing a single note.

The commissioned collection *Sandpaintings for Piano* (2021) is organized by the four cardinal directions, each direction further divided into four pieces by color, clouds, lightning and mountains. "Sandpainting No. 13: Jet," features the main theme of the *Sandpaintings*. The Eastern, Southern and Western themes alter the Jet motive using inversion, retrograde inversion and retrograde.

Chee advises young composers to "write as if you are writing for yourself...protect what makes you unique and don't compromise." As Chee's recognition continues to grow, his compositions and lectures illuminate Navajo culture. (Connor Chee, Zoom interview with author, June 3, 2022)

### Sandpainting for Piano No. 13 Jet

Connor Chee

♩ = 80

*mp*

*with pedal*

7

*mp*

## Charles Shadle

Charles Shadle holds a PhD degree in composition from Brandeis University and is an award-winning professor of music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is also an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. When he was 10 years old, Shadle was given a precious book of music that his great-great-great-grandmother brought with her on the Trail of Tears (the forced removal of Native Americans to Oklahoma from their southeastern homelands beginning in the 1830s). This book of sacred harp music illustrates the importance of group singing to the Choctaw. As Shadle remarked, "Once you get past the essentials, what you take with you has real cultural significance."

Shadle's compositions reference his Choctaw heritage. But since much of his work required highly accomplished musicians, in 2019 Shadle composed *Choctaw Animals*, a set of four pieces for pianists of many ages and abilities. "My thought was they could be played by people taking piano lessons," he said. Shadle worked with the Choctaw nation to ensure these pieces were also respectful to the Choctaw people who "are thriving and have a vast amount to contribute to our modern culture." In this spirit of accessibility, Shadle has made *Choctaw Animals* free to print, play and perform for non-commercial use.

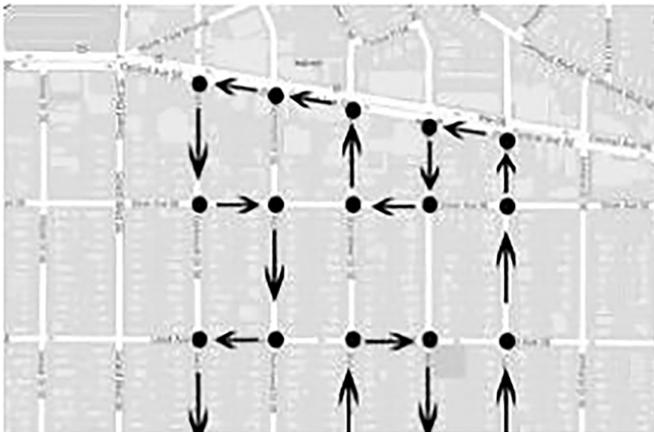
Shadle provides description and performance suggestions and has named the pieces using the Choctaw language to help preserve it: "Chulhkvñ" (Spider), "Nvni" (Fish), "Nashoba" (Wolf) and "Issuba" (Pony). He said he composes using classical compositional devices while "highlighting elements of what I think of as innately Choctaw rhythms and melodic fragments," without ever directly quoting actual dances. The music weaves, swims, skulks and, in "Issuba," gallops. (Issuba is a rare and historically important breed of pony being brought back from near extinction). (Charles Shadle, Zoom interview with author, May 12, 2022)



## Raven Chacon

Raven Chacon is a Navajo who grew up hearing his grandfather sing the traditional songs of his people. Raven took piano lessons as an adolescent, teaching himself guitar and composition when he was 12. Raven has a style of composing that places importance on the participants rather than the audience who may be there. Once the people involved are determined, Raven then looks to add in the instruments, timbre, then finally pitch and harmony. In his compositions, Raven also hopes to bring attention to the history of the land where people perform, sometimes going back to pre-human times. For Raven, his most fulfilling work is the involvement in NACAP (Native American Composer Apprenticeship Project), where he mentors Native high school students in writing string quartets.

“Drum Grid” can be performed with any group, even pianists, with approximately 20 performers spread out on corners of villages, cities or suburban streets. One player will start the piece with a single drum hit, followed by the next drummer in line interpreting what she heard, then another and so on. Like the “telephone game,” in which a message is whispered to a string of players, “Drum Grid” relays how messages can be carried or misheard, generated or collapsed. A goal when performing this piece is for the performers to traverse new places and see new parts of a neighborhood. (Raven Chacon, phone interview with author, April 26, 2022)



## Beverley McKiver

Adopted as a young child, it was 40 years before Beverley McKiver discovered her true native heritage: Anishinaabe from the Lac Seul First Nation. She now describes herself as a pianist, teacher and composer inspired by the outdoors, the landscape and the recovery of Indigenous knowledge. McKiver’s *Canadian Floral Emblems* (2021) is a suite of intermediate-level piano solos. Using the floral emblems of Canada’s 10 provinces

and 3 territories, each vignette creates an aural picture and demonstrates McKiver’s knowledge and love of plants.

The first piece in the suite, “Lady Slipper,” captures the beauty and delicacy of these orchid-like flowers using a variety of tempi, articulations and dynamics. McKiver describes a colony with thousands of lady slippers in the Purdon Conservation Area near her home in Ottawa as being “magical” when in bloom. Set in “swing” triple meter, this portrait takes time to develop into a full, albeit brief, high “bloom” that disappears into thin air.

For “Trillium,” McKiver uses subtle harmonic shifts over a gently rolling left hand triple meter accompaniment to depict the easily identifiable white flowers with three petals and tender leaves of Ontario’s state flower. (Beverley McKiver, Zoom interview with author, May 13, 2022)

II. Trillium

## Hwaen Ch’uqi

Hwaen Ch’uqi was born in the rainforests of Peru to the Inca. As a young child, Ch’uqi remembers the Inca singing and improvising together in groups while playing multiple instruments. At age 5, Ch’uqi came to the United States with adopted parents and later went on to study at Eastman. When it comes to composing, Ch’uqi is inspired by his Inca heritage, including the animals and birds that surrounded him as a child. His style has been described as eclectic, to which he doesn’t disagree. However, he sees himself as more of a romantic composer with an acute understanding of counterpoint and emotional structures. (Hwaen Ch’uqi, phone interview with author, April 30, 2022)

His work, “De Mes Amis, Les Animaux” 12 Études-Tableaux for Developing Artists for Piano Solo, is like Schumann’s or Tchaikovsky’s *Album for the Young*. The work intends to bridge the gap between method books and more challenging classical repertoire. According to

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Hwaen, each movement depicts a different animal and combines a study in color and emotion as an exploration of technique. As a supplement to these pieces, Hwaen provides performer's notes including articulations, dynamics and a proposed order of study. The styles of the movements vary from the Baroque-inspired "On The Spider's Threads And Cunning" to a piece reminiscent of the Romantic era, "The Sea Inflamed, Yet Doth The Tuna Hold Its Course," which takes the performer and listener on a wild sea adventure.

## VIII. On The Spider's Threads And Cunning

Amabile (♩ = 40)

Musical score for 'On The Spider's Threads And Cunning' in 3/8 time, marked Amabile with a tempo of quarter note = 40. The score shows a single melodic line in the right hand with a trill at the end.

Continuation of the musical score for 'On The Spider's Threads And Cunning', showing a more complex melodic line with slurs and ties.

## XI. The Sea Inflamed, Yet Doth The Tuna Hold Its Course

Moderato (♩ = 66) *ff* *sim.* *m.d.* *10* *8va*

Musical score for 'The Sea Inflamed, Yet Doth The Tuna Hold Its Course' in 3/4 time, marked Moderato with a tempo of quarter note = 66. The score features a powerful, complex texture with dynamics *ff*, *sim.*, and *m.d.*, and includes a ten-measure passage marked *10* and an octave passage marked *8va*.

*8va* *m.s.* *10* *9*

Continuation of the musical score for 'The Sea Inflamed, Yet Doth The Tuna Hold Its Course', showing further complex textures and dynamics.

## Zenobia Powell Perry

Zenobia Powell Petty (1908–2004) self-identified as both Black and Muscogee Creek. Perry grew up in Boley, Oklahoma, a predominantly African American town that was on the Trail of Tears. Perry's physician father and educated mother roused her earliest musical interest. Even before earning her master's degree from Colorado State College, composers Nathaniel Dett, William L. Dawson and emigre Darius Milhaud encouraged her to use jazz and the African American spirituals she learned from her enslaved grandfather. Her 1985 opera *Tawawa House* is about a real place that embodies her multi-racial identity. *Tawawa* was a watering hole first named by Native Americans in Wilberforce, Ohio. Surrounded by natural springs, it featured a luxurious

300-room house built in 1850, first used by slaveholders and their enslaved mistresses and later becoming part of the underground railroad during the Civil War (Perry 2011; Cronin 2014). In 1863, using a land grant, the buildings became the first black-owned college in the United States. Professor Perry taught at Wilberforce, renamed the Central State University of Ohio, for almost 30 years.

Perry wrote more than 32 pieces for piano, including a group titled *Piano Potpourri* that range in level from late-elementary to late-intermediate. "Ties," "Orrin and Echo" and "A Jazz Trifle" with contrapuntal penta and blues scales, are a delight to teach. For the intermediate student "Nocturne" is a wonderful example of the moonlit genre using impressionistic dissonance around a tonal center.

## Ties (1970)

Zenobia Powell Perry (ASCAP)

Andante (♩ = 92) *mf* *legato*

Musical score for 'Ties' in 3/4 time, marked Andante with a tempo of quarter note = 92. The score features a melodic line in the right hand with slurs and ties, and a bass line with chords. Dynamics include *mf* and *legato*.

Continuation of the musical score for 'Ties', showing further melodic and harmonic development.

## Orrin and Echo (1970)

Zenobia Powell Perry

Andante (♩ = 80) *Piano*

Musical score for 'Orrin and Echo' in 3/4 time, marked Andante with a tempo of quarter note = 80. The score is for piano and features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with chords. Dynamics include *Piano*.

Continuation of the musical score for 'Orrin and Echo', showing further melodic and harmonic development.

## Conclusion

An inclusive piano studio will expose students to a wide range of composers of different backgrounds, nationalities and ethnic groups. The composers highlighted in this article represent a very small sample of Indigenous music of the Western Hemisphere. Renata

Yazzie, Diné musicologist, pianist and writer, says this about indigenous music: “Our music can be medicine, history, even law. It can have agency. There are 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States and each group has their own conception of what music or song is” (King 2020). Indigenous composers have made significant contributions in chamber, choral, orchestra, opera, film, jazz, hip-hop, electronic music and the like. Recognizing these artists will connect our students to an ever-evolving number of voices far beyond the trope of drumming fifths.

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**Sue Ruby** co-owns K & S Conservatory of Music and teaches at MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis. Sue co-founded the Association of Professional Piano Instructors (APPI) and Fridays in the Valley Chamber Music Series.



## RESOURCES

By no means are the works and composers discussed in this article exhaustive of the repertoire available from Indigenous American Composers. Since the time of these interviews, the field of American Indigenous piano music has continued to grow, including pieces by Barbara Assingnak in the Celebration Series, additional movements for *Choctaw Animals* specifically for late elementary pianists by Charles Shadle, upcoming works by Hwaen Ch’uqi, and a collection of works compiled by Connor Chee with the Francis Clark Center. The authors encourage the readers to explore this rich sector of works by the American Indigenous composer.

Find more compositions by Connor Chee at <https://www.connorchee.com>.

Download Charles Shadle’s *Choctaw Animals* (free to print, play and perform for non-commercial use) at [https://shass.mit.edu/files/shass/cimg/news/2020/Shadle\\_Choctaw\\_Animals\\_Final-3-20-21.pdf](https://shass.mit.edu/files/shass/cimg/news/2020/Shadle_Choctaw_Animals_Final-3-20-21.pdf).

Raven Chacon’s compositions as well as instructions regarding the Drum Grid can be found at <http://spiderwebsinthesky.com/portfolio/>.

Hwaen Ch’uqi’s works can be found on Lulu.com.

Zenobia Powell Perry’s music, including piano arrangements of *Tawawa House* can be downloaded from <http://www.zenobiapowellperry.org/>.