

# Aboriginal Musics of Canada

Because of language difficulties and cultural differences, studying the aboriginal musics of Canada can pose quite a challenge. Moreover, the cultural geography of First Nations in Canada is extremely diverse. There are many independent and unique aboriginal communities, so many, indeed, that it is impossible in short compass to study the music of even a handful of them.

The first task, therefore, is to survey briefly the number and variety of Canadian First Nations, which we do by means of the *Canadian Encyclopedia* article on the subject.<sup>1</sup> We can then move to an overview, written for the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, on “First People’s Music” in Canada.<sup>2</sup> An alternative discussion by a well-respected expert in the field is Beverley Cavanagh’s article in *Ethnomusicology* titled “North America: Indian and Inuit Music.”<sup>3</sup>

While determining that the music of First Nations falls, very broadly speaking, into four main categories: Inuit, Coastal First Nations, Inland First Nations, and Métis, we must also recognize that within these broad categories there are many sub-categories, reflecting the cultural differences between communities in different regions. Surveying all the different varieties of aboriginal music in Canada would therefore be a formidable task. Necessarily, then, we will be highly selective as we probe beyond our initial survey into a few aspects of the musics of First Nations.

How did non-native Canadians come to know something of these various musical traditions? An article on research into native music in Canada in *Oxford Music Online* (formerly *Grove Music Online*) provides some of the answers with a survey of scholarly work and collecting.<sup>4</sup> We can supplement this by briefly canvassing the fieldwork and publications of such investigators as Marius Barbeau, Ida Halpern and Beverley Diamond. An introduction to each of these major figures can be found in short articles written for the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.<sup>5</sup>

Inuit music is found in two forms: traditional and contemporary. For a convenient account of traditional Inuit tales and songs with illustrations, one can consult Franz Boas’s pioneering articles in *Journal of American Folklore*, although these of course reflect the perspective of early scholarship in this area.<sup>6</sup> We can use short pieces written for the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* to obtain an initial orientation to Inuit throat singing and to Susan Aglukark, a contemporary singer-songwriter of Inuit descent who has successfully blended traditional and Western musical forms.<sup>7</sup> Beverley Diamond (formerly Beverley

Cavanagh) is a prominent ethnomusicologist who has written extensively on aboriginal music, and her article in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* on imagery and structure in Inuit songs is a classic in the field. It provides an illustration of the kind of scholarly analysis that has been done on Inuit vocal music.<sup>8</sup> This can be supplemented with three short pieces from *Canadian Folk Music*: Mary Piercey’s “Gender Relations in Inuit Drum Dances,” Jim Hiscott’s “Inuit Accordion Music – A Better Kept Secret,” and David Gregory’s “Some Inuit Music on CD.”<sup>9</sup>

Moving on to the subject of Amerindian musical culture, the obvious place to begin is on the West Coast. The aboriginal music of British Columbia and the far North is usually divided into nine sub-categories: Athapaskan, Dene, Dogrib, Haida, Bella Coola, Kawakiutl, Nootka, Salish, and Tsimshian. Some of these native communities, especially those on the northwest coast of British Columbia, have been fairly extensively studied by folklorists and ethnomusicologists. Prominent among the pioneers was Ida Halpern, and her report on their music titled “Music of the B.C. Northwest Coast Indians” is a classic.<sup>10</sup> We supplement this with a more localized study of Tsimshian love songs by Ellen Moses, who drew upon Marius Barbeau’s collecting as well as her own fieldwork in the Skeena River valley. This was published in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* in 1980.<sup>11</sup> Marius Barbeau was the pioneer in this field and his short 1957 *Canadian Music Journal* article on “Indian Songs of the Northwest” is still useful.<sup>12</sup> The fruits of his song-collecting among the Tsimshian were published in a book that is now unfortunately out of print, *The Tsimshian, Their Arts and Music*.<sup>13</sup> Another old out-of-print book that provided a valuable overview of this general subject was Frances Densmore’s *Music of the Indians of British Columbia*.<sup>14</sup> And still useful is Graham George’s account of Salish music in his article titled “Songs of the Salish Indians of British Columbia” in the 1962 issue of the *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*.<sup>15</sup> It can be supplemented with Wendy Stuart’s “Coast Salish Gambling Music” in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* for 1974.<sup>16</sup>

There are too many other First Nations for us to do more than notice the music of some of those that also happen to have been studied by folklorists or ethnomusicologists. These include the Iroquois, Ojibway, Blackfoot, Blood, Cree and Mi’kmaq. For example, a brief but informative look at some of the songs and instrumental music of the Iroquois is possible because of the scholarly work of Marius Bar-

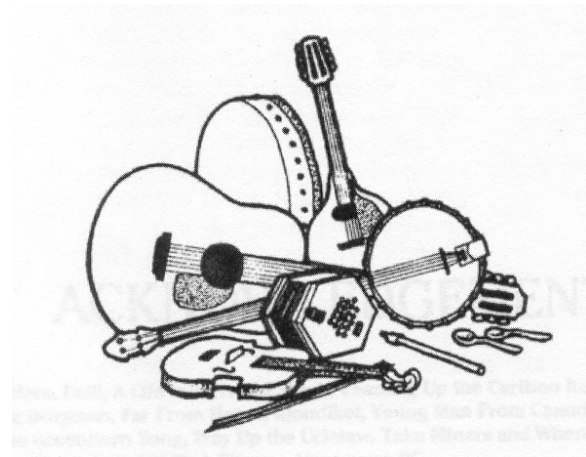
beau and Mieczyslaw Kolinski. Barbeau wrote on “Dragon Myths and Ritual Songs of the Iroquois” in *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*,<sup>17</sup> while Kolinski’s article on “An Apache Rabbit Dance Song Cycle as Sung by the Iroquois” is a classic in the field.<sup>18</sup> For the Blackfoot one can consult Bruno Nettl’s “Studies in Blackfoot Indian Musical Culture,”<sup>19</sup> while Robert Witmer’s studies on the Blood Indians include “Recent Change in the Musical Culture of the Blood Indians of Alberta” and “‘White’ Music Among the Blood Indians of Alberta.”<sup>20</sup> Accounts of Cree musical culture include Frances Wilkins’ report in *Canadian Folk Music* “Notes from the Field: The Cree Fiddlers of James Bay.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Janice Tulk has more recently studied Mi’kmaq musical culture, reporting her findings in an article titled “Cultural Revitalization and Mi’kmaq Music-Making: Three Newfoundland Drum Groups.”<sup>22</sup>

It is possible to make a closer study of the role of the powwow in First Nations’ culture and music-making, since this is a topic that has caught the attention of several ethnomusicologists. For example, we can draw on the published work of two ethnomusicologists who have become authorities on the subject, namely, Lynn Whidden and Anna Hoefnagels. Whidden’s pioneering article in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* is titled “Ritual Powwow Music: Its Power and Poetics.”<sup>23</sup> Hoefnagels’ contribution, “Northern Style Powwow Music: Musical Features and Meanings,” was published in the *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* nearly twenty years later.<sup>24</sup>

Aboriginal musical traditions in Canada include the music of the Métis nation. In the history of the fur trade, the *voyageurs* were often Métis, and *voyageur* songs are a unique form of Canadian folk song, one with few parallels elsewhere. Marius Barbeau was a pioneer in the study of *voyageur* culture, with his 1942 article “Voyageur Songs” and his 1954 piece drawing attention to “The Ermatinger Collection of Voyageur Songs (ca. 1830).”<sup>25</sup> François Brassard took up the story in 1974 in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* with “Le Voyageur.”<sup>26</sup> However, there was (and is) a strong instrumental side to Métis musical culture, as Anne Lederman points out in “Old Indian and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba: Origins, Structure, and Question of Syncretism,” also in *Canadian Folk Music Journal*.<sup>27</sup> Franceene Watson followed this with an account of “Red River Valley Fiddler Andy De Jarlis: His Musical Legacy Touched by New Dimensions” in *Canadian Folk Music*.<sup>28</sup> Another expert researcher on Métis musical culture, Lynn Whidden, contributed three articles on the subject to *Canadian Folk Music*: “A Note on Métis Music,” “Native and Métis Songs from the SMEA Project” and “Cowboys and Indians: Putting the Indian into Cowboy Music.”<sup>29</sup>

Many First Nations people migrated to Canada’s cities, and in an urban metropolis such as Toronto there may be found additional examples of Native music that reflect the cultural heritage of aboriginal musicians and singers as well as point to ways in which that culture has been adapted to an urban (and often hostile) environment. Several ethnomusicologists have examined the way of life, including the songs and instrumental music, of these urbanized refugees from reservations or other rural communities. One quite recent study is Klisala Harrison’s “‘Singing My Spirit of Identity’: Aboriginal Music for Well-being in a Canadian Inner City” in the 2009 issue of *MUSICultures*.<sup>30</sup> A previous analysis along similar lines was by Wendy Wickwire in her article titled “Traditional Musical Culture at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto” in *Canadian Folk Music Journal*.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, we should take notice of two good articles that analyse First Nations music but do not fit easily into any of the above categories. They are David Pulak’s “Rhythm, Myth, and Spirit” in the 1990 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Journal*<sup>32</sup> and Murray Smith’s “Learning Through Drum and Dance,” in one of the following year’s issues of *Canadian Folk Music*.<sup>33</sup>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Aboriginal North Americans in Canada,” in *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*.

<sup>2</sup>“First Peoples’ Music” in *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*.

<sup>3</sup>Cavanagh, Beverley. “North America: Indian and Inuit Music,” *Ethnomusicology*, 29: 2 (Spring-Summer 1985), 337-342.

<sup>4</sup>“Amerindian Music. V. 1. Research: Canada” in *Oxford Music Online*.

- <sup>5</sup>Marius Barbeau, "Ida Halpern" and "Beverly Diamond," in *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*.
- <sup>6</sup>Boas, Franz. "Eskimo Tales and Songs," *Journal of American Folklore* 2 (1889), 123-131 and *Journal of American Folklore* 7 (1894), 45-50 & 10 (1897), 109-115.
- <sup>7</sup>"Inuit Vocal Games" and "Susan Aglukark," in *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*.
- <sup>8</sup>Cavanagh, Beverly. "Imagery and Structure in Eskimo Song Texts," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 1 (1973), 3-16.
- <sup>9</sup>Gregory, E. David. "Some Inuit Music on CD," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 39.3 (Fall 2005), 9-10. Hiscott, Jim. "Inuit Accordion Music – A Better Kept Secret," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 34.1-2 (March/ June 2000), 16-19. Piercey, Mary E. "Gender Relations in Inuit Drum Dances," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, 39.3 (Fall 2005), 1-6.
- <sup>10</sup>Halpern, Ida. "Music of the B.C. Northwest Coast Indians," *Proceedings of the Centennial Workshop on Ethnomusicology*, Vancouver (1968), 23-41.
- <sup>11</sup>Moses, Ellen Karp. "Love and Lonesome Songs of the Skeena River," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 8 (1980), 31-39.
- <sup>12</sup>Barbeau, Marius. "Indian Songs of the Northwest," *Canadian Music Journal* 2 (Autumn 1957), 16-25.
- <sup>13</sup>Barbeau, Marius. "Tsimshian Songs," (75 musical transcriptions) in *The Tsimshian, Their Arts and Music*, ed .C.M. Barbeau, Viola E. Garfield & Paul S. Wingert, 95-280. New York: Augustin, 1951.
- <sup>14</sup>Densmore, Frances. *Music of the Indians of British Columbia*. Washington: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1943.
- <sup>15</sup>George, Graham. "Songs of the Salish Indians of British Columbia," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 14 (1962), 22-29.
- <sup>16</sup>Stuart, Wendy B. "Coast Salish Gambling Music," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 2 (1974): 3-12.
- <sup>17</sup>Barbeau, Marius. "Dragon Myths and Ritual Songs of the Iroquois," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1951), 81-85.
- <sup>18</sup>Kolinski, Mieczyslaw. "An Apache Rabbit Dance Song Cycle as Sung by the Iroquois," *Ethnomusicology* 16 (1972), 415-464.
- <sup>19</sup>Nettl, Bruno. "Studies in Blackfoot Indian Musical Culture," *Ethnomusicology* 11 (1967), 141-160 & 293-30, and *Ethnomusicology* 12 (1968), 11-48 & 192-207.
- <sup>20</sup>Witmer, Robert. "Recent Change in the Musical Culture of the Blood Indians of Alberta," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 9 (1973), 64-94. "'White' Music Among the Blood Indians of Alberta," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 2 (1974), 35-39.
- <sup>21</sup>Wilkins, Frances. "Notes from the Field: The Cree Fiddlers of James Bay," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter 2011-12), 21-25.
- <sup>22</sup>Tulk, Janice Esther. "Cultural Revitalization and Mi'kmaq Music-Making: Three Newfoundland Drum Groups," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 22:1 (Spring 2007), 259-285.
- <sup>23</sup>Whidden, Lynn. "Ritual Powwow Music: Its Power and Poetics," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 11 (1983), 3-11.
- <sup>24</sup>Hoefnagels, Anna T. "Northern Style Powwow Music: Musical Features and Meanings," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 31 (2004), 10-23.
- <sup>25</sup>Barbeau, Marius. "Voyageur Songs," *Beaver* (June 1942), 15-19. "The Ermatinger Collection of Voyageur Songs (circa 1830)," *Journal of American Folklore* 67 (1954), 147-161.
- <sup>26</sup>Brassard, François. "Le Voyageur," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 2 (1974), 13-18.
- <sup>27</sup>Lederman, Anne. "Old Indian and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba: Origins, Structure, and Question of Syncretism," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 19 (1991), 40-60.
- <sup>28</sup>Watson, Franceene. "Red River Valley Fiddler Andy De Jarlis: His Musical Legacy Touched by New Dimensions," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 31: 2 (June 1997), 16-22.
- <sup>29</sup>Whidden, Lynn. "A Note on Métis Music," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 24: 1 (June 1990), 12-15. "Native and Métis Songs from the SMEA Project," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 24: 1 (June 1990), 16-24. "Cowboys and Indians: Putting the Indian into Cowboy Music," *Canadian Folk Music/ Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne*, 35: 1 (Spring 2001), 11-13.
- <sup>30</sup>Harrison, Klisala. "'Singing My Spirit of Identity': Aboriginal Music for Well-being in a Canadian Inner City," *MUSICultures* 36 (2009), 1-21.
- <sup>31</sup>Wickwire, Wendy. "Traditional Musical Culture at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 4 (1976), 48-55.
- <sup>32</sup>Pulak, David. "Rhythm, Myth, and Spirit," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 18 (1990), 32-38.
- <sup>33</sup>Smith, Murray Douglas. "Learning Through Drum and Dance," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 25: 3 (Fall 1991), 6-7.