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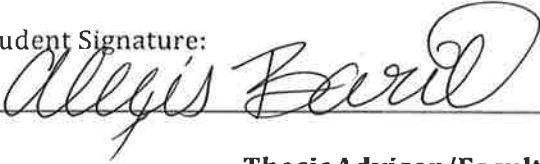
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**“Weapons of Emotion”: A Sampling of Historical Indigenous Instrumental
Music throughout North America**

Senior Honors Project

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

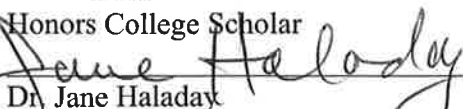
By Alexis Baril
American Indian Studies/History
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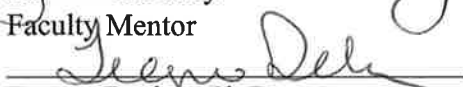
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Abstract

The Indigenous traditions and experiences of instrumental music in North America are as varied and diverse as the people that use them. However, Indigenous instruments share three common traits. First, particularly prior to European contact, instruments, are of organic construction. After contact, Indigenous peoples had access to various processed materials such as tin that they then incorporated into their musical practices. Second, instruments can be classified into four distinct families: drums; flutes and whistles; rattles and shakers; and other percussion. Finally, the vast majority of uses of these instruments were strongly tied to spiritual rituals and events and were used to symbolize, imitate or invoke sounds, experiences, or entities found in the natural and spiritual worlds. This paper will examine musical instruments of eight different groups of Indigenous peoples, spanning six of the ten cultural regions in North America: the Pacific Northwest, the Great Basin, the Southwest, the Great Plains, the Southeast, and the Northeast, specifically, the Great Lakes.

**“Weapons of Emotion”: A Sampling of Historical Indigenous Instrumental Music
throughout North America**

Alexis Baril

The Indigenous traditions and experiences of instrumental music in North America are as varied and diverse as the peoples that use them. However, Indigenous instruments share three common traits. First, particularly prior to European contact, instruments, are of organic construction. After contact, Indigenous peoples had access to various processed materials such as tin that they then incorporated into their musical practices. Second, instruments can be classified into four distinct families: drums; flutes and whistles; rattles and shakers; and other percussion. Finally, the vast majority of uses of these instruments were strongly tied to spiritual rituals and events and were used to symbolize, imitate or invoke sounds, experiences, or entities found in the natural and spiritual worlds.

When discussing Native cultures, it is important to understand that culture is not static. Culture is fluid and changes as its people adapt and respond to changes in their lives, and therefore it is important to understand the key distinction between history and tradition. History is the past. It exists in the memories of the living, in artifacts, in documents. Tradition, on the other hand, is what still exists in some extent in the present. For example, in his book *Voices of the Past*, Douglas Spotted Eagle tells an anecdote about Native men at a ball game in the 1990's. At these games, it is commonplace to have someone using shakers to accompany songs to give success to certain players. At this particular game, the men were using boxes of macaroni and cheese in place of “traditional” shakers.¹

¹ Douglas Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America: Instruments and Music* (Liberty: Eagle's View Publishing, 1997), pg 81.

In this example, the use of the shaker is “traditional,” the construction or materials of the shaker are not as important. However, the use of a gourd shaker, for example, would be a tradition using a historical music practice. It is a common misconception that Native traditions are dying and in need of saving because they are not “as they once were”, meaning Native peoples do not live as they did prior to and at contact. Rather, in the 1990’s, it was easier to obtain several boxes of processed food, i.e. boxes of macaroni and cheese than dried-out gourds. This case is more representative of the impact of colonization and assimilation on Native foodways than it is representative of a loss of musical tradition. This adaptation of a common musical instrument to accommodate the use of available materials is a symbol of cultural continuity, not a sign of cultural loss. This paper is a look into the use of *historical* Indigenous instruments and their uses in the past. Many of these still exist and are in use today, however, since they take so many different forms, it is at times difficult to distinguish them.

This paper will focus on musical instruments of eight different groups of Indigenous peoples, spanning six of the ten cultural regions in North America: the Pacific Northwest, the Great Basin, the Southwest, the Great Plains, the Southeast, and the Northeast, specifically, the Great Lakes. The Nootka and Quileute peoples live in the Pacific Northwest.² The term “Nootka” is actually in reference to a linguistic branch of the Wakashan language family that encompasses the Makah and Clayoquot peoples. The Makah, Clayoquot, and Quileute historically occupy territories in the upper northwest corner of Washington State and Vancouver Island.³ Today, the Makah still occupy their homelands in Neah Bay, Washington. The

² See Appendix 1 for a map of Culture regions.

³ Frances Densmore, *Nootka and Quileute Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), pg. 1

Clayoquot, also known as Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations people are a member of the Nuu-chah-nult Tribal Council and are located on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia.⁴

The Northern Ute people live on the Uintah and Ouray reservation in Utah. Little is known about the Ute peoples prior to 1650; however, according to their oral history, the Ute have historically occupied territory in the Great Basin cultural region spanning areas of northern New Mexico, Colorado, and eastern Utah.⁵ Linguistically, the Northern Ute are a Shoshone people and are related to the Paiute, Chemeheri, Kawaiisu, and Bannock peoples.⁶

The Papago people, known today as the Tohono O'odham, historically occupy territory in the desert regions and river valleys of Arizona and into Sonora, Mexico.⁷ The Tohono O'odham are linguistically and culturally related to the Pima who reside north of the Tohono O'odham. The Tohono O'odham speak a Uto-Aztecan language, a dialect of Piman.⁸ Additionally, the Acoma, Isleta, Cochiti and Zuñi Pueblo peoples occupy territories in the American Southwest. Among these four peoples, three language families are represented. The Acoma and Cochiti Pueblo, respectively, belong to the western and eastern division of the Keresan family. The Isleta then belong to the Tanoan family and the Zuñi to the Zuñian family.⁹

The Mandan and Hidatsa peoples are Great Plains people, who coalesced after raids in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries threatened the survival of the Hidatsa people. Both the

⁴ John Dewhirst, "Tla-o-qui-aht (Clayoquot)", *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Last Edited November 12, 2018, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/clayoquot-tla-o-qui-aht>.

⁵ Sheila Goff, "Northern Ute People (Uintah and Ouray Reservation)", *Colorado Encyclopedia*, last modified January 24, 2018, <http://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/northern-ute-people-uintah-and-ouray-reservation>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Frances Densmore, *Papago Music*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), pg. 1.

⁸ The Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Tohono O'odham", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last updated October 25, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tohono-Oodham>

⁹ Frances Densmore, *Music of Acoma, Isleta, Cochiti, and Zuñi Pueblos* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), pg. 1.

Mandan and Hidatsa belong to the Siouan language family. Today, the Mandan and Hidatsa are members of the Three Affiliated Tribes: the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara who all reside on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in central North Dakota. The Omaha people occupy territory that is on the “border” of the Eastern Woodlands, specifically the Great Lakes, and the Great Plains cultural regions. Today, their land holdings are located in northeastern Nebraska and western Iowa, and they speak a language in the Dhegiha branch of the Siouan language family.¹⁰

The Menominee are an Algonquian speaking people who currently reside on a reservation in Wisconsin. It is believed that they are more linguistically related to the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo than to the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi. Finally, the Choctaw are a Muskogean people whose historic homelands span parts of southeast Mississippi and southwest Alabama. Culturally, they are similar to other southeastern peoples such as the Cherokee, Chickasaws, and Creek. Today, the Choctaw are split into two separately recognized reservations, the Mississippi Band, located in Mississippi, and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Indigenous Instruments

1. Drums

Drums are an instrument found all over the world and are, perhaps the first instrument of civilization. In Native music, use and construction of drums varies widely across the continent. In almost every instance, drums are made by stretching hide over a frame. Despite the variety

¹⁰ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Omaha", Encyclopedia Britannica, Last updated February 27, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Omaha-people>

that exists between Native nations, there are several overarching families of drums: water drums, box drums, standing drums, and hand drums.

Water drums are used all over the continent, but most prominently in the southwest. The water drum is essentially a container, filled partially with water, covered by a hide stretched over the top of it. When preparing to play, drummers wet the hide. As the drum is played, the hide dries out and the pitch rises.¹¹ The Menominee, for example, use a cask-like water drum in religious ceremonies or in ceremonies when required by a person's dream. Because of its use in sacred ritual, it is not uncommon for Menominee people to put small amounts of tobacco in the water.¹² In many Eastern Woodland cultures, tobacco serves as the unifying thread of communication between the spirit and human worlds. The spirits, in many cases known as manidog, are believed to be very fond of tobacco and they can only get it humans through the smoke from a pipe or through an offering of some sort. Putting tobacco in the water, therefore calls forth spirits, adding spiritual power to the players and ceremony or ritual.

In the Northeast, water drums typically take the form of hollowed out tree trunks or logs with a hide head whereas in the Southwest, they are typically pots covered with hide.¹³ Box drums are typical in the Pacific Northwest where using raw hide for large drum heads is impractical. Due to the climate the drum would have to constantly be near a fire, or it would quickly lose its tone.¹⁴ Box drums are long wooden boxes; five sides are made from hardwoods like oak, walnut, or hickory and the open side is plugged with a softer wood such as cedar or

¹¹ Douglas Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America*, pg 67.

¹² Densmore, *Menominee Music*, page 10.

¹³ Douglas Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America*, pgs 66 - 67

¹⁴ Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America*, pg. 64.

spruce or a harder material such as birch or mahogany. The Makah people, for example use cedar. Instead of closing all sides, they left both the bottom and one end open¹⁵, likely to allow the sound to resonate more. Box drums can vary widely in size, and the size is the determining factor for how the drum is played. For moderate sized drums, the “head” of the drum can be struck with fists or a mallet, Smaller drums need no more than fingers whereas larger drums – some of the largest being near ten feet long – may be played with the person’s feet.¹⁶

Hand drums are likely the most popular kind of drum found in North America and are much flatter in comparison to other drums. Similar to a tambourine in shape, hand drums are made of hide stretched over a thin frame that has been bent into a circle.¹⁷ These drums are made in a variety of sizes but are played by only one person. Examples of the Hand Drum crop up in Native communities all over the continent. Pueblo people use hand drums of “ordinary size”¹⁸, approximately a foot in diameter. The Omaha, Northern Ute, Mandan and Hidatsa, and Choctaw, also all use typical variations of the one-sided hand drum.¹⁹ The Menominee also use a hand drum variation; however, the Menominee drum is double-sided and is eighteen to twenty inches in diameter. This particular drum is used in the drum ceremony, moccasin games, and Individual songs.²⁰

Finally, standing drums is the vaguest family of drum and essentially refers to any drum that is not a water drum, hand drum, or box drum. Drums in this category fall into a couple of

¹⁵ Densmore, *Nootka and Quileute Music*, pg 27.

¹⁶ Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America*, pg. 34.

¹⁷ John Bierhorst, *A Cry from the Earth: Music of the North American Indians* (Santa Fe; Ancient City Press, 1992), pg 24.

¹⁸ Densmore, *Music of Acoma, Isleta, Cochiti, and Zuñi Pueblos*, pg 3.

¹⁹ All found in the Frances Densmore books.

²⁰ Densmore, *Menominee Music*, pg. 10.

sub-families: Basket Drums, Standing Drums, and Wide Drums. Examples of the standing drum come from the Southwest and Great Plains. In the Southwest the Pueblo peoples use a form of standing drum, a cylinder with two heads made of hide lashed together with leather thongs and struck with a mallet with a round, padded end.²¹ A larger version of this drum was used for winter dances. Additionally, the Omaha use a standing drum that consists of a hollowed-out tree trunk and a head of hide stretched over top and secured with a leather thong.²² The Tohono O'odham people, use a basket drum, also called a *tamoa*, which is simply, a basket of medium size that's turned over and played by up to three or four men and is sometimes accompanied by a rattle.²³

Finally, the wide drum, also known as the large drum, is a large drum suspended from four stakes driven into the ground. The Menominee used this in both religious and social gatherings, as did the Omaha.

II. Flutes and Whistles

Flutes

The flute is an instrument that is found in some form on every continent. Nearly all nations in Native North America historically have a flute of some shape or form. The material, use, and overall sound of the flute ultimately depend on physical and cultural geography as well as the resources that are available to the maker. The vast majority of Native American flutes are a kind of wind instrument called a flageolet. Also known as a whistle flute, flûte à bec, or block

²¹ Densmore, *Music of Acoma, Isleta, Cochiti, and Zuñi Pueblos*, pg 3.

²² Alice C. Fletcher, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), pg. 54.

²³ Densmore, *Papago Music*, pg. 3.

flute, the flageolet is a wind instrument closely related to the recorder of early European music.²⁴ Similar to the recorder, the flageolet, is a fipple flute, meaning it is a flute “sounded by a stream of breath directed through a duct to strike the sharp edge of a hole cut in the side of the pipe.”²⁵

Native flutes take many forms. Eastern Woodland peoples tend to use birch bark or willow wood as their medium. Kwakwaka'wakw and Tlingit peoples make dual toned reed whistles whereas Zuni people make flutes out of clay. The Seminole, Yuma, and Pueblo peoples all use cane such as bamboo, the main differences being in construction and alignment of the saddle. Similar to a traditional Andean practice, the Mandan tie eagle quills together in double rows and play them similar to pan pipes. This practice is rare north of Mexico. Great Plains peoples are famous for their cedar flutes; however, it is not uncommon to find flutes made from modified gun barrels. Douglas Spotted Eagle notes the irony of the use of this material in *Voices of Native America*, noting that it is “ironic that a weapon of destruction might be converted into a weapon of emotion”.²⁶ More than just a statement of poetic irony, this also provides evidence to the environmental impact of trade and the impact on Native trade routes. After permanent contact with Euro-American settlers, Great Plains people have had more access to guns than they had access to cedar trees or trade routes on which they historically obtained cedar wood.

Whistles

Whistles are similar to the flute in that they use wind or breath to make noise, however, they are generally much smaller and made without tone holes. Often times, whistles were made

²⁴ Bierhorst, *A Cry from the Earth*, page 28.

²⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Flageolet", Encyclopedia Britannica, Last updated April 25, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/flageolet-musical-instrument>

²⁶ Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America*, pg. 29.

out of the wing bones of large birds, such as geese. The best example of whistles and their uses come from the Mandan and Hidatsa who divided men into different classes based on age and ability and each class had a different whistle. First, the “foolish dogs” consisted of boys ten to fifteen years old who carried small whistles made from the wing bone of a wild goose. Next, “crows and ravens” consisted of young men twenty to twenty-five years of age who carried a double war pip consisting of two goose wing bones joined together.²⁷

Third, the soldiers –distinguished by painting the top of their face red and the bottom black – carried a large whistle made from the wing bone of a crane. The fourth class is that of the “dogs” who carried large whistles made from the wing bone of a swan. Finally, the members class of the “buffaloes” alone could carry the large wooden war pipes. In addition to these war whistles, the Mandan and Hidatsa used courting whistles that were carved on the open end into the head of a bird.²⁸ Choctaws, unlike the Mandan and Hidatsa had one kind of cane whistle that was blown by medicine men on the night before and during ball games to bring success to certain players.²⁹ As ball games were a time for men to display their spiritual power, it can be concluded that to the Choctaw, the whistles had specific spiritual significance.

III. Rattles and Shakers

Rattles and shakers, just like all the other instruments take many forms. They can be made from gourds, turtle shells, inflated and dried animal bladder, or rawhide. Over time, tin boxes and other materials were substituted for these original materials. These instruments are

²⁷ Densmore, *Mandan and Hidatsa Music*, pg. 9.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Densmore, *Choctaw Music*, pg. 5.

generally used to help drummers and dancers keep time during a dance. Some people, the Omaha for example, find rattles to be emblematic of supernatural forces.³⁰ Often times, there is no distinction made between rattles and shakers; however, for the sake of clarity, the term “rattles” refers to a closed container containing rocks, pebbles, teeth, and other small bits that clash together and against the container when shaken. Shakers, on the other hand are, noise makers that have objects that clash together on the exterior of the instrument.

The gourd rattle is one of the most common kinds of rattle and is used in some form by the Omaha, Pueblo, Menominee, and Tohono O’odham peoples. To make these rattles, large gourds are chosen, hollowed out, and dried. The gourd is then filled with “rattles” - I.e. pebbles, teeth, rocks, etc. - and attached to a handle. Turtle shell rattles are also used all over North America, though they are most common in the southeast. Turtle shells make convenient materials for rattles as they are naturally hollow and only need to be filled and sealed. Additionally, turtles are plentiful in the arid Southwest and Swampy Southeast climates. The Nootka and Quileute peoples have the most unique rattles: their rattles consist of rain sticks and elk horn rattles. Rain sticks are long containers containing pebbles that are tipped back and forth and used in the Thunder Bird Dance. Elk horn rattles are used only by whale hunters.³¹ Another example is the Menominee Doctor’s Rattle, a thin hoop covered on both sides by the hide of a woodchuck. It contained a few pebbles and was used in rituals to treat the sick.³²

³⁰ Fletcher, *Omaha Music*, pg. 55.

³¹ Densmore, *Nootka and Quileute Music*, pg. 27.

³² Densmore, *Menominee Music*, pg. 4.

Shakers, on the other hand, include sticks with deer hooves or dew-claws tied to the end that then clash together when the stick is shaken.³³ This kind of shaker is common among the Menominee and Mandan and Hidatsa. Other examples include Nootka and Quileute shakers that are of a similar construction but use pecten shells instead of deer hooves or dew claws.³⁴ For some Native groups, shakers are spiritually powerful enough that they are included in war bundles, since a man's spiritual power is displayed in his success in war and combat. Because acts of war involve such display of spiritual power, many Native people make war bundles that include items believed to bring spiritual power to the owner. As such, if a shaker is included in a war bundle, it obviously is believed to hold high spiritual significance.

IV. Miscellaneous Percussion

Just as European cultures do not have two or three finite categories of instruments, neither do Native peoples. The following instruments are instruments that would not fit into any other category but need to be recognized just the same. In many cultures, when without an instrument, or sometimes, in addition to an instrument, Native peoples have used whatever they could find. In many instances, Native peoples were observed to beat on stiff rolls of rawhide, hit two sticks together, or use their bodies to stomp, clap, or hit their legs to create music.

Bull-roarers

Bull-roarers are another instrument that are found all over North America but are most prevalent in the Southwest. These instruments are used for a variety of purposes; they are used to

³³ Mentioned in almost all Densmore books.

³⁴ Densmore, *Nootka and Quileute Music*, pg. 5.

attract curious antelope, used in prayer to attract rain as they are often thought to symbolize thunder, and sometimes they are used as a toy for children.³⁵ Bull-roarers consist of a long slender stick, shaped like a feather or mini surfboard, that is attached to a leather thong. When a person holds the leather thong and spins the stick in a circle, the stick creates a sort of moaning drone.³⁶ Today, these sorts of noise makers are not uncommon at sporting events.

Scraping Sticks

Scraping sticks are instruments that connect North American Indigenous traditions to those of China and Eastern Asia. This instrument goes by a variety of names, such as Rasps, Notched Stick Rattles, Guiro, and Morache. Though they are used differently by different people, the Ute and Pueblo peoples use them in a similar practice in which they use a resonator. In this practice, the instrument has three components. The first two are the stick in which notches are cut down the length and a short stick or bone that is rubbed across the notches. Finally, a resonator, a shallow hemispheric form such as a basket, half a gourd, or piece of zinc or tin, is placed over a dug-out hole in the ground. One end of the stick is then placed on the resonator and the instrument is played in this position. It is said that with the resonator, the sound is comparable to that of a snare drum with the snares turned all the way on.³⁷

Other forms of this instrument are made from antler or hardwood. These forms generally only include two parts. A wave or zig-zag pattern is carved into the top of the rasp wood and a scraper is then dragged down the ridges. The noise scraping sticks make seem to be emblematic

³⁵ Spotted Eagle, *Voices of America*, pg. 95.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Densmore, *Northern Ute Music*, pg. 27.

of water in several cultures. For the Papago, scraping sticks are used in medicine songs or songs that “came from the ocean”³⁸ For the Northern Ute people, scraping sticks were commonly referred to as “rain sticks” and were used in dealings with the weather.³⁹

Snap Sticks and Striking Sticks

Snap sticks consist of a thick stick, twelve to fourteen inches in length, that has been split in half and bound at one end. The contraption is held by the bound end and then hit against a palm or thigh and makes a distinct “clacking” sound. These are most often used in western and coastal areas.⁴⁰ Striking sticks, on the other hand are similar in construction. A thick stick, approximately a foot in length, is split in half lengthwise but they are not bound at one end. Each stick is held in a different hand and are struck together on the flattened surface. This instrument is said to be the only instrument used by the Mississippi Choctaw when accompanying songs. This instrument is also noted among the Menominee in connection with spiritual power.⁴¹

V. Conclusions and Reflections

Writing this paper was more of a challenge than I originally realized it was going to be. One of the main issues I had, was that the source base for these topics is both limited and yet vastly abundant, creating an interesting and frustrating paradox. As both an American Indian Studies student and a History student, I went searching for historical sources on Indigenous music traditions. When searching for sources, plenty of information comes up under the umbrella

³⁸ Densmore, *Papago Music*, pg. 8.

³⁹ Densmore, *Northern Ute Music*, pg. 27

⁴⁰ Spotted Eagle, *Voices of Native America*, pg. 97.

⁴¹ Densmore, *Menominee Music*, pg. 4.

of Native Music, however, most of these sources are either archeological and offer little in the way of an examination of musical traditions or they examine music on reservations today, which is fascinating but not as relevant to this topic. When I narrowed down the possible sources to historical music traditions, I faced yet another problem. I had too much material to use in one paper, but not enough from one particular Native group or even from one cultural area. This became even more apparent when I narrowed my search even further to instrumental music. Additionally, the sources I did find were not Indigenous in origin.

Most of the information for this paper came from the work of Frances Densmore, a non-Indigenous anthropologist working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She traveled all over the United States observing and recording Native peoples and their music traditions. Her books offered a wealth of information; however, they are problematic in many ways. Many of these problems result from the attitudes of the era in which she was operating. Frances Densmore was a “salvage ethnographer”, which means that she recorded Native traditions because she believed them to be dying out and was trying to preserve them before they disappeared. On several occasions throughout her books, she makes it clear that she does not believe Native peoples to be members of sophisticated civilizations, but rather believed them to be almost prehistoric primitive peoples. This arises particularly when she analyzes the melodies in Native songs. She records them and tries to notate them according to the European system of pitch and music and on several occasions explains that this is difficult due to the fact that Indians “have no sophisticated pitch system”.

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Appendix 1

