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Cultural Awareness Through Music Study: Fostering Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education Vocal Music Curriculum

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Abstract

The educational research study explored ways to bring history into musical art fostering a deeper attentiveness to diversity, equity, and inclusivity in higher education music studies in North America. It explored the historic narrative of the Indigenous Beothuk people of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada through music. The study focused on the opera *Shanawdithit* by Canadian composer Dean Burry, and Indigenous Canadian librettist, Yvette Nolan as an example of how music curriculum can be reconsidered and reimagined. The anthropological and archeological history of the Indigenous Beothuk people - as was taught in Canadian history was filtered through a Western European lens. The musical work reconceptualized the story of *Shanawdithit* - considered the last of the Beothuk people in Newfoundland and was told from an Indigenous perspective. As well, other notable works by Canadian Indigenous will be presented in this study. As both Canada and the United States explore Indigenous reconciliation, bringing works of underrepresented composers to higher education music study and performance offers a means to foster DEI and more cultural awareness in North American arts curriculum.

Introduction

In this researcher's role as teacher, mentor, performer, musician, and faculty member working with undergraduate and graduate music students in a private studio setting, as well as at an academic institution, provides numerous opportunities to engage in the teaching, performing, and dissemination of new vocal works. Further, it provides the opportunity to bring a well-rounded depth and breadth of vocal literature to students who may not otherwise study the works of composers beyond the very traditional Western canon of vocal music (Sharanya, 2022). This canon includes such composers as, W. A. Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Gioachino Rossini, Richard Wagner, Benjamin Britten, Gabriel Fauré, Joseph Haydn, Henry Purcell, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Giacomo Puccini. In this tradition of Western music or the Western canon, one does not encounter the works of BIPOC, CisFemale, Indigenous, nor Two-Spirit composers (Wilkinson, 1996).

It is of note, that many of the works studied for years in higher education vocal programs was in general based on literature from the Western tradition, in particular, at the Conservatory level of study (Bollobás, 1997). That was the experience of this researcher studying at American Conservatories of Music in the last fifteen years (Eisner,

1976). A Conservatory of Music is considered an elite institution where a musician may pursue a degree in music. Admission to a Conservatory is limited and competitive. The culture and environment during music degree study is competitive. The Conservatory provides a model of study for students in preparation for a career in performance. The degree expectations, and level of performance are quite rigorous. In contrast, a degree in music based on a model of study in a Liberal Arts program or School of Music within a University is considered more generalised. There tends to be not as much focus placed on performance and a career in performing (Sternberg et al., 2022).

Contextual Background and the Need for Study

This study explored ways in which the music of underrepresented composers may become more mainstream in music curricula in higher education music program, versus primarily music of the Western tradition - what is often the case for students in many programs (Griffiths, 2020). For this study, the lens was narrowed specifically to focus on the works of Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Vocal Repertoire. Institutions in North America are actively embarking on strategic planning processes to advance goals surrounding DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). This study provides a strategy for consideration presenting an examining of strategies that may serve to both enhance and reconceptualise how history may inform the arts in music composition.

The National Association of the Teachers of Singing (NATS) is a professional association for teachers of singing, voice students, and collaborative pianists in the higher education, community school, independent (private) voice studio, as well as in elementary and secondary school settings (NATS, 2023). The association was founded in 1944 with a mission, “to advance excellence in singing through teaching, performance, scholarship, and research” (NATS, 2023). The organization’s values and mission support teachers, voice students and collaborative pianists in North America along with over thirty-five countries worldwide.

NATS is an organization from which the framework for many curricular guidelines for vocal study are created. Like many academic institutions in North America, NATS has also developed a strategic plan, NATS Strategic Plan 2020-2025: Framing Our Future (NATS, 2023). As the association for voice teachers, students, and collaborative pianists reexamined its mission and goals, they (NATS, 2022) developed a new iteration of the organization’s statement of diversity and inclusion:

NATS strives to be a welcoming and supportive community of members and students who celebrate the unique identities, varied backgrounds, and experiences of all individuals. We are dedicated to ensuring that all voices are valued and heard in an inclusive environment with equitable treatment for all. (p. 2)

The organization further developed its mission to foster diversity and inclusion by developing a guide for voice teachers in support of, and for the education of its membership in four areas: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Anti-Racism (I.D.E.A.). NATS (2022) designed a program of training modules and a toolkit “to deliver the foundational building blocks of I.D.E.A. through the lens of the arts.” The guide is a valuable tool and reference for teachers. It may assist them in engaging in self-reflection regarding the culture fostered within their studios and classrooms. Further, it provides a means to assist teachers in finding ways to perhaps either maintain or strive

to create an environment of belonging and support for those coming from varied cultures and backgrounds. This refers not only students, but as well, to teachers and to colleagues. The I.D.E.A. Best Practices Guide for voice teachers includes guidelines; dos and don'ts; definitions, and strategies, (NATS, 2022).

Further, the NATS guide clarifies the notion of diversity. Not merely in a perception of diversity anchored in how one looks but through different lenses. The guide is beneficial for those in the arts community in identifying the varied ways in which one can be perceived as different, and several views of the notion of diversity. The ways in which teachers and students in the arts are different, or diverse “can include our education, our experiences, where we grew up, how we grew up, our temperaments, what populations we teach, our values, attitudes, and beliefs” (NATS, 2022, p. 6). The guide provided by NATS (2022, p.3) provides an excellent visual diagram which may be utilized by teachers in the arts to explore the idea of belonging and suggests ways in which this notion works and may be intertwined with inclusion, diversity, and equity (see Figure 1).

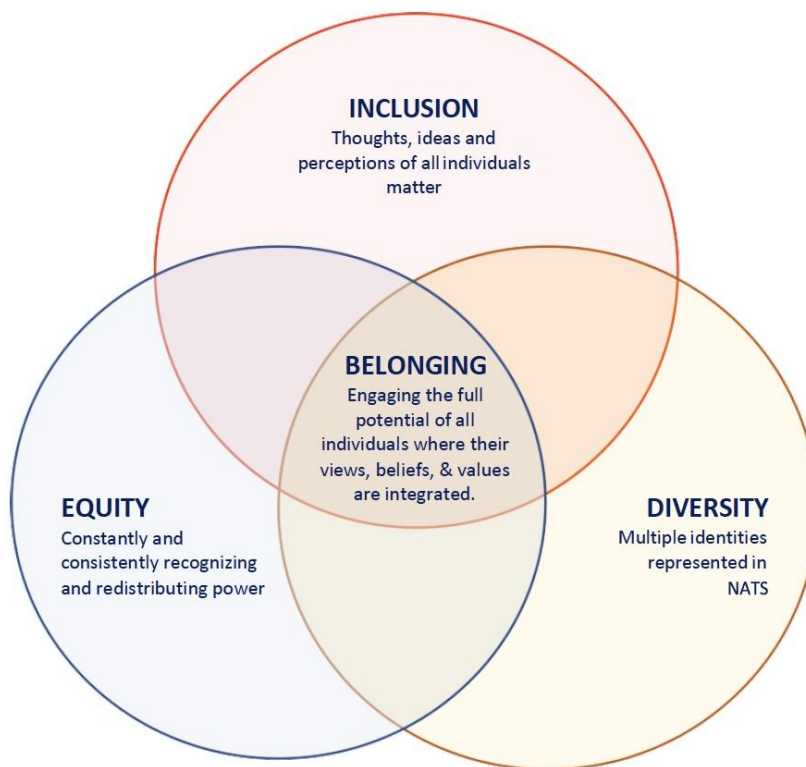


Figure 1. Fostering Belonging in Teaching

This research study expanded the notion of DEI to goals to include I.D.E.A. As with I.D.E.A. work, the process begins with internal examination. And, as music educators the key to the growth in this area is examining how to expand the *music canon*, a program of study for singers. This expansion can be achieved by exposing students of singing in higher education to the music of Contemporary Canadian BIPOC, Cis Female, and Two-Spirit composers and other underrepresented composers. This expansion will facilitate ways to continue the work of re-examining perception of excellence in classical music. This research focused on the music of Contemporary Canadian Indigenous composers to present just one view of how this body of underrepresented composers and

their music compositions may foster more attentiveness to cultural awareness, and better communication across cultures in higher education music study.

The study narrows the focus further to explore the historic background of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, and how the reconceptualized narrative of the experience of the Beothuk people informed the music composition, *Shanawdithit* by Canadian composer Dean Burry and Canadian Indigenous writer and librettist, Yvette Nolan. The next section examines the rationale for this qualitative study grounded in Exploratory or Formulative Research and will outline the method for collecting layers of data.

Method

This section of the study will introduce the methodology and the rationale for grounding the research in an Exploratory framework, also known as Formulative research (Stebbins, 2001). The study of educational philosophy, social sciences and education are well-suited to this exploratory grounding as for many research studies there may not be pre-determined objectives. This framework gives the researcher flexibility to review the literature and other sources of data. The following section outlines more of the characteristics one may note in an exploratory framework and discusses further the researcher's rationale for grounding the study in this methodology.

Case Study

Exploratory, or formulative research methodologies presents the researcher, or researchers with the opportunity to explore the underlying problem that has led to the need to for study. It presents requires the gathering of information from different sources leading to underlying themes that may be extracted. From this exploration, the researcher can clarify an area of focus. A pathway to fine-tune the scope of the study and the problem that had prompted the need for study. This methodology may assist the researcher in gaining insight into the experience of the subject, person or persons reviewed and/or surveyed. By engaging in an extensive literature review the researcher will be able to determine perhaps what information is missing and may proceed with formulating solutions for consideration.

Such was the case for this study. The problem of a lack of awareness and the existence of the wealth of vocal repertoire by BIPOC, Cis Female, Indigenous, and Two-Spirit composers was evident to this researcher. An awareness of the gap in such an important category, and history of vocal literature was uncovered through many years of teaching, course instruction in song literature, performing and research in the fields of vocal pedagogy, and vocal literature. Further, continued educational research grounded in evaluating pre-service music teachers assessing the depth and breadth of their knowledge, or lack thereof a broad range of diverse vocal literature (Eisner, 1976, 1985, 2002). Van Manen (1990) declares, "I am not *just* a researcher who observes life, I am also a parent and a teacher who stands pedagogically in life" (p. 90). This statement was quite appropriate for my research study. As a vocal pedagogue, this researcher is very motivated to find instructional methods that will assist in facilitating the most beneficial outcomes for all students.

This area of research is of particular importance given pre-service teacher will become a vital, and influential part of building the music curriculum in the K-12 schools in their respective school districts. A music student not exposed to music and a framework of instruction that is grounded in the notions of I.D.E.A during their studies in higher education may not be positioned to be able to foster a culture of belonging, inclusion, equity, and anti-racism in their classrooms. There is value in an exploration of the roots of music and the Western tradition, however it is critical to blend this with in-depth knowledge of the roots of non-Western music (Bennett, 2008; Griffiths, 2020; NATS 2022; Segal & Wilson, 2004; Sharanya, 2022; Wilkinson, 1996).

The next section will detail the research method used for the exploratory research study. It will illustrate the history of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland and Labrador presenting sources from the Western and more recently, the Indigenous perspective.

Research Method

The notion of a lack of diverse repertoire in higher education is a broad field of research, thus in order to present a clear view of the problem, the method narrowed the focus and scope to the anthropological and archeological history of the Indigenous Beothuk people of Newfoundland and Labrador, and how it informed the writing and conception of the opera *Shanawdithit*. The musical work reconceptualized the story of Shanawdithit – she was considered the last of the Beothuk people in Newfoundland. The libretto (the story) for the opera was informed by research and artefacts that were uncovered that challenged the narrative of the Beothuk people as was originally presented in Canadian history books written by Western Europeans (Briffett, 1949; Devereux, 1970; Harris, 1968; Holly, 2000; Howley, 1974, Marshall, 1996). The opera libretto was written to be told from an Indigenous perspective (Nolan, 2018).

Review of the Literature: The Beothuk People of Newfoundland

This section of the study presents the findings from an extensive review of the literature surrounding the varied perspectives of the history of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Beothuk people that were the Indigenous settlers of the Canadian province. The Beothuk culture formed around 1500 AD.

Newfoundland did not join Canada until 1949, it was a part of England until that year thus the historians writing the story of history of Newfoundland in Canadian history books was from a British perspective. Newfoundland's history wrought with explorers and hunters depleting its vast natural resources (fish, timber, iron ore and other natural minerals). The Vikings, England, France, and Spain sent explorers to Newfoundland to see what opportunities for harvesting these resources could be found (Briffett, 1949; Devereux, 1970; Harris, 1968; Holly, 2000; Howley, 1974; Marshall, 1996; Prowse, 1895, 1972), (see Figure 2). The figure following figure 2 indicates the Beothuk tribal territory (Rochon, 2008), which show the same areas that were explored and stripped of natural resources (see Figure 3).

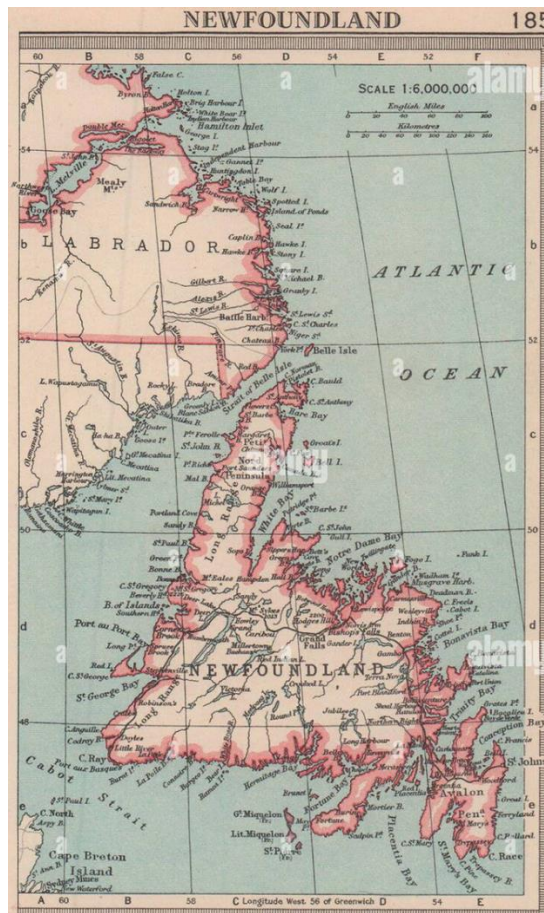


Figure 2. Map of Newfoundland (Harvey, 1885)



Figure 3. Map of Beothuk Tribal Territory (Rochon, 2008)

The Beothuk people of Newfoundland were completely wiped out. The historic perspectives are quite different depending on if told from the British and Indigenous perspectives (Briffett, 1949; Devereux, 1970; Harris, 1968; Holly, 2000; Howley, 1974; Marshall, 1988, 1996; Prowse, 1895, 1972). The Colonial-written history of Newfoundland introduced the idea of the “Mercenary Myth” (Marshall, 1996). This myth was a claim made in Canadian history books that the Mi’kmaq People were not Indigenous to Newfoundland – that they were brought to the island by the French to kill off the Beothuk people (Marshall, 1996). This story is what was taught to schoolchildren in the province for decades (including this researcher as a child). Indicates Briffett (1949, p. 75), “The French brought in their allies, the Micmacs, from Nova Scotia. In the Micmacs, the Beothuk found a deadly enemy. The Micmacs visited Beothuk camps and lost no chances to murder Beothuk hunters.” From another Canadian history text (Harris, 1968, p. 56), “When [Sir Hugh] Palliser tried to befriend the [Beothuk], many of them had already been killed by the settlers and the Micmac Indians.”

Another perspective from a more recent history book with an account based on artefacts and drawing found in Newfoundland. In March 1819, John Peyton, Jr. (Wetzel, 1995) was accused of killing a Beothuk man, *Nonosabasut*, and kidnapping his wife *Demasduit* (assimilated name Mary March). These were the aunt and uncle of the last surviving Beothuk person in Newfoundland, Shanawdithit (1995, Wetzel). As was the case for many Beothuk people, they were assimilated, which included changing one’s name to sound more Colonial or white. As part of Shanawdithit’s assimilation, her name was changed to Nancy as she became a nanny and servant in Peyton’s home (Wetzel, 1995), (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Demasduit* (Mary March), 1819 Library and Archives Canada. By Lady Henrietta Hamilton.

The timeline of Shanawdithit indicates the more accurate narrative of what happened to her people and to her family, confirming that the Mi’kmaq People did not cause the extinction of the Beothuk people, rather it was the British explorers (Wetzel, 195), (see Figure 5).

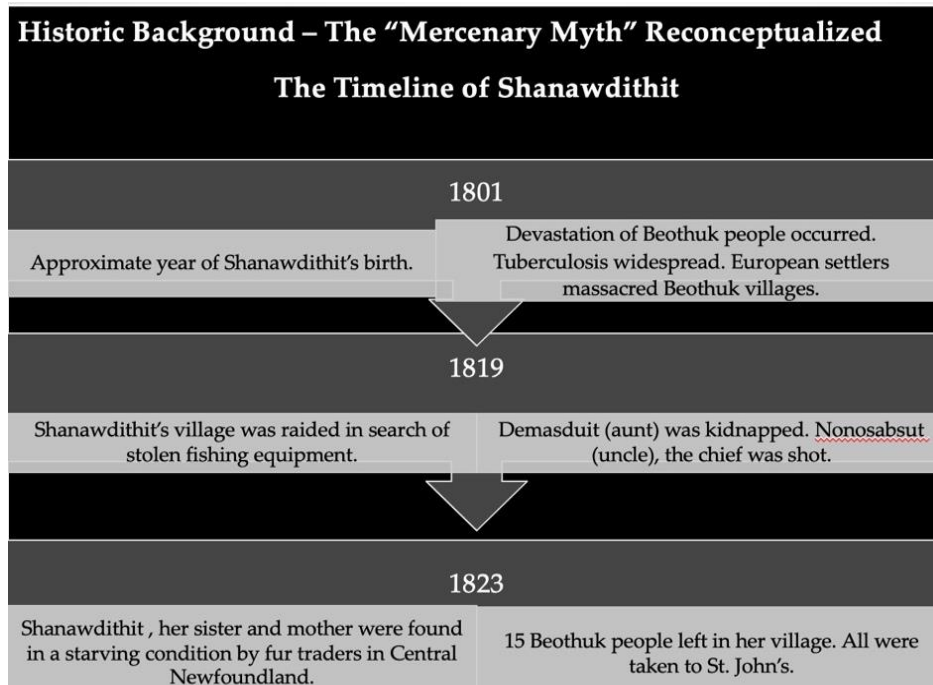


Figure 5. The Timeline of Shanawdithit (Wetzel, 1995)

The narrative of Shanawdithit from the Indigenous perspective continues (Wetzel, 1995). In the next series of dates from the timeline of Shanawdithit and the Beothuk people, the accurate narrative of their experience is illustrated from the Indigenous perspective (see Figure 6).

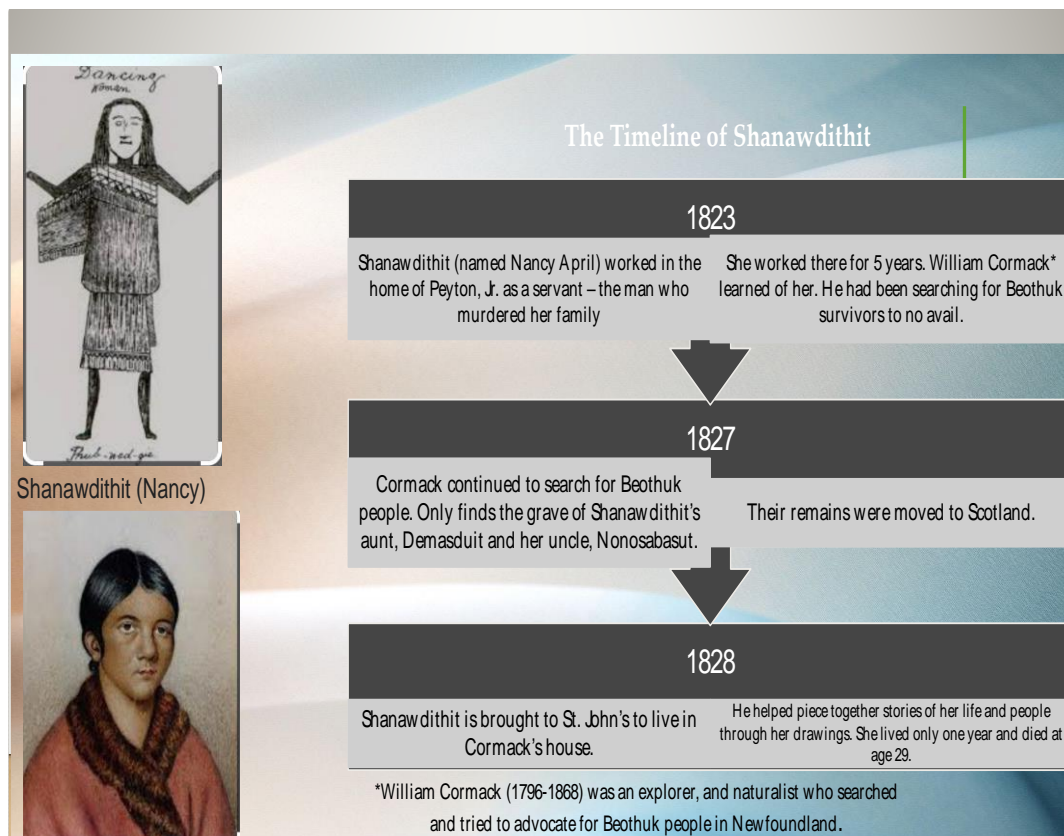


Figure 6. Timeline of Shanawdithit and Her People

Shanawdithit's Drawings

Shanawdithit was brought to St. John's, the capital city of Newfoundland to live in the home of Mr. William Cormack where she was safe. Cormack was an explorer who attempted to assist and advocate for the Beothuk people of Newfoundland. The drawings which were assisted by William Cormack helped Shanawdithit recount the Beothuk way of life. Shanawdithit's drawings depicted the destruction of her family were of great significance to this study. It helped to frame an accurate narrative of the plight of the Beothuk People. The drawings indicated their destruction was not from not by the Mi'kmaq People, but rather by the British (Marshall, 1996, Wetzel, 1995), (see Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9).

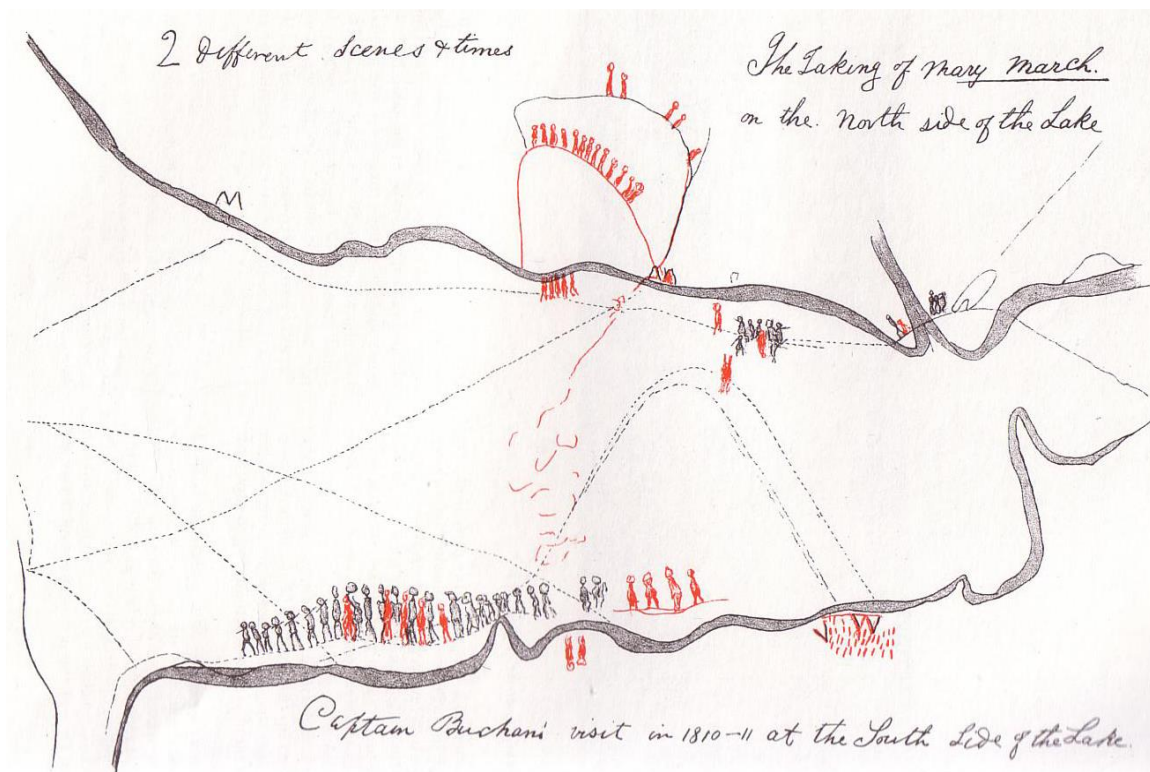


Figure 7. Shanawdithit (Nancy April), The Taking of Mary March (2023).

Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

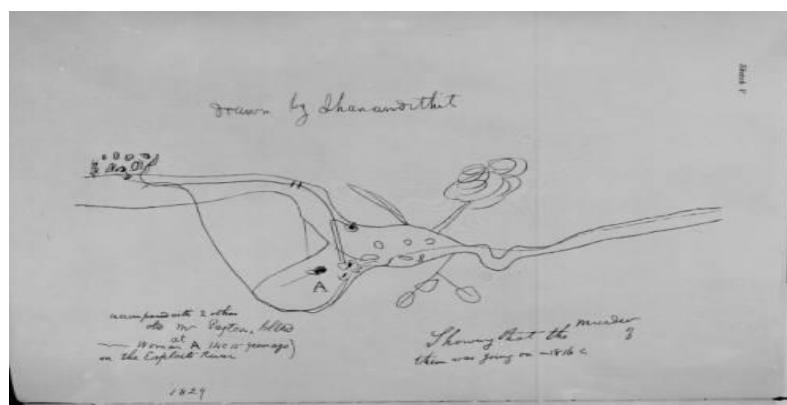


Figure 8. Murder of Indian Woman at Exploits. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (2023)

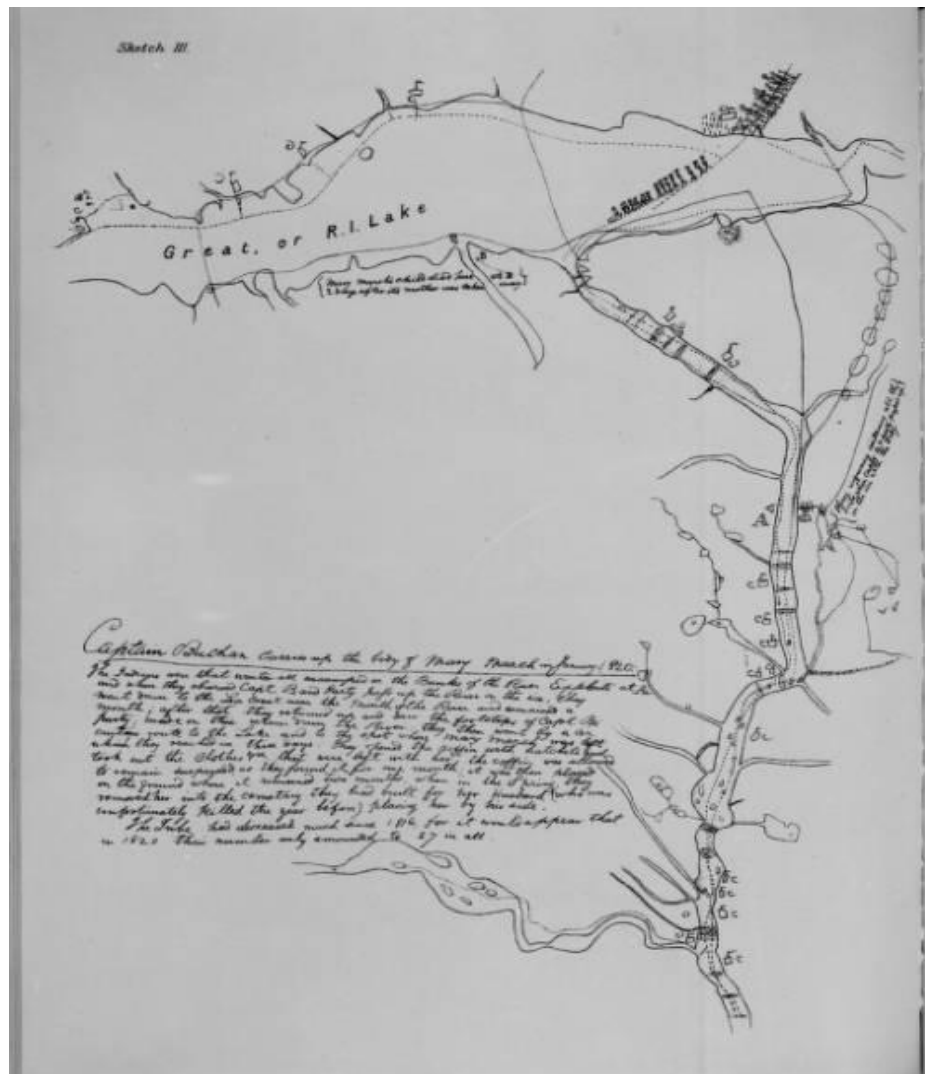


Figure 9. Relocation and Murder of the Beothuk People. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (2023)

The narrative and Shanawdithit's drawings were the source of the libretto for the opera *Shanawdithit*. From Tapestry opera (2018):

In 1828, the last known member of the Beothuk people, Shanawdithit, was taken to St. John's by William Cormack. In her final months, she created a series of ten drawings that speak of the loneliness of survival, the beauty of the land, and the life she used to know. (2018)

History Becomes Art Form

The narrative of Shanawdithit became an inspiration for an opera (Nolan, 2018). Opera composed by Canadian composer Dean Burry with libretto by Indigenous Canadian composer Yvette Nolan (2018) surrounds the story of Shanawdithit, the last of the Beothuk people. The opera brought to light the story of the last years of Shanawdithit's life – recounting the history of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland (2018, Nolan; Wetzel, 1995). This story was not the same story previously told by historians of European and non-Indigenous descent, but rather from the perspective of the Indigenous people of Newfoundland (Briffett, 1949; Devereux, 1970; Harris,

1968; Holly, 2000; Howley, 1974; Marshall, 1988, 1996; Prowse, 1895, 1972). The opera assisted in disseminating both the story of the experience of the Indigenous people from their perspective and a work represented an underrepresented community and music. This story was not from the perspective of those that were responsible for the genocide of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland.

Many of creative team for the opera were from the Mi'kmaq People. They were the closest to the Beothuks, and those with the richest memory of the Beothuk people and their oral tradition - in contrast to the Mercenary Myth (Marshall, 1996). As well, many of the cast for principal roles were of Indigenous heritage (Tapestry Opera Company, 2023), (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. From the Opera Shanawdithit (Katz, 2019)

The main Character - Shanawdithit is sung by First Nation Canadian mezzo-soprano Marion Newman (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. Marion Newman as Shanawdithit (Katz, 2019)

Newman (2018) speaks to her experience and the importance of telling the accurate story of Shanawdithit and her people through music. The historic narrative, repurposed as an art form presents the historic narrative of the Beothuk people from the perspective of those who lived it as such, and not from the perspective of the colonization of the native peoples of Newfoundland. Newman reflects on singing this important role, “In Her Words – What does it mean to tell Shanawdithit's story?” (See link <https://youtu.be/17PoaQojLn4> (2018, Newman, Tapestry Opera Company).

Conclusion

The opera reconceptualized the historic narrative of Shanawdithit and the Beothuk people from the more accurate Indigenous perspective. The opera presents just one example of how history, and in this case the retelling of it based on artefacts may bring a deeper cultural awareness to those that shaped our culture through music. It provides music curriculum designers and teachers with an opportunity to bring more awareness to I.D.E.A. (NATS, 2022) in higher education music study.

This may be accomplished by learning the stories of the underrepresented composers they share with their music students. The opera examined in this study - Shanawdithit was just one example of how history informed art and brought a deeper awareness of I.D.E.A. (NATS, 2022) to students and audiences. There are numerous works by of BIPOC, CisFemale, Indigenous, and Two-Spirit composers that may be examined, shared with students, and performed for audiences in North America.

The music of underrepresented composers may not only add to the vocal literature canon helping it evolve beyond solely the Western canon. In addition, it may provide a platform to bring a deeper cultural awareness to the audiences that hear the music, as well as students and teachers that bring these works to their school. Deantha Edmunds, Canada's first Inuk opera singer from Newfoundland and Labrador states:

In my work as a composer and performer, I don't just want to create and sing “nice”-sounding songs. I hope my words and melodies will go straight to the listeners' hearts and make audiences consider how we are walking through this world and who and what we carry with us. I want my work to encourage people to have hope, to feel empowered, to spark change and inspire action. (Edmunds, 2023)

Recommendations

This research study focused on one music composition as an illustration of how history may inform art and how examining the narratives and works of underrepresented people can inform cultural awareness and foster I.D.E.A. in higher education music study. The research must continue given the wealth of repertoire that exists by of BIPOC, CisFemale, Indigenous, and Two-Spirit composers. Other works by Canadian Indigenous composers may be examined in further studies. Other Canadian Composers that may be considered for further study are: Deantha Edmunds, Ian Cusson, Dean Burry, Dace Asperans, Jocelyn Morlock, Melody McKiver, Beverly McKiver, Jeremy Dutcher, Martha Hill Duncan and Vandana Vishwas.

The research study may present a guide or framework for researchers, musicians, as well as educators that may wish to explore music, narratives, and origins of the Indigenous People and those that came before them in their respective communities in North America and beyond. This may generalize to include the history and originals of other forms of music: jazz, musical theatre, and rock and roll to perhaps inspire a search and examination of the roots of these music and art forms, and their historic accuracy. This can provide an opportunity to expand I.D.E.A (NATS, 2022) in music curricula in higher education. The exploration of the anthropological and archeological history may unearth a new narrative which in turn presents an opportunity for further growth in cultural awareness.


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