

Reconciliation Music

Jim Palmer

Call to Action #79. *We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal organizations, and the arts community, to develop a reconciliation framework for Canadian heritage and commemoration.*

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action

I love music. As a music teacher, I have fought for music education in our schools, working hard to ensure that provincial and local decision-makers recognize the power of music in the lives of children.

We've known lean times of late in music education, facing shifting priorities and shrinking resources. Yet, even in our most challenging times, even in moments when it seemed like music was, at best, a poor cousin to a beatified core curriculum, there was music all around me. My home was filled with familiar tunes coming from the radio and television; in my rural community there were more concerts and shows than I could ever actually get to; and children in my schools and neighborhood sang the songs my mother sung to me as a child. Music... my music... was ever in my ears.

This has not been the case for the indigenous peoples in Canada. For almost two hundred years, this nation—my nation—carried out a policy of aggressive assimilation intended to eliminate the original peoples as viable cultures. This was a not a policy developed in secret or carried out in quiet ignominy. Canada's clear and directly stated objective was *"to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department."* (Dr. Duncan Campbell Scott – Department of Indian Affairs, 1920)

140(1). Every Indian or other person who engages in, or assists in celebrating or encourages either directly or indirectly another to celebrate any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony ... is guilty of an offence and is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months.

From iv. Indian Act, R.S.G. 1927, G. 98, s. 140.

A vital part of the Canadian strategy of aggressive assimilation was the residential school system. *"At the schools the students were punished for singing their family's songs, practicing their own religion and speaking their own languages".* (LearnNowBC, April 2012)

The last of the residential schools in Canada were not closed until 1997. That was 15 years into my teaching career. The impact of this legacy is not something that belongs to some distant past. It is an all-too-recent reality, and the generational trauma it has caused will affect us as a nation for years to come.

Today, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples are working to reclaim their politics, their economies, and their cultures. The *Idle No More* movement has brought these issues to our public consciousness. and the powerful work of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* has clearly outlined the role that public policy and education need to have in moving forward.

I view myself as an ally, a partner with the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people with whom we share this land. I listen, because listening is central to reconciliation. I work in my school and school board with First Nations students and teachers, and with people from the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit world, to bring to my school and my students some level of understanding. I do what I can to build the bridges that reconciliation will require. I'm trying.

But lately, I am struck with the enormity of it all - the profound effect that enforced assimilation has had, and continues to have, on indigenous peoples. Most powerfully, I am stung by what it must be like to have come so close to losing music and song.

For some time, I have not known what to do. In the small cache of knowledge I do have of First Nations music, I know that some is considered sacred, and I want to be careful, respectful, and authentic in offering what I know to my students. First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples have survived generations of their music being suppressed, and the last thing I want to do is make things worse by sharing things in a way that does not respect their rights and beliefs.

Couple this concern for propriety with my miniscule knowledge of this music. And who do I go to for help? This wisdom was secreted away for so long that there are still relatively few First Nations people we can turn to for knowledge. And then, there are the other contexts. Even the most conservative estimates say there are over 60 indigenous languages in Canada, along with countless cultures and ways of seeing. I am daunted by the immensity of the undertaking, as all these cultural, historical, linguistic, and spiritual aspects will surely have to be included in any meaningful exposure I could give my students to this music.

Or will it?

We will stand for the right to be free

We will build our society

And we will sing, we will sing

We will sing our own song

Buffy Sainte-Marie, From *Power in the Blood*.

Perhaps, like the music that surrounds me, what we need to do is put the music of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples into our ears. Just get it into our ears, letting our minds work their way around these unfamiliar rhythms and melodies. Let the unfamiliar drum roll over us until it is no longer strange. Let the melodies enter our consciousness often enough that they no longer strike our ear as eccentric. Let the languages tease our minds with syllables and vocables we have never known, until we know them.

My plan is to find music to listen to (and in our electronic age, this will not be a challenge), and then, just to listen. And have my students listen with me. Casually, intently, and every way in between.

The vital first step is to get this music, forbidden and discouraged for so long, into the air again. There will be second steps, I'm sure. And third steps, and who knows how many more.

For now, I'll put the music in the air. I'll listen. My students will listen. I invite you all to listen with us.

Resources

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action

http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

Idle No More <http://www.idlenomore.ca>

Indigenous Music Awards
<https://indigenousmusicawards.ca/home>

A Tribe Called Red (Download their first album free).
<http://atribecalledred.com/download-a-tribe-called-red/>

Power in the Blood: Buffy Sainte-Maire
http://buffysainte-marie.com/?page_id=1597

Aboriginal Music Week Directory
<http://www.aboriginalmusicweek.ca/artist-directory/complete-directory>

CBC: 23 Indigenous Musicians
<http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/11438/23-indigenous-musicians-who-are-finally-getting-so>

CBC Music: Indigenous Streams
<http://www.cbcmusic.ca/genres/indigenous>