



FIRST NATIONS COMPOSER INITIATIVE

Statement of Intent

We BELIEVE that American Indian* composers and musicians deserve a rich, supportive environment in which to create, perform, and flourish.

Those who are producing quality work beyond the traditional framework are frequently isolated from each other and from major presenting organizations. There are also very few composers who have had wide experience with the field, and no established mechanism for mentoring the next generation.

Clearly there is a need to build infrastructure for American Indian composers and musicians, and to facilitate the integration of their work into the wider cultural and artistic framework. Native American composers and musicians of all ages, interests and abilities need to have access to information and opportunities, collaborate to ensure that future generations gain composition skills and the chance to express themselves creatively, and facilitate ways for their music to be heard by a wide audience.

And we are CONCERNED that American Indian musical traditions be respected and understood.

In general, information in and about this creative cultural community has been difficult for Native American artists to access or for wider musical audiences to access appropriately.

At the same time, the Native community and its traditions have withstood:

- **Misuse and stereotyping** — Non-Indian composers have received commissions to create Indian-related or -inspired works since the 1700s, a pattern that continued through the “American Indianist” period of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. The Western world justified this because it did not know of Indian composers with formal composition skills or the degree to which this gave rise to and continues to create harmful stereotypes.
- **Misappropriation from an intellectual property rights perspective** — Traditional cultural knowledge has been difficult to protect. Existing Euro-American legal principles of intellectual property rights have not adequately recognized the ancestral and contemporary cultural property of Indigenous Peoples. Much traditional American Indian music has been lost or stolen under the legal principle of public domain — sometimes copyrighted by non-Indians and therefore no longer claimable by Natives. We continue in the struggle against appropriation of the cultural property of American Indian peoples.
- **Intrusion into the ceremonial** — Native American culture has both ceremonial (private and sacred) and social (public) elements often confused by musical audiences. Traditional music performance, performance practice and ownership of songs that are ceremonial and social, must be treated with respect.

Therefore, We ESTABLISH the First Nations Composer Initiative to address these needs and concerns.

Just as The American Composers Forum (the Forum) is committed to engaging communities in the creation, performance and enjoyment of new music and providing new opportunities for composers and their music to flourish;

The First Nations Composer Initiative (FNCI, *pronounced “fancy”*) will work to:

- Enrich lives by nurturing the creative spirit of composers and communities,
- Provide new opportunities for composers and their music to flourish, and
- Engage communities in the creation, performance and enjoyment of work from this community of musicians.

A culture
speaks
eloquently
through the
music it
creates.

– Libby Larsen

* The First Nations Composer Initiative’s interchangeable usage of American Indian and/or Native American, recognizes, and is inclusive of, all of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.

The First Nations Composer Initiative will do this by building relationships between American Indian artists and publics.

The FNCI will develop programs that educate audiences, energize composers' and performers' careers, stimulate collaboration, and promote musical creativity.

The First Nations Composer Initiative will serve American Indian composers, musicians, and the field of music:

- **Establishing** a flexible, inclusive organization embracing all forms of American Indian music and encouraging an interdisciplinary arts orientation.
- **Linking** composers, musicians, and performers to communities and to one another:
 - Creating a structure of professional development and opportunities for the field;
 - Disseminating information about the field to the wider public;
 - Directing artist support, encouragement and feedback; and
 - Serving as a catalyst for showcasing new works.
- **Creating** a center for objective, neutral service; relevant advocacy; and substantial exchange of information, resources, and support at the same time:
 - Exploring the history and cultural importance of American Indian music,
 - Encouraging research and knowledge building around this aspect of culture, and
 - Disseminating knowledge about this history, research, and advocacy.

In all its efforts, the First Nations Composer Initiative will support the cultural rights asserted in the Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other rights documents as follow:

Article 12 – Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artifacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature, as well as the right to the restitution of cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.

Article 13 – Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.

Article 14 – Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Article 29 – Indigenous peoples are entitled to the recognition of the full ownership, control and protection of their cultural and intellectual property.

They have the right to special measures to control, develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestations, including human and other genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs and visual and performing arts.

The First Nations Composer Initiative will also be:

- **Artistically and culturally inclusive**
 - We adopt a broad conception of Native American music inclusive of:
 - Traditional and contemporary idioms, as well as
 - Aural and notational traditions.
 - We represent a neutral resource available to and inclusive of all:
 - Tribes, peoples, and traditions — rural, urban, and community-identified;
 - Indigenous communities worldwide; and
 - The wider community of composers and musicians.
 - We hold in equal esteem the culture and cultural artifacts of all peoples — Indigenous and Western — while recognizing and respecting the fundamental differences among them.
- **Committed to Native values**
 - We commit to governance based on the principles of American Indian self-determination.
 - We accept our cultural responsibility to the seventh generation.
 - We honor the wisdom and teaching of our elders.
 - We acknowledge our relations and the interconnectedness of life.
 - We respect the sacred and social aspects of Native American culture.
- **Composer and musician-focused**
 - We serve as a catalyst in a culture of creativity and change.
 - We advocate for protection of community rights and culture.
 - We support the needs of individuals in their professional development.
- **Education-focused**
 - We encourage the development and training of future American Indian composers and musicians.
 - We teach respect for American Indian music traditions, past and present.
 - We transmit our cultural heritage within tribal communities while protecting that, which is sacred and social.
 - We share information to increase connections between our cultural community and the world of music.
 - We educate the wider community of music to correct and shatter harmful stereotypes.

In practice, this suggests a First Nations Composer Initiative that will:

- **Function** as a permanent program of the American Composers Forum through its offices and staff — integral to the mission of the Forum, consistent in values and mission, but targeted to the unique needs and concerns of the American Indian;
- **Attract** and serve a national constituency without bias toward geography, musical idiom, or tribal affiliation;
- **Draw on** the wisdom and leadership of an advisory board including Native American composers, musicians, and others in the field; and
- **Explore** program and service opportunities that advance the field and transmit the art to coming generations.

FNCI Core Advisory Group Members

Dr. Louis W. Ballard (*Cherokee/Quapaw*)
Sharon Burch (*Navajo Nation*)
Raven Chacon (*Navajo Nation*)
Jim Clairmont (*Sicangu Lakota*)
Brent Michael Davids (*Mohican*)
Joy Harjo (*Muskogee*)
Jerod Impichchaachaaha' (*Chickasaw Nation*)
Jennifer Elizabeth Kreisberg (*Tuscarora*)
R. Carlos Nakai (*Navajo/Ute*)
Bird Runningwater (*Cheyenne/Mescalero Apache*)
Joanne Shenandoah (*Oneida Nation*)
Ed Wapp (*Comanche/Sac and Fox*)

Georgia Wettlin-Larsen (*Assiniboine/Nakota*)
Dr. Patricia Shifferd, American Composers Forum

It is not enough to acknowledge that American Indian music is different from other music.

What is needed in America is an awakening and reorienting of our total spiritual and cultural perspective to embrace, understand and learn from the Aboriginal American what motivates his musical and artistic impulses.

— Dr. Louis W. Ballard