

Instruments of Exchange:

Music in the Fur Trade and the Arrival of European Instruments
into the Canadian West 1760-1821

by

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This paper is based on the preliminary findings of my dissertation research, tentatively titled "Sound and Rhythm in the Canadian Fur Trade, 1760-1860." My basic argument here, that music played a crucial role in the fur trade both before and after the arrival of European musical instruments, is based on the primary evidence provided by letters, diaries, and journals of European explorers and fur traders, as well as the official documents and inventory lists of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies. I have referred to key works in history and ethnomusicology to assist in fleshing out the historical context and details of the musical instruments that contributed to the changing soundscape of the Canadian west. As no systematic music history of the Canadian fur trade has yet been conducted, particularly one that considers how music worked *between* the diverse groups involved, I focus here on music's function as a social and cultural intermediary. The extent to which Europeans and First Nations Peoples communicated with sound and music in signals, ceremonials, and celebrations has not been adequately explored by historians or musicologists. I hope that this paper provides a preliminary step in this direction.

Musical interactions served as important social bridges between the polyglot cultures of the fur trade. In the 18th century these interactions were centered mostly on the music of First Nations Peoples. Fur traders gained a familiarity with Aboriginal musical traditions and instruments in a way that Europeans and settlers along the Atlantic seaboard could not. The drums and rattles that sounded so regularly in First Nations hunting camps and villages were integral to basic elements of the fur trade, such as

hunting and alliance-making ceremonies. With the expansion of the Montreal fur trade into what is now the Canadian west in the 1770s, the primarily Scottish fur traders and their French Canadian voyageurs began to overwinter on the western plains and in the Athabasca. By 1783 the North West Company had amalgamated most of the Montreal merchants, exporting materials thousands of miles to the northwest limits of the continent. Only small musical items such as bells were traded by the company, and were incorporated easily into First Nations' traditions. By the onset of the 19th century, European musical instruments such as flutes, bagpipes, and particularly violins or *fiddles* had begun making their way along the trading routes to the west and northwest in significant numbers, allowing for European-styled sonic spaces to emerge inside and around the trading posts, while also offering the potential for new combinations of musical traditions that variously bridged divisions of race, language, and class.

The English assumed control of the Great Lakes fur trade in the 1760s after the fall of New France and decades of brutal warfare. The Seven Years War, or as it is known in the United States, the "French and Indian War" led to decades of raiding and bitter fighting along the frontier that had left many colonists traumatized, and resulted in deeply engrained associations of fear and apprehension regarding First Nations Peoples. The American Revolution served to further cement the cycle of distrust and warfare between Americans and First Nations Peoples.¹ The popular literary genre of the

¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 366 - 412.

captivity narrative served to fuel these sentiments and associated Aboriginal drumming with frontier atrocities, such as scalping and ritualized torture.²

Alexander Henry, one of the most important early English speaking fur traders to push west of the Great Lakes and help found the North West Company, barely escaped with his life in 1763 when he bore witness to "Pontiac's rebellion" at Michilimackinac. Sequestered alone in a room writing letters, Henry first heard a war cry, and then watched the carnage from his window as he clutched his gun and "wait[ed] to hear the drum beat to arms."³ He would ultimately seek refuge with the French Canadian *voyageurs*, adopting their dress and habits until the threat to the English died down.

Over the next decade, Henry would intimately experience Ojibway and Cree cultures and witness a range of drum-based ceremonials and dances. He frequently witnessed and participated in calumet or pipe-ceremonies as he moved into the northwest, for instance while trading on the North Saskatchewan in the 1770s.⁴ Variations of the calumet ceremony had been crucial to the fur trade since the 17th century. Father Marquette provides the first ever staff notation transcription of First Nations' music in 1673 (although it may have been transcribed by Louis Joliet), and it was of the singing that accompanied the calumet ceremonies of the Algonquian speaking First Nations along

² From a popular compilation entitled *Indian Atrocities* first published in Philadelphia in 1782: "The man that was blacked was about twenty yards before us in running the gauntlet. They made him their principal object, men, women and children beating him, and those who had guns firing loads of powder on him as he ran naked, putting the muzzles of the guns to his body, shouting, hallooing and beating their drums in the meantime." In "Memoir of John Slover," *Captivity Tales* (1782; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1974), 44.

³ Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures In Canada and the Indian Territories: Between the Years 1760 and 1776: By Alexander Henry Fur Trader*, New Edition with Notes by James Bain (1807; repr. Toronto: George N. Morang & Company, LTD. 1901), 78.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 296-7.

the Mississippi and western Great Lakes.⁵ This ceremony, in many variations, served as a cross-cultural alliance-making mechanism by explorers and fur traders over the following century and a half.⁶ Alliance was a necessary pre-cursor to "gift-giving" and "trade" with First Nations groups of the west. Henry's contemporary, Jonathan Carver, remarks that he travelled great distances through hostile territory in the 1760s "satisfied that the pipe of peace, which was fixed at the helm of my canoe. . . would prove my security."⁷

Calumet ceremonies could be initiated by fur traders in order to secure alliances and ensure material exchanges. Longtime North West Company voyageur Jean-Baptiste Perrault was witness in 1788 to a delicate meeting between Sauteux (Ojibway) and a band of Siouan speakers, when his fellow voyageur Desnoyer "prit le tambour" and led the calumet ceremony.⁸ This ceremony played a crucial role in the cultural "middle ground" that developed between Europeans and First Nations Peoples in the Great Lakes region, and it was taken by fur traders into the northwest in the latter half of the 18th century. It involved special rites, smoking, and varieties of drumming and rattling,

⁵ *Early Narratives of the Northwest*, edited by Louise Kellogg (New York: Charles Scribner, 1917), 254; Willy Amtmann, *Music in Canada 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Habitem Books Collier-Macmillan Canada, 1975), 197.

⁶ This ceremony is mentioned in the accounts of many fur traders. David Thompson records an account around the year 1798 of a number of his Iroquois men putting on their version of the calumet ceremony or dance for a group of Nahathaways (Cree). David Thompson, *The Writings of David Thompson: The Travels, 1850 Version*, vol. 1, edited with an introduction by William E. Moreau (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 281-2.

⁷ Jonathan Carver, "Captain Jonathan Carver's Journal," in *The Northwest* (Astoria: Oregon: Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1964), 38.

⁸ Jean-Baptiste Perrault, *Jean-Baptiste Perrault marchand voyageur parti de Montréal le 28e de mai 1783*, edited with introduction Louis - P. Cormier (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1978), 70-2.

depending on the group and circumstance. Fur traders tapped into the ceremony's widespread cultural caché amongst First Nations to help provide safe travels.⁹

While the calumet ceremony quickly became familiar to fur traders, other forms of First Nations' musical expression seem to have been kept relatively secret from them. The numerous songs that accompanied the religious rites of the Midewiwin or "Grand Medicine" lodge of the Anishinaabe (Ojibway) tradition were largely shielded from the observation and scrutiny of English traders.¹⁰ Alexander Henry the Younger (Alexander Henry's son) describes the Grand Medicine that was held every spring among the Sauteux with whom he lived, when novices were "admitted into the mysteries of this grand and solemn affair."¹¹ Yet he does not provide details concerning their rites or songs, perhaps because he was not invited or initiated himself.

A more public form of religious expression that gained popularity in the 1790s amongst the Ojibway of the Western Great Lakes was known as "Wabbano" or "Wahbino." David Thompson, while serving his first year with the North West Company

⁹ This ceremonial complex occupies the subject of one of the pioneering works of ethnomusicology. See Alice Fletcher, *The Hako: Song, Pipe, and Unity in a Pawnee Calumet Ceremony*, introduction by Helen Myers (1904: repr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Richard White posits the calumet ceremony as central to the fur trade and colonial relations from the 17th century onwards, White, *The Middle Ground*, 20-23.

¹⁰ For more on the music of the Midewiwin, see Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music, Volume 1 & 2* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), 13-20, 95; Beverley Diamond, Sam Cronk and Franziska von Rosen, *Visions of Sound: Musical Instruments of First Nations Communities in Northeastern America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 36-7, 136.

¹¹ Alexander Henry the Younger, *The Publications of the Champlain Society: The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger 1799 - 1814, Vol. 1*, edited with introduction by Barry M. Gough, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1988), 118.

in 1797-1798, describes with great detail the musical instruments that accompanied this religious movement as it spread in the Lake of the Woods region:¹²

Under the guidance of the Wahbino sages, tambours were made, the frame circular of eight inches in depth and eighteen inches in diameter, covered with fine parchment; the frame covered with strange figures in red and black, and to it were suspended many bits of tin and brass to make a gingling noise; the Rattle had an ornamented handle; and several had Wahbino Sticks, flat, about three feet, or more in length, with rude figures carved and painted. The Mania became so authoritative that every young man had to purchase a Wahbino Tambour; the price was what they could get from him; and figured dances were also sold.

Though the sacred music relating to the Wahbino was taken very seriously, it was much less secretive than the Midewiwin, and was performed out in the open. On an unusually warm day on January 4th, 1801 while trading *en derouine*, Alexander Henry the Younger describes the women playing "their favourite game of Coullion," while some men played "Platter," and others beat the drum "to keep chorus with their Wabbano songs."¹³

First Nations musical instruments could be used to celebrate a successful hunt following a great feast. In 1776 Alexander Henry was on the western plains to witness a grand buffalo hunt, and he describes in fascinating detail the musical festivities of the following evening:¹⁴

The instruments consisted principally in a sort of tambourine, and a gourd filled with stones, which several persons accompanied by shaking two bones together; and others with bunches of deer-hoofs, fastened to the end of a stick. Another instrument was one that was no more than a piece of wood, of three feet, with notches cut on its edge. The performer drew a stick backward and forward, along the notches, keeping time. The women sung; and the sweetness of their voices exceeded whatever I had heard before.

¹² Thompson, 231.

¹³ Alexander Henry the Younger, 108.

¹⁴ Alexander Henry, 302.

The detail of this passage reflects the maturity of Henry, who had come to pay close attention to the material culture of First Nations Peoples as well as their ceremonial procedures. Henry's "sort of tambourine" was likely a version of the frame drum, in Cree *taawahekan*, that was popular amongst First Nations from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains.¹⁵ Alexander Henry was a passive though keen observer in 1776; later fur traders would describe picking up Aboriginal musical instruments themselves.

While overwintering in what is now Minnesota in 1803, North West Company partner George Nelson describes attempting to "conjure" a successful hunt with his voyageurs. They had been living in close contact with an Ojibway band, and were in desperate circumstances regarding food: "We speechified, sang, beat the drum, smoked & danced, Sorel, he who sang the best, imitating them, would run to the chimney yelling 'something shall be cooked in that place' - part indian, part french & English."¹⁶ The conjuring ceremonies described in numerous accounts are here enacted by George Nelson and his voyageurs. As with most music-related descriptions from the fur trade, this brief entry offers little detail regarding musical instruments; yet it suggests a fascinating cultural pattern of musical appropriation from First Nations Peoples (in this case Ojibway) to Euro-Canadians.

While drums may have been the most frequently mentioned Aboriginal musical instrument, rattles were probably more prolific. Rattles were mostly known in the religious rituals of medicine men and shamans who used them to make contact with the

¹⁵ Lynn Whidden, *Essential Song: Three Decades of Northern Cree Music* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), 16-20.

¹⁶ George Nelson, *My First Years in the Fur Trade: The Journals of 1802-1804* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 153.

spirit and natural worlds. They came in a wide variety of designs, from globular, to teardrop and disc shaped, and made from bark, wood, horn, gourd, or tortoise shell.¹⁷ The rattle is the key instrument in traditional healing ceremonies of a number of First Nations groups all the way across the continent.¹⁸ Fur traders such as Alexander Henry encountered them early in their careers. He describes how a "physician (so to call him) seated himself on the ground. . . In his hand, he had this *shishiquoi*, or rattle, with which he beat time to his *medicine-song*."¹⁹ Rattles literally became part of the fur traders' vocabulary. In Daniel Harmon's Cree vocabulary he includes "to beat" and "to rattle - *Se-se-quin*" as well as "to sing" and "to dance."²⁰

Rattles were often used in tandem with drums, or even used as the beater with which to strike the drum. David Thompson, who spent much of the last two decades of the 18th century amongst First Nations of the west during his employ with the Hudson's Bay and the North West Companies, describes how Cree dances were not for mere pleasure, but rather as a "religious rite for some purpose."²¹ He describes an incident when "the young men came with the Rattle and Tambour, about nine women formed the dance, to which they sung with their fine voices, and lively they danced hand in hand in a

¹⁷ Beverley Diamond, *Native American Music in Eastern North America: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98-99. Diamond, Cronk and von Rosen, 33-34, 121-158, 186-190.

¹⁸ Marius Barbeau, *Medicine Men on the North Pacific Coast* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1958); Bruno Nettl, *Blackfoot Musical Thought: Comparative Perspectives* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1989), 77, 82, 133-6.

¹⁹ Alexander Henry, 115-7.

²⁰ Daniel Harmon, *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America.. During a Residence of Nineteen Years in Different Parts of the Country* (Toronto: George N. Morang & Co., 1904), 347-8, 360.

²¹ Thompson, 106.

half circle, for a long hour."²² Recall Thompson's earlier description of the Wabino ceremony with the drum and rattling elements described as "many bits of tin and brass to make a gingling noise,"²³ as well as Henry's earlier description of gourd rattles and bone and hoof clackers.²⁴ These important 18th century descriptions serve to document the musical culture of western First Nations Peoples that still seems largely untouched by European influence, though even in these early descriptions they had incorporated new materials such as tin and brass into the soundscape.

The earliest and certainly most materially widespread musical material that the North West Company traded to First Nations Peoples was bells. The North West Company traded three main varieties of bells, in ascending size: Hawk, Horse, and Table. Some or all of these types turn up on most NWC inventory lists. An example is a list of items headed to the Mackenzie River in 1820, where all three varieties appear.²⁵ Within these basic categories there could be small variations and slightly different designs, such as "*Round* Horse Bells."²⁶ The North West Company preserved the trading records and debts of some of its hunters, such as "Wanatte Indian Chief Scioux" who in 1820 purchased five Horse bells for 17s 6p and fifty-nine Hawk bells for 5s 4p, and the next year purchased five dozen Horse bells for the remarkably high value of 5£ 9s 4.5p.²⁷ Of

²² Ibid., 107.

²³ Ibid., 231.

²⁴ Alexander Henry, 302.

²⁵ "An Inventory of Goods, Liquers, Provisions to Mackenzie's River Spring 1820." HBC Archives. Microfilm, F439, *North West Company Account Book 1820-1821*, 63.

²⁶ "Invoice of Goods shipped by the Earl of Selkirk to the care of Capt Matthew Red River Settlement." HBC Archives, microfilm, 4m107.

²⁷ "Red River Settlement Account Book," HBC Archives, microfilm, 4m107. E713: 380.

course these amounts were not paid back in currency, but rather equivalent value in pelts.²⁸

First Nations Peoples seem to have conceptualized and adopted bells as a type of rattle. In the Algonquian language Mi'kmaq the term *sesuwejk* is applied to both rattles and bells.²⁹ There is evidence that bells were used as a rattle-like device very early on the plains of Western Canada. After Alexander Henry's previously described buffalo hunt musical celebration in 1776, there is a dance in which the men and women line up on opposite sides of the room and "the sound of bells and other jingling materials, attached to the women's dresses, enabled them to keep time."³⁰ In the brief ethnography of the Cree at the end of his account, Alexander Henry describes how bells frequently were attached alongside traditional materials: "All the sex is fond of garnishing the lower edge of the dress with small bells, deer-hoofs, pieces of metal, or any thing capable of making a noise. When they move, the sounds keep time, and make a fantastic harmony."³¹ In Bruno Nettl's important ethnomusicology of the Blackfoot, he claims men attached bells to their legs for dancing starting in the early 19th century.³² Yet it seems likely that this practice started even earlier, in the late 18th century when the trading networks first reached the Blackfoot.³³ The adoption and use of bells by First Nations Peoples in a

²⁸ For an introduction to the subject, see Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930: repr. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the lands southwest of Hudson Bay 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

²⁹ Diamond, Cronk and Von Rosen, 76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 312.

³² Nettl, 37.

³³ Innis, 139.

distinctly "indigenous" fashion fits with broader patterns of material use in this era, as emphasized by various historians over the past forty years.³⁴

The only type of musical instrument traded by the North West Company to First Nations Peoples on any considerable scale was the Jaw or Mouth Harp (listed in the NWC inventories as "Jew's Harp"). These appear to have been produced in two basic varieties, iron and brass. In the Lake of Two Mountains inventory in the North West Company's Account Book of 1821 is listed two "Iron Jew's Harps" valued 13s 6p and four dozen "Brass Jew's Harps" valued 6s apiece.³⁵ This musical item had many good things going for it as a trade item: it was small and lightweight, of durable cast metal manufacture, and relatively inexpensive to produce. Its characteristic "twanging" sound is reminiscent of another rudimentary musical instrument (perhaps) familiar to plains First Nations peoples: the mouth bow.³⁶ In *Sketches of Upper Canada* is a description of an encounter between John Howison with a First Nations veteran of the 1812 war who "took two Jews harps from a little bag, [and] play[ed] upon each alternately."³⁷

It would not be until around 1800 that European musical instruments would begin to appear in the written record in significant numbers. It is difficult to trace musical instruments in the fur trade because they rarely turn up in inventory lists; rather, they

³⁴ See Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's 'Heroic' Age Reconsidered* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985); Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*.

³⁵ "Lake of 2 Mountains Inv. Cont." HBC Archives, microfilm, 5M12: 132.

³⁶ The mouth bow, comprised of a hunting bow with one end placed in the mouth as a resonator, has been claimed as an indigenous chordophone instrument by the Cree musician Buffy Ste. Marie. Yet some ethnomusicologists have suggested it was an importation from African culture. See George List, "The Musical Bow at Palenque," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, vol. 18 (1966): 36-49; Otis Mason, "Geographical Distribution of the Musical Bow," *American Anthropologist*, 10:11(Nov., 1897): 377-380.

³⁷ John Howison, *Sketches of Upper Canada, Domestic, Local, and Characteristic* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1821), 130-131.

tended to be carried by individuals as personal possessions, and revealed only through happenstance descriptions of performances. Perhaps the earliest and most important mention of an instrumentally based European style "ball" is from Daniel Harmon in 1800. The site was Grand Portage, the crucial rendezvous and jump off point for the Saskatchewan and Athabasca brigades at the western end of Lake Superior.³⁸

In the day time, the Natives were permitted to dance in the fort, and the Company made them a present of thirty six gallons of shrub. In the evening, the gentlemen of the place dressed, and we had a famous ball, in the dining room. For musick, we had the bag-pipe, the violin and the flute, which added much to the interest of the occasion. At the ball, there was a number of the ladies of this country; and I was surprised to find that they could conduct with so much propriety, and dance so well.

Note that the First Nations Peoples, who in this location were Ojibway ["Chippeways" in Harmon's journal] were "permitted to dance in the fort" only in the afternoon, after which the dance included only the "gentlemen of the place." As most European dances are styled for couples, Aboriginal women here were invited, and their abilities and familiarity with European dance customs seems to greatly have impressed Harmon. The instruments on this occasion: violin, flute, and bagpipe, used in combination because they were available. In the *pays d'en haut*, musical diversity was well appreciated. To Daniel Harmon, it "added much to the interest of the occasion."³⁹

A fiddle (and presumably a good fiddler) was such a luxury to fur traders and voyageurs that its arrival seemed to temporarily allay their sufferings and put everything else on hold. Archibald McLeod makes the following remark on Monday April 6th 1801,

³⁸ Harmon, 17.

³⁹ Ibid.

after he and his men had struggled for weeks due to a scarcity of food and basic goods: "One of the Shell river men having brought his Violin with him the people danced all night."⁴⁰ This occurred the day after Easter, which was probably the justification for the dance. It was held despite the fact that most of the men were "ill with bad colds" and unable to work for much of the following week.⁴¹

Dances could get in the way of work, and yet the fur traders were helpless in preventing the men from celebrating holidays and special events. George Nelson relates an event of September 3rd 1808 when he and his men abruptly stopped their work to "prepare for a dance (which is now the third) in honour of Mr. Seraphin's wedding." Perhaps the third celebration was required due to the recent arrival of instruments, as "Mr M Donald played the violin for us + Mr. Seraphin played the Flute alternately."⁴²

Music could bridge the class divisions that ran deeply through the social organization of the fur trade. Those at the top, the partners, factors, chief traders, and clerks generally did not engage in physical labour or paddle the canoes, and were supposed to wield almost supreme authority over the voyageurs and "servants" below them.⁴³ Yet life was often too harsh and fragile in the northwest for class hierarchies to

⁴⁰ Archibald McLeod, *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest: Being the Narrative of Peter Pond and the Diaries of John MacDonell, Archibald N. McLeod, Hugh Fairies, and Thomas Connor*, edited by Charles M. Gates and with an introduction by Grace Lee Nute (St. Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1933), 170.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² George Nelson, "Journal 1 Sep. 1808 - 31 Mar 1810," Baldwin Reading Room, Toronto Reference Library. S13: 1.

⁴³ Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade*, ch. 5 "The Theater of Hegemony," (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 134-164; Edith Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

remain firm.⁴⁴ Despite a structurally entrenched class division, fur traders traveled, worked and hunted closely with their inferiors. Although servants, voyageurs, and First Nations' families were not always permitted into the trading posts, on special occasions and holidays there was a strong tradition of inviting everyone inside for communal merriment, when all celebrated and danced together. Yet this intimacy could problematize modes of "gentility." Daniel Harmon relates the celebration of St. Andrew's Day on November 30th 1800, when a celebration was planned in which all the "people of the fort" (both Euro-Canadian and First Nations) were invited:⁴⁵

In the evening, they were invited to dance in the hall; and during it, they received several flagons of spirits. They behaved with considerable propriety, until about eleven o'clock, when their heads had become heated, by the great quantity of spiritous liquor. . . blows soon succeeded; and finally two battles were fought, which put an end to this *truly genteel*, North Western ball.

Here we can see the difficulty in maintaining the decorum of a musical event on par with the expectations of fur traders who fashioned themselves as "gentlemen". Yet they included servants and First Nations Peoples during celebrations, out of goodwill or sheer necessity. On January 1st 1809, George Nelson describes how the trader Mr. M Donell gave "a Genteel feast to all hands." The men desired a dance after the feast, but as there was no recourse to a musical instrument, the voyageur Augsé sang "as a mean substitute for the fiddle."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Voyageurs in fact exercised their power over *bourgeois* at various locations along the route from Montreal to the northwest, demanding drams of alcohol for an avoidance of a dunking in the river. See Podruchny, ch. 3 "Rites of Passage and Ritual Moments," 52-85.

⁴⁵ Harmon, 36-7.

⁴⁶ George Nelson, "Journal 1 Sep. 1808 - 31 Mar. 1810." Baldwin Reading Room, Toronto Reference Library. S13: Monday 1st January 1809.

Some instruments do turn up in the inventory lists of the Northwest Company. One violin is listed in the North West Company's 1821 spring inventory at the English River post of the Athabasca department.⁴⁷ Two tambourines turn up in the Northwest Company's Lake of Two Mountains inventory list in that same year.⁴⁸ Yet most instruments did not end up on inventory lists. There must have been more violins in the Athabasca in 1821 than the one listed at English River, as six sets of violin strings were shipped into the region by the North West Company in 1821.⁴⁹ Most violins stayed close to their owners, and never left a mark in the written record.

We have a few glimpses into *what* was played on the fiddles of the fur trade. Most of the time, fur traders merely mention that a dance was held, and occasionally note the hour of completion (often daybreak the next morning).⁵⁰ Yet based on a few comments it seems safe to assert that by and large faster dances such as reels, jigs and marches prevailed over slower more intimate dances such as waltzes and quadrilles. Fur trader Ross Cox describes a dance at Lac La Pluie in 1817 led by "two excellent fiddlers":⁵¹

We got up three or four balls, in which the exhilarating amusement of the 'light fantastic toe' was kept up to a late hour in the morning. We walked through no lazy minuets; we had no simpering quadrilles; no languishing half-dying waltzes; no, ours was the exercise of health; the light lively reel, or the rattling good old-fashioned country dance.

⁴⁷ HBC Archives. Microfilm. F439. "North West Company Account Book, 1820-1821," 15.

⁴⁸ "Lake of 2 Mountains Inv. Con't." HBC Archives, Microfilm 5M12. Columbia B. 133.

⁴⁹ "Invoices for Athabasca Con't" HBC Archives, Microfilm 5M5. 36.

⁵⁰ Hugh Fairies, *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest: Being the Narrative of Peter Pond and the Diaries of John MacDonell, Archibald N. McLeod, Hugh Fairies, and Thomas Connor*, edited by Charles M. Gates and with an introduction by Grace Lee Nute (St. Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1933), 227.

⁵¹ Ross Cox, *The Columbia River: Or scenes and adventures during a residence of six years on the western side of the Rocky Mountains*, edited with introduction by Edgar and Jane Stewart (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 321-322.

The more "sophisticated" music of Europe however did make its way into the trading post circuit to a certain extent. I have discovered a list of sheet music that John MacDonald of Garth ordered to his trading post in 1818, which lists a complete set of Mozart's and Beethoven's waltzes, Haydn's "Gypsy Rondo", and many others.⁵² This valuable document suggests that the slower and more "refined" classical musics of Europe did indeed find their way west through the networks of the fur trade. Yet the majority of sources indicate that these styles were not favoured as the music to accompany larger dances and celebrations.

Music was crucially important to the social interactions of the fur trade. Musical ceremonies associated with hunting, healing, and alliance-making brought First Nations' drums and rattles to the attention of fur traders, who often described them in great detail and were cognizant of their various applications. Some elements of First Nations musical culture were well known to explorers and fur traders such as the music associated with the calumet ceremony and "Wabbano," while other musical complexes such as the Midewiwin seem to have been shielded from view. Competency with First Nations' ceremonies was most important for the fur traders and explorers at the cusp of the European advance westwards, such as Alexander Henry, David Thompson and Alexander Mackenzie, who had to adapt culturally to navigate the various First Nations groups because they depended so fully on them for information, guidance, skills, and safe passage. The North West Company did not trade musical materials that radically changed First Nations musical culture; rather, bells and to a lesser extent jaw harps were traded by

⁵² Papers of John MacDonald of Garth, McCord Museum, P655/C.

the company and fit quite easily into existing indigenous practices and musical conceptions.

As the fur trade matured in the first two decades of the 19th century, *bourgeois* and voyageurs were enabled to construct a musical culture modeled on European traditions. The records indicate a favouring of the violin or fiddle, but references to flutes and bagpipes also occur. These instruments could be used to establish "genteel" and "civilized" European-styled social spaces, but not without many challenges and potential failings. Dances seem to have been optimal social situations for bridging racial, linguistic and class divisions, and indeed served as one of the few contexts when the rivalry between the trading companies was put aside.⁵³ The written record is a problematic account of musical culture, and tracing change over time is difficult. Yet there is a perceivable shift in the late 18th century from a complete dominance of First Nations soundways to a large injection of European musical instruments, particularly violins. Musical instruments were physically exchanged during the fur trade; the contexts for socialization and sharing they provided facilitated wider cultural exchanges between Euro-Canadians and First Nations Peoples.

⁵³ McLeod, 148.

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