

The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

and

Sounds Modern

present

Maps of Music and Memory: Music of Raven Chacon

Saturday, January 20, 2024, 2:00 pm Modern Art Museum auditorium

Program

Quiver (2018)

from ***For Zitkála-Šá*** (2017-2020)

For Jacqueline Wilson

For Joy Harjo

Biyán (2011)

—— intermission ——

lá'ts'áadah (2004)

from ***For Zitkála-Šá*** (2017-2020)

For Laura Ortman

For Carmina Escobar

Horse Notations (2019)

(in five movements)

Musicians

Sarah Ruth Alexander, voice

Mia Detwiler, violin

Daphne Capparelli Gerling, viola

Hunter Long, contrabass Paetzold recorder

Andrew May, violin (Sounds Modern assistant director)

Charlotte MacDonald, clarinet

Elizabeth McNutt, flute (Sounds Modern director)

Kourtney Newton, cello

Patrick Overturf, percussion

Kory Reeder, double bass

Jessica Stearns, alto saxophone

Notes

In addition to an inspiring body of work that has made her one of the first artists, in her words, “to break the buckskin ceiling,” Jaune Quick-to-see Smith has been a groundbreaking leader in the community of Native American artists. One of the artists featured in the exhibition she recently curated at The National Gallery in Washington, D.C., is Raven Chacon, a Diné artist whose wide-ranging practice includes composition, performance, visual art and audiovisual installations. Chacon’s career has included some remarkable breakthroughs of his own, as the first Native American composer to receive the Pulitzer Prize (2023) and the MacArthur Fellowship (2024).

Sounds Modern’s *Maps of Music and Memory* celebrates both artists’ work with a concert of solo and chamber music by Chacon, including projections of several of his scores (which are remarkable works of graphic art in themselves) and sounds far beyond the usual; as Chacon has said, “Of course, you want to go to the future. For me, it’s actually not about sound. Maybe I would try to see: What is the sound of time travel itself? But, it’d be to see what kind of tools exist in the future. It’s not about having an instrument that can be understood. The whole reason I play is to find some kind of unruliness in these instruments — to find new sounds.” As a composer, Chacon takes a similarly expansive view: “Scores themselves can be the document to mediate every part of the work itself, to be a kind of feedback loop within itself, as supplemental information, as something that allows the music to continue to grow through its existence as being separate from the music, as well... Meaning that it’s not just the instruction manual anymore. It’s more information about the concept, the narrative, the biography, the concern, and it can have that other existence separate from the music.” His scores deliberately leave room for the interpreter’s agency: “I wanted to be very careful that I’m not a man who’s instructing others what to do. I’m just a conduit for the story.” — Andrew May

Quiver

Commissioned by Michelle Kesler, *Quiver* is the third in a series of solo cello works on the tracking of animals. Rather than notes and rhythms determined by the cellist’s left hand, the score focuses on the drama — even aggression — of the bow hand; the bow becomes the weapon that projects a quiver-full of sonic arrows. The notations range from purely graphic to highly detailed technical instructions: a range of armaments to suit a variety of targets, deployed in time with the patient, stealthy attention of a hunter. — Andrew May

For Zitkála-Šá

“[*For Zitkála-Šá* is] a book that celebrates contemporary Indigenous women composers. ... It started off as prints, but [is now] a book dedicated to Zitkála-Šá [born on the Yankton Reservation in South Dakota], an early 20th-century activist, writer, poet and composer. It is also dedicated to other contemporary Indigenous women composers.” — Raven Chacon

For Jacqueline Wilson: On Shapeshifting

“There is a Yakama story of the Tah-tah-kle'-ah: shapeshifting women who can transform into owls. They hunt humans by mimicking their language, including those from other tribes and nations. I mention this in consideration of the systems that shapeshift us.

“Jacqueline Wilson received a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Bassoon Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Iowa. For a Native musician, attaining this level of academic achievement is not a common occurrence; it requires one to endure the reducing of one’s culture that frequently occurs when Native people pursue an academic career. For us, the academy is a place where code-switching is necessary for survival, and this then encourages us to develop this switch as if it is a creative practice-although the institution does not realize that we have been in and out of costumes and regalia all our lives.

“Jacqueline’s score is composed for a solo woodwind instrument playing a single note, cycling through a series of alternate fingerings and timbral trills, or *bisbigliandos*. As the tone shape- shifts throughout the piece, the player is asked to constantly return to the original playing mode, until the end, when this normal mode of producing the note no longer sounds as it once did.

“The purity of tone becomes compromised when adding more alternate fingerings. By the end of the piece, when the player makes it back home, they have had many chances to speak in the true tone. Each time, when they were able to return, even for a brief moment, a part of them stayed there while some of home left with them back on the road.” — Raven Chacon

For Joy Harjo: On Bending Time

“One of the first Native women I met who made contemporary improvisatory music is the same woman who later became the three-time Poet Laureate of the United States. I heard Joy Harjo’s saxophone as a voice, before her poetry. While she didn’t begin playing the saxophone until later in life, she often speaks about how words and music come from the same place, not only for her as an artist but also in how many Indigenous ways treat the two as influencing each other.

“Diacritics are used to understand how to pronounce spoken tones; we Indigenous folks, with endangered words, see them employed often to help others pronounce our concepts that were never written down. This score uses diacritics as a musical notation to suggest the timbre of the saxophone, relying on the faith that such indications encourage accent and inflection, for inside every inflection is a suppressed culture. Though there are different ways to voice a word, this is not just a piece about timbre and articulation. Joy says, ‘Music goes where words can’t go.’ There is a freedom to create pathways in this score. From Joy I have learned that being a poet means making paths with words, and therefore with music. Indigenous people know that words manifest worlds into being.

“There are two musical parameters not indicated, and perhaps not needing to be said. How loud does one speak or make a sound? Joy told me there are three ways that she prepares her poetic works: reading aloud to herself, reading aloud to another, reading aloud to everyone. I draw these as directional symbols in a row above the diacritic paths in reference to Joy’s band, Arrow Dynamics. Who is spoken to determines the loudness of delivery. She shared with me that when she was in college, and surrounded by vocal Native warriors of the 1960s and ’70s, listening to their demands for justice, she would hear a rhythm in their speeches. The inflection, stresses, pauses, peaks, and valleys of pitch, mirroring every Indian landscape of the Americas, has influenced the rhythms of her poems. Because all musical parameters influence any other, one may find patterns that bend time.” — Raven Chacon

Biyán

Commissioned by Ensemble Music New Mexico / Chatter, *Biyán* uses relatively traditional notation and a variety of repeated patterns to project a sound world far removed from traditional chamber music. Chacon has written that “Chamber music might be considered elitist, or inaccessible to the general public. Finding ways that others can appreciate chamber music has been a goal of mine, either through my own work or my teaching work.” Here, extended techniques and percussion sounds bring the chamber ensemble into an eerily unfamiliar space that upends the norms of the European tradition. — Andrew May

łá'ts'áadah

In the *Diné bizaad* or Navajo language, *łá'ts'áadah* means “eleven.” This might refer to the eleven bow patterns used in the piece, which range from traditional down-bows to figure-eight patterns. These movements, along with a variety of slides and other ornaments, twine around a series of melodic phrases that gradually unfold a near-complete quarter-tone gamut of 17 pitches from low D to the B quarter-flat above it (G-sharp/A-flat is omitted). The pacing of notes and bows varies radically over the course of the piece, creating a multi-dimensional ebb and flow of energy. Written for Mark Menzies at the California Institute of the Arts, this relatively early work of Chacon’s demonstrates a consistent thread in his work, reinventing the physicality of classical instruments to reveal new sonic and expressive qualities. — Andrew May

For Zitkála-Šá

For Laura Ortman: On Doubling

“Who decided for the horse how much of her tail is used for the violin bow?”

“I wrote the first score for Laura Ortman. In the years around 2005, when I was beginning to travel across this country to play music, whether in a cramped basement or having a piece performed on a concert music stage, I was hearing of the only other Native person making improvisational, highly dissonant, and overly amplified music at the time. The instrument that accompanies Laura in life is the violin, already an instrument full of contradictions, one made from thin pieces of wood yet held together in powerful tension with steel strings, which are touched with all spectrum of pressure using a perpendicular length of hairs. And whether bowed slowly or as fast as possible, it can potentially sound forever. When amplified, even the

direction of the bow stroke becomes magnified; if bowed fast enough, it becomes the same sound. Counterpoint is the study of these contradictions, of identity, of our positions in the multiple communities we inhabit. This composition is a study in the counterpoint of speed. In a forest of alternating tremolos, there is no going backward, only moving parallel or contrary to something else in the world. How to be in two places at once? From the desert canyons of Apache land to the Midwest to New York City, one determines how those places match their internal velocities.” — Raven Chacon

For Carmina Escobar: On Erasure

“It is likely that the first vocalizations we make as infants are screams. While we have no reference for this first voicing, it must give us the self-awareness that we are alive and that we are someone separate from our mothers. Maybe in this moment, we know who we are.

“Carmina Escobar does not identify as Indigenous. Many mestizas and mestizos do not identify as Indigenous, because many languages, traditional ways, and actual people of tribes of what is now called Latin America were completely eliminated. Those who were left became the descendants of mixture with the Spanish, with new identities formed by the Catholic Church and various nationalisms. When you have no tongue to speak your original language, what is the sound of that scream? What is the sound of the horror of not having the words of your true name because that name in your language no longer exists? Is this the stifled scream hidden behind a mask?

“When one screams, they realize they have many screams inside them. Though originating inside a single body, this personal howl can be the search for transformation, the dream that a new voice will emerge that one never knew was also them. Does this once-hidden voice replicate the wail hidden inside entire nations of bodies? Or is there a void of sound, the unspokenness of the detribalized condition? Many never have the opportunity to speak about their Indigeneity. When what should be spoken is suppressed, it escapes through the only way possible. Once released, there is the urge for the reverse - an urge to undo the horror, to let the scream back into the body.

“I looked for a woman sound artist or composer from Mexico or Central America who identified as Indigenous and found none. I asked Carmina if she knew anyone. She responded that she felt that she could not speak on anyone's behalf. We began to talk about this dilemma, of which half my own blood carries knowledge. I realized I must write the score for Carmina.” — Raven Chacon

Horse Notations

Commissioned by the Oregon East Symphony, *Horse Notations* takes its inspiration (and many of the notations in the score) from Étienne-Jules Marey's analyses and graphical analyses of the paces and patterns of horses' hooves. The composer includes with the score a 1874 article from *Popular Science Monthly* discussing this research into gait and rhythm, and presenting several of Marey's illustration. The five movements of the piece can be heard as imaginary tableaux: individual horses and bands of horses heard at varying distances as they walk, trot, canter, gallop, whinny, and listen attentively to the whistling of the wind, rustling vegetation, and other sounds of their environment. — Andrew May

Sounds Modern

The most up-to-the-minute and least predictable concert music series in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Sounds Modern has been exploring links between contemporary music and visual arts for over a decade. Conceived and directed by virtuoso flutist Elizabeth McNutt in collaboration with The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Sounds Modern adds a sonic dimension to the ideas represented in the galleries, and brings the artwork to life in the concert hall. McNutt also directs the Nova new music ensemble at the University of North Texas, where she teaches in the flute and composition areas. Sounds Modern assistant director Andrew May is on the UNT composition faculty.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Tina Gorski and John Nuckels for collaborating with us since 2007 to bring new sounds to the Modern. We're planning our next program here on May 18. Keep up with the latest Sounds Modern news at www.soundsmodern.org, www.facebook.com/SoundsModern, and on Twitter and Instagram @soundsmodern.