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Exploring the Musical identity of the Canadian Arctic

Canada is blessed with an immense size which stretches over 5,500 kilometres from the West coast to the East; its ten provinces and three territories extend from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and northward to the Arctic Ocean, covering 9.98 million square kilometres (3.85 million square miles), making it the world's second largest country by area. Canada is the northernmost country in the Americas (excluding the neighbouring Danish Arctic territory of Greenland, which extends slightly further north) and its southern border with the United States of America is the world's longest bi-national land border (hereafter termed as the 49th Parallel). Generally, Canada is sparsely populated, with most of its land area comprised of forest and tundra. As a result, its population is highly urbanized, with over 80 percent of its 36 million inhabitants concentrated in large and medium-sized cities, mainly along the southern 49th Parallel.

My paper will focus on what I will call the Far North and the musical language of the Inuit people (formerly termed as Eskimos), both from the point of origin with the indigenous people and from two well-known composers from Toronto and their interpretations of the Far North. Finally, I'll return to the Far North and explore contemporary music and its themes with one notable contemporary Juno award winner, who possesses a refreshing style from that of her ancestors while maintaining some of their traditions. But first, I must discuss the notion of north Canada, one that is not well understood by the majority of Canadians, because most live so much further south.

Northern Canada, colloquially called The North, is the vast northernmost region of Canada variously defined by geography and politics. Politically, the term refers to Canada's three northern territories: Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Similarly, the concept of the Far North may refer to the addition of the Canadian Arctic, the portion of Canada that lies north of the Arctic Circle between the east part of Alaska and the west of Greenland. This area covers about 39 percent of Canada's total area but consists of less than one percent of Canada's population.

The Inuit people live throughout most of Northern Canada in recently established Nunavut, the northern third of the province of Quebec, the northern parts of Labrador of Nunatsiavut and Nunavut, and finally various parts of the Northwest Territories, especially along the coast of the Arctic Ocean. Notably, these population groups are located close to the vast Hudson's Bay coastline due to their reliance on water and food. These areas are known in the Inuktitut language as 'Inuit Nunangat.' These reckonings somewhat depend on the arbitrary concept

of 'the north,' a measure of so-called 'northernness' that other Arctic territories share.[1]

As a social rather than political region, the Canadian north is often subdivided into two distinct regions based on climate, the near north and the far north (hereafter termed as the Far North and the focus of this paper). The different climates of these two regions result in vastly different vegetation, and therefore very different economies, settlement patterns, and histories. The Far North is synonymous with the areas north of the tree line with a barren tundra landscape. This area is home to the various sub-groups of the Inuit, who form a distinctive aboriginal people of Canada.

Very few non-Aboriginal people have settled in these areas, and the Inuit peoples have traditionally relied mostly on hunting marine mammals and caribou, as well as fish and migratory birds for survival. This area was partly involved in the fur trade (centuries ago) but more recently impacted by the whaling industry. As well, this area was not part of the early twentieth-century treaty process and aboriginal land had to be acknowledged by the Canadian government with the creation of autonomous territories, unlike the Indian reserves of further south.

The relatively new territory of Nunavut, created just twenty years ago in 1999, has a population that is predominately Inuit (84% as of 2013[2]), and the new Canadian federal agreement facilitated more self-control of their own land. The Inuit people are given equal membership with governmental agencies to manage their waters, land, wildlife and to have representation of their people with the federal government. As a result, they are no longer a colonized people, and now have their independence to help maintain their knowledge of traditional customs and culture. The well-respected artist Kenojauk Ashevak, when asked to create a print about the agreement, created one that depicts hunters fishing through the ice with mountains lit behind from a glowing sky.[3]

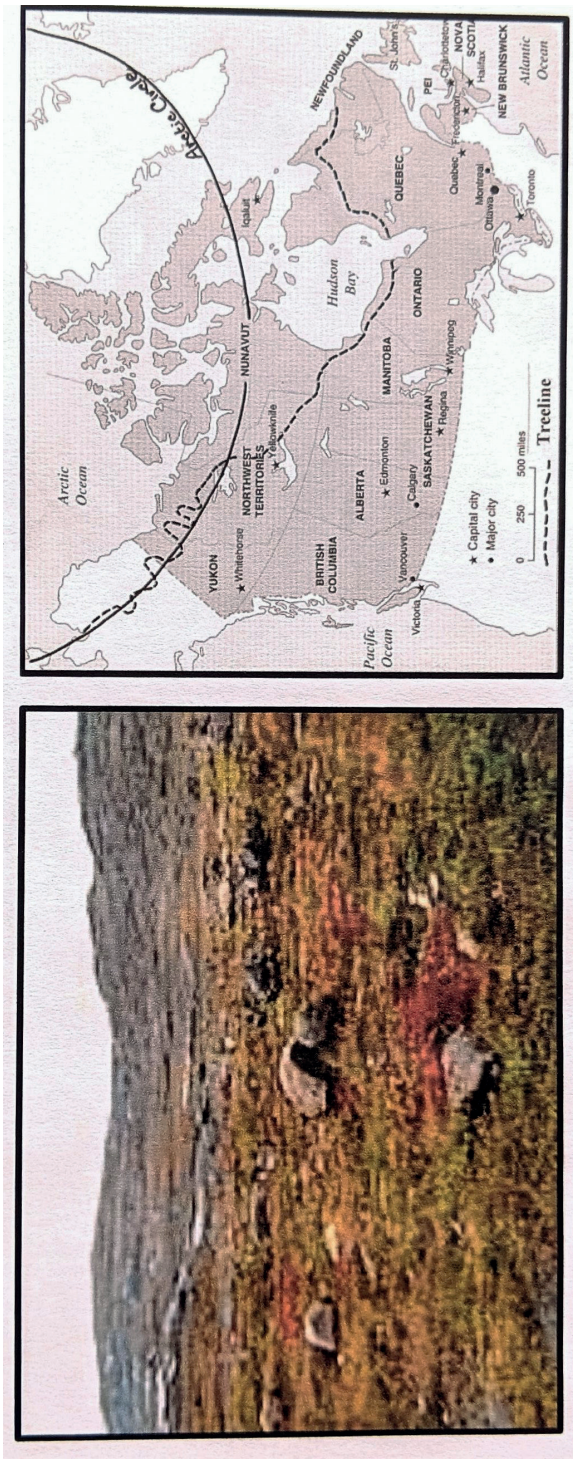
Traditional Inuit music has been based on drums used in dance music as far back as can be known, and a vocal style called *katajjaq* (Inuit throat singing). Common themes involve hunting, wildlife, their natural surroundings, the weather (numerous synonyms for the one word 'snow' abound greatly), and day-to-day life. The musical characteristics of the Inuit tend to include: recitative-like singing, complex rhythmic organization, relatively small melodic range averaging about a sixth, prominence of major thirds and minor seconds melodically, with undulating melodic movement.

1 Joan Goldi – John Goldi: *Canada's First Peoples*, Goldi Productions, 2007, film and information website: firstpeoplesofcanada.com.

2 Online article *Consensus Nunavut* from website nunavut.www.gov.nu.ca, 2018.

3 Caitlin Amborski: *Social Hierarchy and Societal Roles among the Inuit People*, New York, USA, Saint Lawrence University, 2017, 8.

[Figure 1] Map of the Inuit people in Northern Canada and First Nations in North America.



[Figure 2] A typical landscape picture of the tundra. Far North: north of the tree line (dotted line).

Katajjaq is a type of traditional competitive song, considered a game, usually between two women. It is one of the world's few examples of overtone singing, a unique method of producing sounds. Specifically, the human voice can be selectively amplified by changing the shape of the resonant cavities of the mouth, larynx and pharynx. This resonant tuning allows singers to create apparently more than one pitch at the same time (the fundamental and a selected overtone), while generating only a single fundamental frequency with their vocal folds.

The nature of this special duet singing is a good-natured competition, to see who out-sings the other. When singing (or competing), the two women stand face-to-face and sing using a complex method of following each other in quick alteration; one voice hits a strong accent while the other hits a weak, melding the two voices into a nearly indistinguishable single sound. They repeat brief motifs at staggered intervals, and at times they often imitate sounds of nature of their surroundings, such as geese or caribou. The competition (or, the duet) ends once one runs out of breath, or trips over her own tongue, or begins laughing uncontrollably.

The drum used to accompany the two singers is called a *qilaut*. It is made of caribou skin stretched across the frame and fastened down with a string. The drum can reach one meter in diameter but is usually smaller. It is struck on the edge of the rim by a *qatuk*, or a wooden beater. The resulting sound is a combination of the percussive attack from striking the wood and the resulting vibrations from the stretched membrane. A Jew's harp and other small percussion instruments are also optionally used.

One other unique Inuit instrument is a *tautirut,* which is a bowed zither and is comparable to the Icelandic *fiðla*.[4] Lucien M. Turner described the 'Eskimo violin' in 1894 as being … made of birch or spruce, and the two strings consist of coarse, loosely twisted sinew. The bow has a strip of whalebone in place of horsehair and is rosined with spruce gum. This fiddle is held across the lap when played. It is not clear whether the instrument is indigenous or introduced by Nordic sailors either pre- or post-Columbus. In Peter Cooke's book,[5] he suggests that this instrument is introduced to the Inuit by the Hudson's Bay company sailors from the Orkney Islands and/or Shetland Islands. The Inuit culture is one of the few New World cultures to have a chordophone tradition.[6]

In the south part of Canada (particularly those who live along the 49th Parallel), non-Inuit composers have long been fascinated by a certain myth of the Far North. Themes of great spatial expanse are common, as well as images of the barren land and ice, as well as the endless night that these folks face.[7] Often left to their imagination, they are drawn to its haunting beauty of the landscape (particularly that of the 'Northern Lights'), and the hardiness that the 'Eskimo' [sic] folks must endure to survive the harsh climate and other elements.

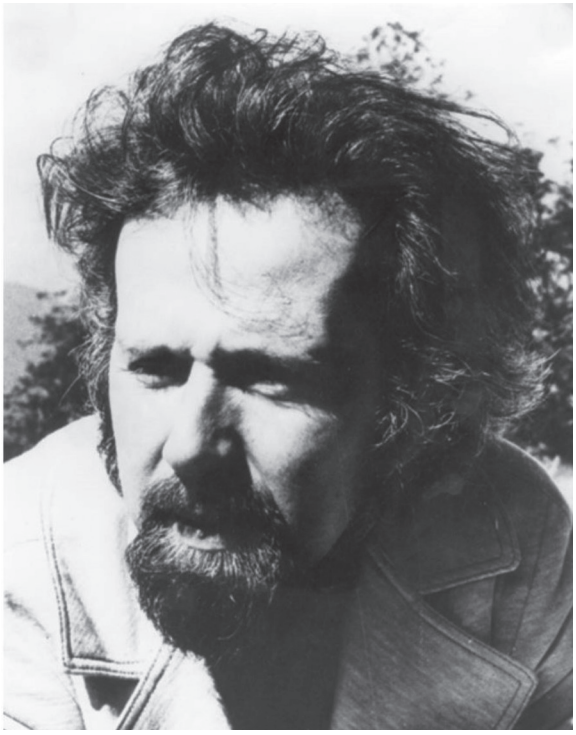
4 Peter Cooke: *The Fiddle Tradition of the Shetland Isles*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 3.

5 *Ibid*. 5.

6 *Ibid*.

7 Incredibly, some regions normally have six months of daylight followed by six months of night.

[Figure 3] Two Inuit singers engaging in traditional *Katajjaq* singing.



[Figure 4] Photograph of R. Murray Schafer.

Two well-respected Toronto-based Canadian composers from the twentieth-century, R. Murray Schafer and Harry Somers, have shown a keen interest in the Far North purely from an aesthetic viewpoint instead of a rigorous study or application of traditional folk idioms into their musical canon. This attitude reflects the isolationist feeling that the Inuit often possess. While their language, customs and music are not reflected in Somers's and Schafer's music directly, exploring their own understanding of the Far North is very revealing, nonetheless.

Schafer (pictured below) was born in Sarnia, Ontario in 1933, and gained an international reputation not only for his work as a composer, but also as an educator, researcher, writer, ecologist, and visual artist. He continues to be a highly prolific composer and has produced works in every musical genre, from opera to music theatre, to chamber and orchestral music, by way of pieces for choir and a variety of soloists. During his teaching years at the Simon Fraser University in Burnaby in the 1970s, he developed 'The World Soundscape Project,' which initiated the modern study of acoustic ecology. Its goal is 'to find solutions for an ecologically balanced soundscape where the relationship between the human community and its sonic environment is in harmony.'[8] The practical manifestations of this goal include education about the soundscape and noise pollution and is reflected in his musical choices.

[8] R. Murray Schafer: *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher,* Scarborough, Ontario, Berandol Music Ltd., 1969, 57.

Other works illustrate Schafer's wide range of artistic interests, such as the twelve-part work for music theatre *Patria*, and his ten string quartets which are among his most significant works. But his attention to understanding and creating what he terms 'soundscapes' remain his paramount interest throughout his career. The composer's celebrated book, *The Tuning of the World* (1977), documents the results of the World Soundscape Project—research that brings together the social, scientific, and artistic aspects of sound and which introduced the notion of sonic ecology.

Schafer's choral piece *Snowforms* (scored for women's choir, 1982) creates a 'landscape' of sounds describing various images of snow. The text is in the Inuktitut language, ranging from 'newly drifted snow' to 'snow like salt' (there are 52 words to describe snow[9]). The Far North was an inspiration as Schafer himself describes in the score's opening pages:

> In 1971 I flew the polar route from Europe to Vancouver over Greenland. Clear weather provided an excellent opportunity to study the forms of that spectacular and terrifying geography. Immediately, I had an idea for a symphonic work in which sustained bulks of sound would be fractured by occasional splinters of colour. That experience remains clear in memory. It suggested the orchestral textures of 'North/White' and it returns now to shape *Snowforms*, yet very differently, for my memory of the vast foldings [sic] of Arctic snow has been modified by the experience of passing winters in Ontario. Often on a winter day I have broken off from other work to study the snow from my farmhouse window, and it is the memory of these forms which has suggested most of the continuous horizon of *Snowforms*.[10]

Using graphic notation, he asks singers to sing 'shapes' or 'drawings' which are representations of snow forms on the distant horizon. Schafer's graphic notation is augmented by suggested pitches and the voices are asked to 'glide' from one pitch to another in a continuous portamento. Timed durations are marked in the score, but Schafer is quite specific that conductors should not feel 'enslaved' by the timed suggestions. Often written for two-part treble chorus (I believe Schafer was musically referencing the traditional two-part *katajjaq*), there are a few times when each of the two parts split into four independent lines. Interestingly, except for the occasional interjection of actual words (various synonyms of the word 'snow' in the Inuit language) the entire piece is hummed, which gives a sense of smoothness and peaceful quietness.[11]

Schafer's earlier orchestral piece, *North/White* (1979) explores issues of destruction of the silence and solitude of the Far North made by man-made noise pollution,

[9] Online source *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 'Inuktitut Words for Snow and Ice,' 2012.

[10] R. Murray Schafer: *Snowforms* for treble voices, text consists of various Inuit words for snow, Arcana Editions, 1983.

[11] Program notes by Diane Loomer, *Elektra Women's Choir*, 2014.

and the score includes the sounds of a snowmobile on stage. These attributes are consistent with Schafer's conception of acoustic ecology (i.e. a 'soundscape'). A great deal of attention of this avant-garde music is placed on spatial sound qualities, both on-stage and sometimes off stage with varying and wide dynamics throughout. In this manner, the music emerges from silence and the score is filled with many allusions to the Far North 'soundscape' (Schafer's interpretation of the overall sounds he imagines the landscape to possess). There are soft whirling noises, whistling by the musicians, multi-phonics in the winds and quarter-tone clusters in the strings. Following the surprising sound of a loud and live on-stage snowmobile, the music ends with a very odd 'flapping' sonority created by an oversized large cardboard sheet, the sound of which suggests the sound of snowshoes softly pawing through the powdered snow.[12]

In his introduction to the score, Schafer writes a poignant message about how symbolic Canadians living along the 49th Parallel view their Far North neighbours:

> The instruments of destruction are pipelines and airstrips, highways and snowmobiles. But more than the environment is being destroyed by these actions, for… Canadians are about to be deprived of the 'idea of the North' which is at the core of the Canadian identity. The North is a place of austerity, of spaciousness and loneliness, the North is pure: the North is temptationless [sic]… The idea of North is a Canadian myth. Without a myth a nation dies.[13]

Canada's other well-respected composer, Harry Somers (1925–1999), composed his iconoclast orchestral masterpiece *North Country* much earlier than Schafer's two works, in the fall of 1948. This is the earliest Canadian work that represents a more symbolic conception of what composers thought of as the music of the Far North, particularly as it embodies more contemporary music techniques rather than to musically portray a soundscape or even a connection to traditional two-part throat singing (as with later works by Schafer as described above). Importantly though, this work is among the first compositions after World War Two that responds to a need for a music with a singular Canadian voice, and to divorce away from the influences of England and France which played a significant impact on the prior generation of composers.[14]

[12] Maria Anna Harley: *Space and Spatialization in Contemporary Music*, dissertation for McGill University, Montreal, 1994. From Chapter 8: 'Soundscapes and Rituals in the music of R. Murray Schafer,' 301–24.

[13] Harry Somers: *North Country*, string orchestra, Berandol Music Ltd., 1948.

[14] Specifically, two Canadian composers dominated the first part of the 20th century: Claude Champagne from Quebec studied in Paris extensively and his music embodies both French elements and some folk qualities of Quebec; and Healy Willan from Ontario, who brought his inimitable conservative British compositional style to Canada when he immigrated from London, England in 1913.

[Figure 5] Photograph of Harry Somers.

Somers was born and raised in Toronto, Ontario, and took an interest in composition only in his late teens. Somers received no professional instruction but persisted in writing all the same. As he said at one time, his early works were 'not imitative because I had no knowledge of much music other than a few classics. I was fortunate in learning to speak for myself at the beginning.'[15] Soon after the end of World War Two, he spent one year in Paris studying with Darius Milhaud and upon his return to Canada, studied with serialist composer John Weinzweig (Canadian founder of the Canadian League of Composers in 1951).

Somers wrote *North Country* soon after his music studies and it was performed by the CBC orchestra in 1948.[16] It remains, more than seventy years later, one of his most frequently played. As biographer Brian Cherney comments, this work is:

> one of Somers' most original achievements. It contains all of the important elements of his language: the lean, highly strung melodic lines; thin transparent textures, often involving considerable contrapuntal organization; the tight thematic control; the use of the extended orchestral crescendo as a structural device; the restless dynamic contrasts; and the tension producing appearance of tonal elements within a non-tonal context.[17]

North Country evokes qualities of the northern Ontario wilderness where Somers visited when he wrote the work: its rugged terrain, bleak landscapes, and tranquility and loneliness, like that of the Far North.

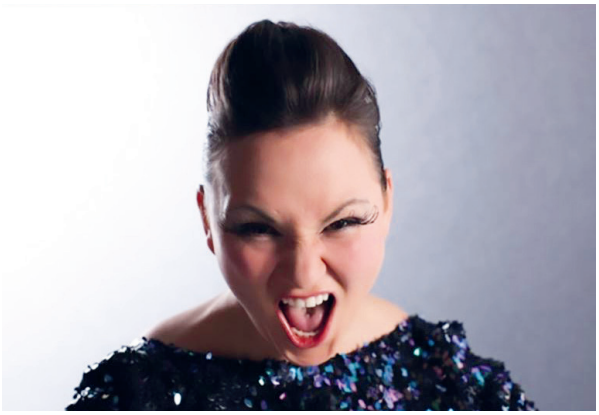
To quote Robert Markow from the National Arts Centre: 'The first movement is the most substantial and serves as a microcosm of nearly every compositional technique Cherney mentions above. The frolicsome second movement begins with rapidly repeated notes played pizzicato and punctuated with descending glissandos. Then follows another slow movement, this one quietly reflective, and the suite

[15] Michael Schulman: liner notes for CD *Canadian String Quartets: Morawetz, Somers, and Glick*, Canadian Music Centre, 1982.

[16] Robert Markow: program notes for Harry Somers: *North Country* as part of the series NAC Orchestral Canadian Composers: Landscape and Soundscape. Online source for Teachers' Centre Home Page, 2010.

[17] Ibid.

ends with a very brief but energetic movement replete with irregular rhythmic patterns.'[18] While nothing in the score relates to traditional Inuit music nor its themes or issues, it is still nonetheless a remarkable and powerful work that exemplifies genuine Canadian intent and content with contemporary musical devices for its time.



[Figure 6] Photograph of Tanya Tagaq.

Citing a well-known proverb: 'if you want a thing done well, do it yourself.' To that end, the very best Inuit music from the last fifteen-odd years is produced by Canada's finest Inuit composer and performer and two-time Juno award winner, Tanya Tagaq. She is a native Nunavut citizen and blends traditional throat singing with electronic, classical, punk and rock music unlike anyone else has done before. The *New Yorker* has described Tagaq's voice as 'guttural heaves, juddering howls, and murderous shrieks' and remarks that her work has 'fearless lack of inhibition, technical skill and mastery of tradition.'[19]

While Tagaq was studying in Halifax at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the early 2000s (and she is also a prolific oil painter), she started developing the unique throat singing of her ancestors (*katajjaq*) and performed for friends at parties. At an exhibition at the Great Northern Arts Festival in Inuvik (Northwest Territories) she sang at a campfire and was asked to perform at the festival, whereupon the well-known Icelandic singer Björk heard her sing. Subsequently, thanks to Björk's encouragement, Tagaq joined her in a world tour and later inspired Björk's music album *Medúlla*.

Tagaq's first official album was entitled *Sinaa* (Inuktitut for 'edge') and included a collaborative duet with Björk called 'Ancestors.' The album was nominated for a Juno for best Aboriginal Recording of the Year 2006 and won a Juno for Best Producer/Engineer and Album Design. From there, her career accelerated with other collaborations such as with the San Francisco based string quartet group Kronos, writing *A String Quartet in Her Throat*. Additional albums explored yet other sounds of the Inuit people such as *Auk/Blood* (2008). In 2009 she worked with film-makers Felix Lajeunesse and Paul Raphael to make a short film featuring her song 'Tungijuq,' which won three prestigious media and dramatic awards in 2009 and 2010.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Laura Stanley: article on Tanya Tagaq for the online *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. The *New Yorker* comments for this paper are drawn from this article. Toronto, August 5, 2015.

Tagaq's most successful album to date is *Animism* (2014), where she explores more aspects of throat singing along with more contemporary musical effects. Writer Geoff Berner describes this as 'dizzyingly complex and sophisticated in structure, it also completely hits you in the guts, in your soul.'[20] When performed at the Polaris Prize performance, a long list of 1,200 murdered and missing indigenous women in Canada were scrolled on a screen. The performance was met with a resounding standing ovation.

Tagaq is controversial in that she often respects her Inuit traditions, such as the annual seal hunt. An outspoken critic, Ellen DeGeneres donated 1.5 million to raise money for the Humane Society of USA, by publishing a selfie at the Oscar ceremonies. Tagaq countered that selfie with a picture of her young daughter lying beside a dead seal. Sparks of protests and threats ensued, not surprisingly. As Tagaq herself defended: 'I had that scroll of 1,200 missing and murdered indigenous women—and that's just in Canada over the last 30 years—and you're freaking out over some seals. It's terrifying to the bone that people would care more about that, and I don't even know how to deal with it.'[21]

I find it encouraging that Tagaq and other Inuit artists (such as Kathleen Ivaluarjuk Merritt, as well as Alacie Tullaugaq and Lucy Amarualik who perform in the *katajjaq* style) honour their traditions and past to the extent that they promote their own unique culture and values through their music and interpretations to the broad public and the world at large. The Inuit people are marginalized due to their remote location and are plagued by social-economic problems such as increased suicide rates, depression due to long winters and their livelihood endangered by the changing climate. While most Canadians living along the 49th Parallel have their own understanding of a Canadian identity, I believe the music of the indigenous people, particularly those of the Far North, should be better heard and understood. This would be consistent with the national values that Canadians enjoy by incorporating our full understanding of all peoples and their music and culture that comprise this vast and wonderful land.

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

Figure 4: Photograph of R. Murray Schafer. Courtesy of the Canadian Music Centre.
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Figure 6: Photograph of Tanya Tagaq. Courtesy of Helen Britton, manager and PR agent

Abstract

The music of the Inuit people from the Far North of Canada is a rich but often marginalized tradition. My paper will consider this indigenous traditional music and the issues surrounding it. I will investigate the music of two non-Inuit Canadian composers and their views of the Far North. Finally, I will discuss the music and style of a contemporary musician from the Far North who successfully integrates traditional and contemporary idioms.

Keywords
Inuit people, indigenous traditional music in Canada, Canadian composers

Rezümé

A Kanada északi részén élő inuitok zenéje gazdag hagyományokkal büszkélkedhet, ennek ellenére kevéssé kutatott tudományterület. Tanulmányunk ezen őslakos zenei tradíciót és az ezzel kapcsolatos kérdéseket veszi górcső alá, ezenkívül két nem inuit kanadai zeneszerző műveivel és a távoli Északról vallott felfogásukkal is foglalkozik. Ezt követően a tanulmány egy távoli Északról származó, kortárs zenész műveit és stílusát is vizsgálja, akit az tesz különlegessé, hogy a hagyományos és a kortárs zene kifejezőeszközeit sikeresen gyúrja egybe.

Kulcsszavak
inuitok, kanadai őslakosok hagyományos zenéje, kanadai zeneszerzők