Topics to Consider in Unit III

- *How might we understand "symbolism" in general? As relates to the meaning of vocabulary? And, specifically in musical expressions?*

- *What are some of the main tools and considerations in "de-coding" symbols of culture or music?*

- *What is "intuition"? What are the blocks to developing and trusting intuition? And – how can we better develop it?*

- *What are some of the most important and pervasive symbols in Native American culture systems? And – how might we benefit personally from a better (deeper) understanding of Native symbolism?*

- *What is a "pow-wow" and what does it represent to Native Americans?*

- *What is the significance of the "drum," dance, and the circle in the pow-wow experience?*

- *What is the significance of the pow-wow, flute music, and specific rituals, ancestry, history in general to Mr. Bedeau, Mr. Locke, Mr. Burga, Tiger/Tiger, and Casper respectively?*

- *How important are "songkeepers" to Native traditions?*

- *What is "culture balancing" and how might it be important, if not essential, to improving the quality of our lives?*

- *How can we manifest in our lives – through such tools as the "talking circle" — deeper listening skills as manifest in many Native cultures?*

- *What sort of music or messages do young Native musicians have for us today?*

UNIT III

Native America: The Spirit in Symbolism

"There is only one thing which can master the perplexed stuff of epic material into unity; and that is an ability to see in particular human experience some significant symbolism of man's general destiny." Lascelles Abercrombie, *British Poet Quotes*, 1881-1938.

"When a man does a piece of work which is admired by all we say that it is wonderful; but when we see the changes of day and night, the sun, the moon, and the stars in the sky, and the changing seasons upon the earth, with their ripening fruits, anyone must realize that it is the work of someone more powerful than man." Chased-by-Bears (1843-1915) Santee-Yanktonai[3.0]

"If we knew the extent to which Indian ideas have shaped American culture, the United States might recognize Native American societies as cultural assets from which we could continue to learn. Indian history is the antidote to pious ethnocentrism of American exceptionalism, the notion that European Americans are God's chosen people. We must temper our national pride with critical self-knowledge." James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Touchstone, 1995, p.136.

Understanding the Aesthetics of a Culture … Through Its Symbolism

Perhaps you've had the experience where someone said or did something that you were certain you understood, only to find out later you had completely misunderstood the person's intentions. Maybe you were even a little offended, only to find out that the person's actions had, for this person, a completely opposite meaning from that of your initial interpretation. If meaning in expressions is *not universal* in communications within our own languages or cultures, then it must be even less so in languages or cultures in which we are uninitiated. In fact, all communication is *symbolic* in its nature. Words, facial expressions, body language, colors, movement, and sounds all require reading and interpretation before they take on meaning.

What comes into your mind (which files "surface") when you see the words:

HUMILITY

RELIGION

ROCK 'N' ROLL

Is **humility** embarrassment (to humiliate)—or is it putting others' lives or opinions ahead of our own?

Is **religion** your church or synagogue, mosque or temple? Is it your beliefs or a particular orientation or the beliefs of others? Or is it "re-connection" to a higher purpose in life (the original meaning from the Latin pre (re) and suffix (ligion see Unit V)?

And is **rock 'n' roll** heavy metal, or is it the music of Elvis, Kiss, or Jimi Hendrix? Or perhaps the music of Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, or the Chinese artist Cui Jian?

Human expressions and communications are filled with imagery, are constantly changing, and are subject to the creative nature of each culture group in each generation. In general, understanding what sounds and words *mean* requires deep reading into their *symbolism.*[3.1] In most music, an appeal is made to our emotions and senses, frequently without a concrete *factual,* or verbalized, communication. For these reasons, a music appreciator must learn to become a deeper listener or reader of symbolism.

Music is oftentimes defined as *sounds and pitches organized in time,* which have meaning to those who create them. Music is a combining of vibrations (sounds) that frequently have both pitched (recognizable frequencies) and un-pitched sounds and, however organized, have at least some intention or purpose behind them. The question for us is: what is the purpose or meaning? That is, if those who make the music create their organization of sounds with an intent foreign to our experience, what tools can we use to understand its meaning?

If we can accept the simple premise that music, even more than words, is laden with symbolic meaning, just as we accept that words do not have inherent meaning but are given meaning according to our personal experiences and acquired values, then our goal becomes more defined. If we strive to postpone judgment or opinions, put a blanket on our biases or prejudgments, and *listen* more *deeply* to what is *symbolized* by the sounds, then we ask of the music: What is really being "said" (communicated)?

Perceptual "Tools" for Decoding Symbolism in Music

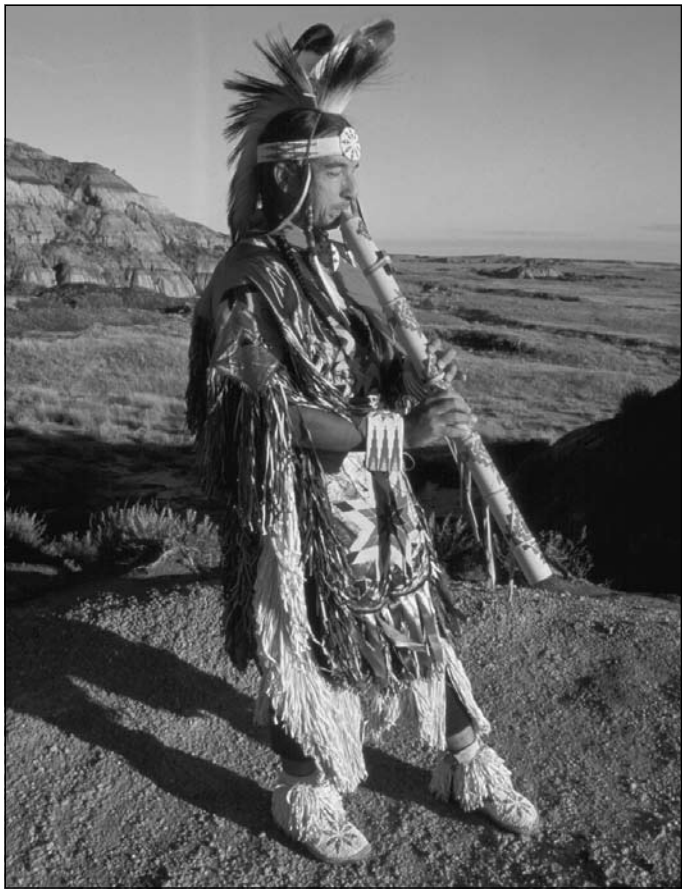
Motivation is the ever-reoccurring partner in the acquisition of skills and knowledge. One motivation for "decoding" the symbolism in the expressions of others may be that this skill is as helpful in understanding the meaning in simple conversations with friends and family as it is in understanding the expressive nature of Chinese opera. After motivation it is then essential to learn the skills that can help us question the meaning of human expression, whether in the world of words, the world of images, or the world of sound.

Verbal and Nonverbal

Most songs that are instructional, factual, or literal are generally not created as "art," nor are they generally designed to communicate as deeply to the emotion or spirit as to the intellect. In the majority of music with poetic lyrics, however, we are both required to explore nonverbal communication and to understand the depth of the intent or meaning of the text. We generally do not know, unless we read the musicians' or composer's intent for the composition, the exact or literal intent of the artists themselves. So we must be content to infer our own meaning from the organization of sounds. This is where we come back to our own file systems.

How we might use or perceive one piece of music, how we might interpret a song or musical piece in our world, might be completely different from the world behind the musical piece. Each culture has a wide diversity of skills and *aesthetics* in human expression. Among the expressive variations in music is the depth to which culture groups use nonverbal communication—body posture, eye contact, hand gestures, and a host of other nonverbal means including pitches and vibrations, to express themselves. Following is a partial list of considerations to help us better perceive nonverbal communication in order to grasp larger portions of the *symbolic* meaning in music. Note: Some of these assume we have access to persons from the culture in some form or another (email, in-person, telephone, oral histories, or documentation from within the culture through film, photography, or art).

- The duration of a culture's history will greatly impact the "symbols" in its music. The older the culture, the longer the traditions and depth of interconnection to ancestry and to the symbolism of various phases in the culture's evolution. This means that, with cultures that have a history spanning millennia, we must be prepared to read multiple symbols within a singular expression that could reflect numerous generations, past to present.



Pic. 3.1 *Kevin Locke playing a flute in the Dakotas.* Photo: Courtesy of Mr. Locke and Bruce Wendt.

Suggestions: We can *practice*—by reading transcriptions of oral histories or texts, or by having discussions with the culture-bearers. We can keep our questions open and remember that whatever may sound "primitive," "ancient," or "foreign" to our ears *will unquestionably* still relate to the commonality of our mutual human experience and have a parallel in some fashion to our world. Additionally, we must always be prepared to change and update our perceptions. Especially today, the *tradition* (in a fixed sense) of yesteryear is not likely to be the *tradition* (as in something giving way to something else) of today. Even when we have an accurate perception of symbols based upon an interpretation of the past, it is not likely to be the same interpretation as that of the culture's representatives today.

- If there is text or storytelling in the music, unless we know the language of the culture very well, we must be prepared to simply not know and to look for "clues" in the music or nonverbal messaging. Even if we gain access to the culture-bearers, it can still be complex to decode the symbolism of their responses. The answers we receive will directly correlate to the degree of trust the culture-bearers feel for our motives and the depth of sensitivity or respect of our questions—and will still be encoded with meaning based upon the culture-bearers' history.

If there is no text, or we cannot ask questions to gain access to the inner circle of the symbols, we must always assume that there is meaning beyond or deeper than any meaning we can immediately perceive. This simply means we assume greater depth and value as a habit. If we find out later that the piece was simply a "joke," a party tune, or a piece of simple entertainment, we have at least not underestimated its value.

The Power of Intuition

Discussion Reflection III-A

in·tu·i·tion (in'too-ish'un,) n.

1 a) *The act or faculty of knowing or sensing without the use of rational processes; immediate cognition.*

b) *Knowledge gained by the use of this faculty; a perceptive insight.*

2 *A sense of something not evident or deducible; an impression.*

Does needing to "know," having "factual" support or statistical justifications, have limitations? When we sense something to be true, is there a science in the possible interconnection of the human soul or spirit with its source of creation? Can this connection be as (or more) valid than anything that is material or tangible?

Against the backdrop of hundreds of years of education founded on material and statistical science is the generally less supported "reality" of intuition. However, becoming both keenly aware and trusting of our intuitive faculties, against the daunting task of "proving" them, has left many of us reluctant if not completely negligent in developing this marvelous ability.

The capacity for trusting and increasing our intuitive and/or spiritual powers lies first in our self-esteem and self-confidence. From there, the capacity to investigate truth, to see alternatives, and to trust that small voice whispering from within, can begin to grow.

Questions

- *Must we be school-trained in order to be "knowledgeable"?*
- *Without intuition, how do we understand someone speaking or singing in a language we do not speak? How do we understand the needs of a very young child or, perhaps, a pet?*
- *How do we know what is right or wrong, especially when the apparent "right" may be the minority opinion? How can the power of "intuition" be more fully developed and, ultimately, trusted?*

Native American Symbolism: The "World" of the Circle

> *"Myths by their nature need not be negative. When, however, myths that concern the construct of perceptions which diminish human potential, undermine the respect and integrity of groups of people, or restrict the implementation of cultural and social justice across centuries get implanted, it is critical that they are explored, decoded and eventually replaced in the interest of justice." In Search of Truth: A Re-examination of Western Academia in the Context of 'World,'* c.2004, Center for Cultural Healing, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Although there are many instances wherein diverse human culture groups come into contact in peace and respect for each other (which seldom make our history books), there are many as well in which the contact process is marred by a lack of understanding for the symbols and expressive features of the opposite culture group. The unfortunate nature of the European settling of the Americas and the generally negative result of the contact these individuals had with the indigenous cultures are by now mostly known. Even more devastating is the impact that the arrogance of a minority of individuals has had, through the eventual establishment of policies and institutions in government, on nearly every political, economic, and educational institution, for generations. Despite the fact that there might have been generations of individuals who would have sincerely loved a unilaterally respectful connection to Native cultures, to the sophistication of indigenous religion, to the symbolism in their honoring and respect for ancestry and their environment, and, most especially, to the enormous dignity and passion exhibited in their music and dance, there has been instead a void in Western education as well as romantic illusions that will take gen-