

## Powwow Time for String Quartet or Piano Trio: Flag Song

Notes by Judith Vander

The intertribal Native American powwow has become one of the most important events, or "Indian doings" as they are called, on the Native American calendar. I have been privileged to experience the powwow firsthand during many years of studying Wind River Shoshone music and culture. The powwow is a time to get together with family and friends, to proudly assert one's Indian identity and heritage through dance and song, and last but not least, to thoroughly enjoy oneself. A tribal community hosts a weekend of dancing and singing. People from many states come, camp, and compete for generous cash prizes in dance contests. Indian song, Indian dance, a good time shared by many local and visiting participants--that, in a nutshell, is the ideal and flavor of Northern Plains' powwows.

At the beginning of each powwow evening, a war veteran is the honored person to carry the American flag across the powwow arena. It is a solemn and deeply moving moment: everyone rises and men remove their hats. A drum group sings a Flag song as the veteran moves with a dignified dance-step. The Flag song is the surrogate for the national anthem, merging the double allegiances of the Indian community into one.

Powwow time, in my piece, refers to the musical characteristics of powwow music in general, and specifically, the Flag song. I have

composed a Flag song whose melody, rhythm, and form draw inspiration from its actual counterpart in the powwow.

Drum groups provide the musical accompaniment for the powwow dances. The musicians encircle a large drum that has been tipped on its side, and beat in unison on it while also singing. The lead singer sings a high opening phrase, which the rest of the singers repeat: a call and response. Then all sing together as the song descends to lower and lower phrase levels. A long final note marks the end of the first big section of the song. The second section is the same as the first, except it omits the opening call and response. This basic song repeats many times during the course of a dance. My composition follows the descending melodic contour and two-part form, which are characteristic of the Flag song and other powwow song genres.

The drumbeat is at the center of every powwow song. It plays alone at the start and sets the tempo for the singing. The Flag song has its own distinctive drum pattern: there are two beats in every measure (2/4 time), but the drum only hits on beat one. A fascinating aspect of powwow songs is the relationship of the voice to the drum. Unlike Western music, the drumbeat and the voice do not come in precisely together on the beat, but rather one part enters ever so slightly before the other. It imparts an almost imperceptible subtlety to the music. Responding to this a-synchronous quality between voice and drum, I have written a flurry of fast notes around the first beat of each measure in these pieces.

The Flag song tempo is slow and measured. These characteristics lend a majestic and stately quality to the music, a sense of time slowed down, of time out of time.

Singing style is another key aspect of all Plains songs. Singers mark the end of sections in a variety of ways. The final notes of sections are almost always on the lowest and longest note of the melody. But it is the way that they sing this note that sets it apart from the rest of the melody. Singers create a pulsing sound -- rhythmic waves of louder/softer sound on the last note. Mozart ornamented long cadence tones with trills—a fast alternation of two pitches. Powwow singers achieve a similar effect through fast alternation of dynamic levels. I have overlapped repeated patterns between the instruments to create the effect of the pulsation of powwow singers.

Finally, singers end the long last note in a decrescendo as their voices trail down to an indefinable lower pitch and silence. In instrumental music, such as Native American flute music, the final note is handled the same way, except that it trails up to an indefinable higher pitch and silence. Because my piece is an instrumental piece, I have followed this convention.

Composing this piece has been a balancing act. On the one hand are the musical characteristics of a Flag song--its structure, its rhythms, its melodic contour, and the way singers sing and drum these elements. On the other hand is my own background in Western music. I have attempted to blend these two musical skeins into a tightrope and to walk across it. However, the all important

context and meaning of the authentic Flag song and my non-powwow reflection of it remain and will ever be worlds apart.