Surviving Racist Music Pedagogies: A Conversation

MELODY MCKIVER and JESSICA MCMANN

This conversation between Jessica McMann and Melody McKiver came about at the second Indigenous Classical Music Gathering held at the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity in December 2021. The first two Indigenous Classical gatherings in 2019 and 2021 were founded and curated by the Cree-Mennonite cellist and composer Cris Derksen. Invited participants were professional Indigenous early- and mid-career musicians and composers whose artistic training and practices are (partially) based in Western European classical music traditions. Gathering participants quickly found comfort and validation in being able to relate to Indigenous peers about shared experiences in our respective music educations. Commonly related experiences include experiences of racism (whether overt hatred or recurring microaggressions), additional barriers in accessing a music education, and a frustration with mainstream Canadian classical music institutions that can be slow to listen to Indigenous creatives.

Melody McKiver (they/them) is an Anishinaabe composer, violist, and educator. A member of Lac Seul First Nation in Treaty #1, they were raised in Ottawa and are now based in Winnipeg, Treaty #1. At the time of this interview, they were an assistant professor of music composition at Brandon University and moved to the University of Manitoba as an assistant professor of Indigenous music in July 2022.

Jessica McMann (she/her) is a Cree multidisciplinary artist based in Alberta (Cowessess First Nation). Her dance and music creation/performance practice weaves land, Indigenous identity, history, and language, fusing together traditional language and dance with her own contemporary experiences as an Indigenous woman and Two-Spirit person. A classically trained flutist, she holds a bachelor's degree in music from the University of Calgary and an MFA in contemporary arts from Simon Fraser University.

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Both Melody and Jessica are millennial musicians close in age who have studied at a number of Canadian universities throughout their respective academic careers. Knowing that among participants at the second Banff gathering, Jessica was reflective and outspoken about her experiences and persistence in pursuing post-secondary education in music and dance, Melody proposed an interview for the purpose of this publication. Also invited, but unable to participate due to conflicting schedules, was Beverley McKiver. Beverley took an early retirement from a career in IT to retrain in piano pedagogy and pursue a second career as a pianist, educator, and composer. Beverley is a frequent collaborator with Jessica and is also Melody's mother.

The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Melody McKiver [MM]: This is Melody McKiver and Jessica McMann in discussion at the Banff Centre on December 14, 2021. This conversation is in response to the call for proposals from *MUSICultures* for the special issue on anti-racist pedagogies. I wanted to have this conversation between the two of us, both Indigenous composers and performers who have faced challenges and barriers in Canadian university music education through the graduate level. I thought this would be a really great opportunity for us to discuss some of the issues that come up in this call for proposals.

To briefly contextualize for the interview, could you provide readers with a bit of your educational experience and current artistic practice?

Jessica McMann [JM]: I have a bachelor of music from the University of Calgary — which took me eleven years to get and three different schools until I returned to the University of Calgary. I did a few years at the University of Manitoba in jazz, and then left jazz and went into Native studies, and then I left the school. I studied at the University of Victoria through the Enow'kin Centre for three months. I attempted to go to the Mennonite University, and then I went back to the University of Calgary. I did some classes at Mount Royal College before that, and my courses were about to expire and I didn't want to start year one again in music. I was accepted to the University of Lethbridge, but as a first-year student. So I decided to go to the University of Calgary and I finished my degree in one year.

I then went to Simon Fraser University for a master of fine art in contemporary arts, which is an interdisciplinary degree. I went in as a musician and I came out as a dancer. And that's my history with school, and I finished my MFA early. I finished my degree early because I just wanted to get out of there.

My artistic practice is many, many years of dancing, with music off and on, as I attempted school and then quit school and attempted school and quit school and didn't have any music jobs. I didn't play music because I had no opportunities in music. So, I just danced until 2016, when I went back to school. And then in 2019, following the first Indigenous classical gathering at the Banff Centre, music picked up, and lots of opportunities came. So now I'm doing music and dance. So, it's not like I haven't been doing music forever. I've been playing it for myself forever. I've been taking lessons forever, but not considered a "professional musician" until the last few years.

MM: The first point I wanted to bring up for discussion is in the *MUSICultures* call for proposals, Dylan Robinson's letter is quoted, where he states that it is time to transform "systems of music education into spaces where different epistemologies and values of music and worldviews are equally supported" (2019, 137). I want to give the floor to Jessica first and ask how did you — or did you not — feel valued sharing different world views within your music education?

JM: Different world views were definitely not valued. There is no space in which it was valued or an opportunity to even bring that in. Unless, of course, it was Katherine Hoover's Kokopelli for solo flute, which is super problematic and all her Native-inspired flute works. People love that. They eat it up. You know, I had a flute teacher actually apologize for giving that to me to play in university, which was really nice, but it's been twelve years or longer. It was 2006 when she gave that to me and then she apologized this year [2021] — but at least she apologized.

I wasn't allowed to read Leanne Simpson's *As We Have Always Done*. It wasn't "academically rigorous" enough for the people who I was studying with in my masters. So even when I did try to bring in Indigenous world views, well, it was a big fight. My MFA is in Indigenous creation methodologies, and I fought for that. I had Dr. June Scudeler (Métis) be on my supervising committee, so that helped a lot. In the last few months of my program, we had some really good discussions, but in the first year of my MFA, it was a real fight to bring anything from Indigenous world views in.

MM: What is it about the Canadian music economy that has led it to feel like you haven't been able to establish yourself as a professional musician for such a long time?

JM: I think, one, I was told I wasn't good enough. So, I believed I was never good enough. And now [that I'm over twenty-four] I'm considered too old, which limits my opportunities. So, after twenty-four you're viewed as too old [in some circles], and [by working around traditional career pathways, my artistic practice is] not considered air quote, "professional."

You really need recommendations from your music teachers for all of the [professional opportunities, which I never received]. So I'm not getting the opportunities that other music students get... Or the music teachers I've encountered are just racist and don't want to support me. It's very difficult. Yeah. [long pause] I needed to come to the Banff Centre and be a part of [the second Indigenous Classical Music Gathering] to be considered a "professional musician."

MM: The gathering first occurred in 2019, and I believe it was really the first of its kind within Canada. There's certainly been initiatives [for Indigenous classical musicians] in the US and Australia over the years, having very similar conversations. I believe we will be looking to extend these conversations on a more international scope, hopefully for our next gathering in 2023. But these first two gatherings at the Banff Centre brought together a collection of performers and composers. And I think for many of us, there's a collective relief in the room where we've always been the only Indigenous person in any classical music space. I think for many of us at these gatherings, it was really a healing space that validated that our experiences of racism, especially through music education and performance in Canada, weren't exclusive to us.

MM: [These experiences of racism are] part of a larger systemic phenomena. And so, seeing a discussion on decolonizing music pedagogies [in this *MUSICultures* issue], it's certainly a loaded term for many of us. Many Indigenous musicians are fully on board that there are significant things that need to shift within music. For myself, one of my recurring questions is suddenly seeing *decolonizing* become a buzzword in the last few years. I was told in 2011, when I was still a graduate student, that I was "groundbreaking," and I was one of the first people to talk about decolonization in music. I shouldn't have been seen as groundbreaking; these were common discussions in other disciplines! By now I'm kind of over talking about decolonization in music, but everybody else is on board ten years later.

When I revisit Tuck and Yang from 2012, this quote really resonates with me. According to them:

> … decolonize, a verb and decolonization, a noun, cannot easily be grafted onto preexisting discourses or frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist even if they are justice frameworks, the easy absorption, adoption and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor. It is not as an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym. (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3)

They emphasize in their abstract,

> Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to "decolonize our schools," or use "decolonizing methods," or, "decolonize student thinking," turns decolonization into a metaphor. (Tuck and Yang 2012: 1)

JM: That's it! *Decolonization* now is like a feel-good word. "Oh, we did our research on decolonizing our curriculum and now we feel good about ourselves, but we're not actually going to change anything." Or, "we got all the money and we spent it and now we're not actually going to hire the Indigenous professor," you know? It is really frustrating.

MM: I know my own gut reaction, but do you feel that decolonization is possible when we're talking about Canadian university music studies?

JM: I would say no, but also there's hope, but it's just such an entrenched thing. You cannot change it because the structures are embedded at every level. When students leave the school, they're going into a world that's built from these existing foundations. They're learning from their beginnings in the Orff or Suzuki methods. Then they go into the Royal Conservatory or Conservatory Canada and they have their private teachers. They get their grade 8, and then they're going into university. All those systems exist everywhere. So, can we decolonize it? [long pause] It's just too much to think about, there's no space for anything else.

MM: For myself, I keep coming back to that one excerpt from Tuck and Yang (2012): "decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (1). So, for me, that's always the fundamental question: is this musical action going to give Indigenous peoples any land back? No, the answer is generally no. And I tell my colleagues in music scholarship as well, unless we're talking about overthrowing governments and returning land (and we're not), we need to set our expectations for decolonization in schools of music accordingly. However, I do believe that there is a lot of room for growth and change if we take a broader look at anti-racist initiatives within music education. Speaking to this gathering at the Banff Center, I think we're all here because we love music.

JM: Mm-hmm.

MM: And we have fought through a lot of unnecessary trauma within our experiences of music education to continue to appease the gatekeepers and create work to the best of our abilities. I question whether a lot of this gatekeeping and these pedagogical strategies remain necessary. I mean, we're only a couple of decades out of things like corporal punishment in instrumental music education being common practice. I mean, I'm sure it still happens behind closed doors. So, there's epistemological and physical violence that occurs throughout Canadian music education.

I think there's multiple conversations happening at the same time, and sometimes wires get crossed. Now that I have a faculty position, I'm thinking about the experience for Indigenous music students. I want to be able to extend additional support to Indigenous students. Especially if Indigenous musicians are coming from rural or Northern communities. Frequently they're not going to have the same level of access to that Western musical education in Wunnumin Lake or The Pas that an upper middle-class kid in Winnipeg or Calgary would have. It's an unequal playing field. And it doesn't mean that these students are less than, it just means that there are structural inequalities.

JM: So often people in institutions believe that Indigenous music students are less than. They perpetuate this [anti-Indigenous] racism, and that's why anti-racism should come before decolonization.

MM: For sure. And I think that lack of Indigenous self-esteem that we see in so many of our musical peers and community, it's something that's generations in the making. It is a Canadian legacy, based on systemic inequalities in educational opportunities for Indigenous students. I'm not aware if anyone's tracking these numbers, but I do believe informally that the numbers of Indigenous students

are increasing in music programs. I'm aware of multiple Indigenous students at Brandon University. And within our cohort here at the Banff Centre, I think very few of us ever had an Indigenous classmate anytime, anywhere, any school!

JM: I did! At the University of Calgary, there was another flute player. She was Ojibwe. She didn't make it. She left by her second year. There was no place for her. They placed her in the general music program, so she didn't have access to flute lessons. She didn't have access to all of the stuff that really helps. So, she didn't make it through the music degree.

And then while I was at the University of Manitoba, there was a classical guitarist who was Oji-Cree. But we didn't have anything to do with each other because I was in the jazz program and there's a very clear divide between classical and jazz students. And then the jazz players were stereotyped as those who "couldn't read music," even though we all could. It was very much a class divide between classical and jazz, so we didn't talk to each other. He graduated, but I didn't make it through the program. When I returned to the University of Calgary, there was nobody else who was Indigenous. So, I was lucky to have one peer in each school, but only one of us made it through.

MM: I'll walk back my own statement because Corey Payette (Oji-Cree musician and composer and another Banff Indigenous Classical alumni) and I were both at York University music at the same time. He graduated a year before me. I was very entrenched in university music life and lived on campus for a long part of it. And Corey was a working actor downtown and was in and out from campus to get the degree as quickly as possible. We didn't meet until a decade later.

JM: Even though I was in school at the same time as a few other Indigenous students, there was no connection [between us]. It was very, you know, hide your Indigenous-ness. You know, I [was able to navigate music school] because my [adoptive] dad is Norwegian/Irish. When I went back to school, I didn't tell anybody I was Indigenous. [Students would ask me about my ethnicity and] I'd say, "Oh, well my dad's Irish and my mom's from the Ukraine."

I was found out as Cree in the winter semester when some guy asked, "Excuse me, but are you native?" "Mm-hmm." "And do you dance powwow, because we'd like to hire a dancer," and it just so happens I do. So, they didn't believe my story [omitting that I was Indigenous]. I mean, my [adoptive] parents are Irish and Ukrainian, but I'm adopted. It kind of helped because I wasn't visibly perceived as Indigenous — for example, I didn't wear beaded

earrings. I was trying to be on the down low, but I think it's harder for me to hide than other people [because I'm not white-passing.]

MM: I want to follow up with that, as I think it is helpful for readers to understand how racism really manifests itself in Canadian music spaces. I'll share one of my own experiences during my studies. I took a course with a professor who specialized in Indigenous music research. Once we finished the class, they added all of the students on Facebook. I was a racialized Indigenous youth in a new city and was really struggling to adapt. On Facebook, I was vocal about the racism I was experiencing on a regular basis. One evening I posted on Facebook about a car full of young people that had deliberately swerved toward me while I was biking. This professor got so frustrated with me frequently naming the racism that I was living through that they [messaged] me on Facebook and told me, "If I hate it here so much, I should go back to where I came from." The irony is this was a settler researcher of Indigenous music that was telling me, as an Indigenous person, to "go back to where I came from."

JM: That just makes me so mad. "Go back to where you came from." Well, I'm from here. It reminds me of these common conversations, where people ask, "Where are you from?" I always say, "I'm from here," but people will push and ask, "Where are you really from?" No, "but are you from some other country? Because you have a different skin complexion." "I'm from here." They don't get it.

MM: In 2021, I joined the music faculty at Brandon University. The position that I applied for was the first time I had seen a targeted Indigenous hire by a Canadian music department. And as someone that's been involved in Indigenous academic spaces since I was a graduate student, targeted hires are not an uncommon practice for Canadian universities. There's been a number of Indigenous cluster hires since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report in 2015. There have been targeted Indigenous hires in many different areas of study, but very few to date in music. [*In July 2022 McKiver moved to a similar targeted Indigenous position with the Desaultels Faculty of Music at the University of Manitoba. A small number of other Canadian university music programs are presently hiring comparable targeted Indigenous music positions.*]

JM: It's usually art or literature for Indigenous hires. But often nobody gets hired for those positions and then the position is gone. And I really don't like seeing that, so I have applied to Indigenous art and English positions because there are no positions for music in the area that I want to live in.

MM: So, what do you think it is about music as a discipline that [it] has been so hesitant to do any sort of targeted hiring and engagement of Indigenous faculty on a meaningful level, not just a single sessional course?

JM: I feel like music programs are scared to open the doors [to Indigenous scholars]. One, because they've heard the conversations and seen the changes in other faculties, and two, it would destabilize their entire way of being in music. Because there's a ratio of women musicians [presented] in the [Western canon] history, you get Clara Schumann sprinkled in a music history course. That's [the extent of] the diversity [commonly found in university music programs]. Then there's the appropriation of Indigenous and [other] cultural music from around the world. From the seventies onward, many schools have had a focus on contemporary new music. [Canadian music programs] don't want to have [Indigenous scholars] come for all these [settler Canadian composers] that appropriate and steal Indigenous cultural music from around the world. And that's the whole thing [of mainstream Canadian classical music]. That's what they teach. It's going to change, and they don't want to.

MM: Mm-hmm.

JM: Some of the people who've been teaching in music programs have been teaching there for decades; it reminds me of *The Chair*. Music departments want to hire people who think like them so they can maintain the status quo. And also, some music scholars are just racist and don't want to have Indigenous or Black students in their faculty. Some music faculty think these horrible things about Indigenous people because they learned it from their parents and their [North American] schooling. Racists want Indigenous people to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, get over ongoing colonialism, and stop complaining. I've been told in university music spaces to "stop complaining."

I had a professor yell at me once. They wore fringe boots [to campus.] They didn't want me to yell at them about appropriation for wearing fringe. I didn't even notice [the boots.] I was called into their office so they could yell at me about appropriation. That's racism right there. [I was told by more than one professor,] "You don't belong here. You should just drop out." Then I did! Why? Because [many music professors are] racist and don't want an Indigenous person as their student. They don't want to teach an Indigenous student.

I had a professor tell a friend of mine, who's from South America, that she didn't teach poor people, people of colour (except she probably didn't use that term), or farmers. That was brutal. [Many people] don't want to hear these

stories [of racism in music programs], but they're there. [So many racialized] students have these stories, and decolonization [as it's deployed in music studies] doesn't even look at [the student experience]. You have to first look at racism and classism within the faculty [and curriculum].

MM: Yeah, because classism and classical music often go hand in hand. I feel like more ink has been spilled on that topic, but classism is so entrenched. I remember with one of my violin instructors, they described my instrument as, "Oh, it's just this old fiddle. You should really get something better." And for orchestral instruments, the expectation is always that by the time you're playing at the undergraduate level, you need an instrument that costs a minimum of twenty thousand dollars.

JM: I said that I wanted a better flute, and a teacher said, "Oh, you're not going to need it. You're not going to get good enough to have a better flute." And so, then I didn't get a better flute. I got an intermediate flute instead of a professional-level flute. Then [in 2017] I won the REVEAL Indigenous Art Award, and I used that money to buy a new [flute] head joint. My sound is totally different [after upgrading my instrument], and so it wasn't [my lack of ability]. Always being told [I'm not good enough and upgrading my flute won't help my tone] really held me back from a lot of things. I guess that [active discouragement] also stopped me from being a professional musician-composer until recently.

MM: And, of course, [classism in music is] such a sweeping systemic issue. When you look at rates of poverty across Canada, Indigenous people are typically at the bottom of the rung. I still haven't upgraded my "old fiddle," even though poverty hasn't been my experience, because musical instruments costing tens of thousands of dollars aren't within my reach. My parents helped me with getting a modest, but better-quality, viola when I switched from violin midway through my undergrad. I wouldn't have been able to switch instruments without their support.

JM: I still think about how being told that I don't deserve to get a better flute held me back from something that I wanted, which was to do the National Youth Orchestra auditions. [Once I gained the confidence,] I couldn't audition because I was too old. [NYO auditions are limited to ages sixteen to twenty-eight.] But if I had been encouraged to get that better flute, then I think everything would've changed. I wouldn't have been struggling with my cheap flute.

MM: I know my self-esteem has come a long way since I was an undergraduate, but I'm also realistic with the barriers that still exist. For example, when the Canada Council Musical Instrument Bank auditions come up, I've had Indigenous community members outside of music see the ads and encourage me to apply. I have to try and explain [to non-musician Indigenous community members] that I'm not a classical concert soloist that meets the Canada Council's criteria. I'm a crossover artist and primarily perform my own compositions. I know that I am not going to make it through the consideration of this particular jury, and a Black and/or Indigenous artist has never been awarded by the Instrument Bank. So, it's not worth my time and effort. As much as I'd love to be running around with a two-hundred-thousand-dollar violin, I'm also realistic about my odds. Even when well-meaning Indigenous people tell me, "Oh, but you're just so swell. Just go for it!" Sometimes I have to pick and choose my battles. And I know that I'm not an orchestral soloist or chamber artist within the Western art music canon, and those are who the juries select for the Instrument Bank.

JM: I want to be an orchestral soloist, but I noticed that here [at the Banff Centre Indigenous Classical Music Gathering] everyone's self-esteem is pretty low. And I look at everybody here and I think, "Oh my gosh, you're all so amazing, and you're doing all these amazing things and you sound brilliant." Then you hear one of us say, "Well, I can't do this. I'm not good at this."

We Indigenous musicians are always demeaning ourselves. I ask myself, "Why is your self-esteem so low?" I mean, I know it is, but I don't like it when other people's is too. You know, saying things like, "Oh, I have to hide my sound by doing this." Or, "I need to go back to school for technique," or "I don't write classical music," but we're all writing it [Western classical music] and we're all performing it. Or, as I just said, "I know that I could never solo with an orchestra, but I want to one day — maybe."

MM: Likewise. And I think there are some answers to why our self-esteem is so low that needs to just be put on the record.

JM: It's our music teachers.

MM: And if we look broader into the foundational elements of Canada, how many of us have family members that are residential school survivors? Because that trauma passes itself on intergenerationally, even if we ended up in child welfare systems and lost that direct family connection. Child welfare systems have also introduced a whole new level of self-esteem issues.

JM: Who [Canadian child welfare agencies] chose as adoptive parents for the Sixties Scoop was very specific. [Agencies] had a way to talk to [Indigenous adoptees] to make sure we never felt like we were good enough. There was a booklet to tell parents how to raise the "Indian child." My grandmother told me about [the booklet] and she had all the rules. For example, I was not allowed to have sugar. There's just so many things in that booklet I wasn't allowed to do…. It was really about making sure we never thought of ourselves as "too good."

We have been taught through residential schools to self-monitor our communities so that nobody ever is too good or does well, because then they're acting "too good" [common slang in Indigenous communities]. So Indigenous residential school survivors had to sit in this low or mediocrity to exist. And now you have our communities telling ourselves that. So, I play a concert and an Indigenous peer says, "Oh, you're acting too good." Or, "You're acting too white." You have to be really strong to keep working through that. You have these little kids in band and their friends go "Ha! too good." And then they stop going to band because their friends are ridiculing them. And then you have another musician, who's not going to be a musician. It's a larger situation.

MM: I remember once I shared a story about music education on Facebook and spoke really positively. Of course, we know that I have a complicated relationship with music education, but the music teachers that were kind to me, I think really did save my life in a lot of ways. One of my Elders saw the story on Facebook, and she commented: "I hated music education. It was one of my worst experiences in residential school because of how they treated us in those band programs." I think that's also a legacy that Canadian music institutions aren't ready or willing to talk about. This is not ancient history. These people are living. These are living memories of what music education was in a residential school. And the heightened level of abuse that came there.

JM: Marieval Indian Residential School (which operated from 1899 to 1997 on Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan) has a recording of their band program. I tried to get it a few years ago, but then I haven't been able to continue that journey. My birth mom played flute and oboe. I only found that out later, but my birth dad played guitar. So, my birth family was very musical, which brings me to something completely separate. Somebody said to me, "Well you should be very grateful to your adoptive parents for giving you the gift of music." And I said, "Okay, thank you. But actually, it's in my blood because both my birth parents were musical. I did not get that from being raised in a white family."

Sure, [my adoptive parents] paid for my music lessons and stuff, but they did not genetically gift me this ability to play music. It was actually my birth

family [that is musical], and it made me quite angry actually, because it's not my adoptive family. That's happened several times where [people] attribute my successes to my adoptive parents, who don't have any musical DNA in them. They paid for my music lessons because I wanted them, I even had to pay for my own sometimes. Piano lessons were thought of as a torture thing [by my adoptive parents.] And it was, but then I ended up playing flute and liking it and escaping to it. And then there wasn't the same level of support for [the flute]. Once [my adoptive parents] realized that I actually liked music, then they would say, "Well, you can only practise 30 minutes a day." Then [flute] started being used against me because I ended up liking it. So, to have people say, "Oh, well, because you were raised by white people is why you're good at music," really, really irks me.

MM: Yeah. And it seems to be such a recurring theme among our demographic of Indigenous classical music professionals working in Canada. Disproportionately, many of us were a part of the Sixties Scoop. So, it's a very multifaceted area where — and ideally my mother [Beverley McKiver, another Banff gathering participant invited to participate in this interview but who was unavailable] would've been a part of this conversation. I look at my mother's demographic on reserve [in Lac Seul First Nation] that was down the road from the town where she was raised. All of our relatives her age are residential school survivors. And so, they would've had that baseline residential school music education at Pelican Falls, but no private lessons. But what was interesting was seeing that musical pull. When my mom reconnected with one of her younger birth sisters who grew up in the same town, she was also a high-level pianist that studied with the rival piano teacher. And so that musical impulse is there. Looking at the younger generation in our family, with our younger cousins on reserve, many of them are fantastic pianists, completely self-taught off of YouTube. One of them can lift Rachmaninoff by ear and has this phenomenal level of ear training that most conservatory students would kill to have. He has an incredible ear and is a gifted improviser. And I think part of it is because he hasn't been stifled by abusive music education.

Many of our family members are really musical, but we know that a lot of our family on reserve do not have the access to capital or resources for good instruments and music teachers. Some of that Sixties Scoop experience seems to be access to music lessons. It's not putting the joy in — there's not a lot of joy in the Sixties Scoop for the vast majority of folks — but the relocation to more urbanized centres that have these musical infrastructures. So, we see that and it's certainly a complex trauma to navigate.

JM: I feel like part of the force of music lessons on the Sixties Scoop adoptees was also because of this Western idea of having the piano in your living room and being forced to play Christmas songs while everyone's eating dinner. It's a cultural thing, and now we [adoptive parents] can eat dinner and we can have this kid play the music for us.

MM: I think that goes back to the residential school dynamic as well, where the Sixties Scoop is an extension of the same residential school ideas of "let's continue to civilize and assimilate the Indian, Métis, and the Inuit." But instead of having to run these expensive institutions that had come under public scrutiny, it is more efficient [for forced assimilation] to simply sweep everything under the rug and decentralize [by adopting out Indigenous children.]

JM: The assimilation process spread it out. Then [Sixties Scoop survivors] end up reconnecting, because our ties are so strong that we get brought together.

MM: Even the overseas adoptees, they find their way back.

JM: It's funny. My elementary school in Calgary was the same school that half my [biological] family went to. They lived like five blocks away. My brother's kids ended up in the art programs I ran. We get those ties back, even though they try to separate us.

I think if we put it on the record, the reason why [Indigenous musicians face barriers] is because [many] of our music teachers in post-secondary education and high school are racist. I mean, my band teacher was amazing, and I told him that recently. My junior high school band teacher was really amazing as well. If it wasn't for them, I probably wouldn't have gone into music.

But then in university, my teachers were really racist and bad. I only learned one song and one study my entire first year of university. Everyone else [in my flute studio] was playing concertos. I was being told that I didn't know what a flute sounded like and being made to do push-ups, sit-ups, and core exercises instead of actually learning to play the flute.

MM: Wow.

JM: Then [in second year, I] had a better teacher. She was really nice. But she couldn't convince me to stay — by then I was so far behind. I couldn't catch up and I wanted to be a performer, and I couldn't be a performer and cultural stuff came first.

MM: I did want to circle back to another recurring theme. What do we think are the power dynamics of the "non-Indigenous Indigenous music expert" in terms of Canadian music studies?

JM: I feel like non-Indigenous Indigenous music experts always are taken more seriously or respected more. And that they somehow know better because we [Indigenous musicians] are too close to the subject matter to be "objective."

I wanted to use Indigenous methodologies to create an Indigenous creation framework for Indigenous performance [in grad school]. And I was told that it was tautological. I was told I needed to use Western methodologies to look at Indigenous creation because Indigenous methodologies, "it was too much of the same" — so I needed to bring in some European philosopher.

MM: One of the power imbalances too. I remember wanting to get my masters [in 2010] and I was like, well there are Indigenous studies programs, but they aren't really tailored to performing arts. At the time I wasn't interested in studying Indigenous governance; I was focused on music performance. Show me where in the world I can find an Indigenous person, any nationality, to supervise me as a graduate violist, or an Indigenous person in Canada to supervise me as a graduate musicologist.

It's just such a — I don't want to say lack of capacity because I think the capacity has always been there — but there's such an intentional stifling, barriers and gatekeeping where we haven't had access to be able to develop with our own people.

JM: Because we're too close to the subject matter. We can't study our own people. When you're looking at undergrad, you're often not allowed to because you have to be "objective." I wanted to write about Indigenous women, and I was told, no, I had to write about women from India because I was too close as an Indigenous woman. I couldn't talk about [my own experiences]; it's changing a little bit now, but then I wasn't able to do that kind of work. And then in grad school, the same thing. And there was nobody to supervise me, either in the performing or contemporary arts world. I had a really good supervisor, but we couldn't have those same discussions. I had somebody else on my committee with whom I could have these discussions, but they weren't a performing artist, they studied dance academically. But she was amazing.

And then my external person whom I could talk to did not have an advanced degree. So even though we have those deep philosophical discussions, it was not valued in academia, so it doesn't exist. Those who do want to go into these places, it's often violent for them to be there. Now we have Dr. Jacqueline

Wilson as performance faculty for bassoon at Washington State. She has written a powwow dance suite for solo bassoon, which is really amazing. And it's nothing like you would think it would be because of how it ends up, but you can just see the fancy shawl dancers dancing when she plays. But she's in the States and [doesn't teach either of our instruments].

MM: We have no Indigenous piano faculty [anywhere], and now there are incredibly gifted Indigenous pianists that are working within concert repertoire spheres. A number of them are looking for graduate supervisors now, and it's really difficult to ask who do you think will (a) be able to advance your career as a pianist and (b) not destroy your soul in the process.

JM: Exactly. Destroy your soul. I have an MFA in contemporary art, but I want to do my MMus [in flute.] I don't know that there's anywhere to study that I would feel safe. Because it is soul-destroying and violent, and often people don't continue in music after they're finished school because it's so terrible. It has to change.

MM: I've touched on this a bit, where I think one of the important pieces is I would like to see the prioritization of more Indigenous faculty [in music].

JM: Yes!

MM: [Having more Indigenous scholars] enter these Canadian music programs [is needed], because we have an intuitive feeling of how the curricula that we [experienced] has harmed us. [Indigenous scholars can] push in different generative ways and be a support person that can understand where these [Indigenous] youth are coming from.

Also, as Dylan Robinson rightfully outlines in his open letter, changing entrance requirements is going to be a big game changer. It's just a matter of giving Indigenous music students the time and space to catch up. Because there are so many structural disadvantages before we even get let in the door. Those few of us that make it in the door at all. And as you said, you dropped out of multiple programs. You've seen other Indigenous music students do the same. The odds are stacked against us.

JM: Even if [Indigenous music students] do get admission, my one friend was in honour band, summer band, all of that. Once they got their acceptance, they couldn't go [due to personal circumstances.]

MM: And I'm happy to say on the record that I auditioned at three schools for my undergrad, and I only got into York — and I am now tenure-track music faculty. So!

JM: I only got into the University of Calgary for my undergrad. I auditioned at four schools for my master's. I applied twice to the University of Calgary and I did not get into the performance master's program. So, I did dance at SFU. Now I'm looking at PhD programs, but not in music because it's not accessible to me — as a professional musician!

MM: And the MFA [which Jessica has] is a terminal degree, which means that you shouldn't necessarily have to be looking into PhD programs. But when there are so many barriers in the job market, the PhD definitely helps.

Anything else you'd like to propose to make experiences better for Indigenous music students moving forward?

JM: I think every professor and every person existing within the building of a music faculty needs to take actual anti-racism training and Indigenous cultural safety training. Music departments need to be held accountable and allow Indigenous students to criticize them without threatening to fail them, kick them out, or reduce their grades. [Indigenous students] don't say anything because we know they hold the power in failing us. I almost failed out of every single one of my classes in my last year because I was too vocal about stuff.

I was worried about an Indigenous student when I was a TA, and I was told to not talk about it because then there were some arbitrary rules about not caring about students' well-being. I think there has to be empathy and kindness; just step back from your power trip. It's not about that. And you see it all the time, just not even in music, but everywhere. It's about that power trip. Why are you even teaching?

I spoke at a university recently where the professor of the studio was trying to make their students realize that it's not [only about] orchestra. I think a lot of music schools think that all their students are going to graduate and win an orchestra position. We need to decentralize the orchestra position as the ultimate success of graduating music school and start valuing and teaching other types of lives. And that they're also valid. Anything non-orchestra is not valid in music school still.

MM: That's just one of those foundational value shifts that needs to occur. You just said, "I'm not good enough to do this." And that's the message you received in the education you were paying for. We need to be realistic with our students.

We need to challenge them. But if someone is really passionate about doing something, it is such a horribly punitive mentality to just put up that barrier and to beat a person down.

JM: Or those, those levels of, "if you can't play your scales at 120, and if you can't hold one note for 32 seconds, don't even bother trying to be a professional musician."

MM: Just across the board. I just finished my first semester of teaching [post-secondary] and taught an introduction to electroacoustic music. I dedicated most of the class to giving students a foundational practice in using DAW software. I was getting a lot of recurring feedback of "I've never done this before. This is so hard for me. I can't do it." I just kept on telling my students, "This is an intro course. I am grading you accordingly. This is something that many people find useful in the real world as a working musician to understand how things work on the computer, especially now in COVID. And so, I just want to see you try and I will grade you based on effort." And that went a long way. I can hold the door open, or I can close it.

JM: Most people want to close it. I think all classical musicians in schools should learn how to improvise. Because there's a huge wall and opportunities that come will probably require you to improvise. And if you're saying I need notes, it's not going to get you very far. It gives you freedom.

And then bring in more Indigenous people to perform in your school. Bring you, bring me, bring your mom, bring everybody here to come and perform chamber music, concerts or solo with your orchestra. And then that will start changing the view that we aren't good enough to be there or we're lesser people. And that we [Indigenous musicians] deserve to be in front.

MM: Absolutely. And I think also moving forward, university music programs just need to be music programs. And not, you can be a jazz major or a classical major. If you're someone that wants to create music, then let's do that. Let's break down those genres. And I know that some of my students still really love Mozart, so fine, I'm going to work with you on your Mozart. But the students who want to work on their tape loops, great, I support that. Music is such a wide realm to explore. By arbitrarily narrowing the constraints into this Western classical model, we're only hurting ourselves. Yeah. I think there's a reason why university music programs are seen as being kind of like this elitist institution where it's like popular music and any other cultural music, just doesn't have a place to fit in. And I think there's capacity to create those places.

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