“A Fusion without Confusion”—
Merging Classical with Native American Music and Dance

A Conversation with the Ensemble of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*

Megan Marie Hamilton

Weber State University had the privilege of celebrating Native American culture and heritage with a once-in-a-lifetime performance by Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion, *an ensemble of Native American and classical musicians, dancers, and poets combining music, words, and dance into a unique symphony for the eye, ear, and spirit. Sponsored by the Telitha E. Lindquist College of Arts & Humanities under the auspices of its signature event series,* Browning Presents, *the performance introduced the audience to a line-up of world-renowned performers sharing their gifts. Among them were Navajo singer Radmilla Cody, GRAMMY nominee, multiple Native American Music Awards winner, the 46th Miss Navajo Nation, and one of NPR's 50 Great Voices; flutist Hovia Edwards of Shoshone-Navajo-Okanogan heritage, who performed at the opening of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City; Menominee and Oneida singer and Native American Music Awards Best Male Artist, Wayne Silas, Jr.; and powwow dancers from the company Indigenous Enterprise, who performed for Jennifer Lopez's World of Dance and the virtual presidential inauguration parade. The ensemble also included jazz, Latin, and classical percussionist and conductor of* The Lion King, *Rolando Morales-Matos, and one of the world's most versatile cellists and member of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Udi Bar-David.*

On the day before the concert, I had the opportunity to converse with some of the ensemble members about their evolution as artists and performers, their desire to blend various traditions and art forms, and their motivation to share cultural knowledge not only with the audience, but also with younger generations of aspiring dancers and musicians.

(Megan Hamilton) *I have both Anishinaabe and Swedish ancestors. I come from Minnesota – the White Earth Nation – and I'm also a military brat. That's how we ended up in Utah. Will you please introduce yourselves and describe your backgrounds?*

(Udi Bar-David) My name is Udi Bar-David, and I'm a classical cellist. I live in Philadelphia and play with the Philadelphia Orchestra. For over twenty five years, I've had a passion for producing, blending, and performing cross-cultural activities—cross-over performances with ethnic musicians who come from different parts of the world. I'm also very interested in using the arts as a means of conflict resolution. When we talked about the theme for this project, and tonight's event, I was enthusiastic about presenting indigenous culture in music and dance.

(Hamilton) *Thank you, and welcome.*

(Hovia Edwards) My name is Hovia Edwards. I'm a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribes in Fort Hall, Idaho. I play Native American flute; I've been playing that instrument for pretty much all my life. I am a Grammy-nominated musician. I am currently working on a few different projects, one of them being an opera titled "Nu Nah-Hup: Sacajawea's Story" with the Opera Theatre Oregon. I'm very grateful to be working with all these beautiful people on ***Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion***; it's been a wonderful experience.

(Hamilton) *Welcome. Thank you.*

Hovia Edwards, Udi Bar-David, and Rolando Morales-Matos playing "Retrouvaille" during a performance of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*. Weber State University Browning Center, 2024.

(Wayne Silas, Jr.) My name is Wayne Silas, Jr. I come to you from the Menominee and Oneida nations of Wisconsin. I belong to the Bear Clan. I would like to start by saying that I'm very grateful to be here today and to share this time and experience with so many wonderfully talented people. When I was approached about this show, I immediately got excited and didn't hesitate to say, "Yes, I'd love to be part of it." It's been an amazing experience so far, collaborating with musicians and dancers. I think we are building something unique, fantastic, and healing. I hope that when everybody leaves the auditorium tonight, they take something good with them from what we've put together. I'm a singer and a dancer. I am happy to contribute a little of what I have to this performance in a good way.

(Rolando Morales-Matos) Hello, my name is Rolando Morales-Matos. I am a percussionist and the assistant conductor of Broadway's *The Lion King*. I have played classical music with many different orchestras at different venues. I was invited here to participate and share because I have participated in concerts with many different cultures. To me, this is very important because it brings us together. Through music, we can open dialogues. Moving through music, opening dialogue is very important. In the time we live in now, we need music. It's a huge privilege to share the stage with this group of beautiful people.

(Nanabah Kadenhii) Hello, my name is Nanabah Kadenhii. I'm twenty-two years old. I live in Garden Grove, California, and am originally from Arizona. I'm a hoop dancer. I've been hoop dancing since I was ten years old, but I've been dancing since I could walk. Thank you for having me and including me in this project. I've never done a project that combines different musical genres, cultures, and dance. I'm happy to be here.

(Dominic Pablo) Hello, my name is Dominic Pablo. I am Navajo from the Navajo Nation, and I live in Lake Valley, New Mexico; it's near the Four Corners area. I've been dancing for most of my life—since I was about five years old—and am thirty-two now, so, that's twenty-seven years of dancing. I'm also part of the drum group Calling Eagle Singers from Wonder Rock, Arizona. I've been singing with them since I was seven years old.

(Jamal Isaac Jones) Hello, my name is Jamal Isaac Jones. I am also Navajo, from the Navajo Nation, in the small town of Chinle, Arizona. I've been dancing since I was about six years old. I come from a family of dancers. My mom

and dad used to dance, and my grandparents on both sides used to dance as well, so it was passed down to me and my siblings. I'm also a singer; I represent the Calling Eagle Singers. We've been singing together since we were really young kids. We are out here representing Indigenous Enterprise. I grew up in the powwow circle doing my own shows from a young age. Over the years, I progressed and connected with people who did the same thing. When Kenneth Shirley created Indigenous Enterprise in 2013, he approached me, my cousin, and my brother, and asked us to be a part of his dance troupe. Since then, we've been traveling the country, doing small shows, and sharing our dance styles through education and workshops. It has allowed us to travel the world while doing what we love. This is my first experience combining an orchestra with dancing. It has always been a goal of mine to perform with different genres of music and different types of music. I dance the grass dance. The grass dance is part of a warrior-society dance; it originated in the Northern Plains. It is a privilege and honor to carry on those ways. You have to be given the right to carry on those ways. I was blessed enough, along with my dad and my brother, to carry on this tradition. I'm very happy to be here. And I'm excited to see how this performance turns out.

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(Hamilton) *All of you have wonderful talents and gifts as artists and performers. Where did you nourish your gifts, and who helped you develop your gifts?*

(Bar-David) I was born and raised in Israel; that's where I received my primary education. I learned to play the cello when I was seven years old. Later, I came to the U.S. to study at the Juilliard School of Music. After that, I moved to Philadelphia to join the Philadelphia Orchestra.

(Edwards) I started playing because my father, Herman Edwards, introduced me to the Native American flute at about age three. I have my first flute to this day. I've had numerous teachers—Native flute players—who taught me to play traditional songs. I continue to learn from many different artists.

(Silas, Jr.) I have been singing and dancing for as long as I can remember. One of my first teachers was my father, especially for singing. He taught me a lot of protocol, a lot of etiquette, and also a lot of styles, patterns, and songs. From a young age, I remember being inspired by and in awe of the style of music that I now practice. I looked up to a lot of older people. Some of those people have adopted me into their families—such as the families of Ben Bearskin, Jr., and Herman Logan. They have taught me a lot about singing. I have been inspired by the teachings they passed on to me. From singers of the past and the accomplishments of other singers to the directions our style of Native Indigenous music is heading in, I have always wanted to be a part of that. I passed my knowledge on to my children. Hopefully they will do the same for generations to come.

(Morales-Matos) I was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I received my education in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. I've been playing music since I was very young. I am one of six siblings—we are a family

of musicians who played together. Music has always been part of our family.

(Kadenhii) I mostly taught myself to hoop dance, though I did have some teachers who helped me along the way. Luckily, I grew up in a world with the internet, so I watched a lot of YouTube videos. I was at a powwow when I was about eight or nine years old, when I saw the two-time world champion hoop dancer Jasmine Pickner Bell perform; that's when I knew I wanted to start hoop dancing. Seeing a female dancer out there inspired me. I met other hoop dancers along the way who inspired me, like Macy Bilanga. I also had family members—Jones Benally and Nakotah LaRance—who helped me to improve my hoop dancing.

(Pablo) I've been dancing since I was five years old. I have older cousins who danced, and so I started out doing the grass dance. I learned from watching them dance, and then I transitioned into becoming a fancy dancer and started doing that. Basically, I would watch older dancers dance and try to copy their moves until I could form my own way of dancing and my own style. I was mostly self-taught; no one actually showed me anything. My singing also was self-taught. I'd listen to powwow cassette tapes or CDs and sing along to those and learn how to sing from there. That's basically how I learned, and how I have been doing it ever since.

(Jones) My father taught me to dance, but we didn't dance the grass dance, or powwow, right away. It was just something we kind of discovered, because our grandmas, on both sides, would do it. When I was growing up, my dad used to breakdance; he would teach my brother and me breakdance moves. We also learned dance moves from TV and stuff like that. My dad was really good; he had a dance crew and everything. When my younger brother found out that my grandma used to dance when she was young, he wanted to

Musicians and dancers led workshops with Weber State University students before a performance of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*. Weber State University, 2024.

carry on that tradition. She stopped when my mom was born, and my mom stopped before I was born. My dad used to dance when he was a kid, but stopped before he went to high school. My brother was the one who got our whole family back into the powwow circle. Since he wanted to do it, I had no choice but to do it. My dad trained us. He had been in the military, so he would give us these crazy military-like regimen training styles. We'd also watch VHS tapes of powwows that happened in different parts of the country. We would sit for hours just watching them and creating our own style, our own moves, based on the breakdance style we had started before. We got really good, really fast.

We needed the correct protocol to get us into the circle so that we could be legitimate. My dad reached out to some friends, who reached out to other people to help us. There happened to be a powwow in our hometown of Chinle, Arizona, coming up. They

used to call it the Kenny Nichols Powwow. A legendary grass dancer from the '70s and '80s, Jonathan Windy Boy from Rocky Boy, Montana, happened to be the arena director at this powwow. My family did everything they could leading up to that point to get us ready for that initiation. When he came down to Arizona, Jonathan Windy Boy initiated my brother, myself, and my dad. Ever since then, we have been carrying on those grass dance ways. During that powwow, we were approached by our brothers, Jared, Malcolm, and Dom from the Calling Eagle Singers. They had just formed the group about two weeks before, so that's how we started singing with them. Everything just came together at that point for us as dancers and singers, and we just carried on from there. A lot of the credit goes to my father, obviously, but it also goes to people I looked up to in the circle. They gave me the motivation to try to be the best. Now, it's part of my discipline to better myself and to try to get to the next level as a dancer, performer, singer, and human.

(Hamilton) *What do you hope the audience will take away from your performances?*

(Morales-Matos) If you look around this room, these people bring Indigenous music and dance with them. I'm privileged to be a guest here and to learn, be inspired, collaborate, and introduce my sounds as a bridge. These eight people fill up the space tonight with Indigenous sound and dance. You asked, "What can people take away from this?" Many people, myself included, may think of Indigenous culture in one way. Two days ago, I met Hovia and tried her Native American flute sounds with the cello, a Western instrument. The audience is hearing a Western instrument; some of them may only be familiar with Western instruments. Hovia is bringing at least four different kinds of flutes, all tuned differently. So, there is an adjustment there. And it's not just a technical adjustment; the audience hears different sounds, different combinations, and different registers. I'm not trying to be technical, but it's a different expression. It's a different soul that comes with each different pitch of the flute.

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Then, Wayne gets on stage. The first time Rolando saw Wayne on YouTube, I got a text from Rolando, shouting "Wow!" (Laughter) I knew he was the real deal. I couldn't wait to meet him. I've loved performing with Rolando; I've known him longer than anyone else in this room. He comes from classical jazz, Latin music, and improvisation. Wayne brings his own form of art. When someone asks me to describe Wayne, it's hard because he's so unique. Wayne, what you bring is not just an art form—it is an

All performers enter the stage for the grand finale of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*. Weber State University Browning Center, 2024.

identity. Maybe it's in your voice, your throat singing—it doesn't have a terminology.

The audience tonight will be introduced to something that many of them have never seen before, never heard before. We're bridging many elements here tonight with Indigenous Enterprise. When I watched your videos, Wayne, for the first time, I wasn't watching a typical powwow—you go places, you merge. So, in a way, what you do as dancers is what we are doing tonight on stage. I don't know how many times you've played with the cello on stage, a classical instrument. Maybe this is the first time you've played to "Spain" by Chick Corea. The audience is being taken to broader and broader spaces with these many elements. This is a fusion without confusion, because we all bring our own individual identity to the performance. We put it together into something that has a lot of harmony to it.

(Hamilton) *This process has really fascinated me because I work in science education. I was trained with a Western perspective. My mom was a botanist; she taught me to collect plants and make offerings of tobacco and things like that. I'm trying to work with colleagues to bridge these two opposing systems. In reality, those forces can work in concert with one another; it's like a parallel experience. Thank you for sharing. That was a beautiful answer.*

You all seem to travel quite a bit. What piece of home do you carry with you during your travels?

(Collectively) Our children.

(Silas, Jr.) My family back home. There are obligations at home, like education, sports, and creative activities; I get lonesome for them quite a bit. But I've learned to remind myself that I'm doing this for them; it takes a little bit of the loneliness away.

(Jones) I would also say my family. Over the years, I've lost quite a few family members. They're always in my thoughts and my prayers. I try to think about the journey, how far I've come, and what we're representing. We're representing our tribes, and we want to do that to the best of our abilities. I want to be a positive role model, a person to look up to for our younger generations, if they choose to go down this path.

(Pablo) I carry my name with me and where I'm from. My last name is Pablo, which is my grandma's maiden name. My middle name is my grandpa's last name. I always carry Bear with me. I always tell people where I'm from. I always say that I'm from Lake Valley, New Mexico.

(Kadenhii) I have to agree with Dom. It's important to represent yourself and your family. We're taught to be well mannered, because you're not only representing yourself— you're also representing your family members and your bloodline. I feel happy when people recognize where I'm from. They know how sacred that place is and how sacred it is to me and my family members. Material items that I like to travel with me are my stitch doll and a spirit rock that my partner gave me. I also bring integrity and commitment. I try to represent everything that I am and where I come from.

(Edwards) I bring the thought and representation of my ancestors, the people who are no longer here. Their prayers and what they represent are still with us to this day. I have been fortunate enough to work with a lot of elders, and I've heard their thoughts; I've heard what they have to say about our Shoshone culture. I carry their teachings with me as well as their knowledge that they have passed on to me. When I go to performances, I keep them in my thoughts and prayers, because they had the patience to sit down with me and tell me their knowledge. I do my best to represent my family and my tribe—not only my tribe, but Indigenous people in general. I do this in the hope that we can be positive role models for our future generations, someone that our kids can be proud of, and look forward to, being a Native American person. The beadwork and regalia that I wear has been made by various family members, from my great grandmother all the way down to my mother. I keep them in my prayers, because they cared enough for me to give me those items to remind me to be proud of who I am.

(Hamilton) *All of you are quite prolific. You are extraordinarily skilled in your art forms. How do you keep going? How do you stay in shape?*

(Kadenhii) Exercise! You have to make sure you're in shape. We're kind of dying here in Utah, because the elevation is so high. We've got to start training out here or something. The key factor of continuing to dance is that we are dancing for others as well. I'm dancing for a guy in a wheelchair who used to dance. My dad loves to see me dance. It heals them, so we dance extra hard.

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(Jones) You have to stay in shape, eat right, and meditate a lot. We're not out there dancing for ourselves. We dance for those who can't dance. We dance for our ancestors, our grandparents. I try to keep my loved ones in mind. We also have a duty as young Indigenous peoples to carry on these traditions in a positive form. We don't want to be ridiculed or canceled, so we have to be on point with everything. I want to inspire younger generations. It's cool when a kid comes up and tells me I'm his favorite, or, when a young girl comes up and says, "I love the way you dance." I've gotten gifts

from people because they love my dancing. I never take that for granted. I always take time for someone who wants to take a picture with me, or just talk and get to know me; it puts what we do in perspective.

(Silas, Jr.) **Our health is what keeps us going, not only physically, but also having a healthy mind, body, and spirit. What we're doing isn't just for us, it's for other people. We're singing, dancing, and making music for people who need to see it, need to hear it, and need to feel it. Keeping ourselves healthy, in all aspects, is what keeps us going. It helps us to inspire others in the ways we are inspired.**

(Hamilton) *You've all talked about the "next generation." What words of wisdom would you like to pass on to the next generation of performers and artists?*

(Collectively) **Just do it; and be a good human.**

(Hamilton) *Very wise. I'm going to bring my family to the performance tonight. I hope they will be inspired. Thank you so much for your time and insights. It was a pleasure.*

Megan Marie Hamilton (PhD, Utah State University) was an assistant professor of STEM education at Weber State University. She was a citizen of the White Earth Nation. She honored her Anishinaabe heritage and dedicated her work to increasing access to STEM education for Indigenous peoples and other historically marginalized groups. Megan was the first doctoral scholar in the Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences program in USU's Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. She served as treasurer and vice president for the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science Utah State Chapter. She received the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services Legacy of Utah State Award in 2019. Megan passed away in 2024. In honor of Megan's extraordinary contributions to scholarship and teaching, and her unwavering passion, The Megan Marie Hamilton Indigenous STEM Scholar Endowment Fund was created. The scholarship will support students studying a STEM field or STEM education who are members of a federally recognized Native American Tribe.