

Conductor David Lockington, Emcee Sammy Tone-Kei White, Composer Brent Michael Davids, and a young Native American dancer backstage at PAUWAW's world premiere



A Native American dancer in traditional dress provides an unconventional concert experience

# American Sound *Redefined*

## Composer Brent Michael Davids Brings A Native American Powwow Into The Concert Hall.

by Molly Sheridan

“Welcome to PauWau: A Gathering of Nations, our first Indian powwow. It’s a powwow symphony, and it’s created by our Mohican brother, Brent Michael Davids, sitting right over here. And he’s that good looking guy, the flute player. Let’s have a big round of applause for him...”

With this introduction, Sammy Tone-Kei White, a member of the Kiowa Nation and the evening’s emcee, welcomed the audience gathered last January in Popejoy Hall to the premiere of PauWau. The New Mexico Symphony Orchestra and Chorus were joined by traditional Native American dancers and Davids himself playing a specially designed quartz crystal flute. When the piece concluded about an hour later, the audience was on its feet shouting its approval.

NMSO Music Director David Lockington first heard Davids’ music at a concert by the Desert Chorale in Santa Fe. “I was very moved by the music,” he

recalls. “It had not only an excitement, but an emotional depth to it.” Soon after, Lockington and Davids began discussions for a collaborative project with the orchestra. “When I heard more of his music, I was really captivated by it, by its unique world. What struck me was the raw vigor that he elicited from a chorus and the extraordinary tonal colors of his string writing.”

Davids had already begun work on what would become PauWau: A Gathering of Nations (the title uses the traditional spelling of powwow). As with many of his works, he sought to combine his European classical training -- Davids holds degrees from Northern Illinois University and Arizona State University -- with his Native heritage as a member of the Mohican Nation. Up until that point, he gained recognition primarily as a chamber composer.

His work had been performed by the Kronos Quartet and the Joffrey Ballet and he had received awards from the NEA, Meet The Composer, ASCAP, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the Sundance Institute.

When Davids began to contemplate writing a large-scale work, it was important to him to create a piece that Native Americans would respond to. Davids was also seeking to fill what he saw as a void: The “American sound,” he believes, has been defined primarily by composers such as Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, and Virgil Thompson -- that is, without any kind of indigenous, Native American influence.

“I got to thinking about all those issues, and then came up with the idea of a powwow symphony, because I use that example a lot in describing what’s Native about my music.” He explains that in contrast to the concert hall, where music is the primary emphasis, a powwow is a holistic melding of music, dance, food, and socializing. Davids relies on this differentiation when speaking about the cultural divide he seeks to bridge through his work. The idea behind PauWau is to bring the sounds, colors, and atmosphere of the powwow into the concert hall with a fifteen-movement symphony representing the typical events of a powwow day.

“That’s why I wanted to have dancers, and an emcee right on stage in his normal attire,” Davids says. The chorus was dressed in traditional Southwestern garb drawn from their personal wardrobes, and the dancers performed in the aisles as a way of bringing the audience into the performance. “It was very freeing,” he says.

Davids’ decision to use the old spelling of powwow was a calculated move to avoid confusion with the Gathering of Nations powwow held annually in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “I wanted to differentiate it from that, to make people think about it a little more. It’s a real powwow, but something a little different.”

While the themes in Davids’ symphony are rooted in the composer’s heritage, the score is entirely of his own creation. The piece is fully orchestrated for a traditional symphonic ensemble, but its Native inspiration echoes throughout -- a fact that’s especially evident in Davids’ flute playing, his use of the chorus, and his percussion scoring. As Lockington explains, “At a powwow, the drums normally have a consistent rhythm, but Brent was putting in beats, sometimes consistently, sometimes sporadically. Another rhythmic element came from the costumes the dancers were wearing -- they had bells on them. This created a really beautiful effect right among members of the audience.” Davids also worked with the chorus to achieve the nasal quality of the Native American vocal sound -- a very unusual style for classically trained singers.

It is challenging works such as PauWau, says NMSO Chorus President Philippa Schwendimann, that draw professionals to this largely volunteer chorus. Darrel Randel, the orchestra’s principle oboist, speaks with noticeable excitement about the piece today, but it was an opinion he came to

over time. It took a few rehearsals for him to “hear the musical language” and appreciate what Davids had done. “He uses very complicated, challenging rhythms, bringing organization to what appears to be chaos. It’s pretty brilliant work.” Lockington calls the piece “very sophisticated. The repetition is such that you recognize something is coming around again, but the pattern’s not obvious until you’ve heard it many times.”

Davids has a deep respect for the work of George Crumb, especially for his use of sound effects, and this carries over to PauWau. “Crumb actually composes the sounds into the music, so they’re an integral part of the composition and used rhythmically. In the music, they make compositional sense. There’s a logic to it, and I really like that about him.”

While Davids’ piece has a very spontaneous feel, an examination of the score shows careful planning of every aspect, down to the jokes White told from the stage. Davids penned most of the narration himself, but he also worked in some of White’s own material. There’s even a section where White engages the audience with a musical quiz. “What’s the definition of a grand pause?” he queries. “A grand pause is when the conductor loses his place.” Waiting for the laughter to die down, he jibes, “A good one.”

Davids would like to try performing the piece in different venues, and he sees no reason to limit it to the Southwest. He feels that as a portrait of Native American life, PauWau could, like Copland’s Lincoln Portrait, be appreciated across the country. While it may not be as visible elsewhere as in states like New Mexico, Native American influence is alive across the nation.

“Powwows occur in virtually every state across the country, several times a year,” Davids explains. “Virtually

anybody who hears the symphony could in fact go to a real powwow in their own state.”

Schwendimann believes that this shows the importance of cross-cultural composers like Davids. “His work brought a traditional Native American function -- the powwow -- to a general audience. Audience members who had never been to a powwow said they would make a point of going in the future.”

Lockington shares Schwendimann’s enthusiasm. “I feel enormously enriched, particularly because I’ve been exposed to things I wouldn’t normally be -- different people, different backgrounds, different approaches to performance. And yet ultimately, we’re all trying to communicate the same sort of thing.”

This excitement carried into the audience. NMSO Executive Director Kevin Hagen points out that New Mexico offers a unique environment for this kind of work: Less than 50 percent of the audience is Anglo. At both Friday and Saturday performances, he says, there was “a feeling of mutual respect for the two traditions that was very powerful and very moving.”

The score to Davids’ composition bears this dedication: “In loving memory of my English Grandparents and my Mohican Grandparents, the last of which traveled to a new season in late summer of 1998. And to my very old English and Mohican relatives, the Pilgrim who Mayflowered the ocean to land on Native soil, and the Mohican who was there to meet him.” With PauWau: A Gathering of Nations, Davids continues to bridge these cultures -- through music grounded in his personal heritage and composed in his own distinct voice.

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