

# MOHICAN SOUP TANGLEWOOD REVIEW

## Mohicans, minstrels and gourmet delights

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By Andrew L. Pincus

LENOX -- Mohican soup is made of "blackberries, chest nuts, huckleberries, apples, black beans, cucumbers, white beans, corn." Then there are the ants, served warm. Don't chew them, the man warns -- they're better swallowed whole.

The gourmet delights gave Tanglewood what must have been its first taste of music composed by a Stockbridge Mohican. As part of a program of American music Thursday night, the male chorus Chanticleer sang "Mohican Soup" by Brent Michael Davids, who took a microphone to inform the Seiji Ozawa Hall audience that he is a proud member of the Mohican Nation, driven from its Stockbridge grounds a couple of centuries ago by the white man.

To the insistent beat of a drum, the nasal chanting, rasping and whining of "Mohican Soup" combined American Indian and European styles to produce what Davids described as a "silly, fun piece." But humor, he told the audience, "always comes from a position of strength," and even though the Mohicans' numbers were reduced to 220 by the time of their expulsion from Stockbridge, that strength is "the reason why we've been around so long."

In his sometimes rambling talk, the dark-skinned, long-maned Davids said the trip to Lenox from his reservation in Wisconsin reminded him of his many ancestors buried here. In fact, he declared, the Berkshires' "creative energy" in the arts is "based on a foundation provided by the Mohican people. You're not going to hear that from the Boston Symphony and the business people."

Davids, who plays a quartz crystal flute and has composed at Robert Redford's Sundance Institute, said he wasn't trying to make any one feel guilty. But "Mohicans have been caretakers over these grounds for 6,000 years. And it's only in the last 200 to 300 years that we have left."

With its cumulative effect, louder and louder, "Mohican Soup" turned out to be one of the more effective pieces on a program that -- until its pop-oriented conclusion -- tended toward the slow, the quiet, the repetitive and the sleepy in recent American music. The concert opened Tanglewood's Festival of Contemporary Music, which will continue through Tuesday.

Clad in white bib and black tails even on a warm evening like Thursday, the 12-member Chanticleer ensemble changes formations onstage in a quasi-military style. It sings with military precision, too. The sparing use of vibrato led to near-flawless intonation, but it also lent the singing a certain colorlessness, which added to the feeling of sameness in some pieces.

The most appealing songs, apart from Davids', came from Augusta Read Thomas, who has a home in Becket. Five selections from her "Love Songs," drawing on poets from Shakespeare to Emerson, were -- in her words -- "loads of fun to compose." Tender and witty by turn, they were also fun to hear.

Jackson's Hill's "Voices of Autumn" drew on Japanese styles and a haiku to create a sense of suspended harmony and time. Paul Schoenfeld's Four Motets set verses from Psalm 86 in a kind of medieval polyphony -- music whose Christian roots seemed jarring against the Hebrew texts.

Steven Stucky was represented by "Drop, Drop, Slow Tears," an updating of an Elizabethan song, and three "Cradle Songs," drawing on texts from Brazil, Poland and Tobago. Steven Sametz set an e. e. cummings poem about grief in a static, elegiac style that had the singers standing in a circle and went on a lot longer than cummings did.

As dessert, the ensemble offered a Stephen Foster group, a couple of pop tunes and a medley of spirituals. The Foster arrangements were too clever by half, denaturing the simplicity of the originals and submerging the melodies in tricky effects. Performed gospel-style, complete with hand-clapping and shouting, the white man's version of the spirituals lacked only blackface to turn into a modern minstrel show. The crowd loved it. No wonder the Mohicans left.