

The Role of Choral Music and Portrayal of Indigenous Choral Traditions in Films

Aimee Chao

Mentor: Dr. T.J. Harper

Choral Activities, Department of Music at LMU

Abstract

Movies greatly influence our culture, and music is an integral part of these films. Choral music, in particular, is especially impactful when included in films. Beyond the movies and the music, however, it is important to note who and whose music is represented in these movies. Indigenous peoples are a notoriously underrepresented and often misrepresented group. In light of rampant misrepresentation, cultural erasure, appropriation, and lack of representation altogether, this research paper aims to investigate the role of choral music in films and how indigenous choral traditions are portrayed in films.

Introduction

Movies are an important part of our popular and mainstream culture. They influence what we talk about with others and what is at the forefront of our minds. They can even inform our beliefs and how we act.

An important component of movies is the music within the film. Music provides additional meanings and contexts and can elicit different emotional responses. Choral music, in particular, can be quite impactful when placed into a movie's soundtrack (Caps).

Movies expand our worldviews and our ability to understand and empathize with others by portraying different stories, viewpoints, walks of life, and people. It is for this reason that what and who is represented in them is so important.

There are so many types of representation in film, across both the live-action and animated mediums. Examples include African and African-American representation in Marvel Studio's *Black Panther* (2018), female representation with an all-women main cast in *Ocean's 8* (2018), Mexican and Latinx representation in Pixar's *Coco* (2017), autism representation with the main character of *The Good Doctor* (2017), Asian-American representation with *Searching* (2018) starring John Cho, and LGBTQ representation in the show *Schitt's Creek* (2015).

Indigenous peoples are, across the board, an underrepresented group. Worse, however, the few times they are represented in popular culture, they have the risk of being misrepresented and wrongfully portrayed. Think, for example, of Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) (Simonpillai, 2020) or the *Twilight* franchise's portrayal of the Quileute people (Dartt-Newton, 2010). Movies like these subject indigenous people to

simpleton narratives, play into romanticized tropes, and even perpetuate historical inaccuracies (Mohamed, 2019).

One recent representation of indigenous peoples and their choral traditions can actually be found in Disney's massively popular, billion-dollar *Frozen* franchise. Disney's *Frozen* (2013) features yoiking, a type of chant singing from the Sami people indigenous to Scandinavia, in its "Vuelie" opening song. However, after allegations of appropriation, whitewashing, and cultural erasure, such as with Kristoff, a very Norwegian-looking character, wearing the clothes of the indigenous Sami reindeer herders and also the lack of acknowledgement of the Sami in the "Vuelie" and first movie altogether, Disney entered into a contract with Sami leaders to affirm Sami ownership of their culture (Simonpillai, 2020). Disney's *Frozen II* (2019) introduces the Northuldra indigenous tribe and features the group yoiking.

Something about the music and inclusion of indigenous peoples in *Frozen II* strikes a chord. Therefore, in continuing to ponder the movie, these two questions emerge: first, what is the role of choral music in films, and second and more specifically, how are indigenous choral traditions portrayed in films?

Background and Motivation

Several popular media general audience articles have been written, putting together lists of great choral moments in film. One list includes titles like "Hymn to the Fallen" from *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), "Somewhere in My Memory" from *Home Alone* (1990), and "Auld Lang Syne" from *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) (BBC); another

cites films like *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), *Amadeus* (1984), *Sister Act* (1992), and even *Pitch Perfect* (2012) (Chorus America, 2014).

Separately, blogs have been written on the role of choral music in film. One in particular is titled “The Dangers of Choral Music in Films”. It explains that filmmakers sometimes shy away from choral film scores, as they can distract from the visuals (Caps). While it addresses a fair number of films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), it fails to address many of the aforementioned films heralded as great choral moments, with the exception of a one sentence mention of *Saving Private Ryan*.

Therefore, it seems that there is an opportunity to further explore the role of choral music in films. Keeping with the type of musical analysis in Caps’ “The Dangers of Choral Music in Films”, there is room to analyze the other films featuring choral music for shared themes, as well as potential overlap in context, form, subject, and style.

As for indigenous choral traditions in film, there is little research into this subject. It appears to be a new frontier for music, film, and cultural research. Again, this leads to the questions: what is the role of choral music in films, and how are indigenous choral traditions portrayed in films?

Methods

To fully observe the role of choral music in films, let alone indigenous choral traditions, watching a short clip of a scene would not suffice; rather, one would need to watch the films in their entirety. Going along this logic, watching one or two films would not be enough to make generalizations about something like shared themes. To

thoroughly research these correlations and make an informed claim about the role of the music, one would need to expand the sample size and watch a minimum of three (but probably far more) films.

I would begin by watching a selection of the films mentioned above, comparing and contrasting the subject matter, context, and themes and analyzing the music itself.

Then, I would delve into the second question and watch and analyze films more specific to indigenous choral traditions. Besides for *Frozen II* (2019), a few preliminary selections include *The Sapphires* (2012), the story of a female Australian Aboriginal singing group (Nunn, 2018), and *Genghis Blues* (1999), a documentary which prominently portrays Tuvan throat singing (NPR).

Along with watching and analyzing the films and their music, I would do online research on indigenous peoples and their choral traditions to supplement my analysis. If the opportunity arose, I would not even be opposed to reaching out to relevant sources (filmmakers, composers, indigenous people) for personal interviews and accounts.

To “measure” or gauge the portrayal of indigenous choral traditions in films, I will research the audience reception, both in regards to critics and the indigenous peoples themselves. This may come in the form of others’ analysis or firsthand impressions. It will give some insight as to whether these choral traditions were accurately and respectfully represented.

Expected Results

I would expect to write a paper, detailing my research findings. In terms of answers to the questions, I expect to confirm and reinforce the assertion that choral

music contributes to a historical or religious context in films, as seen in Caps' article. I would also venture to assert that there is a correlation between moments of great human emotion and the employment of choral music in films. Perhaps one can even pinpoint a correlation between the height of story arcs and inclusion of choral music.

In terms of the portrayal of indigenous choral traditions, I expect that some representations will indeed be accurate, respectful, and in good taste; I also anticipate others will not be so and may have backlash, appropriation, and even cultural erasure associated with them. While I do not hope to encounter these results, they may, in some sense, be more important than the former, in the sense of bringing awareness to issues surrounding the representation of indigenous peoples through this paper.

Conclusion

To continue the discussion about indigenous peoples and their representation, I would encourage one to take tangible steps towards further education such as by watching films on indigenous peoples or even enrolling in a course on indigenous history, such as "Indigenous Canada", which is one offered free online through the University of Alberta on Coursera. It is important to continuously be learning and striving towards making the world a better place.

However, in the meantime, I hope that this research highlights the importance and impactfulness of choral music in films. It is also my hope that it brings attention to indigenous peoples, their representation, or lack thereof, in popular media, their history, their rich choral traditions, and, ultimately, their stories.

Works Cited

- "8 Great Choral Moments From Film." *BBC*, BBC,
www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/DXsRlxbWwyDGz8Sd3kS5bb/8-great-choral-moments-from-film.
- "Best Picture Nominees for People Who Love Choral Music." *Best Picture Nominees for People Who Love Choral Music* | Chorus America,
www.chorusamerica.org/singers/best-picture-nominees-people-who-love-choral-music.
- Caps, John. *Choral Quarrels: The Dangers of Choral Music in Films* - by John Caps,
www.mfiles.co.uk/choral-quarrels.htm.
- Dartt-Newton, Deana. "Truth vs. Twilight." *Burke Museum*,
www.burkemuseum.org/static/truth_vs_twilight/.
- Frozen*. Directed by Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, 2013.
- Frozen 2*. Directed by Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, 2019.
- Genghis Blues*. Directed by Roko Belic, 1999.
- Mohamed, Zahra. "Indigenous Representation in Media." *ArcGIS StoryMaps*, Esri, 15 Dec. 2019,
storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/34bdcbb62ba04aa2a63a2bdc1e8accab.
- NPR. "Remembering The People's Throat Singer Of Tuva." *NPR*, NPR, 9 Aug. 2013,
www.npr.org/2013/08/09/210485677/remembering-the-peoples-throat-singer-of-tuva.
- Nunn, Gary. "The Sapphires: Where Are They Now?" *Australian Geographic*, 2 Sept. 2018,
www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/history-culture/2012/09/the-sapphires-where-are-they-now/.
- The Sapphires*. Directed by Wayne Blair, 2012.
- Simonpillai, Radheyana. "Disney Signed a Contract with Indigenous People before Making Frozen II." *NOW Magazine*, 3 July 2020,
nowtoronto.com/movies/news-features/disney-frozen-2-indigenous-culture-sami.

Budget and Timeline

It costs \$1.99 to \$4.99 to stream a movie online. Therefore, to give a conservative estimate, I would allot \$5.00 per movie. This paper mentions 21 different movies and shows. Given I watch around 20 films for my research of choral music and indigenous choral music, I would project the total expenditure for this research project to be around \$100.

Movies tend to be around 90-120 minutes long (1.5-2 hours). If I watch 1-2 films a week for the span of this project, film data collection time could take 10-20 weeks. Assuming I take 15 weeks to research, watch, and analyze the films and that compiling the final paper takes about 1 week, the project should be completed in approximately 16 weeks; that is equivalent to 4 months or one semester at LMU.