

**Connor Chee, Navajo Pianist and Composer**

*"Indigenous Perspectives" - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net*

*# 17 -March 24, 2022*

For audio podcast:

<http://www.ecologia.org/news/17.NavajoPianistConnorChee.mp3> (59 minutes)



Image source: [www.connorchee.com](http://www.connorchee.com)

**Segment One**

Randy Kritkausky: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkausky, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives, along with Carolyn Schmidt. Today we're going to be talking with Connor Chee, Navajo pianist and composer.

Carolyn Schmidt: Indigenous Perspectives originates from Vermont in the United States. Vermont is located on lands that the Abenaki people call N'dakinna. It's the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people, who for thousands of years have been stewards of the lands found here and across the border in Québec province in Canada.

We welcome today's guest, Navajo pianist and composer Connor Chee, who is speaking to us from Arizona.

Connor is known for combining his classical piano training with his Native American heritage. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music and the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, his solo piano music is inspired by traditional Navajo chants and songs. Connor has released four studio albums of original pieces, and piano transcriptions of Navajo music; much of his material is available through his website, [www.connorchee.com](http://www.connorchee.com)

So, welcome, Connor!

Connor Chee: Thank you so much for having me.

Randy: Connor, your journey combining classical music and Navajo culture is a powerful expression of both creativity and resilience. Can you begin by telling us how you combine these two traditions?

Connor: Well, you know, I didn't start out doing that at first. My journey with music was just in performance. I started piano lessons when I was about six. And as I went on to go to school and to college, eventually getting my master's degree, it was all very much focused on performing other people's music. I did take some composition lessons while I was in school, but my focus was, you know, playing Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninoff. It wasn't until after I graduated that I sort of, you know, I came back home to Arizona where I'm from and I - I wanted to try and have kind of a preservation project, with my grandfather, with a lot of the music that he sang - traditional chants and songs. And, it was during that time that I started to experiment with what I'm doing today, as far as composing based on these traditional elements.

So, I originally was thinking to somehow write these down, but I found that really wasn't going to be the most useful or, you know, purposeful thing that I could do. Because it's an oral tradition, and there are reasons for that, because it's sacred music. So what I did instead was I studied these - these chants that my grandfather sang, and sort of took things that I felt to be interesting elements, whether it's the rhythm or the melodies or the tone collections used, or the structure. And I started to either arrange some of these for piano or just write original pieces based on some of these elements. And that's how I started out with my first album, *The Navajo Piano*. And, since then, I've also just kind of taken elements of the culture and kind of

told stories through music, sharing either pieces of our history or our life now, or some of the beliefs in the culture.

Randy: You mentioned in particular being inspired by your grandfather. Is there a - is there a moment that you can recall when you had sort of the - you know, as they say, the light bulb go going on or an Aha moment of "I've got to do something with this!" Or was it a slow process of internalizing and processing your traditional roots?

Connor: I think it was a slow process for sure. I mean, my - he was some of my earliest musical influence listening to him sing, you know, before I ever touched the piano. And it's kind of strange that I ended up with the piano because I kind of grew up in the middle of nowhere, Arizona, and it wasn't at the forefront, you know, music education wasn't necessarily there for everyone. My parents at one point were driving me to Flagstaff, which was a couple hours away, on the weekends. So it was like a four hour round trip for me to get a piano lesson. But my dad got a little, basically a toy piano keyboard for Christmas and he didn't play. It was just kind of one of those gifts like, oh, this is kind of fun. And I took to it and I just started playing by ear and kind of teaching myself little basic melodies, so eventually that's when my parents started giving me lessons when I was about six years old.

So I had this musical journey with the piano and learning all about, you know, classical music. And eventually - I knew when I graduated that I wanted to come back home, to Arizona, and to sort of reconnect with what I'd been away from for so long when I was studying. 'Cause I left when I was about 10 years old, and I went to a performing arts school starting when I was 10. And so coming back after finishing up my master's degree was something I'd always kind of wanted to do. So when I came back, that's sort of how things just naturally progressed, to where I'm at today.

Randy: So you mentioned, you know, starting out on the piano. At the time you were beginning to experiment with the piano, other than your grandfather's chants, were you exposed to music that's part of tribal ceremony outside of the relationship with your grandfather? Like powwows, drumming, and things like that?

Connor: Yeah. Different, - different events and gatherings. I would hear a variety of different things, especially powwows which are more inter-tribal, and what was on

the radio. And I think that's where I really started to take an interest in piano. My mom had gotten a cassette tape, I think, of one of these classical albums, like "the best of" type of a thing, where it was just a mix of all sorts of different types of piano music that's popular. And I really took to it. And I - that's sort of what got the wheels turning, I think for - for myself and for my parents as well - that, oh, maybe he's interested in piano; maybe we should get him some piano lessons. But definitely the traditional music was a big part, but also everything that was on the radio. And somehow when that classical cassette tape came into the mix, I was drawn to it at a young age.

Randy: So I sometimes feel that my ancestors, both Native American and European - on the European side, my ancestors are French Canadian fur trappers - I feel that they're calling me back home. I mean, literally. I don't hear voices in my head, but I - just, I just feel it in various places, and then I, you know, I get reminders from our other than human kin, basically telling me "Randy, wander back home." Do you ever have intimate moments reconnecting you with your ancestors or with the desert - you perform beautifully in the desert - or your Navajo ancestors through music? Do those kinds of things ever become your muses in a very profound sense? Or is it more of a musical aesthetic kind of experience?

Connor: You know, it's definitely a journey for me, in connecting and reconnecting with my culture. Because I was away for so long. I grew up in Northern Arizona. I grew up, you know, going out to my grandfather's on the reservation and I was surrounded with the culture and the customs. But also part of what I'm doing with my music is when I go to create these pieces or record these albums, I do also a lot of research and learning on my own. You know, when I - when I did the album "Emergence" based on the Creation Story, I - I'd known a lot of the Creation Stories. But I really - it was my time to dig deeper and to go to my dad or to my grandfather and ask more questions and do more learning, and - and more digging.

And the internet has also been a great resource, 'cause there's a lot of - there are elders out there who are sharing stories on YouTube and it was, like I said, a journey for me while sharing parts of the culture, also kind of strengthening my roots and going back to those things, and learning it all over again and learning new things as well.

So that's definitely, I feel in that sense, that calling from my ancestors, you know, I guess to reconnect. It's a spiritual thing because when I'm writing the music, it's sort of a different head space, it's a different spiritual place that I have to get into. And sometimes it's hard to access that for me. So those are definitely things that I turn to because I say all the time, I don't know where music comes from. I wish I could just like flip the switch and I'm going to sit down and I going to write a bunch of music today. And it never works that way. Sometimes it's just a struggle where there's nothing coming out. And so my go-to is to, you know, listen to my grandfather singing or to dive into these stories, into these parts of the culture and to sort of get to that spiritual place where I feel comfortable to create something.



*Image source: [www.connorchee.com](http://www.connorchee.com)*

Carolyn: Well, you're having feet in two distinct worlds. Obviously it's really exhilarating. You've got the classical training, which comes through with your piano pieces. Do you ever find yourself suspended between the two worlds? Is there a struggle or do you feel that it's going pretty seamlessly because of your motivation?

Connor: You know, honestly for a while, I kind of decided to sort of walk away from the classical world in a sense - where I was kind of tired of some of the culture in that community, which did exclude a lot of things that were not in the standard repertoire. And, you know, that's when I really reconnected, I think the most, with my indigenous roots and the traditional music. You know, because there's a rocky history with that in classical music. And there have been other Native composers, but they're just extremely underrepresented. And when I looked for them, it was difficult for me to find. There's definitely been a revitalization in the past few years where now, finally, there's some space that's being created for people to listen to and acknowledge these indigenous composers that have been here all along.

But like I said, there's a time when it almost felt very unwelcome. You know, if you're not doing the standard classical repertoire. And classical music didn't really take indigenous music seriously for quite a while; it was just seen as primitive music. And there was the Indianist movement where some composers were taking Native themes, supposedly taking these melodies, and it seems like their idea was to elevate this music, that this is primitive music, and we're going to take these things and we're going to turn it into like a high culture, something that's more refined. And that's not at all what I do with my music. You know, it's something that I'm just taking and putting it in a different format, but it certainly isn't elevating it or making it any more complex, because it's full of complexity and nuance, and it's just different.

So I think now, as of today, there's people that are much more receptive to that. And like I said, just in the past few years, the diversity in classical music is starting to take things a little bit more seriously. So there's definitely been times when I've been suspended between the two worlds where it seemed like it was one or the other, like I'm going to either have to go to like a totally classical concert and play, you know, the usual stuff, or it's a concert that's kind of almost outside of the classical world where I'm going to be playing my stuff. It's - yeah, it's an interesting question. And it's been an interesting journey.

Randy: I understand, on a deeply personal level, what you're describing. At the very beginning of the book I wrote about my own reawakening to my ancestral roots, I actually have a photograph of a statue in England; it's "Alice Through the

Looking Glass” and it's a bronze statue. And Alice, you know, who's the bronze sculpture, is literally caught halfway in the middle of the looking glass, neither on one side or the other. And there have been so many days and weeks, particularly at night when I awaken and I feel that I need to write when I feel - so, which side am I on tonight? and am I going to step all the way through? and if I step all the way through, can I come back? Do I want to come back? It sounds so much like your experience, particularly when you say, you know, you try to force writing and it doesn't happen. And there are other times it's like somebody from the other side is just grabbing you and saying, here's a gift. It's - I just resonate with what you're saying. So do you feel you've worked out this - this balance. or is it still part of the creative struggle of who you are?

Connor: You know, I think finding balance is a big thing in Navajo culture. And you are always trying to find balance, and things are undoubtedly going to go out of balance, and that's when you have to sort of reset. And that's something I think has been in my career with music and will continue until the end - that I'm going to be looking for balance in new ways. But you know, it's exciting to see all of the other indigenous composers out there and what they're doing that are so different from me.

And you know, sometimes one of the hard things is finding balance with people's expectations, because that's been another difficult thing. Because those outside of the indigenous communities really have an expectation of what they think indigenous music is. And sometimes it can be very shocking for them or they - they don't think that it's authentic or that it's real, even if it's coming from an indigenous person.

And as I said, there's other composers who do things totally different than me, and it's still Native music; it's indigenous music. It's just done in a different way, through a different lens, you know, through different compositional techniques, but it doesn't invalidate it. And sometimes that's a struggle.

And I've - I've heard this from other artists as well, whether they're in classical or whether they're doing, you know, pop or anything else, that there's this expectation of, what is “indigeneity”, what do they look like and how do they sound?! And

sometimes when you don't look the part, they seem, oh, that's - that's not real. I've had people who came up to me and they said, you know, "That was great. But, you know, one time I met this guy who was a real Indian, who was a real -" and they were referring to someone that was like in traditional regalia, like a feather dancer or something.

But that was the thing - that, to them, that image is the only thing; there's that expectation. So doing what I'm doing, as we said earlier, straddling this line between classical and indigenous music, there are certainly, I think, a lot of expectations that aren't met, from people who don't know as much about the culture and the custom. And, that's another purpose behind my music is just sort of sharing that and seeing what it is today. That, you know, there are a lot of things that - we live like normal people today, but we also have a lot of the customs. That was a thing in my music videos that I wanted to show. Kind of like how life is today, you know, for the Navajo people, at least, and what it looks like on the reservation, and that there's kind of a merger between these worlds. And to kind of show people that we're still here. And that it's not just something from the history books - these images that you have, in a lot of people's heads, of what it is.

So that's definitely been part of the journey and part of the purpose behind my music.

Carolyn: Yes. This is a theme that's come up a lot with our conversations with many indigenous people, no matter what field they're working in. It's that sense that somehow the mainstream culture [*assumes*] that indigenous life, whichever tribe you happen to be from, is supposed to be frozen in some sort of vague time in the 1700s or something. And then you're not supposed to have evolved and changed your own culture. Yet that's what everyone does all the time. And to me, one of the exciting things about all the indigenous arts movements today is there - no matter what the medium or what the country, there seems to be this whole integrating - new - new themes, new experiences, new technologies with traditional deep values, and coming up with all this fascinating stuff. And I guess part of the identity thing is that you are indigenous. Whatever you do, it's - you are - your music is indigenous music. In a way, you get to define it. Which I would think gives [*you*] a fair amount of power.

Connor: Definitely.

Randy: You, you mentioned gravitating toward the piano and classical because of having this album. Obviously I'm assuming you also, growing up as a kid, listened to pop music and jazz and such things. What impact did they have on you, and why do you think it was that you were drawn to the classical vein?

Connor: That's an interesting question because, you know, I did listen to a ton of different types of types of music growing up. And certainly everything I listened to has had an influence in some way probably even on a subconscious level where I don't realize what I'm - the influence is there.

But you know, my training in piano was very heavy in classical music. And I think a lot of people would probably gravitate towards it. I think there's - there is somewhat of an intimidation there that I've seen. Where people are like, oh, you have to be really educated or, you know, that's boring. It's kind of, before they've really dived, taken the dive into it, *[they]* kind of dismiss it. And just the nature of what I was doing and studying these pieces, I was kind of really forced into that. And as I went into that as part of my learning, I realized how much I genuinely did enjoy the music. You know, it was those really popular pieces that probably everybody knows that drew me in on that - on that original cassette, you know, that you hear it, you might not know who wrote it or what it is, but you know, it, and people enjoy that, those classical standard things. And that's what kind of hooked me in and got me going with the piano. But the more I - the more that I learned a variety of the repertoire, the more I did my own digging and listening and came to enjoy it, just as much. But, you know, I also enjoyed doing things outside of classical as well. So -

Randy: Well, this is, this is utterly fascinating, and it's shedding a lot of light on what we've been listening to in our household for many months now. We'll take a brief break and we'll come back and continue to explore. Thank you.

## **Segment Two**

Carolyn: Welcome back to the second segment of Indigenous Perspectives. We're talking today with Navajo pianist and composer Connor Chee.

Randy: Connor, as you alluded in the first part of our program, you know, there are challenges associated with being a Native American composer. Obviously there are challenges associated with being a composer and a pianist anywhere, anytime for anyone, but there are some that are unique to being an indigenous person. Can you shed a little light, maybe a story, on what you've experienced and how this has changed over time?

Connor: Yeah. I - I mean, it's definitely been difficult. And I think from a young age, it was difficult for me. Something that really stuck with me for a long time - I had a very negative experience with a piano teacher. I think I was maybe eight - eight years old. And I'd said that I wanted to, to do piano. Like this is what I wanted to do with my life. I was already thinking that when I was like eight years old. And she told me, no, that's not going to happen. Because you just don't have the discipline. not only are you an American because Americans are lazy and you'll never be able to compete with the disciplined students in Russia and Korea and everywhere else, but you're - you're an Indian, you're just, there's no way it's going to happen. That's - it's never happened before and it's not going to happen, but, you know, keep doing piano lessons, but don't expect basically anything to go forward with a career in music for me.

And I think that that is something that a lot of marginalized peoples have experienced, indigenous youth have experienced, is this sort of musical disenfranchisement where before you've even really gotten into it, you're given this defeat. And I feel like that stuck with me for a long time. And in - in some ways it really motivated me to do - to really like light a fire in me to - to prove that wrong. And it made me work harder, but it also, you know, always I found myself second guessing when I wanted to try something like, can I even do it? Am I even able to do this? That was definitely a big part of the struggle.

And also, at the same time, it's kind of, there's been like a tokenization or micro-aggressions where people would be like, "Oh, you play really good for an Indian." Like, thanks for that really backwards compliment! Or, you know, show the novelty of it. Like, "Wow, look at this - this Native person's able to play the piano. Can you believe it?" That kind of affects you, obviously.

But, you know, in recent years there's been kind of a revitalization, and looking for more diversity, and as I said, there's, there's been Native American composers and performers in all genres for many years. And now they are starting to come more to the forefront and be taken seriously. And, hopefully people will realize that these mindsets are - they need to be switched, you know, especially for, for the youth.

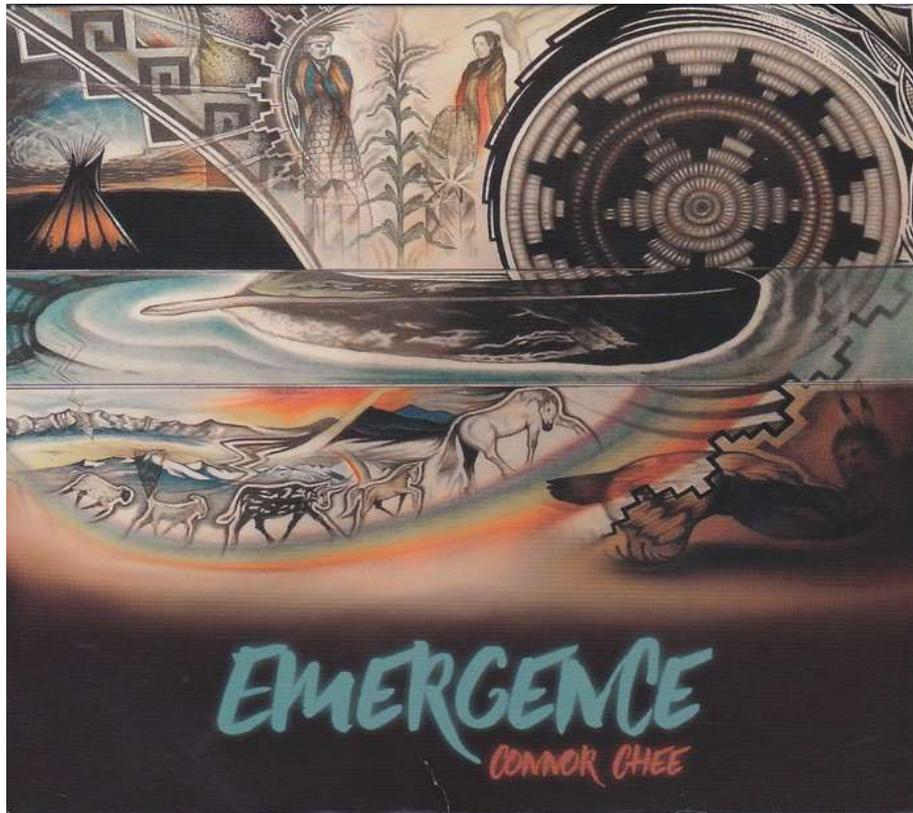
Randy: Our listeners won't be aware - and we did not, in the intro bio, list all of the awards and accolades that have accumulated in your resumé, because it sometimes makes an academic boring long bio - but I mean, you've performed at Carnegie Hall; you've won some really important competitions. Have you ever heard back from those who were discouraging, saying, "Gee Connor, I was wrong. I owe you an apology." Have you ever had that justice?

Connor: No. No. And nor would I expect it, from the people that that came from. I think they're in a certain mindset, all regardless. But you know, just the fulfillment for myself of achieving my own goals. That was rewarding enough for me just because I had so much doubt for so long, to really work hard and sometimes see that payoff. That was, you know, that was all I - I really needed to prove that for myself and, you know, honestly for everyone else.

Carolyn: You wrote your piece "Resilience," which is on your *Emergence* CD, during the protest at Standing Rock as a tribute to the Water Protectors. And you've said that "it's a reminder that the story of our creation is ongoing, and our modern struggles will add new chapters to our history". Can you comment on the roles of artists, especially musicians, in this ongoing process of defense and assertion of land rights and everything else?

Connor: Yeah. You know, I wrote that piece in the midst of - of everything that was going on at Standing Rock. It was the first time I really wrote a piece when I didn't have a piano in front of me. It was all just sort of in my head. And took that back to create the music. But that's something as far as our emergence and our continued - continued emergence - in my album that was something that I was thinking about a lot. Because we have this history and we have the stories of how we came to be. But I think sometimes we forget that we're still going through things, we're still going through changes, we're still learning new things in our culture and as a people, and I

think artists are really often at the forefront of sort of portraying that and protecting that - all the things that are happening as they're evolving.



*Artwork: "Life" ©2016 Evans Jensen  
Emergence CD ©2018 Wild Saguaro Records, Inc.*

Whether you're musicians and storytellers or actors or writers, the new, interesting things that are happening going forward. And my purpose behind "Resilience" was also that our existence today is really a protest in itself. You know, after centuries of genocide and attempting to just totally rid the world of Native people, we're still here. Not only are we still here, we're creating things, we're creating new, exciting things. We're getting together and sharing our music and thriving in so many areas. And that is still part of our emergence and what we're doing next. And how we're cultivating this in our youth and preserving our history, but also, moving forward with new things. I think that's what's really exciting about all of this, that we're still - still learning and still expressing new things.

Randy: I love what you just said, because very often when I hear people say “We're still here,” I fear that people in the mainstream hear that as a slightly defeatist message, as it’s “we're hanging on, you know, with our fingernails on the precipice.” But what you're saying is it's not that we're just still here. I love the second part of what you said, which is we're creative, we're resilient, we're assertive. I can hear that in your music and I assume - I'm assuming you feel that, because it comes out in every single piece you play. We've got just a minute left. Can you explore that idea for a moment, a little further?

Connor: Yeah, definitely. I mean, like I said, not only are we here, but we're thriving. And for me creating this space in the classical world is kind of where I am, I've put my purpose, and with my music. And that's really fulfilling and important. And it's also exciting to see it in other areas where indigenous people are doing wonderful things in other creative areas, or other professions or things all throughout the world. It's really exciting to see that.

Carolyn. Now, we'll hear a Navajo Corn Grinding Song, followed by Connor's composition based on that song. His composition is titled “Navajo Vocab for Piano No. 9”. Let's hear it.



CornGrindingSong.m  
p3

(1 min 21 sec)



NavajoVocabforPianoNo.9.mp3

(2 min 43 sec)

Thank you very much; we'll wrap up this segment and see you in a bit. Thanks, Connor Chee; we'll be back in a moment.

### **Segment Three**

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives, talking with Connor Chee. Conner, your most recent CD *Scenes from Dinétah* features piano pieces written about elements of Navajo life and culture accompanied by videos. And you recorded these pieces while playing outdoors in the Navajo landscape. The videos by Navajo filmmaker Michael Etcitty, Jr. include scenes of the landscape and the featured

elements of that composition. For example, the one titled “Weaving” shows a weaver working an intricate pattern on her loom. And the one titled “Horses” shows the rider currying the horse, then saddling the horse and riding away along a path. I’ve found the combination of the music and the videos to be really spellbinding. Can you choose one of the compositions and sort of talk us through how you and the filmmaker managed to put all these pieces together?

Connor: Yes. You know, I knew I wanted to do music videos for this album in particular. It kind of goes with sort of the changing format of how we receive music, which is constantly changing, but one of the big things is everyone enjoys having a visual aspect to it as well. Having something to see whether you're scrolling through Facebook, something that's going to catch your attention and draw you in. And the videos can also give a lot of context for the music as well.

So when I was writing these pieces, I had in mind that there was going to be a visual aspect. So some of the things, for example in “Weaving” like you mentioned, had the director, Mikey, he actually kind of synced everything up as if she was playing the loom for a few minutes, that lined up with the piano composition. That's something that I did have in my mind. I didn't know exactly how the video was going to turn out, but little things like that. Or in the video for fry bread, how he lined up the music to go with her flipping the fry bread as she's flipping the dough, those little things.

But we actually filmed all of those videos within like four days. It was a really exhausting four days and there's actually a couple I haven't even released yet. But so it was a lot of - a lot of work in the pre-planning stages. And a lot of work on Michael Etcitty's part to prepare what he was going to do because also this was - we didn't have like a big crew or anything. It was just me and Mikey and my friend Mary, that we had to move this piano all throughout the desert and find these shooting locations and get everything done in a very short time. But it was a lot of fun. And, it really - like I said before, my purpose with this music is to share parts of the culture and also to show people a little bit of what it's like on the reservation, and show some of those beautiful landscapes. And also, you know, some of the other

things like making fry bread or weaving, that went along with the videos. So that was like a really exciting part for me is to include that, along with the music.

Carolyn: Well, I had wondered about the placement of the pianos, because at first I thought, how could that piano be in that special nook right by that rock? I thought, is this some sort of a Photoshop thing? But I, I figured it - it, it was really there!

Connor: Yeah, so it was actually like a piano shell for my electronic keyboard. So it was not as heavy as a real piano, but still very heavy. And we definitely had to - we did a lot of scouting out ahead of time, to kind of see where we could get to with the truck that was like where we wouldn't have to carry that piano shell too far. That also was like, it looked nice. And also some locations where we could film something and then turn the piano or move it just a little bit, and it would look like a whole new location. That was one of the really awesome things about the landscape, you know, so diverse in how it looks. And so we were able to film a few videos, like in basically one area without moving the piano too much. But, no, that was, - that was certainly a challenge getting that piano around.

Carolyn: Well, you had a number of pieces about our non-human kin such as the Gila Monster and you include explanations of their positions as sacred beings in traditional Navajo teachings. And these are clearly meant for a non-Navajo audience. Can you talk a bit about how you decided to make those connections and work them into the music?

Connor: Yes, I think it's really interesting, the roles that these - these animals, these creatures play in our culture. And they inspired my music. And I think having some context for that was important for the listener. So oftentimes in the description I'll include a little bit - or not, sometimes it's - I kind of leave it up to the listener that if they're interested, they can go sort of on their own journey of learning a little bit about these pieces and the culture. But for example, the horny toad or the horned toad, we call him Cheii, which means grandfather. And there are some traditions with him that we use. Like if you come across him in the desert, you can give a gift of corn pollen, you put him over your heart and he offers protection. And so in my music, I kind of put a little bit of a heartbeat in the middle of that piece that was

inspired - sort of just a little bit of a nod to that. And that's something that I hope can connect the listener with that element, through also the music and the culture and seeing the video and everything. They're - those were things that just always fascinated me and those were - I turned to them for inspiration. And, it was a really interesting journey how that all came together

Carolyn: Are there any non-human beings that you've thought about doing a musical piece for, but you just haven't - it just hasn't come to you yet, or are there any you sort of have in your mind for the future?

Connor: Certainly. For all of my albums, I sort of create a huge list of possible things that I could include. And that was, you know, for *Scenes from Dinétah* was the same thing. I had a big list that was maybe almost twice as long of what I actually wrote, and I sort of go through that list and I just find what I'm inspired by, and then I go with that. And as I'm writing these pieces, I sort of then put everything together in the concept for the album, and placement and how I'm going to compose it. But there's certainly a lot of things that I had written down as possibilities that I didn't get to in time that I might go back to. I can't think of anything off the top of my head right now, but there's, you know, lists from *Emergence* as well, pieces that were about the Creation Story, that I just didn't include in the album that I might come back to at some time.

Randy: So you've, you've performed on the stage at Carnegie Hall. I'm assuming you wore some kind of formal clothing, and then we see you performing in the desert. Can you, just in the remaining minute and a half we have to go here, can you explain to the audience how it feels as a performer performing in those two very distinct places?

Connor: You know, I mentioned earlier, I kind of walked away from the classical music scene for a little bit, and that was one of the things I just really didn't enjoy was there's kind of this stuffiness to it sometimes, you know. There's a lot of tradition, but sometimes it's - it's a bit much. And when I perform, I first and foremost need to feel comfortable and that's something that I feel when I'm at home. And when I'm playing in, you know, a certain attire that's more comfortable for me,

it changes me as a performer and a musician. So that's something that's very freeing for me, and that I really appreciate being able to do.

Randy: Thank you so much. We'll take a break and be back in a minute.

## **Segment Four**

Randy: We're back with Connor Chee. And I'm going to pick up on a thread of the discussion we touched on briefly, but I was hoping we could go a little more deeply. For many listeners, Native American music is going to be the kind of thing they see in a movie or a documentary. Or if they go to a powwow, it's drumming and it goes, you know, on and on. And for many people, it might be a bit monotonous, absent the presentation of the dancing and such things. And one needs to understand that that music is part of the ceremony. On the other hand, classical music suffers under the burden of having to hold the attention of the ears of people sitting in seats, just listening to the music, maybe watching the orchestra. It's a very different kind of aesthetic intensive endeavor. How do you deal with the tension between those two modes of presentation?

Connor: You know, I think one of the really interesting things is kind of the change in concert format that's happening, especially given the internet and how we're consuming music in general. And that opens up a lot of opportunities to experience all kinds of different music in a new way. Social media, there's a lot of negative things that perhaps have come from that, but there's also a lot of really positive things. And that's something that I've enjoyed - being able to go on TikTok and you can listen to traditional music. You can listen to these creators who are offering basically online performances of traditional songs, for anyone to enjoy, right there on your phone as you're scrolling through things. And you can experience things in that way.

And also one of the things about composing based on traditional music is there is some music that's really not shared, or shouldn't be shared, that's only for ceremony. And I try to be very careful with that in my inspirations and what I use. There are certain songs that are only sung during a certain time of the year, or part of the year. So those are things that I wouldn't include in my music. And those are

only experienced at that time in that setting. But for the music that's out there for everyone to enjoy, that does exist. And there are also, like I said, lots of different ways outside of - and that goes for classical music as well, you know, we don't have to just go to a concert hall to enjoy the music or to see a performance, with the internet. I think that's like a really exciting thing. And it's changing, which is also exciting. So I'm looking forward to seeing what's next.

Carolyn: I'm impressed that you record for an independent label, Wild Seguro Records, and also that you clearly work with a team of Navajo artists and musicians, including visual arts. Does having your own label help to raise your visibility as an indigenous performer, or is it some sort of barrier?

Connor: Oh, I've think it's definitely helped - the label. We started a few years ago as sort of a vessel for collaboration. And that's something that I've really enjoyed - being able to collaborate with other artists and other genres, and being able to do things that are outside of my own compositions. But either helping to produce or record other musicians in different styles and also collaborating on these music videos. That's been really exciting.

And I think that's one of the great things that's happening now is the collaboration between indigenous artists, in many different genres outside of you having - I've been to performances that are featuring - I might play something that's more classical or some of my compositions, and you'll also have right after me, somebody performing jazz or a rock band, or, you know, it's all - but we're indigenous and that comes together and the community supports all of it. I think it's really one of the amazing things that I don't experience in many places, other than in these sorts of tribal and tribal gatherings of inter-tribal or inter-genre musical experiences.

Randy: So where in the coming years, would you like to see this whole endeavor go? You mentioned how much it's changed recently. Are there changes that you would like to nudge, or changes that you're working on?

Connor: I think really that inspiring the youth is a really important thing, for a lot of indigenous artists. I worked - I did the music, I scored a film, "Purple Flower Girl" that just came out recently. It's a short documentary about Jean LaMarr; she's an

indigenous artist. And as I was going through that film, one of the things that really struck me with was how she worked with the youth, like these words of encouragement and really telling these young people that are creating art, how magical it is. And that is so important. And that's something that I wish I'd had when I was young, this encouragement, because, that's where the future is, the youth, and we have to really foster that. And that's something that I always try to tell young people is, don't - don't let anything, don't let any doubt hold you back.

I, you know, that held me back. I only can think of what other things I could have done had I not just not even tried because I thought I couldn't do it - and you know, encouraging the youth to do what they naturally do.

I mean, it's so interesting to me because you know, in the classical sense, because we go through and we do all this training and here's how it's supposed to be. Here's music theory, here are like the rules that you have to, to follow for these kinds of music. And then after that they're like, okay, be a composer now, do something totally different. And I'm like, well that's what we were all kind of doing from the beginning, right? Something totally different that was unaffected by anything else. And that's - where is it coming from? It's coming from young people. So we have to not stifle that; we have to encourage it. That's - that's the exciting thing.

Carolyn: One thing that came through to me, especially with your sheep video, was you were having fun! You're playing your piano piece, you're dressed in a sheep hat and a sheep vest and you "baa" at the end. You're - it's great music; it's keyed with the landscape and with the sheep. And you're also having fun doing it. To me, that would be - it's inspiring to anyone, especially to a young person, you know, to see an adult with a specialization, just having such fun playing around with it.

Connor: I'm glad that came across. That was one of the things that I really wanted to do with that video because I think other times I've been interviewed and people, they told me, we weren't sure what to expect because you know, we weren't sure if you were like a classical musician and very serious and very - and I'm like, no, that's not really who I am at all.. And so I wanted to include that music video to show that

I'm not this overly serious person that takes everything in a very like - you know, I take everything a lot more lighthearted, a lot of the time.

Randy: Well, I hope that there is more than one young indigenous musician and mainstream musician, six years old out there with a little electronic keyboard experimenting, wondering what the possibilities are, listening to this and getting some inspiration from you. So that when the music teacher says, you know, son, daughter, girl, you're not going to make it. They say, I just saw this Connor Chee guy, heard this Connor Chee guy. You know, I, I, I really think it has to be inspiring. So thank you very much.

Carolyn: Thanks again to Connor Chee, Navajo pianist and composer. His website, where you can find links to the *Scenes from Dinétah* videos, download compositions, view the artwork, order CDs and sheet music, is [www.connorchee.com](http://www.connorchee.com)

Randy: So Connor, thank you, migwéché, again. This has been an absolutely wonderful experience for us.

Connor: Thank you so much for having me. Thank you.

Randy: And to our listeners. I want to say again, migwéché I hope the broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth, your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of, of living flora, fauna, and perhaps even that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it. And also if you will write to me and let me know about your experience. I can be contacted through my website, at [www.randykritkausky.com](http://www.randykritkausky.com) where you can also find transcripts and supplemental materials for all Indigenous Perspectives shows. And, a heartfelt migwéché. Thank you again to Connor – *[it's]* been great.

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*“Indigenous Perspectives” monthly podcast is hosted by Randy Kritkausky and Carolyn Schmidt, and broadcast on the fourth Thursday of each month, 12 noon Eastern Time (US & Canada), on HealthyLife.net.*



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