



SINGING IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

A MusiCounts & CBC Music
Teaching Resource

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Canada



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INTRODUCTION

Many educators already recognize the significance of bringing Indigenous languages into classrooms. It is an important job that holds the weight of bringing us all on a path towards reconciliation. At the same time, taking on this work comes with obstacles and uncertainty.

This resource is created to empower educators in school and community contexts to bring Indigenous languages into existing courses and programs through singing. With practical activities, discussion prompts, and repertoire suggestions, this resource is designed to be a starting point for teachers, librarians, and community educators who wish to integrate Indigenous languages into music programs in a way that honours Indigenous ways of knowing and cultural practices in a respectful manner.

It is important to note that this information has been compiled by a team of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers from Cree and Mohawk backgrounds, thus will include examples and Knowledge from these two nations. This guide is created with intent to help educators recognize key considerations based on our lived experiences. However, it is imperative that educators understand that there are more than 50 Indigenous Nations across Canada. While they share many of the same values, each carries their own set of languages, teachings, and practices. Knowing this, we must acknowledge that it is not always possible to give a “black and white” answer, as there are many Indigenous people across Turtle Island (a term used to describe North America) that have their own opinions, beliefs, and perspectives.

STARTING POINT: CBC CANADIAN MUSIC CLASS CHALLENGE

Many educators are familiar with the CBC Canadian Music Class Challenge initiative. This is a unique program that equips educators with a list of songs by Canadian artists, and invites classes from across Canada to create a video of their own performance of the song they choose from the list. If you're unfamiliar with that program, you can explore it [here](#).

Not only does this program empower students and teachers to participate in a national celebration of Canadian music, but all participants video performances are profiled on CBC Music's Youtube channel, and all participants are entered for a chance to receive one of several different prize packages!

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND THE CLASS CHALLENGE

Each year, CBC Music includes a song by an Indigenous artist in an Indigenous language on the Canadian Music Class Challenge song list. The artist works directly with CBC Music and MusiCounts to help prepare teachers to bring the song into the classroom though creating a video to support teachers and students in learning the language and properly pronouncing the song's lyrics. This collection of songs is an ideal starting point for educators interested in beginning the journey of integrating Indigenous music into the classroom.



2024 Indigenous Song: Yohahí:yo by Shawnee Kish

This year's song for the Canadian Music Class Challenge is written by JUNO-nominated singer and songwriter Shawnee Kish. In the Spring of 2024 Shawnee partnered with her sister, Mohawk Language advocate Kristi Talbot, to hold a songwriting workshop for the Indigenous youth of their community in Fort Erie, Ontario. Together, the participants of the workshop created a song that reflects the voices of today's youth. The song, *Yohahí:yo* [The Good Road] focuses on empowering our next generation to feel proud of the strength and power within themselves as they walk the good road towards a better future.

- [Here](#) you can view a video of Shawnee and Kristi discussing the song, and what it means to sing Indigenous languages in educational contexts. This is a great starting point for teachers and students alike.
- [Here](#) you can view an instructional video of Kristi and Shawnee teaching how to sing the song in Mohawk.
- [Here](#) you can find sheet music for *Yohahí:yo*.
- [Here](#) you can find lyrics for *Yohahí:yo* in both English and Mohawk.

ADDITIONAL SONGS & LANGUAGES

Educators may also utilize Indigenous songs from previous cycles of the Canadian Music Class Challenge initiative. While you cannot submit your performances of these songs to the competition, they are still terrific resources, and are a meaningful collection of repertoire that educators can leverage to engage students with additional Indigenous languages. Each of these songs includes an educational video to support learning the pronunciation of the text.



Human
Twin Flames
2019

Language	About the Artist	About the Song
Inuktitut - Inuktitut is the Inuit language spoken in the central and eastern Canadian Arctic.	Twin Flames are a husband and wife duo based in Ottawa, Ontario. Chelsey June, a Métis woman from Ottawa, and Jaaji, Inuk and Mohawk from the Arctic, have been creating music since 2014.	<i>Human</i> was written as the official anthem for UNESCO's International Year of Indigenous Languages. The song was written from an Indigenous perspective, but its ultimate goal is to encourage people everywhere to embrace the spirit of inclusion and belonging. You can learn more about the song, and access instructional videos for how to sing both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous versions, at this link .
Anishinaabemowin - Anishinaabemowin is sometimes called Ojibwe, and is a member of the Algonquin family of languages. It is generally spoken in regions from Manitoba to Quebec, and particularly around the Great Lakes.	Tara Williamson is a singer-songwriter, and member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, from Manitoba. She is also a research fellow at the Yellowhead Institute, and works with the Indigenous Law Research Unit at the University of Victoria.	The song Ode'min Giizis translates to "Strawberry Moon", and pays homage to the ways in which Anishinaabe people track the seasons through the moon. The strawberry moon marks the beginning of June, and is a reminder of friendship,



Ode'min Giizis
Tara Williamson
2021



Nikamo
Burnstick
2022



Máhsi ts'enjwę
Leela Gilday
2023

Language	About the Artist	About the Song
		sweetness, and love. You can learn more about the song, and access an instructional video on how to sing Ode'min Giizis at this link .
Plains Cree - Plains Cree is a dialect of the Cree-Montagnais language, which is itself a dialect of the Algonquin language. Cree is the most populous Indigenous language in Canada.	Burnstick are a husband and wife duo based in Manitoba. Its members, Jason Burnstick and Nadia Gaudet, represent Plains Cree and Métis heritage, respectively. Burnstick's distinctive style is in part due to their use of the lap slide Weissenborn guitar - a century-old instrument.	Nikamo is a Cree lullaby that means "to sing out", and is especially about giving thanks to your family. The song emphasizes the poetic nature of the Cree language. For an instructional video on how to sing Nikamo, as well as sheet music, lyrics, and translations, please click here .
Dene Kede - Dene Kede is a language and culture found in the northernmost parts of Canada, particularly the Northwest Territories.	Leela Gilday was born and raised in the Northwest Territories, near Great Bear Lake. She incorporates traditional Dene drumming in her music, and writes songs about her connection to the north and its people.	Máhsi ts'enjwę is a counting song that teaches students how to count to five in the Dene Kede language. Gilday talks about using music as a tool for language learning, and hopes that this song will make Dene Kede more approachable for learners of all ages. For sheet music and an instructional video on how to sing Máhsi ts'enjwę, click here .

The Canadian Music Class Challenge provides a unique experience that gives educators and students an opportunity to learn an Indigenous language through song. These songs are specifically chosen with special permissions that allow participants to feel secure knowing they are welcome to learn and share. In performing these songs, please keep the following in mind:

- **Educational purposes only:** in performing these songs, please keep in mind that these songs are intended to be used for educational purposes only. Please only share and perform with this in mind.
- **Adding Indigenous instruments:** Another point to consider when performing the song with students is the inclusion of traditional Indigenous instruments. While it may seem a good idea to pair the instruments with an Indigenous song, there are many protocols that exist when using traditional instruments. Our instruments are considered sacred. We recognize that they have a spirit, thus we treat them with the same respect and care we would for our own family. Each of the 50+ Nations across Canada have their own protocols for care of their instruments. Some examples include: cleansing through smudge, never leaving it face down, and/or holding it in a certain hand. Some Indigenous Nations also reserve certain instruments for each of the genders. For example it is often the role of the men to play the big drum at Powwow. Should an educator wish to include Indigenous instruments in their songs it is highly recommended to reserve that role for an Indigenous person, whether that be a student that is knowledgeable on the matter or bringing in a Knowledge Keeper from your community.

CONTEMPORARY VS TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS MUSIC

Educators may feel inspired by the MusiCounts Challenge to expand student's learning experience by sharing other Indigenous songs. It is of utmost importance for educators to consider the nature of the song they are sharing. Many Indigenous songs are deemed "Traditional" and hold strong ceremonial significance. It is highly recommended for educators to avoid engaging in the performance of these songs. Instead, educators can engage students in learning about Contemporary Indigenous songs, which represent tremendous diversity in terms of genre, language and approach.

For a wide range of lesson plans and educational videos that explore contemporary Indigenous music by artists including Jeremy Dutcher, the Twin Flames, and Snotty Nose Rez Kids, you can explore [*Kanata: Contemporary Indigenous Artists and their Music*](#). This is a free teaching resource that is a product of collaboration between the profiled artists and Indigenous music education specialist Sherryl Sewepagaham. This resource is designed to support educators who are new to discussing contemporary Indigenous music with students.

To learn more about bringing Indigenous languages into the classroom, [**watch**](#) Kristi share considerations for singing in an Indigenous language.

SUPPORTING ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS, LESSON PLANS & DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Teachers who wish to go further in depth with students using this resource are invited to access the following supplementary materials. Each supplementary package includes classroom materials and activity suggestions based around a particular theme that is relevant to singing in Indigenous languages; these supplementary packages have specific suggestions for different grade levels, please click on each title to access its corresponding materials.

Language Composition (K-12)

This resource introduces students and teachers to the ways in which the Mohawk language differs from English in its composition from its use of verb-based syntax rather than noun-based, to its use of morphemes to express complex meanings through single words. This resource is recommended for students of all ages, and can be modified to suit the needs of any classroom.

Language, Music, and Social Justice (K-12)

This resource dives into the connection between language, music, and social justice. Younger students will be encouraged to think about the ways in which language and music are central to their identity and culture, while older students will begin to inquire about historical and present harms caused by colonization and the removal of Indigenous languages and music from communities. This resource is recommended for students of all ages, and can be modified to suit the needs of any classroom.

Language Pronunciation (K-12)

This resource is rooted in phonetics, and while suitable for all ages, is especially relevant for middle-grade learners. Through guided exploration, students will examine the ways in which the Mohawk language uses different phonetics than English, despite sharing many of the same letters. This resource can be modified to suit the needs of any classroom.

Truth and Reconciliation (7-12)

In sharing an Indigenous song and language with your students, teachers may wish to also engage in discussions around truth and reconciliation. These conversations, while challenging, are deeply important. This resource is designed to help educators facilitate inquiry into the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action in a way that is both respectful, and accessible to a wide variety of learners. This resource is recommended for Intermediate and Senior grade levels, and teachers are strongly encouraged to modify these materials as necessary for your classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Kristi Talbot is a Registered Early Childhood Educator with over a decade of experience serving her Indigenous community in Fort Erie, Ontario. She has dedicated much of that time to reclaiming her culture and language so that she may pass it on to the children and families of her community. Kristi has formal training in Early Childhood Education, Visual Arts, and the Mohawk language. The combination of these skills has allowed Kristi to create a unique and modern approach to the teaching and sharing of traditions. Recognizing that children learn best through a hands-on approach, Kristi works to create culturally rich activities that are engaging and allow the learner to explore and investigate the knowledge. As an Educator herself, Kristi also recognizes that it is essential to create resources that allow for ease of access and application. She does this so that she may assist fellow Educators in their professional development. Kristi achieves this by providing detailed lesson plans and several variations of teaching tools. Many of the resources Kristi has already created have been utilized by herself and fellow Educators and have been successfully implemented year after year in many Indigenous organizations.



Sherryl Sewepagaham is Cree-Dene from the Little Red River Cree Nation in northern Alberta. She holds a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Alberta, a Bachelor of Music Therapy, a Bachelor of Education, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Music with an emphasis in Ethnomusicology in September 2023 at the University of British Columbia. Sherryl is a Cree singer, an experienced elementary music educator, choral composer, music therapist, and academic researcher. Sherryl created the secondary teacher resource, *Kanata: Contemporary Indigenous Artists and their Music* in collaboration with MusiCounts. She composed the theme song “Music Alive” and created and co-created three Indigenous Arts teacher guides for the National Arts Centre’s Arts Alive Program. Sherryl is the 2nd Vice President on the Carl Orff Canada national board. She is also a founder of the 2006 JUNO-nominated Indigenous women’s trio, Asani and released her own solo album *Splashing the Water Loudly* in 2014.