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Jonathan Griffin
Raven Chacon: *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak*
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Music + Add to myFT

Pulitzer-winning composer Raven Chacon on 'noise' music and Indigenous histories

The Navajo artist and musician writes scores to be played on foghorns and guns or screamed out of a window

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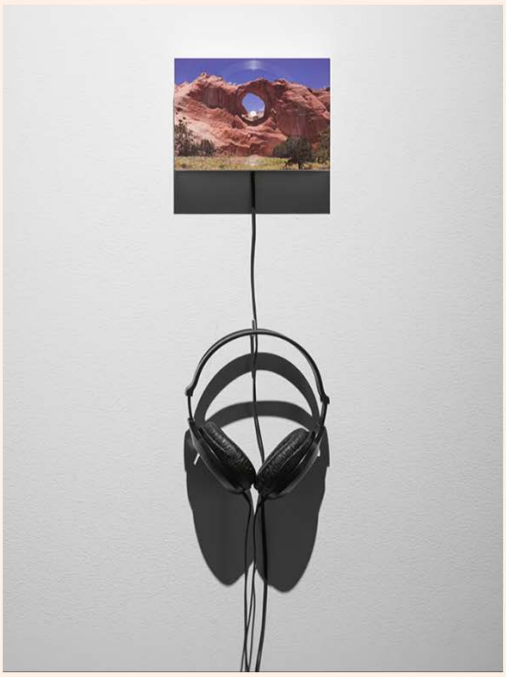
The city of Albuquerque in New Mexico is buttressed on two sides: to the east by the mountain ridge of Sandia Crest, which in winter is dusted with snow, and to the west by the Three Sisters, a trio of extinct volcanoes. On the dark basalt boulders strewn across their lower slopes, Indigenous people and early Spanish settlers have carved symbols and images, some estimated to be 700 years old.

The artist and composer Raven Chacon, 46, who grew up in Albuquerque and now divides his time between the city and upstate New York, used to explore these lava fields as a youngster, ingesting psychoactive plants such as jimson weed and searching for petroglyphs on the sides of rocks. Some — spirals, zigzags and dotted lines, for example — have found their way into the graphic musical scores for which he is now known. When I visited him in Albuquerque, he drove me out to see them.

In 2022, Chacon, who is Navajo (or Diné, as the tribe calls itself), became the first Native American composer to win the Pulitzer prize for music, and last year, he was awarded an $800,000 MacArthur Fellowship. On January 25, his first gallery career survey opened at the Swiss Institute, New York, showcasing Chacon's installations, photographs, videos and prints. Titled *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak*, the show will have a second iteration at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø, Norway, from next month.

His Pulitzer-winning composition, *Voiceless Mass*, was first performed at a cathedral in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2021. It was a commission from the organisation Present Music for its annual Thanksgiving concert — an invitation the artist nearly declined. Instead, he wrote a haunting piece for pipe organ, flute, clarinet, percussion, strings and other instruments but — unusually, for a mass — with no singing, intended to highlight the suppression of Indigenous voices by the Catholic church.

Chacon's 'Silent Choir (Standing Rock)' (2017-22) captures the sounds of a silent protest against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on Sioux lands in 2016 © Daniel Pérez, courtesy Swiss Institute



Chacon's 'Field Recordings' (1999) features ambient sound recorded at locations such as Window Rock (shown above), which is then amplified to the maximum volume © Daniel Pérez, courtesy Swiss Institute

Compared with most classical music, *Voiceless Mass*, which is performed by musicians standing on all sides of the church, may strike some listeners as droning, discordant, unmelodic and at times piercingly abrasive. In fact, says Chacon, "it's probably one of the more consonant compositions I've written".

Chacon's musical roots lie in the genre usually referred to as "noise". Born on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, just across the border from New Mexico, he moved aged seven with his parents to Albuquerque. There, he had piano lessons and by 12 was composing his own melodies. He took up the cello, the guitar and woodwind instruments, later building his own electric guitar, a two-by-four-inch piece of lumber with strings and a guitar pick-up screwed on to it. "It was noisy, it was ugly, it was dumb," he says. Undeterred, he experimented with it to make recordings but, not liking the sound, tried unscrewing the cassette and reversing the tape. That sounded better, he thought.

Unbeknown to him, Chacon was entering a musical field that traces its roots to Dada and Italian Futurism, which the French composer Pierre Schaeffer called "*musique concrète*" and which was later explored by Fluxus artists, including John Cage and La Monte Young. "I didn't know this stuff existed!" Chacon says. "I didn't think it was a career path."

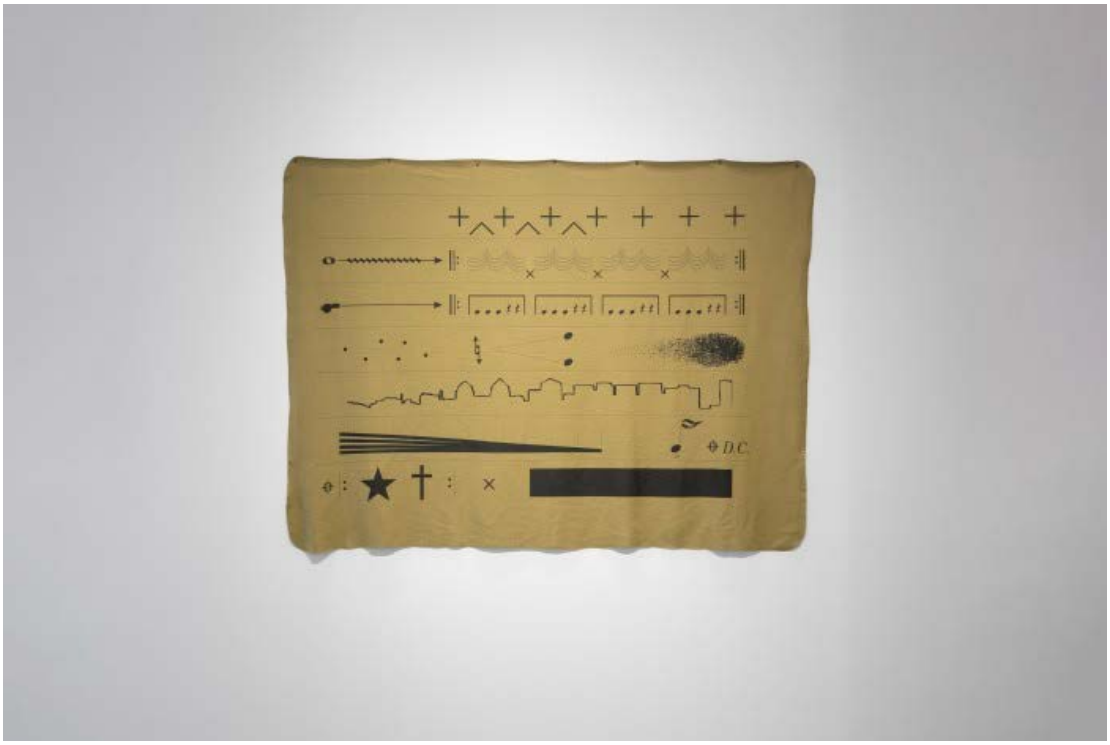
At university in Albuquerque, he studied music composition. Occasionally, he'd drive into the desert with some friends, a generator and a few instruments (including his homemade guitar) "and just make noise". In 2001, he applied to CalArts, near Los Angeles, where he continued his studies with the Fluxus composer and tape musician James Tenney and played in various noise ensembles.

'Report', written in 2001 and filmed in 2015, which is played using only firearms of different calibres © Daniel Pérez, courtesy Swiss Institute

Every summer, Chacon travelled from LA back to Chinle, a town in the Navajo reservation near where he was born, to teach music at a high school as part of the Native American Composers Apprenticeship Project. On these intensive courses, students learn musical notation, enabling them to compose a piece for a string quartet which is performed by professional musicians at the Grand Canyon Music Festival.

Why teach Native kids western musical notation and classical instruments from the European tradition, instead of traditional Indigenous musical forms? Two reasons, Chacon says. "One is that I love the instruments." The violin, the timpani, the clarinet — especially the bass clarinet, a favourite of his — are "absolutely perfect. They have evolved through time and I think they have reached their peak. They can't get any better."

The second is that, by learning musical notation, Navajo students will be able to communicate their ideas to classically trained musicians — most of whom, Chacon says, are white. “My hope is that students living on the Navajo reservation find new ways to use these instruments. I don’t think they need to be limited to the classical genre.”



In other words, Chacon hopes they might follow similar offbeat paths to him. He has composed for ensembles of docked ships playing on foghorns (*Chorale*, 2018) and for guns of different calibres (*Report*, 2001/2015). “Pitch is probably the last musical parameter I’m concerned with,” he says. “I’m more concerned with time and timbre.” One score, posted on a wall at the Swiss Institute, consists only of written instructions: “For a family to perform,/For as long as they want,/In a tall building,/On different levels, towards the same direction,/Scream out of each window.”

With such works, music becomes conceptual art. *Chorale*, for instance, draws attention to the systems of import and export, migration and displacement. *Report*, which was performed in the New Mexico desert, recalls the history of violence in that land, as well as the contemporary Native practice of hunting. His pieces, Chacon says, are site-specific; recording the sound of guns fired in the desert, he realised he was also capturing what he calls “the sonic profile of the land”.

Chacon’s work, he insists, is “not about me”. Rather, it is about the region in which he grew up, the borderlands of the US and Mexico, the histories of conflict in these places and the struggles of the people who still live there. As with many Native-American artists, he feels uneasy about speaking on behalf of Indigenous people in general, because the experiences, customs and beliefs of different tribes even within one region can vary widely. He is also uncomfortable with the pressures of explanation, especially to a non-Native audience or a white critic such as me.

As Chacon leads me down the path towards the petroglyphs, he notes that the meanings of the oldest petroglyphs are mostly unknown, except to some local tribes who refuse to decode them for outsiders. He refers to a mischievous composition from 2004 titled . . . *lahgo adil'i dine doo yeehosinilgii yidaaghi*, a Navajo expression meaning "acting strangely or differently in the company of strangers". Chacon's score for the piece included symbols that resemble those inscribed on the rocks, but also motifs copied from fake Indian crafts in Albuquerque tourist shops which probably originated in China.

"I wanted the musicians to give the symbols meaning," he says. "Of course, they have no meaning. I just drew them up." His graphic scores, he says, "get the hot potato" of subjectivity out of his hands and into the hands of performers who interpret and complete his work, reflecting the non-Native view of Indigeneity back on to itself.

'A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak' runs to April 14, swissinstitute.net; March 16 to September 1, nnkm.no