

## Vision & Collaboration: Cree Composer Andrew Balfour



*Andrew Balfour - Manitoba, Summer 2020*

### **Jenny Crober, Artistic Director/Conductor, the VOCA Chorus of Toronto**

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I first came across the music of Cree composer Andrew Balfour in June 2018 in St. John's, Nfld. at the opening session of the national Podium Choral Conference & Festival. The first selection of this session was *Ambe*, a 'welcome song', sung in Ojibway. My husband and I were captivated by the power and potency of this exuberant, rhythmically-driving piece, which was masterfully performed by Edmonton's Chronos Vocal Ensemble, directed by Jordan Van Biert.

I knew then that I had to find out more about this work - and this composer.

When I met Andrew at a workshop the following day in St. John's, he showed a clear interest in working with the choir I conduct, the VOCA Chorus of Toronto. Soon afterwards, I chose *Ambe* as the opening selection of our May 2019 "Earth, Sea & Sky II" concert, and in preparation for this performance, I invited Andrew to conduct a March 2019 workshop with VOCA. This event became one of the most moving and inspirational sessions which I have ever been involved with. I'll be referring to this workshop again at the end of this article.

Andrew Balfour was a 'Sixties Scoop' child, taken from his Cree mother when he was an infant in 1967, then adopted when he was six months old and raised in Winnipeg. He considers himself very fortunate that his adoptive parents were a loving and supportive couple, who shared their love of music with him (but also noted that many others who were taken from their families were not so lucky, and became stuck in a revolving door of foster homes). At an early age, he sang in the men's and boys' choir at his father's church, All Saints' Anglican Church in Winnipeg (which is where he learned to love early music), and began to play the trumpet, an instrument he later studied at university.

During the early nineties, he went through what he refers to as a "very dark period" of his life. VOCA chorister Carol Toller, in her perceptive and in-depth Globe & Mail article about the composer ("Choral maestro Andrew Balfour pursues his Indigenous identity through music", May 19, 2019) wrote about his recollections of this dark period: "At one point, an elder invited him to participate in a sweat lodge, an experience he found overwhelming. In the darkness of a forest that felt 'like a womb', he put forth the question, 'Who am I? And what am I meant to become?' He recalls a profound sense of feeling protected, as if something was watching over him and the other men attending the lodge. A message of sorts arrived about a week later, when he had what he describes as a vision: 'It felt like a near-death experience', he says, in which he was visited by people he'd known throughout his life, who spoke to him. None of it made sense at the time ... but he's certain about this: 'It was another power, another spirit ... something telling me that life was going to be okay. And from then on, that's how I felt. And I knew that I wanted to pursue my identity through music.' "

That conviction helped him commit to more fully acknowledging his Cree background, and to a career as a professional musician, where, particularly through music and writing, he could more fully explore his identity.

These crucial, life-altering decisions led Andrew Balfour to a highly successful and varied professional music career. He is an innovative composer/conductor/singer/sound designer with a large body of choral, instrumental, electro-acoustic and orchestral works, including *Take the Indian (A Vocal reflection on Missing Children)*, *Notinikew (Going to War)*, *Empire Étrange: The Death of Louis Riel*, *Migiis: A Whiteshell Soundscape*, *Bawajigaywin (Vision Quest)*, *Gregorio's Nightmare*, *Wa Wa Tey Wak (Northern Lights)*, *Fantasia on a Poem by Rumi*, *Missa Brevis*, *Medieval Inuit*, *Quamaniq* and *Manitou Sky-An orchestral tone poem*. His new Indigenous opera, *Mishabooz's Realm* was recently premiered in Montreal and Haliburton, Ontario, commissioned by L'Atelier Lyrique de Opéra de Montréal and Highlands Opera Workshop.

He has also been commissioned by the Winnipeg, Regina and Toronto Symphony Orchestras, Ensemble Caprice, Groundswell, the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra, the Winnipeg Singers, the Kingston Chamber Choir, Camerata Nova and the VOCA Chorus of Toronto, among many others. His works have been performed and/or broadcast locally, nationally and internationally.

Andrew's 2019 season included premieres by New York City's innovative vocal ensemble, Roomful of Teeth, Toronto's Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir (TMC). *Mamachimowin (the act of singing praises)*, conducted by David Fallis, was premiered by the TMC with members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in Oct. 2019 at Koerner Hall.

Andrew Balfour is also the founder and artistic director of the innovative, 14-member vocal group Camerata Nova, an ensemble which started with 5 friends and a mutual love of singing, and which now spans over two decades, offering annual concert series in Winnipeg which focus on early, contemporary and Indigenous-infused vocal chamber concerts. With this ensemble, he specializes in creating innovative "concept concerts", many with Indigenous subject matter (*Wa Wa Tey Wak (Northern Lights)*, *Medieval Inuit, Chant!*), exploring themes through an eclectic array of music, including new works, arrangements and innovative inter-genre and interdisciplinary collaborations.

Andrew designed and directed a three-concert "Truth & Reconciliation Series" for Camerata Nova, beginning with "Taken" (2017). This performance, which dealt with the subject of Indigenous children being taken from their homes and the stripping of their culture by residential schools, featured Polaris Prize-winning artist Jeremy Dutcher, hip hop artist Eekwolfrom Muskoday, throat singer Madeleine Allakariallak and cellist Leanne Zacharias.

"Fallen" (2018), the second concert of this series, explored the contributions of Indigenous soldiers during the First World War, featuring a choral drama entitled *Notinikew* (a Cree word meaning *Going to war*), written by Balfour, and featuring the composer as narrator/performer. Camerata Nova was joined by Indigenous cellist Cris Derksen, traditional drummer and singer Cory Campbell, the Winnipeg Boys' Choir and conductor Mel Braun.

"Captive", the third and final concert, will feature new works on the theme of "captivity", expressing the power and sadness of Indigenous incarceration, with a focus on the arrest and imprisonment of Chief Poundmaker in Saskatchewan in 1885. This event, which was originally scheduled to be performed this past May, will feature numerous Indigenous artists, including electro-acoustic specialist Eliot Britton and cellist Cris Derksen.

Andrew has also become increasingly passionate about music education and outreach, particularly on northern reserves and inner-city Winnipeg schools, where he has worked on behalf of the National Arts Centre, Camerata Nova, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and various Winnipeg school divisions for over a decade. He was Curator and Composer-in-Residence of the WSO's Indigenous Festivals in 2009 and 2010, and in 2007 received the Mayor of Winnipeg's Making a Mark Award, sponsored by the Winnipeg Arts Council to recognize the most promising midcareer artist in the City. In 2017, Andrew was awarded a Gold Medal by the Senate of Canada for his contribution to Canada's Indigenous and music communities.

More recently, Andrew Balfour was invited by the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir (TMC) to be the guest curator for their Nov. 11th “A Program of Remembrance: A Choral Perspective of Canada’s Indigenous Veterans”, a presentation which reflected on Indigenous experience through music and poetry, with conductor Simon Rivard and Elder Dr. Duke Redbird. The centrepiece of the evening was a remounting of four portions of *Notinikew*, movements which were sung by Camerata Nova and by the TMC. Other works included *Ambe*, and the composer’s hauntingly beautiful setting of Sir Wilfrid Owen’s WWI poem *Anthem For A Doomed Youth*. Reviewer Ken Stephen wrote that this concert “swept away Remembrance Day’s more conventional expressions of heroism and sacrifice, and forced the audience to confront difficult truths that cut uncomfortably close to home”.

Shortly before this Remembrance Day event with the TMC, Andrew joined the VOCA Chorus of Toronto for a compelling Interview/Question & Answer Zoom session. He spoke on a wide range of issues, including his start in life as a ‘Sixties Scoop’ baby, his good fortune at being adopted by a loving and musically-supportive couple, his choral singing (including his time as a counter tenor, and his long-time love of Early music, especially Bach) and trumpet playing, as well as the early days of Camerata Nova. He also spoke about his upcoming Remembrance Day event with the TMC, and particularly about the horrendous treatment of Indigenous soldiers after their return to Canada from the First World War battlefields. Indigenous men, who had been actively scouted to become soldiers overseas, became disenfranchised and lost their status upon returning to this country. He also spoke of Reconciliation being “not a destination but an ongoing journey”.

During this Q&A (and in discussions with me), Andrew also shared his concerns about cultural appropriation, and his firmly-held belief that collaboration with Indigenous artists is absolutely key in how to approach working with the performance of Indigenous music. Having allies - people who are sensitive to Indigenous issues and who are excited about collaborating with him and other Indigenous artists - within the various artistic communities is absolutely crucial, and long overdue. “Collaborations with members of the Indigenous community are now the future for all organizations. You have to be able to listen ... give them the space to feel welcome and safe, and be aware of their concerns.” It should be noted that his overriding message during this discussion was one of optimism and hope.

In the summer of 2019, invigorated by a very exciting invitation to the VOCA Chorus of Toronto from Roy Thomson Hall to perform in its 2019-2020 Noon Hour Choir & Organ Concert Series, I began fleshing out a concert program which I entitled “Star Songs”. During my research, I came across an Algonquin story about the myriad stars representing grandmothers, who were looking down upon their families, protecting them, wishing them love, comfort and safety. I immediately contacted Andrew to ask if he would be interested in composing a work about stars for this concert. He enthusiastically agreed, telling me he has always been fascinated by stars and the night sky. His creation for VOCA, *Anang (A Star)*, composed for SATB choir, piano and glockenspiel, and written in both Ojibway and English, is serene, reflective and very beautiful. (I clearly recall that my hands were shaking as I opened the PDF for my first glance at his score.)



*Andrew Balfour with Jenny Crober: TMC's premiere of “Mamachimowin (the act of singing praises)”  
- Koerner Hall, Oct. 2019*

One of the many major disappointments of the March 2020 lockdown was that VOCA had been planning to hold a late March workshop on *Anang (A Star)* with Andrew and percussionist Jamie Drake. This highly-anticipated event, along with our “Star Songs” concerts at both Roy Thomson Hall and our regular venue at Eastminster United, had to be postponed due to COVID-19. We are so looking forward to performing the world premiere of Andrew’s work - as soon as the pandemic will allow - in a concert featuring some wonderful guest artists: Shawn Grenke, organ, Colleen Allen, sax and Jamie Drake, percussion.

Carol Toller’s insightful May 2019 Globe & Mail article finishes by referring to Andrew Balfour’s exceptional *Ambe* workshop with VOCA in March 2019. Like so many of the choristers who were there that day, I still have vivid, unforgettable memories of this event.

He spoke to us - quietly, intensely - of his fervent hope that collaboration with Indigenous artists, so crucial and long overdue, would become much more commonplace: “For me, meeting with you like this is so important. This is what needs to happen.” He then spoke in detail about key aspects of the work: how honoured he was to share the text of this welcome song (“Come in, all two-legged humans, there is good life here”) which was gifted to him by his dear friend, Ojibway drummer and singer Cory Campbell. He spoke about the significance of the rhythmical, repetitive, chant-like sections (particularly in the tenor and bass sections) representing the drum - the heartbeat of Mother Earth. He also referred to the ascending first soprano line (which often soars above the rest of the writing) as a representation of a powerful but graceful eagle in flight. Andrew’s messages of collaboration, empathy and hope, along with his use of vivid analogies and imagery, created a profound presence in the room that afternoon. We then sang *Ambe* one final time (a performance which, I believe for many of us, was a gift to him). As Carol wrote last May: “He listened to the choir sing the piece one more time, nodding as it built to a thundering, almost rapturous crescendo. Then he turned to address the choristers and a smile cracked his face: ‘To hear you singing this work, with so much warmth and energy and respect ... This is the Canada that I want to be part of.’ ”

*Quotations were used with permission from Andrew Balfour and Carol Toller.*

**Jenny Crober** has had a richly varied professional music career of over 40 years as a choral conductor, collaborative pianist, coach, clinician, teacher, choral arranger, adjudicator, dance accompanist/composer, recording artist and a cappella jazz vocalist.

She accompanied singer Patricia O’Callaghan on her debut CD, “Youkali”, recipient of a prestigious Billboard Magazine Critics’ Choice Review.

Since 2004, Jenny has been the artistic director/conductor of the VOCA Chorus of Toronto, for which she has programmed a wide variety of classical and contemporary selections (including Canadian premieres), featuring some of Canada’s finest musicians. Notable choral conductors she has worked with include Elmer Iseler and Ivars Taurins; world-renowned composers include Ola Gjeilo and Bob Chilcott.

Jenny co-conducted Scott Macmillan's *Celtic Mass for the Sea* at Carnegie Hall in 2015. Following a 2016 VOCA workshop with Ola Gjeilo, the composer invited her to assemble a group of choristers to perform as part of a mass choir in a concert featuring his major work, *Dreamweaver* at Carnegie Hall in April 2018. She was honoured to conduct the Canadian premiere of *Dreamweaver* with VOCA in Toronto in May 2018.

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