

# WOMAN OF THE DRUM

## A TRIBUTE TO JEAN BECKER AND MINO ODE KWEWAK N’GAMOWAK

RAE CROSSMAN

Begin with listening. To the words of a poem. To an Indigenous song. To the sound of a drum. To the exchange of ideas. To the dialogue that emerges as music. To a tribute given voice. Begin with listening.

Such is the creative atmosphere that has influenced composer Owen Bloomfield, songcarrier Kelly Laurila of Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak (The Good Hearted Women Singers), and Inshallah director Debbie Lou Ludolph as they work on a new collaboration. The project honours, with an original choral piece and Indigenous songs, one of Waterloo Region’s long serving Indigenous community elders: Jean Becker.

On one level, the music pays tribute to Jean’s inspirational role in forming a drum circle for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women who affirm the Seven Anishinaabe Sacred Teachings: Respect, Truth, Courage, Wisdom, Honesty, Humility, and Love as the way to be in right relations with oneself and others. In other respects, the music spans traditions to promote wider cultural understanding and seeks to engage singers and audience in the process of healing the relationship between Indigenous and Settler peoples.

Jean, of Inuit and English ancestry, formed the group Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak in 2003 as a way for Indigenous urban women in the Kitchener- Waterloo area to re-connect with Indigenous culture and teachings, and to find community and their voices through song. The circle has helped to transform many members spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

A sudden health crisis in 2007, however, threatened Jean’s life. She needed an urgent liver transplant. The drum circle responded with song and prayer. A donor’s gift of a new organ gave Jean renewed life, and her gratitude touched all those around her. A poem gave voice to the celebration.

### Woman of the Drum

Woman of the drum.  
You bend the hoop of your life around us.  
Woman of the drum.  
You shape teachings into circle wisdom.  
Woman of the drum.  
You stretch your laughter blue sky taut.  
Woman of the drum.  
You lace sorrow into a handhold for beauty.  
Woman of the drum.  
You beat the heart song of the deer who gave her breath.  
Woman of the drum.  
You dance stories with the language of your limbs.  
Woman of the drum.  
You sing healing the way spring sings rain.  
Woman of the drum.  
You vision bloodstream into spiritstream.  
Woman of the drum.  
You journey with medicine music.  
Woman of the drum.  
You rhythm our broken lives into song.  
Woman of the drum.  
Together we sing our passage.  
Woman of the drum.  
Woman of the drum.

Rae Crossman  
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Rae Crossman, a friend and colleague of Jean’s, has long imagined the poem becoming song and has initiated the collaborative effort to realize that vision. So now, years later, these are the words Cambridge composer Owen Bloomfield considers as he drafts ideas for a choral composition that will include Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak.

Trained in a Euro-Western tradition, Bloomfield is careful not to impose his musical constructs on an Indigenous group. He knows he must listen first. In creative consultation, Indigenous songcarrier Kelly Laurila, who stepped into the role for Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak after Jean’s illness, has shared with Bloomfield various chants and songs familiar to the group, including the Women’s Honour Song: Anishinaabe Kwe. An idea

emerged. The piece has developed as two sets of voices, initially singing alternately across traditions: the Indigenous and the Euro-Western.

The composed piece for choir is scored with an open consideration to what the drum circle chooses to sing. Rhythmic, phrasing, tempo, and tonal choices will be made by a responding choir listening and taking their cue from the drum circle. The piece will change each time it is performed depending on which Indigenous songs are chosen.

Of course, a choral group committed to such responsive listening and cultural interaction is necessary. Inshallah, under the directorship of Debbie Lou Ludolph, is a Martin Luther University College singing community of over 130 voices that musically celebrates diversity and, as such, is ideally suited.

In Bloomfield’s own words: “What transpires is a musical dialogue of sorts, following the metaphor from the Two Row Wampum Treaty where the First Nation canoe and the European ship travel side-by-side each on their own course as friends and never trying to steer the other’s vessel.”

Respectful listening to distinctive voices, an essential element of the composition, leads ultimately to greater understanding and engagement as the two groups eventually sing together in the spirit of common music making. With the audience encouraged to join the concluding Women’s Honour Song, Anishinaabe Kwe, the community will pay tribute to Jean Becker, the Woman of the Drum.



Choral Presentation of “Woman of the Drum”

Inshallah and Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak

at

Inshallah & Inshallah Kids “Singing with our Neighbours” event

Featuring a Tribute to Jean Becker and Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak

3:00 pm, March 24, 2019

Knox Presbyterian Church, Waterloo, Ontario

Pay what you can.

Proceeds to Aboriginal Student Support at Wilfrid Laurier University

(A more detailed account of Jean Becker’s life and role in forming Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak is available on *The New Quarterly*’s website.)