



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “REAL INDIANS” IN THE MINNEAPOLIS PERFORMANCE OF *WINONA*

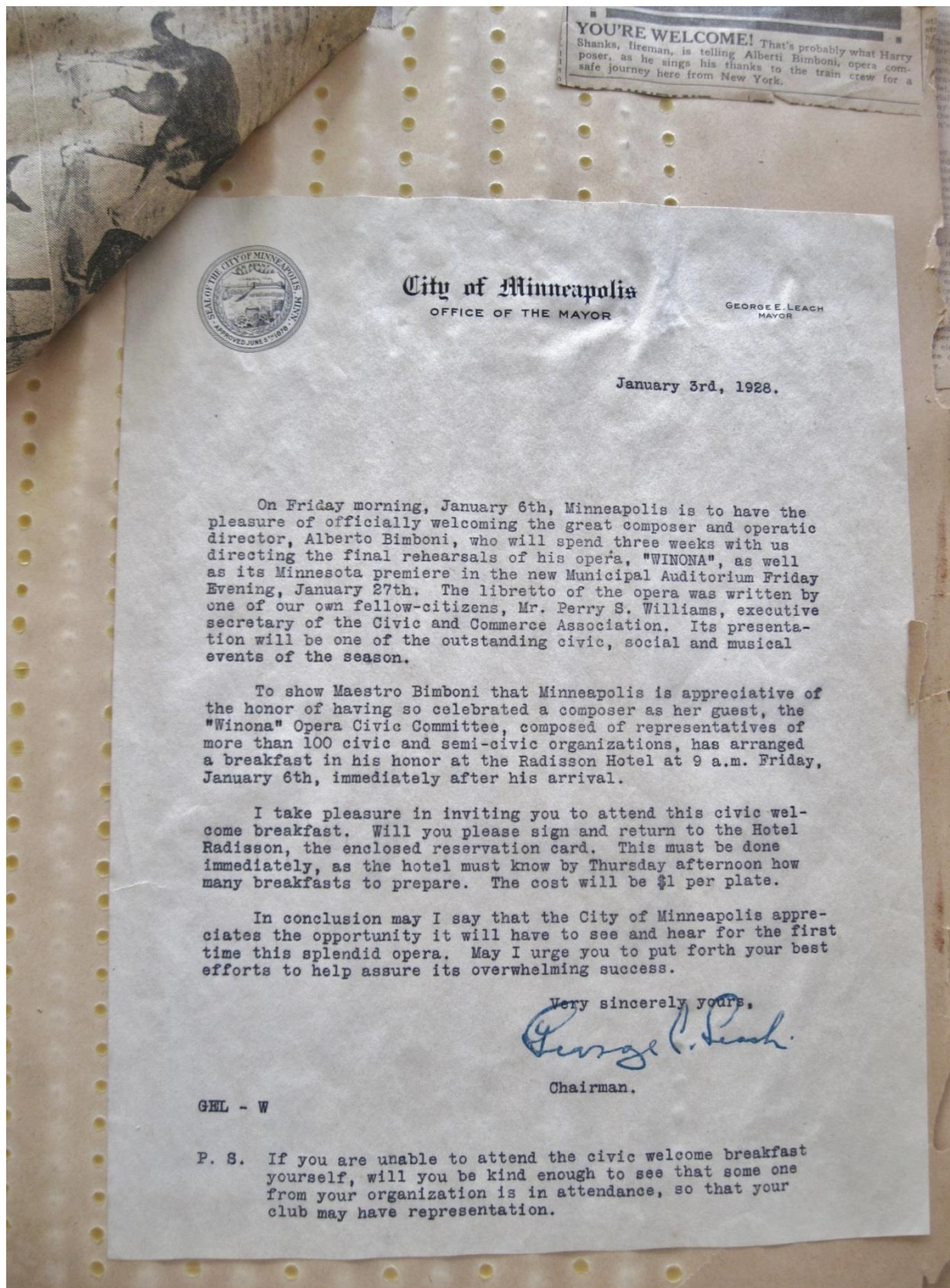
GRETCHEN PETERS

(UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE, MUSIC DEPARTMENT
& THE AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES PROGRAM)

The performance of Alberto Bimboni’s *Winona* in Minneapolis on January 27, 1928, which drew an audience of 9,000 at the new Minneapolis Municipal Auditorium, was a point of pride for many in the region. A narrative surrounding the opera emerged in local newspapers and the playbill that emphasized the “genuine” and “authentic” nature of what was being called the “first all Indian opera.” Contributing to this interpretation was the participation of six Ojibwe Indians from the region in a dance in the final scene of Act I. The surrounding narrative isolated these men in the legendary past of the opera, as any attention to the diverse lives of these individuals would have detracted from a central purpose of this performance--to associate the image of the monolithic, legendary Indian with Minnesota.

Winona was declared as “Minnesota’s own grand opera” in newspapers throughout the state. The story of Winona, the Indian maiden who jumped to her death into the Mississippi River from Maiden Rock to escape a forced marriage, was described in the playbill as “the state’s most popular legend.” The libretto was written by Perry Williams, a longtime resident of Minneapolis, who, according to one writer “steeped himself in Indian lore to such a degree that he [was] able to reproduce a verisimilitude of fact in this narrative of Indian romance and drama.” The composer, Alberto Bimboni, drew Native American melodies from two studies, *Chippewa Music* and *Teton Sioux Music*, conducted by native Minnesotan, Frances Densmore. While Minnesota could not make claims on Bimboni, himself, the foreword of the playbill emphasized that he was an American citizen with personal contacts with Densmore. As summed up in the *Albert Lea*

Evening Tribune, "This opera is a stupendous and spectacular production and of great importance to Minnesota people. All should be interested in their own Indian legends and state people."



Invitation letter from the Mayor of Minneapolis, George E. Leach, to a welcome breakfast in Bimboni's honor, upon the composer's arrival in the city on 01-06-1928. Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

Underlying the representation of *Winona* in Minneapolis was the importance of tourism for the economic future of the state. The librettist had served as the manager of the tourist and resort information bureau for the *Minneapolis Journal*, and at the time of the performance, was the Secretary of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce. In this capacity, Williams emphasized the importance of Minnesota's beautiful scenery, as replacement to the state's lumber industry which had begun to decline after nearly one hundred years. The Nelson Act, which was passed in Minnesota in 1889, had the intention of relocating all of the Indians in Minnesota to White Earth Indian Reservation, providing individual land allotments to Indians, and selling off the remaining reservation lands to the lumber industry. The industry reached its peak from 1890 to 1910, but in 1929, one year after the Minneapolis performance of *Winona*, the world's largest white pine company closed in Minnesota. Williams stated, "the tourist industry draws on a natural resource that is never exhausted—scenery. All it requires is judicious advertising and publicity efforts to attract them..."



Alberto Bimboni' arrival in Minneapolis, January 6th, 1928, to direct rehearsals of *Winona*.
Musical America, January 28, 1928. Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.



Announcements of the Minneapolis production of *Winona* in the local press, December 1927 - January 1928. Newspaper clips in Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

Both the opera, *Winona*, and the surrounding narrative served this effort by highlighting the natural beauty of Minnesota, of which a crucial component was the ideal legendary Indian. The first two acts are set in an Indian village on Lake Pepin, a spot on the Mississippi River that naturally opens up to form the largest lake on the river. The third act is set on the cliffs at Maiden Rock, a 400 foot limestone cliff that extends for nearly a mile. The opera’s scenic design included richly painted backdrops, large painted canvas rocks, canoes, and a ten-foot cliff from which the heroine jumped into a pile of hay. The recounting of the Indian legend of the moccasin flower in the first act drew attention to Minnesota’s state flower and one of Minnesota’s oldest state parks, Minneopa, which is the name of the girl in the legend. Throughout the playbill, an ideal Indian is blended with the natural setting of Minnesota. As one description reads, “Today, as in the days when the love song of Winona echoed through the evening stillness of the Mississippi, the lure of the Minnesota water trails--the winding, bewitching canoe paths that wind their way through the forests- in and out among the hills, or across the prairie country, still grips the heart of the lover of the outdoors. Today the fame of Minnesota as a place of great scenic beauty is spreading throughout the world.” An advertisement in the playbill, with images of Indians on Maiden Rock, encouraged passengers on the Burlington route from Chicago to Minneapolis along the Mississippi River. This narrative recalled and immortalized what was “worthwhile” about the Indians.

Perry Williams and Alberto Bimboni were adopted into the “Mississippi tribe of Chippewa Indians” the night of the dress rehearsal, offering further sense of Indian authenticity to the opera and the region. The six Ojibwe Indians who participated in the opera performed the ceremony; Chief J.P. Buffalo and Joseph Belgard conducted the ceremony and “a large group of Twin City Chippewas clad in tribal regalia” formed the “tribal council.” According to the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, “The ceremony was simple. J.A. Belgard, a Chippewa, welcomed the two white men who were to be made brothers of the red man. The chief filled his hand with earth. This he rubbed on the hands of the director and librettist. ‘You are children of the earth,’ the chief chanted. ‘The blood which runs in your veins is as red as ours, and we love you. You, Maestro Bimboni, shall be known to your red brethren as Wa-Ben-Na-Quid, the Cloud With a Silver Lining; and you, Brother Williams, shall be known as Nay-Ta-Gad, Successful, Progressive Hunter of the Tribe.’” The newspaper interpreted the adoption ceremony as an endorsement of the opera’s depiction of the “primitive Indian character in all its native nobility.”

A photo of the adoption ceremony simultaneously reflects the fascination with the legendary Indian and the failure to acknowledge the contemporary Indian. Below the photo entitled, “Chippewas Adopt ‘Winona’ Authors in Tribe,” it reads, “Above are shown, left to right, Mr. Williams, Chief J.P. Buffalo, who conducted the adoption ceremonies, Maestro Bimboni and Joseph Belgard, orator for the ceremonies. In the background is some of the scenery to be used in the opera.” No recognition is made of the four remaining men standing right alongside the others. The *Minneapolis Tribune* did print an article that day, however, with a list of the names of the four additional Indians: Rd. W. Cart, Emanuel Gustave and Benny Holstein all from White Earth, and Frances Blake from Red Lake.

Winona, with its all-Indian cast and 125-member chorus, provided the opportunity for many Minnesotans to assume an Indian persona. On the morning of the performance, a large

photograph with the chorus and cast in costume appeared in *The Minneapolis Journal* with a headline that read, “All Set, Pale-Faced Indians Ready for ‘Winona’ Opera Premiere Tonight.” Grouped as “hunters and villagers” and “Indian women,” each member of the chorus was identified by name in the playbill, including Joseph Belgard, the only one of the six Ojibwe to be part of the chorus. Belgard and Chief Buffalo are identified as the leaders of the dance, but in contrast to the “pale-face Indians,” the others remain anonymous.



The Minneapolis Journal, January 27, 1928. Article on *Winona*, on the day of the Minneapolis première.
Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

The Ojibwe men danced in the final scene of Act I of the opera. Emphasizing the authentic nature of the dance, a rare reference to these men ten days prior to the performance reads, “Chief J. P. Buffalo is leading the group of Indians who today began work on a group of dances. While the tuneful melodies are sung, Indian dancers in aboriginal garb will perform dances which the red men executed long before white men trod the continent. Joseph Belgard of North Dakota, a member of the chorus and himself a full blooded Indian, will coach the Indians.” Despite the below zero January weather, the Indians dressed only in loin cloths, unlike the pale-face Indians in covered up. The Indian dance was not intended as the focus of the stage, but rather as an extension of the scenery, as intense drama unfolded between the major characters. Throughout this scene, all four voice-parts of the chorus sing a prayer to the “Great Mystery,” requesting health and safety, and over the chorus, *Winona*’s uncle, Wabasha, forbids the young lovers to see

each other. Despite all of this activity on stage, one writer noted “the realistic Indian dancing” and “their apparently simple and yet quite subtle stepping nearly walked off with the show...” For this scene, Bimboni made use of at least three dance songs transcribed by Frances Densmore from the Lakota Sun Dance ceremony, a sacred ritual not intended for outsiders that was banned for Indian use by the U.S. Government for fifty years from 1883 to 1934 (six years after the performance of *Winona*).

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Win. Then sing the day But

Gret. Then sing the day But

Wab. call great mys - ter - y!

S. dance to thee. come! great mys - ter - y! Hear our

A. dance to thee. come! great mys - ter - y! Hear our

T. dance to thee. come! great mys - ter - y! Hear the

B. dance to thee. come! great mys - ter - y! Hear the

Piano introduction

Alberto Bimboni, *Winona*, Act I, Final Scene (Invocation to the “Great Mystery” and chorus dance). Piano-Vocal Score, p. 88. Unpublished. Copy of holograph manuscript. The ICAMus Archive.

The pursuit of the authentic image in this performance was consistent with the work of Frances Densmore, and other ethnographers at this time. They placed high value on preservation of the past noble world of the American Indian, while at the same time encouraged assimilation and criticized contemporary Indian culture. As articulated by one newspaper writer, “out of these studies [of Perry Williams] grew an ideal Indian, not in the least comparable to the Indian of our modern times...” The diversity and the reality of the lives of these Ojibwe men, who were dancing in loin cloths to forbidden Sun Dance melodies, contradicted the Romantic image of Minnesota that was being so carefully crafted through this “true Indian opera.” A consideration of the lives of three of these men provides a strong antidote to the romantic narrative that melds Indian legend to Minnesota, and it challenges the prevalent distinction between the ideal and real Indian.



Minneapolis Daily Star article on Indian operatic singer, Chief Caupolican, engaged to sing the role of Matosapa in Winona. Newspaper clips in Alberto Bimbongi's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.



Articles on the Minneapolis production of *Winona* with photos of the cast of principals in Indian costumes. Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

Joseph Belgard, from Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, who was known as Chief Chibiaboos, had a long and successful career performing Indian culture. At the time of the Minneapolis performance of *Winona*, Belgard was in his mid-twenties and already known in the region. He had attended Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, a well-known Indian boarding school, where he was in a glee club, served as director for a choir, and sang in a quartet at the University of Kansas. Six months prior to the performance of *Winona*, an article in the *Minneapolis Star* focused on Belgard's desire to combine his past training with American Indian music. He is quoted as saying, "...my main interest lies in native Indian music. This field is almost untouched, and I believe it presents boundless possibilities. My ambition is to gain a full comprehension of Indian music, to study its background and its themes. I believe these themes could be worked into music which would prove very much worthwhile. It would take a great deal of research work, I know, but I don't believe it is immodest for me to say that I am well fitted for it. Naturally, being an Indian, I understand what Indian music means." He is quoted in the newspaper, while not by name, as saying that at rehearsals when he heard the opening chorus of *Winona*, it almost made him cry, implying that on some level this music resonated with him.

Throughout his career, Belgard offered a narrative of Indian culture – in tourist shows to President Roosevelt’s first inauguration. In the discussion around *Winona*, however, the ideal and true Indian culture and music lay in Minnesota’s past, not with contemporary Minnesota Indians. *Winona* was described as a model for a true American opera, with inspiration coming from the legendary Indian. In context to *Winona*, one author questioned, “Will the vanished red man teach the world that there can be real opera in English, about real American scenes?” This type of questioning had no place in the answer for Belgard and others like him.

Emanuel Holstein, who was twenty-two at the time of the performance. Holstein was born at White Earth Ojibwe reservation in 1906 to parents who were both enrolled members of the reservation. Holstein attended numerous boarding schools in both Minnesota and North Dakota, and he remembered during his second year running away three times. As punishment he recalled being “licked in front of the whole school” and getting all of his hair clipped off, as well as being required to wear a sign on his back that said “runaway jack.” Looking back toward the end of his life, Holstein said, “It must have been something I ate to make me run like that.” In reference to completing the 8th grade at Wahpeton, North Dakota, Holstein recalled, “I finished the following spring and we were all honored because for an Indian to reach that grade in school was considered to be very good as the white education wasn’t going over so good with the Indian people.”

Holstein, who became a truck driver for the local newspaper in Minneapolis and an organizer for the labor union, also performed in vaudeville as an Indian. He recalled, “I kind of got myself into the entertainment world for awhile and really enjoyed it.” As a boy in the band at White Earth boarding school, he had learned to play the alto sax and the drums. As a young man he performed at sportsman’s shows in lodges in the Turtle Mountains where he met Belgard, and the “few dollars [he] made in the entertainment field” helped him get by. A gig he said he liked to “brag about,” was for the movie *The Lone Star Ranger* at the Minnesota Theatre, where he entertained the customers in line. Referring to *Winona*, Holstein said, “I remember well because in this we wore the breech cloth, moccasins and a roach. I remember Chibiabush coming over to me when we were dancing and dancing close and saying, ‘Get in front of me,’ as he backed up and got off the stage as we went on to finish the act. I went back later and asked what happened and he said he had almost lost his breech cloth, and that was all he had on so he had to be careful.”

One of the men who appears to have had a more difficult time navigating the harsh realities of Minnesota history was Frances Blake. According to census records, Blake was born in 1903 at Red Lake to parents who only spoke the Ojibwe language. His father was a laborer in a lumber camp, but their family still depended upon rations from the government. Succumbing to a disease that hit northern Minnesota hard in the early twentieth century, Blake’s wife died of tuberculosis when their son was only three years old, and he died of it in his forties. His son, offered his perspective of his father, in his book, entitled *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*, which was published in 1995. His son described depressed economic conditions and despair at Red Lake during the 1920’s and 1930’s, and thought his father’s generation received a crippling pressure to assimilate. He wrote, “The *Ahnishinahbaeo jibway* of my father’s generation went through a brutal compulsory education, and my father was

a broken man who grappled with the European diseases of tuberculosis and alcoholism—and lost.” While Frances Blake is barely mentioned in the narrative surrounding the opera, and his name does not even appear in the playbill or under his photograph, his appearance in the Minneapolis performance of *Winona* is central to the meaning of this opera. The lives and experiences of the real Indians in *Winona* were purposely being buried by a Romantic narrative that melded the ideal Indian with Minnesota to benefit the state’s economy.





Gretchen Peters presenting at “Intersections/Intersezioni” - ICAMus Session, Kent State University, Florence Program, June 1st, 2017, & the ICAMus group celebrating the conference’s conclusion.