Are You Listening? by Diane Armitage

“How come they never show an indigenous person using the Internet?” Tanya Tagaq remarked on a recent Sunday visit to the Museum of the American Indian . . . “We’re not only in the past. We’re here right now.”


It was John Seabrook’s profile of singer Tanya Tagaq in The New Yorker that introduced me to her work as a contemporary performer. Seabrook went on to write, “Tagaq is an Inuit throat singer, and she was in the city for a performance . . . a jaw-dropping forty-five minutes of guttural heaves, juddering howls, and murderous shrieks—Inuit folk meets Karen Finley.” Tagaq is known throughout Canada where she lives, and in 2014 she won the Polaris Prize for Canadian album of the year. Her performance at the award ceremony, where she sang from the winning album Animism, can be found online. After reading Seabrook’s article, I went in search of Tagaq’s voice, wanting to experience some of those “guttural heaves,” and once introduced to her singing and her full-bodied delivery of sound, it’s not easy to forget.
To say that Tagaq is a force of nature is true enough, but nothing can prepare a listener for the depth of her involvement with the performance that she delivers. It’s more than a singing performance, however; it’s more like having the ghosts of land, water, and sky pass through her body and then exit through her mouth and her hands and her torso. It’s a case of being inhabited by spirits similar to someone who, in a frenzy of possession, begins to talk in tongues. Tagaq’s utterances—her songs, so to speak—while inspired by a certain kind of spontaneity, are drawn from a set of Alaskan Native traditions where two people engage in a call and response of melodic sighs, non-verbal chants, and sounds that arise from deep within the throat as if scraped away by a rasp. These songs are, at root level, about nature and the individual’s place within it. Watching and listening to the documentation of Tagaq’s performance at the Polaris concert, there is the sense you are following a course of turbulent weather, of animal migrations, countless births and deaths, mating rituals, and fiercely whispered growls of pleasure and pain. Often it felt as if Tagaq herself was in the act of giving birth on stage and dying at the same time—her body undulating, pushed and pulled by the forces of life and death. Hers was an inspired dance driven by the need of animistic cries to split apart the world and put it back together in a new way. When Tagaq performs she is an archipelago of self-enclosed islands defined by sound—non-verbal but linguistically inclined. And although her music comes out of the tradition of Inuit throat singing, Tagaq is unmistakably also inspired by contemporary experimental music.

Tagaq has already become an international artist, working with people like Björk—who sought Tagaq out—and the Kronos Quartet. And her now legendary performances continue to evolve in strength and duration, as was seen when Tagaq was here in New Mexico last August. As part of SITE Santa Fe’s Biennial much wider than a line, which explores the art of the Americas with an emphasis on vernacular strategies, Tagaq did a concert at The Lensic that functioned as a soundtrack to Robert Flaherty’s famous documentary from 1922, Nanook of the North. For approximately one hour and fifteen minutes, Tagaq and her stellar back-up musicians—Jean Martin on drums and Jesse Zubot on violin—put another kind of dynamic spin on Flaherty’s filmic rendering of the life and landscapes of the Inuit people and their harsh struggles against snow, ice, and the calls of the wild. In her introduction to the movie, Tagaq made a pointed comment about Flaherty’s project, saying, “so much is misinterpreted”—which is another way of saying that the filmmaker’s vision was, to a certain extent, based on a constructed view of Inuit life and traditions, and although a documentary, Flaherty’s movie involved deliberate re-enactments that often made the Inuit appear hopelessly backwards and buffoonish. That said, Tagaq’s personal soundtrack forced the movie away from a colonial perspective and into the haunted realm of life on a razor’s edge close to Magnetic North.
During the movie, a viewer could hear Tagaq but not really watch her as she wrenched out of her body those inhalations and exhalations and seemed to embody extremely raw and often scary sounds, giving them a new dimension as they exited her mouth, animating the spaces of the moving images. Tagaq delivered an acoustic narrative of an almost unbearable intensity. It’s amazing to me that Tagaq doesn’t faint dead away at the end of a performance, so viscerally engaged is she in her range of extended vocal techniques. At the end of one of her pieces, where is there to go but into a swoon? There is a line at the end of the opera Tristan und Isolde where Isolde sings an aria in a transfigured state as she is about to die for love: “In the surging vastness of the world’s breath . . . I long for oblivion.” This same force seems to carry Tagaq across time and the spaces of her own history and the cyclic events of her people: she becomes an aspect of the surging vastness of the world’s breath, ferocious, decimating, endlessly inventive, and forgiving, yet always hungry for more. As Tagaq said before her concert began, “We all eat life. . .”

In counterpoint to the hounds of heaven unleashed in Tagaq’s songs, Navajo artist Raven Chacon’s work with young Native American musicians—teaching them the art of chamber music composition—seems dainty by comparison. But Chacon’s involvement with sound, experimental art, and postmodern strategies of identity politics, while decidedly more academic in some respects, is no less rigorous. In October, Chacon’s recent work with students—in this case from the Santa Fe Indian School—culminated in a concert at the Armory for the Arts that featured six chamber music compositions, played by the professional Albuquerque-based Huntress Quartet. Jessica Billey and Rosie Hutchinson were on violins, Heather Trost was on viola, and Ariel Muniz played cello. Chacon has been working with Native students in the Southwest for a dozen years, acting as mentor to budding musicians who had never composed music before, let alone chamber music. To tell you the truth, it isn’t clear to me how Chacon goes about teaching composition with individuals who don’t even know how to read music, let alone write it. I’m assuming that the students base their short pieces on prepared digital loops that perhaps are dragged and dropped into a score—laying down lines of music and series of phrases that can be repeated and juxtaposed to one another in various ways. The music the students create does indeed get formally scored, however, and in previous concerts, like the annual series at the Grand Canyon, well-known groups such as Ethel have played these student works with titles like “Pink Thunder,” from 2009, by Celeste Lansing, who was only fifteen when she composed this piece.

At SITE Santa Fe’s biennial exhibition, there are several listening stations with earphones to engage with work that Chacon has mentored from previous years, complete with the written scores so listeners can read them if they want.