

# **Music Composition through the Lens of the Aleutian People**

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## Introduction

Music plays a significant part to the Aleut culture and many groups in Alaska continue to sing and dance in the traditional ways. The established Aleut musical instrument was the drum and ceremonial songs accompanied various occasions of the people. Music and dance are deeply embedded in the Aleut traditions like many other indigenous cultures in Alaska. Although Aleut traditions are rooted thousands of years ago, written accounts stem from the Russian Orthodox Church continue invigorate the spirit of the Aleut people today.

Although music was passed down orally before the nineteenth century, Aleut music and dance post Russian Orthodox establishment is believed to be a representation of old traditions. After the Aleuts were indoctrinated by The Russian Orthodox church, Russian priests recorded many of the Aleut traditions. The priests recorded traditions and songs and their culture was welcomed into the church. In 1840, a Russian missionary named Ivan Veniaminov visited a famous shaman in Akun Island. Dance and music is a significant part of the practices in Shamanism. In Veniaminov's diary, he noted the great gift that Shamans possess and the importance of preservation of indigenous traditions.

Music of the Aleut people reflects their values past and present, from war songs of intruders and enslavement to songs of the ocean and seagulls. It is a teller of tales and a window into the beliefs and values of a community and people. This lesson reveals the relationship between Aleut culture and music while students relate elements of European music and music of their own cultural backgrounds.

## Materials and Intended Audience

This lesson is intended for upper division high school students. Students should have a background of basic music theory as well as aural skills, however, accommodations are provided. Students need a pencil and staff paper.

## Essential Question

### **How is culture reflected in music?**

#### Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools

- A. Culturally knowledgeable students are able to build on the knowledge and skills of the local cultural community as a foundation from which to achieve personal and academic success throughout lie.

Students who meet this cultural standard are able to...

1. Make effective use of the knowledge, skills and ways of knowing from their own cultural traditions to learn about the larger world in which they live.

A. Culturally knowledgeable students demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the relationships and processes of interaction of all elements in the world around them.

Students who meet this cultural standard are able to...

1. Recognize and build upon the inter-relationships that exist among the spiritual, natural and human realms in the world around them, as reflected in their own cultural traditions and beliefs as well as those of others:

2. Determine how ideas and concepts from one knowledge system relate to those derived from other knowledge systems.

### Objectives

Students will be able to...

1. Identify music of their own cultural background and/or community.
2. Aurally detect musical elements in two traditional Aleut songs.
3. Compose a song of their own cultural significance using one or more elements of Aleut music.

Hook:

*What kinds of music are present in your community?*

*How is this music a reflection of your community's values?*

*Does culture define music?*



This picture is a depiction of a ceremony of the Aleut people.  
*Can you conclude any values of the Aleut people from this picture?*

#### Activity 1: Listening

Listen to an audio excerpt (Excerpt 1), *War Song* of the Aleut people

Listen for elements of music theory and practice you can conclude from this recording such as time signature, tempo, cadence, and dynamics. Transcribe this piece if you can. *This song is in 7/8 and alternates with measures of 8/8 every few measures.*

*Would this song be harder to learn orally or with sheet music? Why?*

Listen to the following song (Excerpt 2) of the seagulls and waves of the Aleut people  
*Compare and contrast this song with the War Song and add any musical elements you hear.*

*What can you conclude are values of the Aleut people based off of these recordings?*

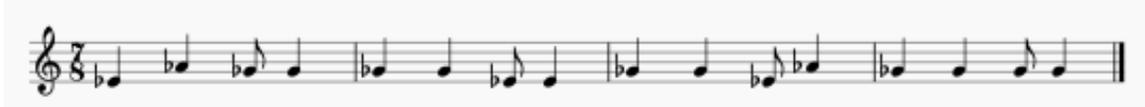
*What are the similarities and differences between Aleut music and the music of Western Europe? Which one is more challenging to write and hear and why do you think that is?*

#### Activity 2: Composition

Students are to compose four measures of their own song using at least one musical elements of Aleut music they heard from the previous examples. They are also writing accompanying lyrics for the song they write. The lyrics must be based on an object or event

culturally significant to them. Accommodation: Students can use the notation of the war song provided for them to create their own lyrics (image below).

*War Song*  
Performed by the Atka Dancers



Tasks

1. Students brainstorm and object that is important to their culture or an event of cultural significance to them.
2. Students write a couple lines about that object or event with the intention of making it into the song.
3. Students write four measures of musical notation using at least one musical elements of Aleut music.
4. Students write in the accompanying words to their song.

Assessment

Formative: Student group work during the hook as well as ability to transcribe the music during lesson one indicators of background knowledge in music. Accommodations will be provided (listed above) if necessary.

Summative: Student compositions should have one element of Aleut music as well as lyrics accompanying a culturally significant object or event.

Reflection

After listening to many songs of the Aleut culture, I was surprised of how many were of difficult meter or changing meter. As a person with a Western European music background, it was very difficult for me to hear the meter of Aleut music. It takes a lot of internal rhythm to consistently feel a 7/8 rhythm with alternating meters of 8/8. This was apparent in *War Song*. This elevates the value of indigenous music to all upper division music classes. I believe that the indigenous people have a much stronger sense of rhythm than that of Western music.