

RAVEN CHACON (b. 1977)

VOICELESS MASS

PRESENT MUSIC

80848-2

1. *Voiceless Mass* (2021) 17:54

Janice MacDonald, flute; Zachary Good, bass clarinet; Bill Helmers, clarinet; Carl Storniolo, percussion; Alex Wier, percussion; Marty Butorac, electronics; John Orfe, organ; Jeanyi Kim-Mandel, violin; Alex Ayers, violin; Erin Pipal, viola; Adrien Zitoun, cello; Christian Dillingham, bass; David Bloom, conductor

2. *Biyán* (2011) 15:54

Jennifer Clippert, flute; Zachary Good, clarinet; Alex Wier, percussion; Carla Kihlstedt, violin; Adrien Zitoun, cello

3. *Owl Song* (2021) 15:10

Ariadne Greif, voice; Janice MacDonald, alto flute; Margaret Butler Padilla, English horn; Bill Helmers, clarinet; Catherine Van Handel, bassoon; Don Sipe, trumpet; Dietrich Hemann, French horn; Megumi Kanda, trombone; Alex Weir, percussion; Marty Butorac, electronics; Emily Melendes, harp; John Orfe, celeste; Jeanyi Kim-Mandl, violin; Alex Ayers, violin; Erin Pipal, viola; Adrien Zitoun, cello; Christian Dillingham, bass; David Bloom, conductor

TT: 48:58

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Raven Chacon *Voiceless Mass*  
Present Music *Voiceless Mass*



## Listening to Silence and Hearing History: The Shapeshifting Music of Raven Chacon

LISTENING IS THE FOUNDATION of Raven Chacon's wide-ranging artistic practice. "I am a listener," he simply declares, but the attention he gives to sound is complex and vast, encompassing far more than what is immediately audible.<sup>1</sup> From his earliest works, Chacon has been dedicated to amplifying the unheard, calling attention to what is absent or unknown. In *Field Recordings* (1999), for example, he recorded quiet outdoor spaces that held meaning for him, then he amplified the playback. "In the studio, I turned the volume up to the max. It's not about the pristine anthropological capturing or listening to this place. It's about letting this place speak and scream."<sup>2</sup> More recently, in one of his most powerful sound installations, *Silent Choir* (2016/2022), Chacon recorded the moment of silent protest at the Oceti Sakowin camp, near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota, during the No Dakota Access Pipeline Resistance in 2016–2017. "The sonic trace not only describes what can be sensed," Chacon indicates, "but also what may be imagined, and amplifies the echo of a movement that stood unshakable."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raven Chacon, "Artist Statement," *Foundation for Contemporary Arts* (2021), <https://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/raven-chacon>.

<sup>2</sup> Wendalyn Bartley, "The Music of Raven Chacon," *The Whole Note* (2019), <https://www.thewholenote.com/index.php/newsroom/beatcolumns-sp-2121861476/newmusic2/28910-the-music-of-raven-chacon> [original source edited by Chacon].

<sup>3</sup> Raven Chacon, "Silent Choir," artist's website (2017), <https://spiderwebsinthesky.com/silent-choir>.

Affirming the multidimensional nature of listening, Chacon embraces physical and metaphysical aspects of sound that surround and permeate us. Since music unfolds over time, past, present, and possible futures are in constant dialog within the listener. There is also an empathic component that is too often overlooked: Listening is the act of paying close attention not just to the sounds and oneself, but also to the environment and to those sharing our time, our physical space, and our history, many of whom do not have the privilege of being heard. "My belief is that sound work cannot be made in isolation," Chacon states. "These are acoustic, conceptual responses to land; they seek to acknowledge the people who have history in those places."<sup>4</sup> This confluence of "sonic traces" creates a resonant hyperreality, a rich polyphonic and polytemporal network that situates, shapes, and guides us. For Chacon, the most important musical parameter reflecting this network is counterpoint, not in traditional terms of melodic polyphony, but on a much grander scale.

I am speaking about the contrary motion of navigating a world that assumes where you are going because of where you come from. Before that contrary motion is discovered, the switching of course, running parallel with whatever is chasing you or whatever you are chasing, at a dissonant interval and distance. It is the zigzagging into crevices where you are not allowed, maybe you bring a friend with you, another species, and you zigzag together. And you gather more, changing forms and formations, mimicking each other's voices to confuse the listeners who want to trap you in your position.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chacon, "Artist Statement" (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Raven Chacon, "Being in a position," *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak*, edited by Alison Coplan, Katya García-Antón, and Stefanie Hessler (Sternberg Press, 2024), 13.

Chacon's expansive concept of counterpoint is relational, subversive, and transformational, taking on a shapeshifting quality that is evident throughout his work, which seems to "zigzag" across different media platforms.

Chacon categorizes his work according to three distinct genres: experimental noise studies, sound installations, and instrumental chamber music. "Those three modes are all very separate parts of my practice," Chacon explains, "and they rarely overlap, but I think, at the end of the day, they're all some form of music."<sup>6</sup> At a young age, Chacon took piano lessons and learned the fundamentals of Western music notation. Thinking that writing notes on paper was the proper way to create music, he gravitated toward chamber music as his first medium for composition, but he soon realized that there were other modes of expression. "I think it's [about] trying to find the best vehicle for relaying the concept or topic or narrative that I want to speak about, and the truth is, instrumental music isn't always good at doing that."<sup>7</sup>

Chacon's involvement with noise as an artistic practice began as a teenager, when he played bass and guitar in various bands. Over time, he grew dissatisfied with the limited palette of conventional rock instrumentation, prompting him to invent and construct his own instruments. These experiments "eventually deteriorated into making noise," Chacon recalls, "or at least gave me an appreciation for a lack of fidelity."<sup>8</sup> His "lo-fi" noise studies incorporate found sounds, extended techniques on conventional instruments, and electronically generated or modified sounds. Unrestricted by pre-

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<sup>6</sup> Matt Moment, "Composer Raven Chacon on 'the mystery of what music can be,'" *Times Union* (2023), <https://www.timesunion.com/hudsonvalley/culture/article/raven-chacon-composer-interview-macarthur-18436509.php>.

<sup>7</sup> Tristan McKay, "Raven Chacon on *For Zitkala-Šá*, Graphic Notation, and Identity," *I Care If You Listen* (2022), <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2022/08/raven-chacon-for-zitkala-sa-graphic-notation-identity.>

<sup>8</sup> Raven Chacon, telephone interview with the author (2025).

scribed structures or sound sources, Chacon's foray into making noise with makeshift bands proved to be musically and socially liberating. "I found the freedom of improvisation, that you could very crudely play with other people you've never met and spontaneously make music together."<sup>9</sup>

Most of Chacon's sound installations are site-specific works, immersive environments designed to engage attendees in sociopolitical issues. "I had a desire to make works with sound that were conceptually or narratively responding to histories," Chacon explains, "and it wasn't going to work if it was limited to the stage or a recording or even a duration . . . it needed to happen all day or for months."<sup>10</sup> A characteristic feature of many of his sound installations is his use of graphics, symbols, and texts to provide directions for the production or performance.<sup>11</sup> Extending beyond conventions of Western music notation, Chacon fashions captivating designs that not only shape the interpretation and performance of his works, but also serve as visual art works in their own right. Indeed, Chacon often displays his graphic scores as part of the installation or performance, and many of these artifacts have been exhibited in museum settings.

Chacon's instrumental chamber music originated with his early experiences studying piano, and developed during his formal studies at the University of New Mexico and the California Institute of the Arts. Although he has apprehensions about the culture of "classical music," he has deep appreciation for the instruments and their players. "I've always been skeptical and cynical of the academy," Chacon admits, "I've always felt

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Chacon published a lexicon of several of his notational symbols with descriptions of their musical function in *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak*, 169–84.

outside of it, but I have tremendous respect for the tools. I want to spend my whole life with those instruments, and I'll never figure them out."<sup>12</sup> Unlike his work with noise and sound installations, Chacon's chamber compositions rarely incorporate digital processing, though he sometimes uses amplification. Chacon also tends to prefer non-traditional venues, alternative spaces where the performance might reveal hidden narratives embedded in the environment. "I try not to limit the idea of the composition as something to be performed exclusively in a concert hall or on a stage," he says. "I'm interested in placing instrumentalists elsewhere, where the sounds can interact with the space or architecture, and not just for sonic reasons. Maybe there's an opportunity to talk about the history of a place."<sup>13</sup>

Although Chacon classifies the compositions on this recording as chamber music, all three of these works "zigzag" through his noise studies and sound installations by integrating electronic sounds, extended instrumental techniques, evocations of sociopolitical themes, and, in the case of *Voicless Mass*, the condition of site-specificity. *Biyán* (2011) for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and percussion, was commissioned in Albuquerque by Ensemble Music New Mexico (now known as "Chatter"). Derived from the Navajo word for "song," the title denotes Chacon's reflection on the function of singing in Navajo ceremonies, where repetition can continue throughout the night. The work's three movements, played without pause, are organized in a block structure of repeating patterns, allowing listeners time to dwell in the mesmerizing soundscape and focus on the constantly changing micro-acoustic details. Chacon's sophisticated ear for instrumentation and orchestration often renders the acoustic reality so ambiguous that the listener may occasionally have difficulty distinguishing natural overtones from

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<sup>12</sup> Raven Chacon, telephone interview with the author (2025).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

articulated pitches. Even when composing for a mixed ensemble of traditional classical instruments, Chacon continues his DIY practice by inventing new sonorities. One of the most striking elements in *Biyán* is the use of friction-based sounds, a method he frequently utilizes in his noise music. The percussionist, for instance, is asked to rub the tip of a wooden drumstick on a pane of glass, guided by graphic notation indicating the motion of the gesture. This produces a chilling effect initially inspired by Chacon's fear of colliding with a deer while driving at night, with antlers screeching across the windshield. The string players respond to a variety of notation asking them to play *col legno* (striking the strings with the wood of the bow), wide vibrato, glissando, their highest possible pitch, as well as an innovative circular bowing technique. Because the hair of the bow cannot grip the string with as much friction as standard (up/down) bowing, the circular motion produces a dry timbral effect that sounds like the string or bow is continuously breathing or wheezing. Circular bowing, which Chacon continues to use in almost all his music for string instruments, was derived from patterns discovered in ancient petroglyphs carved into volcanic rock, offering a visual link between contemporary performance practices and Indigenous history.

*Owl Song* (2021), for sinfonietta and voice, was commissioned by the Bit20 Ensemble, which is based in Bergen, Norway. "*Owl Song* is an acknowledgment of the nocturnal hunting bird, considered by some to have the ability of shapeshifting," Chacon writes. "*Owl Song* asks its instrumentalists to cycle through a variety of timbres on their instruments, often with individual speeds to traverse the composition. They are sometimes guided by a voice, her distance unmeasurable from themselves, and must call out not to locate her position, but to see if she is still with them."<sup>14</sup> Like *Biyán*,

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<sup>14</sup> Raven Chacon, "Owl Song," Instagram (@ravenchn) (March 18, 2021), [https://www.instagram.com/ravenchn/p/CMkT10Alzjm/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/ravenchn/p/CMkT10Alzjm/?img_index=1)

*Owl Song* is a sectional form with segments designated to be repeated variable times—Chacon even welcomes the infinite repetition of certain sections. The large heterogeneous ensemble of winds, brass, percussion, harp, celesta, and strings rotates through different timbres on fixed pitches, sometimes independently and sometimes together. This creates a dreamlike atmosphere of overlapping patterns, mirroring Chacon’s contemplation of Navajo ceremonial songs. To notate the timbral changes, Chacon adopts symbols that previously appeared in one of the graphic scores of his compendium *For Zitkála-Šá* (2017–2020). Many of the scores in that series are about “finding yourself in different places, in different contexts as an Indigenous person,” Chacon relates. “The best way for me to explain that situation was just through playing the same pitch. You’re just shapeshifting the tone.”<sup>15</sup> The exploration of timbre in *Owl Song* extends beyond the standard use of traditional instruments, incorporating objects like drinking glasses on tile and a superball on a tom drum to create a rich array of overtones. At one point in the piece, the score calls for “drumming on a crumpled blanket” to mimic the sound of flapping wings (on this recording, the percussionist ended up putting his winter jacket on a table and striking it with yardsticks). Among the instruments, the solo voice emerges as a sort of protagonist or a guiding presence. Unlike a traditional soloist, the voice does not dominate the texture, but blends, withdraws, and interacts with the instrumentalists. “There are times when the voice is asked to mimic instruments in the ensemble,” Chacon indicates. “The vocalist is asked to listen to other things that are happening. If it is a protagonist, it’s also something that’s waiting, watching, and perhaps hunting.”<sup>16</sup> The shapeshifting quality of the ensemble is electronically

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<sup>15</sup> McKay, “Raven Chacon” (2022). Also see Raven Chacon, *For Zitkála-Šá* (Art Metropole and New Documents, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Raven Chacon, telephone interview with the author (2025).

enhanced by pre-recorded samples (found sounds, noises, sine waves, etc.) that are activated by one of the performers.

*Voiceless Mass* (2021), for pipe organ and large ensemble, was commissioned by WI Conference of the United Church of Christ, Plymouth Church UCC, and Present Music, and composed specifically for the Nichols & Simpson organ at The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One of the options for the premiere of the new piece was Present Music’s annual Thanksgiving concert, but Chacon was initially reluctant to commemorate such an occasion. “As an Indigenous artist, I make a point not to present my work on this holiday, but in this case I made an exception.”<sup>17</sup> Several factors persuaded Chacon to proceed, including the prospect of writing music for a pipe organ, a magnificent instrument housed in a highly resonant space built for sacred community gatherings. The commission also offered Chacon a valuable opportunity to address critical issues concerning the legacy of the Catholic Church and the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples—particularly the residential schools, forced assimilation, and abuse of Indigenous youth—and Chacon was eager to evoke this history directly within the walls of the sanctified institution. “This work,” he writes, “considers the spaces in which we gather, the history of access of these spaces, and the land upon which these buildings sit.” Though the title refers to a “Mass,” the liturgical rite and choral genre common to many Christian denominations, there are no vocal parts and no audible singing. “In exploiting the architecture of the cathedral,” Chacon explains, “*Voiceless Mass* considers the futility of giving voice to the voiceless, when ceding space is never an option for those in power.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Raven Chacon, entry questionnaire, *The Pulitzer Prizes* (2022), <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/raven-chacon>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The placement of performers within the space is a crucial aspect of *Voiceless Mass*. The score asks instrumentalists to surround the audience, while only the conductor and organist remain on stage. This staging choice is symbolic: The conductor assumes the role of a priest or officiant, while the organist, whose instrument historically replaced choir members, embodies the pervasive presence of the church. The organ mostly blends with the fragmented ensemble as an underlying drone until the middle of the work, when a distorted chorale surfaces as a dominant force. The surrounding instrumentalists are individually positioned throughout the church, simultaneously representing and enacting displaced and marginalized voices. They each play fragmented passages within restricted sets of intervals, emerging and submerging as fleeting apparitions. Instructions in the score highlight themes of compelled silence, lost language, and forgotten culture: The violist plays a note only they can hear, the clarinetist alters the timbre by shaping their mouth into different vowels, the flutist faintly recalls material from earlier in the piece, and the percussionist mutters under their breath. The integration of electronic sound reinforces the resonance of the space and underscores the insidious connection between authority and permanence. “As an electronic counterpart to the tones of the organ, the sine tone is implying that the church is going to last forever,” he says. “It’s so subtle that sometimes you can’t tell if you’re hearing the highest key on the organ or a 7000-Hz sine tone.”<sup>19</sup> By navigating the intersection of sound, silence, and power, *Voiceless Mass* invites listeners to bear witness not only to what can be heard, but more importantly to what is being silenced, offering a powerful testimony on the enduring injustices of colonialism. Upon awarding Chacon with the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2022, the committee called *Voiceless Mass* a “mesmerizing, original work . . . that

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<sup>19</sup> Raven Chacon, telephone interview with the author (2025).

evokes the weight of history in a church setting, a concentrated and powerful music expression with a haunting, visceral impact.”<sup>20</sup>

The Navajo word *hozho*, which does not have a precise equivalent in English, encapsulates principles of balance, beauty, harmony, and peace. For Chacon, *hozho* informs his vision of music as a contrapuntal coordination of events within a cosmic temporal framework: “That idea of *hozho* means maybe things lining up with other things. Maybe it’s ourselves and our position here in the universe and us finding ourselves inside of all of this and realizing that we are in a timeline of other occurrences that happen. And, for me, that’s what music is.”<sup>21</sup> He suggests that music guides us through experiences or states of being we may have forgotten, whether from before birth or beyond life. “I think music is not so much a timbral phenomenon,” Chacon remarks, “but a temporal reference, a reminder of where we’re supposed to be or where we have been.”<sup>22</sup> This kind of realignment or reorientation extends beyond sound—Chacon’s music preserves and amplifies historical moments, ensuring that their presence remains tangible and consequential in our collective memory, even if we don’t always understand. “We should embrace incomplete knowledge,” Chacon entreats us. “We should spend time with the mystery of what music can be, of not knowing what it is, of not knowing where it’s going, of hearing things we’ve never heard before.”<sup>23</sup> Chacon’s shapeshifting art transforms silence into music, and music into wonder,

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<sup>20</sup> Statement by the jury for the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Music (Alex Ross, Du Yun, Patrice Rushen, John Luther Adams, and Tania León), *The Pulitzer Prizes* (2022), <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/raven-chacon>

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Brown, “First Native American composer to win Pulitzer Prize on his experimental process,” *PBS NewsHour* (2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/first-native-american-composer-to-win-pulitzer-prize-on-his-experimental-process>

<sup>22</sup> Raven Chacon, telephone interview with the author (2025).

<sup>23</sup> Matt Moment, “Composer Raven Chacon” (2023).

reminding us that we do not listen to history from afar, but from where we are when we begin to hear each other.

—Eric Smigel

*Eric Smigel is Professor of Music and Coordinator of the Music History and Musicology Program at San Diego State University.*

**Raven Chacon** (born 1977) is a composer, performer, and installation artist born at Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation. A recording artist over the span of twenty-four years, Chacon has appeared on more than eighty releases on national and international labels. He has exhibited, performed, or had works performed at LACMA, the Whitney Biennial, Borealis Festival, SITE Santa Fe, and Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York, among others. As an educator, Chacon is the senior composer mentor for the Native American Composer Apprentice Project (NACAP). In 2022, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for his composition *Voiceless Mass*, and in 2023 was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship.

His solo artworks are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Smithsonian's American Art Museum and National Museum of the American Indian, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Getty Research Institute, the University of New Mexico Art Museum, and various private collections. <https://spiderwebsinthesky.com>

**Present Music** is one of the nation's leading ensembles specializing in the commissioning and performance of new music. Founded by Kevin Stalheim in 1982 and based in Milwaukee, Present Music engages artists and audiences in imaginative and provocative experiences through ensemble performance and education. Led by Artistic Director Eric Segnitz, the ensemble has worked closely with many of the nation's most exciting and important composers and has firmly established one of the largest audiences for new music in the country.

Present Music has made a significant contribution to contemporary classical music, commissioning and premiering more than 90 major works from composers around the world, and recording seventeen CDs for the Argo, Albany, Aoede, Northeastern, Naxos, Innova, Capstone, Kairos, Cantaloupe Music and New World Records labels. Composers who have worked in residence or been commissioned by Present Music include Pulitzer Prize winners John Adams, Henry Brant, David Lang, Caroline Shaw, Du Yun, and Raven Chacon, whose *Voiceless Mass*, commissioned and premiered by Present Music, won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

Present Music's programming embraces diverse repertoire, innovative concert formats, and performances in unexpected spaces. The ensemble ranges from a core group of seven musicians to an ensemble of twenty or more, adapting to a broad spectrum of musical styles and settings. Demonstrating Milwaukee's role as a center for creativity, Present Music has toured extensively across the United States and participated in major international music festivals in Japan, New York City, Turkey, and China. The ensemble is also the unprecedented six-time winner of ASCAP/Chamber Music America's Adventurous Programming Award.

**David Bloom** is a conductor equally at home in orchestral repertoire, opera, and new music. Along with Eric Segnitz, his tenure as Co-Artistic Director of Present Music (2019-2024) was lauded for its innovative programming, including the premiere of Raven Chacon's *Voiceless Mass*, which won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize. Bloom remains the ensemble's Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor and also leads Contemporaneous, Queer Urban Orchestra, and the orchestras at New York University, and has guest conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Washington National Opera, Opera Omaha, and American Composers Orchestra, among others.

**Ariadne Greif** has starred in operas ranging from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* with the Orlando Philharmonic to Georg Friedrich Haas's acclaimed *Atthis*. Recent collaborations include William Kentridge, Caroline Shaw, Kate Soper, Sofia Jernberg, Gabe Kahane, Brooklyn Rider, the American Symphony Orchestra, The Knights, and AMOC, with performances at the Ojai Festival, Helsinki's Meidän Festival, Long Beach Opera, Opera Philadelphia, and the Oslo Opera House. Ms. Greif has premiered more than thirty new operas and 150 new chamber works.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*An Anthology of Chants Operations*. Ouidah O (2). [LP]

*Overheard Songs*. Innova Recordings innova 216.

w/ Death Convention Singers

*A Thread, A Braid*. Sicksicksick Distro SSSK #71. [cassette]

w/ Endlings (duo with John Dieterich)

*Human Form*. Whited Sepulchre WSR030.

w/ Postcommodity

*We Lost Half the Forest and the Rest Will Burn This Summer*. Sicksicksick Distro SSSK #64. [LP]

w/ White People Killed Them (trio with Marshall Trammell and John Dieterich)

*White People Killed Them*. SIGE Records SIGE 100. [LP]

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Engineered and mixed by Ric Probst, Remote Planet

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*Owl Song* was recorded November 20, 2023 at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist.

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