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## A Cultural Duet Zitkala Ša And *The Sun Dance*

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### Abstract

In 1913 Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala Ša, 1876-1938) collaborated with her husband, William F. Hanson, a music teacher from Duchesne, Utah, to produce an opera. Hanson combined the musical style of operetta, a melodramatic love story, with the traditional Plains Indian ritual. In regional performances, *The Sun Dance* required Bonnin and other Native American singers and dancers to perform in a style that was forbidden by the United States government. Two months after Bonnin's death in 1938, the opera was selected as the opera of the year by the York Opera Guild.

The composition of the opera presents the challenges of forging a new musical style that respects the challenges of the past.

cultures by harmonizing traditional Native melodies and perspectives of artistic expression in western civilization: grand opera. Opera, an opus or "works" of artistic expression, provides a holistic and complex manifestations of culture. Visual presentation and dancing, storytelling, and even incorporation of a trickster-like Plains culture in *The Sun Dance Opera*. At the same time, an opera and dramatic plot infuse elements of western civilization. As a musician, Bonnin used her skills to affirm her Sioux cultural identity and conventions of popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Hanson used his fondness for his association with them in what critics would now recognize as a result is an uneasy duet of two cultures.

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin had emerged from an obscure, repressed through the Indian boarding school system, to become a public figure. She published a book of traditional stories, *Old Indian Legends*.<sup>2</sup> She wrote compelling articles about her childhood and life experiences for *Atlantic Monthly*. She compiled and published those stories in *Stories*.<sup>3</sup> In 1902 when she married Raymond Bonnin, also a Yonkers woman, she temporarily abandoned her public career. Although she would later enter the national arena of pan-Indian politics, her years in Utah (ca. 1900-1905) were in relative obscurity. The local attention given *The Sun Dance Opera* brought her to the popular stage.

A challenge in studying the opera is the lack of Gertrude's own documentation. Hanson's participation is well documented. The whole score is in the Young University where Hanson (1887-1969) had a lengthy career in music education. Fifty-four years after the debut of the opera, Hanson's memoir that loosely recounted an Indian history in Utah, his relationship with her and her husband, Raymond, and the composing and staging of the opera. Gertrude left no documentation of her involvement with Hanson. During this period, even her regular letters to the Catholic Indian community mention of the opera.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, her diaries of the last years of her life and her political concerns and do not mention the *Sun Dance Opera*.

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