

LEADER OF THE BAND

BY TOM GORDON

Common though it might be to associate a beloved composer with national sentiments – think Liszt in Hungary or Grieg in Norway – musicians have rarely answered the call to political leadership. The sole exception in the annals of modern history was the sensational virtuoso pianist and composer Ignace Paderewski, who briefly became prime minister of the newly independent Poland at the end of World War I. It seems that however much music might inspire sentiments of patriotic fervour, we don't have much of a history of looking to musicians for leadership.

Not so in Nunatsiavut. For well over a century there's been a remarkable overlap between the rosters of organists, band- and choirmasters and the chief Elders – the civic leaders in the Inuit communities along the north coast of Labrador before the creation of the Nunatsiavut Government. For the Labrador Inuit the leader of the brass band or choir was frequently the very man in whom they placed the greatest trust to govern the life of their community. Somehow the same skills that were required to conduct chorus and orchestra through a rousing rendition of *Pillorikput inuit opigosugungnartut* (“Blessed are the People”) defined the leadership required to maintain social harmony in Inuit communities.

Although scores of Inuit musicians are mentioned in the Moravian *Periodical Accounts* across the 19th century, Jeremias Sillitt of Okak was one of the first Inuk musician/leaders for whom a three-dimensional portrait emerges. Samuel K Hutton, the medical missionary who opened a hospital in Okak early in the 20th century, expressed profound admiration for the personal integrity of “our organist, who can render classical tunes from the oratories for voluntaries in church, and who can play any instrument in the band that he chooses” while at the same time “with all the instincts of the Eskimo still strong within him, not a whit spoiled for the rough life that is his inheritance.”¹

Sillitt was poised to take a significant leadership role in his community when his life was cut short by the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, which literally decimated the population of Okak Bay and forced the closure of the mission station there. Sillitt's then-young son Gustav, one of only a handful of male survivors of the epidemic, was adopted by Martin Martin, the chief Elder in Nain. Gustav rapidly grew into leadership roles both in the community and in the choirloft, a dual responsibility that passed to Gustav's son Jeremias in the 1950s.

While Gustav is remembered still for his uncompromising musical standards, the second Jeremias, or Jerry, Sillitt became the archetype of an Inuk leader. Elected to the position of Chief Elder when he was only 34, he was respected in his community for his wisdom and insight when he was called on to settle disputes, enforce regulations, or resolve family conflicts. Carol Brice-Bennett, a sociologist who observed Labrador Inuit communities for more than two decades, reflected on Jerry Sillitt's leadership in his obituary: “Jerry Sillitt represents an old era in the sense the elders managed the community in way that was meaningful to Inuit but misunderstood or ignored by whites.”² Like his father and grandfather before him, Jerry Sillitt was also an organist in Nain and led the choir through its brief, but spectacular, exposure



Jeremias Sillitt, organist and bandmaster at Okak (Photograph: Samuel King Hutton)

to the southern world when it was invited to perform on April 9, 1967 at the Anglican Cathedral in St John's as part of the Canadian centennial celebrations. Broadcast by CBC, the choir's performance under Jerry Sillitt's leadership was a revelation to listeners. Ancient chorales, Moravian hymn tunes, and movements from oratorios by composers like Haydn, performed in texts made unfamiliar in their Inuktitut versions, resonated throughout the cathedral in the "true," "unaffected," and "powerful" voices of the Inuit choir. Jerry Sillitt's leadership of the choir was seconded by the young and very talented Inuit organist, David Harris. True to the model of his mentor, David would succeed Jerry Sillitt as chief Elder, providing community leadership in Nain from the organ bench until his retirement just last year.

The civic/music leadership combo was not a local phenomenon restricted to Nain and Okak. The same situation held true in the other Moravian Inuit communities. The northernmost and most isolated of

the Labrador settlements was Hebron. At the time the station was closed in 1959, there were six organists among its 247 residents, a choir that numbered in the dozens, a brass band, and a small string orchestra that accompanied the choral anthems. The leader of the Hebronimuit – a leader in every sense – was Levi Nochasak.

Nochasak had been born in 1894 in Ramah – a small inlet where the Torngat Mountains meets the Atlantic Ocean. Ramah had been a Moravian mission station from 1871 until it proved no longer viable in 1907. Nochasak's childhood at the mission settlement notwithstanding, his early life could have been sketched by an archaeologist. In a 1977 oral history he recounted his youth:

I've lived in igloos and tents ... We used to have a lot of food to eat in them days ... I had my own kayak at that time and every time I went out

hunting I used to fill up my kayak with seals so fast, I'd head back for home while it was still broad daylight.³

Nochasak moved from Ramah to Hebron some time after the Ramah station closed, trekking the more the 60-mile route overland. Once in Hebron, he began to assume an increasingly important role in musical and community life. The vast majority of the 5000 pages of music manuscript in the Hebron collection that are in Inuk hand are his work. His youngest son, Simeon, remembers his father as a superior and exacting musician. Every member of the choir had to be able to read music. It was taught first through the reading of hymns or melodies in four parts, graduating to the complex anthems.

Across the years Nochasak's name appeared more and more in the official mission records and increasingly in positions of authority. His leadership was not restricted to music. By the early 1950s he was Chief Elder in Hebron, an elected position that represented the confidence of the community in his moral and civic leadership. His role came to the test in 1956 when rumours reached Hebron that the Newfoundland Government, with the concurrence of the Moravian church and the Grenfell Association, had taken the decision to close the community and resettle its residents to the south. As Chief Elder, Nochasak wrote what was likely the first ever communication from an Inuk to the Newfoundland government, addressed to Dr F W Rowe, Minister of Mines and Resources who was responsible for the aboriginal files:

Dear Dr Rowe,

We people from Hebron have heard that Hebron is going to be closed down without giving us enough information about it. We would like to know if this is true or not so that we can be prepared for it.

We are asking not to be removed from our community because we are used to our traditional ways of hunting and it is very excellent. Hunting seals, char, caribou and other animals is our livelihood and are plentiful ... We would be very thankful if we are

not moved from our community, and we would appreciate it if you could consider our interests in not moving. And also we would be very thankful if someone could let us know what is going to happen to us in the future.

Sincerely,

I myself have been asked to write this
Chief Elder Levi Nochasak
Representing men at Hebron in their
decision what to do.⁴

Nochasak's letter was for naught and three years later he, along with almost 150 other northern Inuit, found himself relocated to Makkovik – a Moravian settler community 250 km to the south. Life changed irrevocably for him and those other northern Inuit who overnight doubled the population of the tiny white settlement. Despite government promises to the contrary, there was no housing and there was no employment. Separated by language and custom from the community now surrounding them, and from lifeways and food sources of their former subsistence existence, they also found themselves alienated from the healthy and autonomous social structure they had constructed for themselves in Hebron.

The Moravian church attempted to establish some of the same institutions that had afforded cohesion in Hebron. Efforts were made to reconstitute the remnants of the Hebron choir and brass band in Makkovik. The church encouraged the re-establishment of the authority of the Elders in civic and social realms. And for the first decade after relocation, Nochasak retained his role at the centre of Inuit life in his new surroundings. But the two-solitudes existence of Makkovik and the humiliation of not being able to provide the basics of life for themselves rapidly led the transplanted Inuit to the stereotypical signs of social dysfunction in impoverished and dispirited communities. Nochasak's leadership was unable to combat the challenges of a forced resettlement, a resettlement that also brought the demise of the Hebron Inuit's rich traditions of complex music-making,

The examples of Inuit musicians whose authority extended from the choir loft to the community could be multiplied many times. Natanael Illiniartitsijok,



Levi Nochasak (Photo source: Simeon Nochasak)

who became the first Inuk school teacher in 1869, was both organist and composer. Ambrosius of Hopedale was singled out by numerous visitors to the coast for his skill as a musician and community leadership. The most famous Labrador Inuk of the 19th century, Abraham, whose decision to travel with his family to Berlin in 1880 to be part of an ethnological exhibit proved fatal, impressed audiences equally with his command of the dog-sled and the violin.

What accounts for this remarkable intersection of music and leadership among Inuit of Labrador? In part it was the status attributed by the missionaries. By the close of the 19th century the stewardship for music – choirs and brass bands – was placed entirely in Inuit hands. Music leaders enjoyed social standing and they were often rewarded with trust and responsibility by the church.

But there's more to this than a stamp of approval by the colonial authority. Making music – especially choral singing and brass bands – is a communal activity. It is a place where people come together and, in a moment of shared activity, become one. This communing was all the more critical in the case of the Labrador Inuit who

until well into the 20th century spent most of the year living in isolated hunting and fishing camps pursuing a subsistence livelihood. On those festive occasions when they came together – the major celebrations of the Christian year once the Moravians had settled on the coast – they experienced a profound sense of community. Quite naturally, those who led them through that experience became community leaders in every sense: musical, moral and civic. **NQ**

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1 Samuel King Hutton, *Among the Eskimos of Labrador: a Record of Five Years' Close Intercourse with the Eskimo Tribes of Labrador*, London: Seeley, Service & Co, Ltd, 1912, 210-11.

2 Julie Green, "Nain residents mourn beloved Inuit leader and elder," *Nunatsiaq News*, 14 May 1998, [http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/archives/nunavut980531/nvt80515_12.html].

3 Levi Nochasak, "Ramame Inosik/Life in Ramah," trans. Andrea Webb, *Them Days* V 4 (1980), 16.

4 Retranslated by Rita Andersen. In Brice-Bennett, Carol, *Dispossessed: The Eviction of Inuit from Hebron Labrador*, Report submitted to North Program, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Happy Valley, Labrador, January 1994), 73-74.