**Ramala: An American “Indianist” Opera**, Musicological Lecture Concert
Ohio State University Opera & Lyric Theatre, November 1, 2017
Music by Charles Wakefield Cadman
Libretto by Nelle Richmond Eberhart and Francis La Flesche

Video available at The Ohio State University School of Music Channel: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6HEzeWw9SI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6HEzeWw9SI)
PowerPoint available at Humanities Commons: [https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:17491/](https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:17491/)

Presentation by Katie J. Graber

**Act I, scene 1 “Lo, the dawn”** (Aedeta-Justin Fields)

“**She whom I love**” (Nemaha-Dylan Davis)

“**The Friendship Vow**” (Aedeta-Justin Fields; Nemaha-Dylan Davis)

[PP “Love Call”] This was a real courting tradition among Omaha people; it was described in 1905 by the anthropologists Francis La Flesche and Alice Fletcher in their book *The Omaha Tribe*. It was not appropriate for young men to visit young women at their homes, so they would wait outside for the chance to meet on the way to do chores in the morning. Young men would sing a song they composed, or play on a flute, to announce their presence to their chosen woman. [PP Be-thae-wa-an] Charles Wakefield Cadman scored the opening tune of *Ramala* for Native American flute and based the melody on a tune from another book written by La Flesche and Fletcher called *A Study of Omaha Indian Music*.

Francis La Flesche was not only an anthropologist; he was also one of the librettists for this opera and was the son of an Omaha chief who grew up singing these songs and living these customs. As an anthropologist, he also studied Omaha and other tribes’ ways of life.

La Flesche was deeply interested in teaching people about Omaha culture. [PP Bureau of American Ethnology] He wrote many articles, presentations, and books about his tribe’s customs and music--such as *The Omaha Tribe* here. He also wrote fictional stories and an autobiographical account [PP The Middle Five] of his own experience in a boarding school in his book *The Middle Five*. We have all likely heard horrible stories about abuse at Native American boarding schools, but La Flesche’s account gives just a tiny glimpse of this. There were other Native American writers at the time who wrote much more scathingly about boarding schools
La Flesche dedicated *The Middle Five* to “The universal boy”—emphasizing shared humanity and commonalities rather than difference and antagonism. He did have some barbs and criticisms about the school, but they were often subtle and easily overlooked if a reader did not want to think about them. La Flesche’s dedication to teaching about and bridging different cultures was what likely led him to seek out Cadman to write an opera. This would be yet another way to bring his people’s music to a larger audience.

[PP Cadman] La Flesche had heard Cadman’s other songs based on Native American themes that had become popular at the time. This style came to be known as “Indianist” composition. Cadman was most famous for his songs “Land of the Sky Blue Water” (from Four American Indian Songs) and “At Dawning.” All of these were written with his lyricist Nelle Richmond Eberhart.

La Flesche wrote to Cadman in 1908 asking if he would like to collaborate on an opera, and Cadman enthusiastically agreed. Over the next few years, La Flesche supplied him with a story and many melodies, and Cadman even traveled with La Flesche to Omaha lands to make recordings and transcriptions.

[PP score] The first draft of this opera was finished in 1912, and they tried throughout the 19-teens to get it performed. Cadman and Eberhart wrote another (shorter) opera based on Native American tunes called *Shanewis* [PP Shanewis]; this one was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 1918 and 1919. Cadman, Eberhart, and La Flesche hoped that this success would spur interest in *Ramala*, but unfortunately it did not. In the 1930s Cadman revised the opera [PP Act I score] and created the piano-vocal score that we are using today (and notice, unfortunately, that La Flesche is left out of the credits here as he had died by this time). After these revisions, they still couldn’t get the opera performed. One aria was submitted and won a contest, and Cadman arranged two other selections that were performed at least once as orchestral pieces, but none of those had wide dissemination. The score has lived in the Pennsylvania State University’s archives ever since, and tonight’s performance is, as far as we know, the first time these excerpts have been performed publicly.

[PP] This letter shows an example of how La Flesche and Cadman worked together—it says, “Dear Francis: Will you send me some new Indian themes similar to a couple you gave me
a year ago? … I used one very effectively in Scene one Act I at the conclusion of the Vow scene.” [PP score] And here is the score of the end of the Vow scene that we just heard. This is fairly typical of Cadman’s writing throughout this opera—the Omaha tunes are there, but they’re sometimes buried and they’re often altered (such as modulating in the middle or only using a snippet of the song). And of course they are heavily harmonized and orchestrated. As we hear more, be aware that some aspects that sound Native American may have come from Cadman’s head, and some tunes that came from the Omaha tribe may be so arranged that they sound like Puccini. In rehearsals and discussions, people have also said they hear Wagner, Barber, and Copland so keep your ears open for other musical and dramatic influences.

After the friendship vow that you just heard, Scene 2 opens with Ramala—the heroine and love interest of both of these men. She is with her cousin Magena and mother Taene (a character named after Francis La Flesche’s own mother). The stage directions in the libretto read, [PP] “Late afternoon of the same day. Taene’s fine tepee is in the center of the stage with the flaps open. In the background is seen part of an Indian village. Taene, Ramala, and Magena, handsomely dressed, sit in front. The old woman is beading a moccasin; the cousins are gossiping guilishly, Ramala toying with a game of antelope hoofs.” [PP village photos] here are images of dwellings in an Omaha village that La Flesche likely had in mind—these are from his monograph about the Omaha Tribe.

In the opera now, Ramala declares that she loves both Aedeta and Nemeha for different reasons, and she cannot make a decision between the two. She plays a game of chance to allow fate to choose her love—she tosses up an antelope hoof while saying the two men’s names, and when she catches it while saying the name “Aedeta,” she declares, “Aedeta! To him my life belongs. My heart I know at last.” Ramala’s cousin is secretly thrilled because she is in love with Nemaha. Ramala’s mother is not pleased that her daughter chose a husband by chance, and Ramala responds with the next aria “Chide, chide me not”—marked as sung “with dignity.”

**Act I, scene 2 “Chide, chide me not”** (Ramala-Kimberly Monzon)

[PP Game Song] In contrast to the true custom of young lovers singing to one another before dawn, we could say that choosing a lover by chance was an operatic addition to the story. It is there for the drama and the character development of the three women. Of course, there
were many of these moments of disconnect between reality and operatic fiction. In the letters between the librettist Eberhart, composer Cadman, and anthropologist La Flesche, we see a push and pull, a negotiation of these boundaries.

[PP quotation] For example, Eberhart wrote to La Flesche, “[Ramala’s] big scene is in the next scene and Aedeta is allowed to speak in the last scene but this is Nemaha’s only dramatic opportunity in the whole opera and an aria is imperative. Of course no Indian would sing one at such a time, neither would a man of any other nationality but grand operas are never true to life. They exist only to please the eye and to allow singers to exploit their voices. … ‘Lucia di Lammermoor’ is considered a ridiculous opera by all critics, but Tetrazzini can display her voice in it so crowds flock to hear it.”

La Flesche was more interested in the meanings and “correctness” of the songs than Cadman and Eberhart. In one letter, Eberhart wanted to clarify these parameters of the uses of Omaha songs [PP]: She wrote, “May we use the Hako ceremony melodies in any way we wish. For instance may the Dawn theme be worked into the overture?” … “Are we restricted to Dakota and Omaha melodies or may we use any Indian melody Hopi etc. As there will probably not be a market for more than one Indian opera and as a grand opera in three acts is a large undertaking would it not be best to use the finest of all melodies, making the opera national, as you might call it, instead of tribal? Need we be too consistent?”

And Cadman asked, several years later (and much more excitedly) [PP]: “Shall I or shall I not use the tune we selected for this processional on the Omaha reservation two years ago when you sung it for me and I copied it down. … Now I WANT TO USE THIS SONG FOR I CAN MAKE SOME BIG EFFECTS WITH MY TREATMENT OF IT FOR ORCHESTRA AND CHORUS. Then you remember we use the RATTLES and that will be one of the most barbaric and splendid things in the Opera for it has a savage Pawnee flavor somehow. … If the notes are not absolutely correct or if it happens to “savor of one of those Mescal songs” please [sic] tell me who will know but you and Miss Fletcher? Will the public or the critics, or even ANY ethnologists? I think not.”

We don’t have La Flesche’s answer to either of these specific questions, but there are other indications as to how carefully he thought about the meaning and uses of the songs. [PP two photos of people] His books are full of photographs and details like these that meticulously record facts and data. With that depth of expertise, he made recommendations about instruments,
music, and storyline—even thoroughly explaining to Eberhart what warriors would sing after capturing an enemy in battle.

Through these negotiations of knowledge and creative skill, there were many compromises in this opera. There were many times that La Flesche got his way, making details ethnographically accurate, and there were many times that Cadman rearranged melodies and harmonies to make things fit musically or dramatically.

After the scene we just heard, when Ramala has accepted the Sacred Power’s directive for her to love Aedeta, several important things happen: First, Ramala’s mother “tells her vision of the Northern Lights and prophesies that … there shall be a death in the tribe.” Then the tribe’s warriors pass by these women, “singing on their way to fight the Pawnees.” Finally, Ramala decides to follow the warriors to declare her love. Eberhart’s synopsis describes it this way: “It is now sunset. Taene enters the tent; Magena, weeping, leaves the stage with a group of Indian girls who are, for a little way, following the war-party, and Ramala is left alone. Motionless, she watches the warriors ride away over the hills in the gathering dusk. The evening sounds of the camp fall faintly on her unheeding ears, the fire-flies play about her, the night deepens, and still she stands in grief. All at once, as if inspired by a sudden thought, she raises her head and starts from the scene. Soon horses hoofs are heard thudding the prairie grass until they die away in the direction the warriors have taken. Magena steals back and sings a lament.”

Act I, scene 2 “Nemaha has gone” (Megena-Elizabeth Blanquera)

After this aria, Ramala follows the warriors to their camp and asks for permission to marry Aedeta. Her uncle, the chief Obeska, allows it even though this was a very unusual occurrence. Francis La Flesche wrote in his book about the Omaha tribe that “Marriage with a man either on or about to go on the warpath was not permitted; such a union was looked on as a defiance of natural law that would bring disaster on the people for the reason, it was explained, that ‘War means the destruction of life, marriage its perpetuation.’”

In the opera, chief Obeska declares, “Marriage is life’s promise; War is life’s destruction. Therefore war and marriage do not go well together and all the traditions and the customs of our tribe forbid the union. Yet such is my affection for my kinswoman, Such my
regard for the brave Aedeta, that I put aside the customs of my people and declare the marriage
good. Man and wife are ye now.”

As soon as the other warriors give their good wishes, a scout rushes in to announce that
the enemy is upon them. The warriors go off to battle, and Ramala sings a prayer for their safety.

**Act II “O thou Sun”** (Ramala-Kimberly Monzon)

[PP warrior] The battle happens offstage while Ramala sings. This is a common
occurrence in operas, though it is also one of the reasons that some directors who looked at this
score early on called it undramatic.

Cadman, surely, would have argued that it was the music that made this opera dramatic
rather than any showy battle scene. In his letters, Cadman was clearly excited about the dramatic
possibilities of Native American music, though he expressed this in ways unacceptable by
today’s standards, extolling its savagery and naivete.

It is important to understand how Cadman’s own personal compositional impulses added
to these Omaha tunes—so the “savagery” and drama came just as much from his harmonizations
as they did from the melodies themselves. When we compare two composers’ harmonizations of
the same tune, we can really hear this.

[PP scores] First, let’s listen to a cylinder recording from the Fletcher and La Flesche
collection at the Library of Congress so that you can hear some original Omaha voices. This
recording is from the 1890s, and Cadman most likely heard this song and others in this
collection. [PP listen: https://www.loc.gov/item/omhbib000488/]

Now, Ryan will play these two versions of “The Omaha Prayer” so we can hear the
differences in harmonies between Cadman’s version and another composer. These are not the
same tune as the recording, but it’s from the same group of tunes, and there are some similar
melodic contours among many in this group.

First, Ryan will play the left side here, a harmonization by John Comfort Fillmore from
Fletcher and La Flesche’s book *A Study of Omaha Indian Music*. [listen]

Now, Ryan will play the version on the right. This is the exact same tune, but with
different harmonies. This is Cadman’s version; it is a warrior’s chorus in *Ramala*. [listen]
While Cadman does use some more adventurous harmonies than Fillmore did, he still clearly frames this melody in his tonal time period. In other words, although Cadman claimed to be finding the true spirit of the tunes, he was noticeably influenced by Western classical music history. Cadman and Fillmore both used musical features that were associated with Indianness at that time and that didn’t specifically come from the melody. For example, the open octaves in the left hand of the piano represent the drum, but the use of octaves or fifths rather than any other interval is a Western stereotype of Indian music rather than a Native American musical feature. Cadman’s use of the low register and chromatic descent were also his choices rather than coming from the Omaha tune.

Cadman argued that to write music based on Native American melodies, composers would need to “exercise intimate sympathy and understanding—in other words, would have to put himself en rapport with the native mind.” (389-90). That sounds respectful; that sounds similar to La Flesche’s desire to find similarities and shared humanity among different cultures. However, Cadman also said more patronizing things, such as: “It is really true that no (primitive) race is more music-loving than the American Indian,” and “you will find firm conviction that Uncle Sam’s little wards are in the main quite musical.” “Little wards” here means that Cadman (and many other people!) believed that Native American people were like pitiable little children that need someone to care for them. This common conceit, of Native Americans being in a younger stage of racial development and needing the guidance of European-American people and government, was similar to conceptions of African American people at that time. A major difference, though, was Native Americans’ connection to the soil of America and the possibility many believed this posed for creating new “truly” American music.

[PP] Cadman wrote that Native American music “has sprung into existence on the American continent. It is as much the heritage of America and Americans and of the musicians who live in America as the music of the barbaric hordes of Russia is the heritage of cultured Russians and Russian musicians. We could mention several ingenious members of the Russian school of music whose veins are without a drop of blood of those wild tribes and who have, nevertheless, caught and reflected the lilt, the life and the love of the strange and elemental peoples that make up the great Russian Empire.” Though he was describing Russian folk here, he was clearly making parallels to Native American people. In other sources, Cadman called their music “naive” and “uncouth” and said that only one fifth was useful for composing.
These quotations show the conflicting feelings Cadman had about Native music; while he held it in esteem, it was as sort of raw material for composition. He also believed that “cultured” or “civilized” people like himself should take this low sort of music and raise it up be proper.

So what do we do today with those kinds of arrogant views? We hear this question most often directed toward Wagner, who famously held anti-Semitic views. Should we boycott his music? Can we separate the artist from the art? I would urge us, rather than trying to separate the positive and negative, to learn from these complex and difficult assemblies of human creativity, egotism, prejudice, and ambivalence.

On the one hand, this opera represents the projects of people like La Flesche (and even Cadman!) who wanted to teach others about the depth and meaning of Native American life, culture, music, and people. They believed that Native American people should be respected as an inherent and positive aspect of the US nation. La Flesche worked for the US government with other anthropologists, lawyers, and legislators to make the lives of his people better. Cadman and other composers and musicians gave lecture tours and performances to raise awareness and appreciation.

On the other hand, Cadman and many of the other European-American people involved in these projects had attitudes that separated “us” from “them.” In these views, “their” Native American music was good and useful for the nation, but only when “we” cultivate it and make it proper.

What we should do today is engage both the positive and the negative, the fact and the fiction, in artistic works like this. Cadman’s condescension does not negate the fact that Ramala was a collaboration with a Native American anthropologist, and the fact that La Flesche helped with this project does not negate the fact that there are some prejudiced results in this opera. As we listen, we should wonder about what is “really” Omaha and what are Cadman’s additions. We should wonder which of these characters we identify with and why. We should think about which aspects of the music we enjoy and why. And, we should wonder about how the music shapes our experiences of the characters and the plot.

When we engage art like this—really dig in and experience and learn from it—it can change us. A scientific study in 2013 suggests that reading fiction enhances our ability to empathize. Especially when characters are not too predictable, and when the inner workings of
their thought processes are not spelled out, we have to supply the motivations and feelings of the characters. In opera, we are invited to dwell in others’ emotions through expansive arias and orchestral interludes. Many music scholars and opera aficionados have argued that it’s the music that really is the drama in opera. As Eberhart said, if you read a synopsis of almost any opera, it sounds ridiculous. But yet, the performance—the singing, the human voice—encourages us to suspend disbelief and live in the characters’ minds for these few hours that the lights are low.

[PP] Another scientific study in 2015 found that listening to music from another culture can influence empathy. The postulation there was that a perceived similarity will often cause empathy; therefore, if I encounter a new type of music, I now have a small basis for feeling a similarity with other people who have also encountered that music. If I enjoy this new music, I’m even more likely to feel an affinity for others who enjoy or create this music.

These studies indicate a larger point: art matters to society. Too often, people imagine art to be an extra layer that is added after the fact—like sprinkles on top of a cupcake. In reality, though, art cannot be extracted from its surroundings—it’s more like the sugar inside the cupcake that has melted into the surrounding ingredients. You cannot take it back out, and it does not stand on its own. This isn’t to say that society can’t physically survive without art; rather, when art is created, it is conjoined to its context. Art affects the way we think about ourselves and understand others, and therefore it is absolutely inseparable from how society works. Even when a musical score has been sitting in an archive for nearly 100 years, we can see how it was a product of its time as well as how it speaks to us today.

In Ramala so far, we have heard characters sing of love, friendship, lament, and fear—and there is much more drama and emotion to come. In the next scene, after Ramala sang to the Sun for the protection of her warriors, Nemaha emerges to tell her that Aedeta has perished in the battle. She begs him to go with her to find Aedeta’s body so that she can put it to rest, but Nemaha says they are in danger and must flee. Ramala refuses and rushes out to find her love. In the next scene, we hear her sadness and desperation as she walks through the carnage of the battle, and we hear her shock and fury as she realizes that Aedeta has been betrayed and captured.
Act III, scene 1 “Here the battle stormed” (Ramala-Kimberly Monzon)

[PP arrow] Sopranos in operas are often called heroines, but they don’t often get to be superheroes. In this story, though, Ramala now marches into the enemy camp and rescues Aedeta. In a moment we will hear the final scene, the final confrontation between all of the six principal characters, but first, let’s reflect on the music and drama we have experienced so far.

At this point, we’ve heard enough to ask the big questions: why was this opera written, and why was it never performed?

La Flesche’s motivation was likely to teach about Omaha people and ways of life. Or, even when it was a fictionalized portrayal, he still wanted to represent Native American people as simply people—they can be in an opera just as well as anyone else.

Cadman’s motivation was at least in part to create a “true American music,” but his desire had inherent conflicting ideas embedded in it. Cadman said Natives had an “unconquerable spirit” even as he wrote songs about the dying Indian race. He portrayed the “noble savage,” dignified people deeply connected to this land, but not quite civilized enough to be citizens. Indians were the true Native-born Americans, but yet they were an exotic other. Cadman’s compositions were respectful in some aspects, but patronizing in others—he saw his work as a way to foster appreciation to [quote] “better the lot of ‘our poor red brethren.’” [end quote]

[PP 3 photos] Cultural appropriation is another way to frame these issues: was it appropriation for Cadman to use and change these tunes and hope to make money from this opera without paying the original singers? Yes. Was it appropriation for La Flesche to want to share his music and culture with a non-Omaha audience? No … but neither of these endeavors cancels out the other.

It does not appear that these questions had any influence on the opera not being performed. Opera companies in the 19-teens through the 1930s were frankly not worried about appropriation or perpetuating negative stereotypes. There is no one good reason that this was never performed. Part of it was probably just bad luck, not being at the right place at the right time. There are added difficulties to producing a new opera—companies have to make entirely new costumes and sets, and they have to convince audiences it’s worth their time to try it out. Opera producers would have had to be really convinced that Ramala was a good investment. Potential producers and scholars have said this opera doesn’t have enough drama, or that it is
“lopsided” with too many arias early on and not enough in the later scenes. However, none of these are insurmountable problems. Opera directors—then and now—regularly trim and rearrange operas to make them fit their company and their production, and they regularly deal with the question of how to provide drama when all the characters stop and sing for five minutes at a time. Again, part of the drama is the music, and the music we’ve heard tonight clearly has dramatic potential.

In light of all that, could this opera “work?” Isn’t it great that you get to decide this for yourself? Most other music that you hear comes in a package with ideas about whether or not you should like it and why. But tonight, you can decide whether you want forget all about these arias—or, write a letter to your favorite opera company urging them to do a full production of Ramala!

Of course, a full production would bring up more questions of appropriation and representation. If someone wanted to use Omaha costumes, they would need to do a lot of research—and perhaps you’ve noticed from all the photos that the Omaha Tribe was quite large and diverse, with many sub-clans and closely related tribes. Or, maybe a producer would decide that more fictionalized or abstract costumes would be an option, though they would have to be careful about stereotypes. As you watch and listen to the last scene, think about how you might bring this opera to life in a way that respects Omaha people, culture, and music—and celebrates the shared drama of being human.

**Act IV Finale** (Ramala-Kimberly Monzon; Aedeta-Justin Fields; Nemaha-Dylan Davis; Megena-Elizabeth Blanquera; Obeska-Tommy Petrushka; Taena-Samantha Stiner)