

# Cultural Appropriation and How to Recognize It

An Opinion Study\* with Notes for Composers, Publishers, & Performers

-Dr. Blackhorse (Fall 2022)

*“don’t be afraid to embrace culture, just be informed!”*

This short article will examine/analyze anonymous examples of cultural appropriation and the circumstances that can lead to publication retractions. The goal of this analysis is to provide one perspective on the issues related to appropriation in an increasingly connected and racially ambiguous world—with the intent on prepping future composers, publishers, and performers with the knowledge they need to avoid engaging in cultural appropriation.

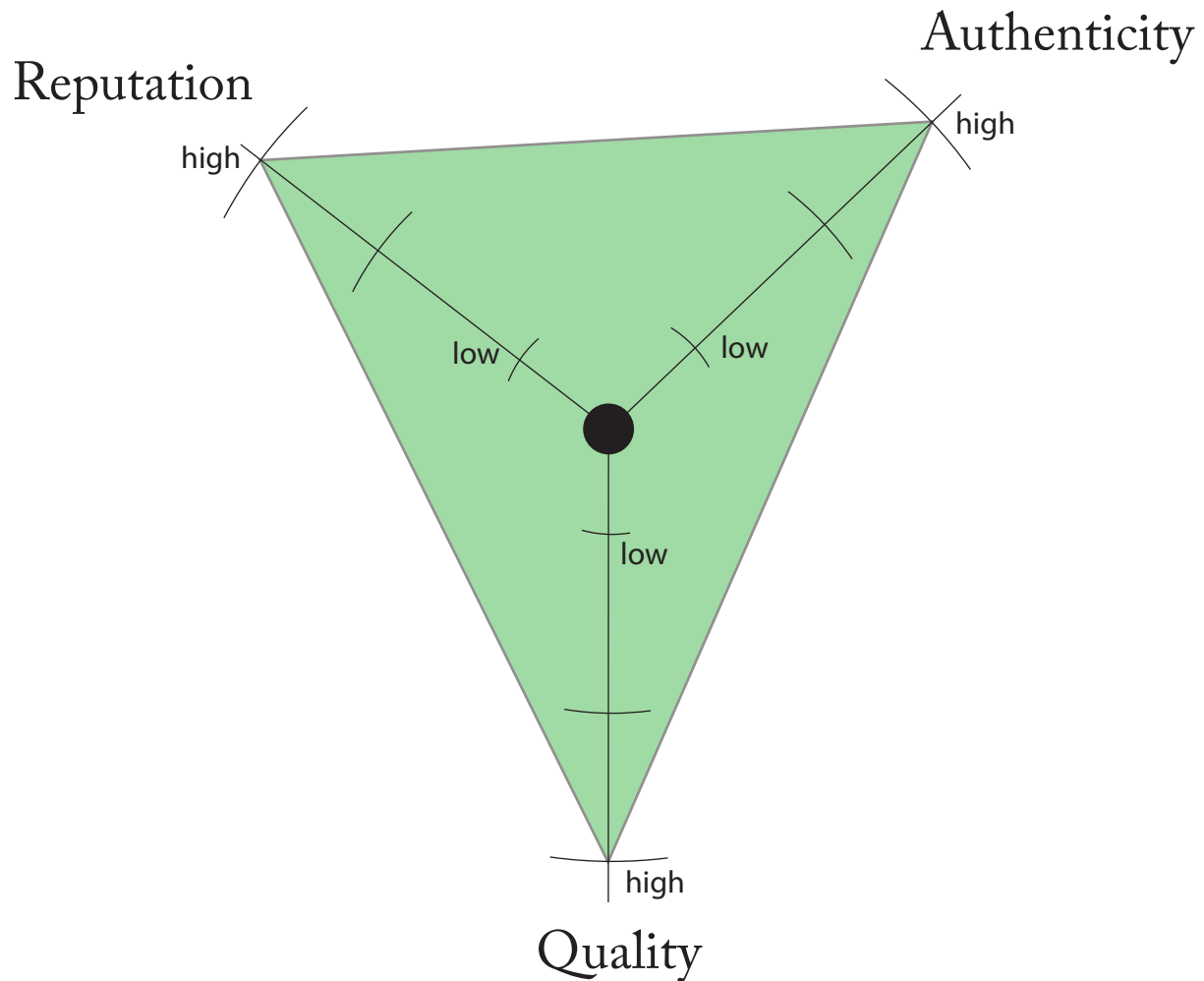
**What is “cultural appropriation?”** Simply put, it is the **ignorant *and/or* malicious use of cultural art with total disregard** for historical/current social issues, artistic style, and/or language. This will be dissected in greater detail throughout the article.

Performers use many forms of research when searching out new music to purchase and perform—the most common methods are most certainly marketing campaigns/packets from publishers, searching the internet, and convention/concert attendance. Pieces were found after searching for Indigenous choral music through various platforms such as Google, Yahoo, Bing, and multiple publisher websites using differing search queries.

The observations of this study provide suggestions/guidance in the creation/utilization of ***cultural art—compositions that are based on identity, social, and/or spiritual issues***. Concepts about authenticity versus quality are examined and how retraction can be used as an alternative form of censorship. Topics regarding cultural appropriation are examined along with methods and information to help composers, publishers, performers, and all culturally related fields in *The Arts* gain understanding and confidence when writing, publishing, programming, or researching culturally sensitive topics and artwork/music.

\*In no way does this article accuse or imply that any composers/arrangers are guilty of purposefully engaging in cultural appropriation, only that inappropriate and misinformed actions/steps taken can result in a culturally insensitive piece of music which will eventually be retracted for the very reasons to be discussed.

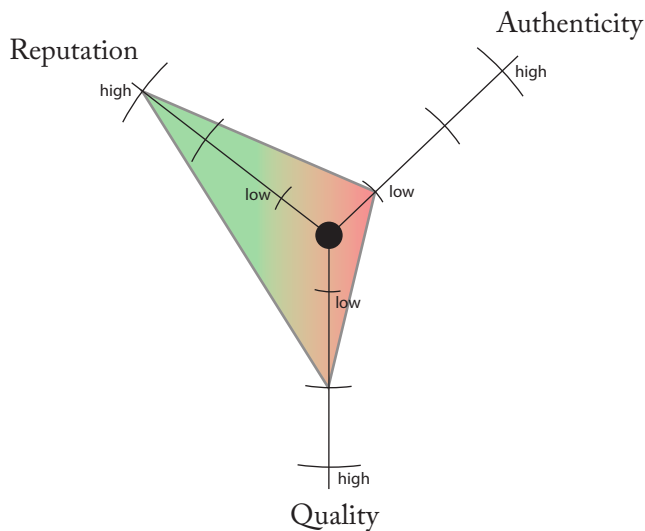
# Graphical Analysis of Works by Artists Representing Cultural Groups



**Reputation:** all artists involved in creating a new artwork should be scrutinized for their education, previous works, publications, critical reviews, transparency and visibility, exposure/accessibility, and recommendations from recognized professionals/community members with established contributions to The Arts.

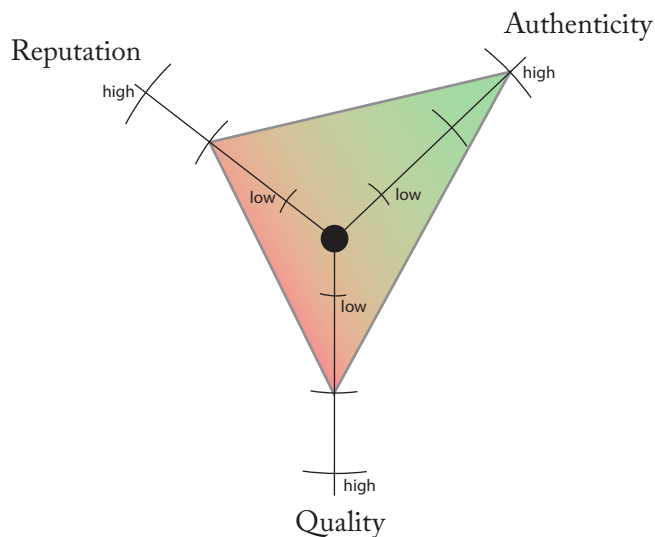
**Authenticity:** all artists involved in creating new artwork should be scrutinized for their connections to claimed communities, have verifiable source material, and have the capability to defend their works when questioned by other recognized scholars.

**Quality:** this is determined over the course of time and most often by scholars and professionals who bring the artwork to the community at large. “Art is in the eyes/ears of the beholder” applies here and is the artistic preference of any performers/contributors when deciding whether or not to program a work.



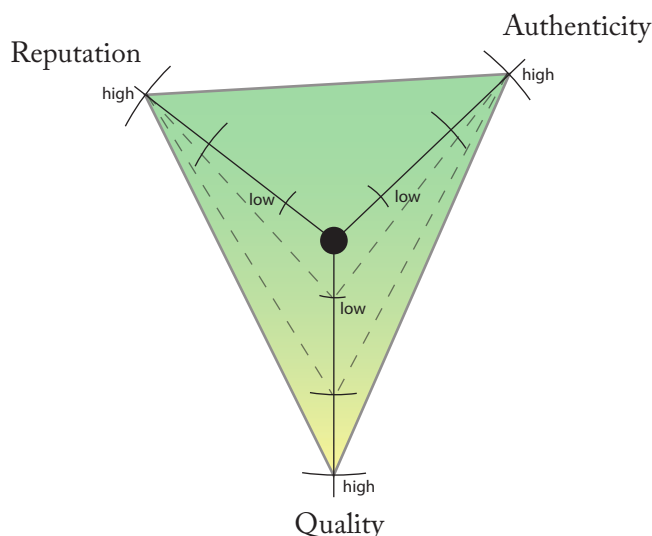
**Example 1:** This composer is well published and recognized in the music community, but has no ties to any indigenous community. The music in question is written well for a choral/church setting within the European writing style, but has no correlation with a complimentary style, proper use of language, nor proper attribution by claiming to be “traditional” in melody and text. They are unable to defend their work when questioned by scholars.

**Cultural Appropriation? Yes.**  
**Should I program? No, probably not.**



**Example 2:** This composer is known in the music and indigenous communities. They have few publications, most being self-published and varying in traditionality, but all are directly influenced by their cultural upbringing. The music in question is written by a recognized composer of indigenous affiliation. The majority of sounds they compose are non-traditional, possibly avant-garde, and when claiming to write traditional arrangements of indigenous music, the reception is mixed by musical and cultural circles.

**Cultural Appropriation? No, not likely.**  
**Should I program? Yes, but only if you think it's a work of quality.**

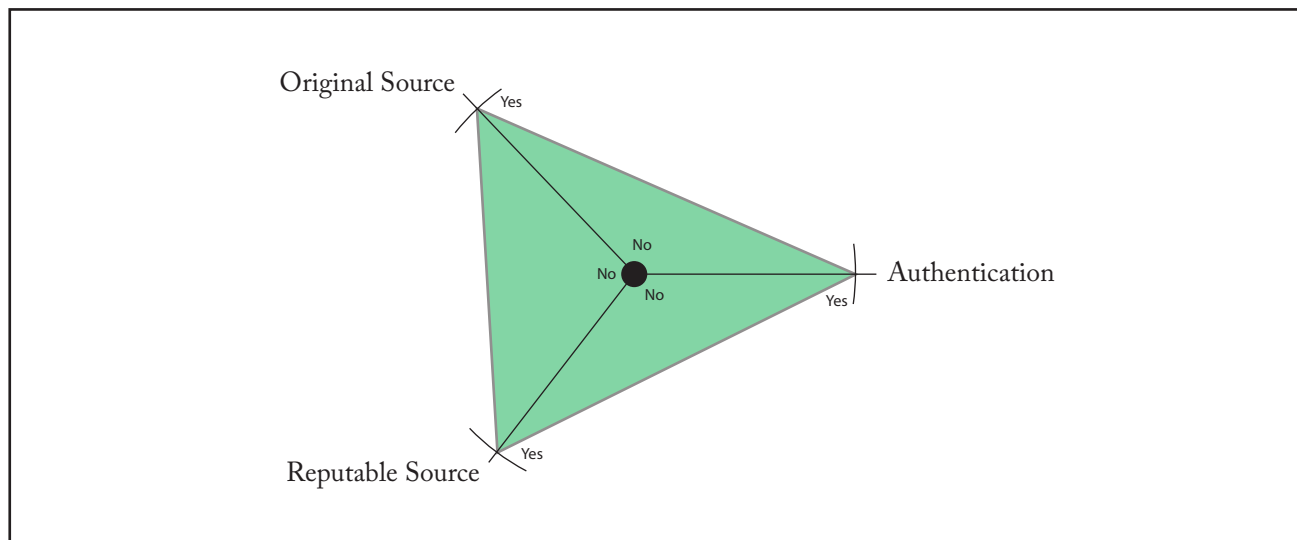


**Example 3:** This composer is known in the music and indigenous communities and they have several graduate degrees in Music as well as published scores, albums, and research articles related to the culture(s) they claim to represent. The music being considered is written using a recognized orthography, has cultural recordings to verify the written score's style and purpose, and the text is researchable/recognizable to the culture it claims to represent. The music is controversial in ensemble approach, but accurately represents the music style and melodies of the culture it utilizes.

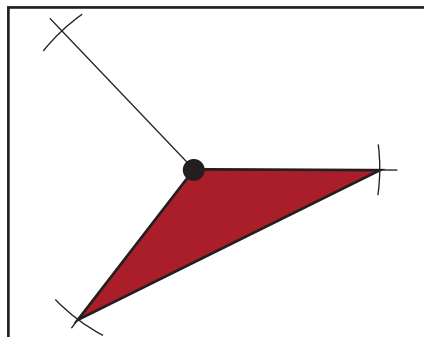
**Cultural Appropriation? No**  
**Should I program? Yes, once informed, and only if you think it's a work of quality.**

When you decide to create, utilize, or publish art based on a cultural premise, make sure that the artwork:

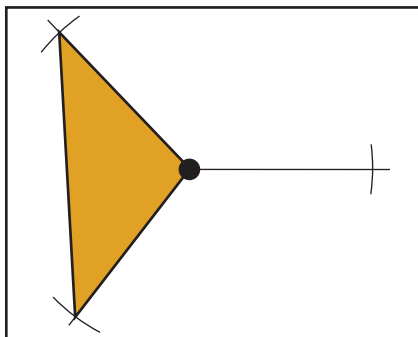
- a) made by an **original source**<sup>1</sup> that is tied to the community within cultural traditions.
- b) has **information that can be authenticated** by the artist/culture represented.
- c) comes from a **reputable source**<sup>2</sup> of which you will need to verify



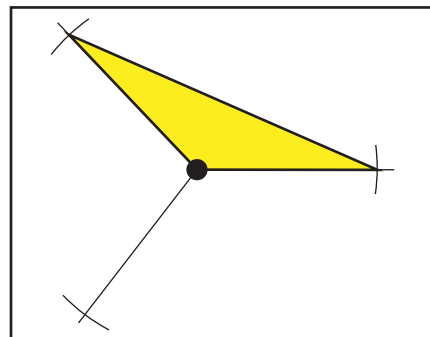
*Preferably you want all three components, but in the case you don't here are some suggestions*



Avoid works absent of an original source.



Be cautious using works that are created without the ability to be authenticated or recognized by the community it claims to represent.



Publishing works is not the only way to determine the quality or authenticity of a work. Quality research is needed to assess the programming potential.

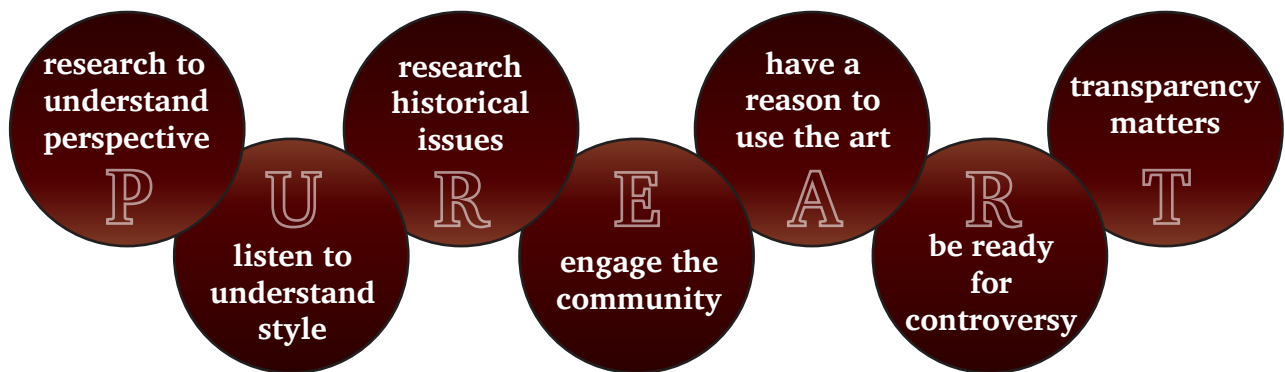
<sup>1</sup>does not imply race or registration, those are government assimilation programs

<sup>2</sup> available online through databases, professional organizations, publishers, composers, directors, and through local universities, libraries, and historical societies. You will still encounter appropriated material from reputable sources, although rarely, which is why cross-referencing with more than one source is essential. This is more commonly encountered with subject matter published prior to the age of easily-accessible internet, or pre-2008, but does not exclude current and future works. Publishers do on occasion make mistakes, but integrity and reputation are maintained by subsequent retractions.

**You can avoid cultural appropriation and respect any culture by doing the following precautionary steps:**

- 1) **research** the social issues that are currently affecting the culture whose art you wish to use/create to **understand perspective**.
- 2) **listen** to/examine examples of music performed by people tied to the culture you are looking to utilize in order to **understand style**.
- 3) research the meaning and **history** of the cultural component to be used
- 4) if possible, **engage that community** you wish to use/create art using their culture.
- 5) **have a reason** to use/create the art other than simply for entertainment
- 6) **be ready for controversy** both from the traditional and modern communities of that culture. As with anything new or different, there are always going to be loud voices of opposition and even louder voices of envy/resentment.
- 7) the **composers/arrangers should be transparent** about the music's intent and purpose, so you can make an informed decision. Not all cultural music has to be "traditional" in sound/style and can be any ensemble of instrumentation.

*~~~Precautionary Steps to avoid Cultural Appropriation~~~*



**Remember this acronym: PURE-ART**

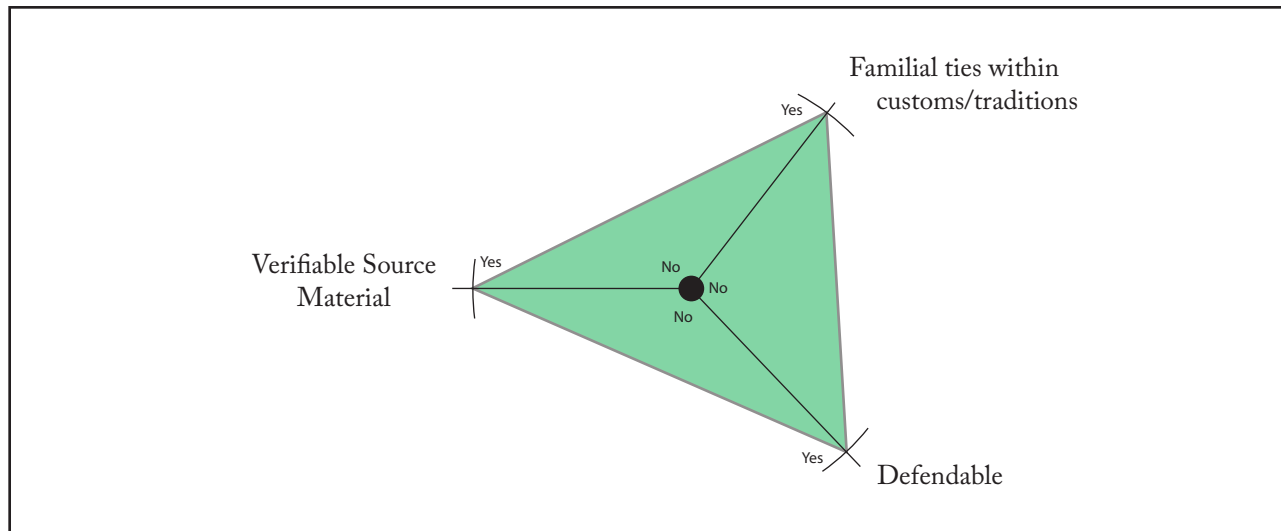
**Perspective, Understanding, Research, Engage, Aim, Ready, Transparency**

Nobody can give you “permission” to use culture, but especially with marginalized communities, sympathizing with their struggles will make you a voice for change and advocacy, rather than arrogation and ignorance.

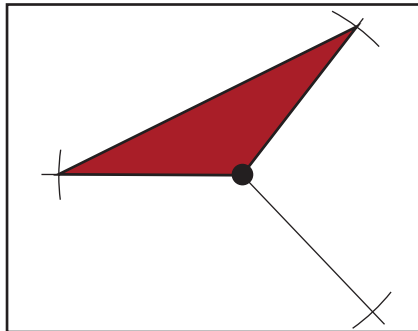
***don't be afraid to embrace culture, just be informed!***

## What defines authenticity? (different from quality)

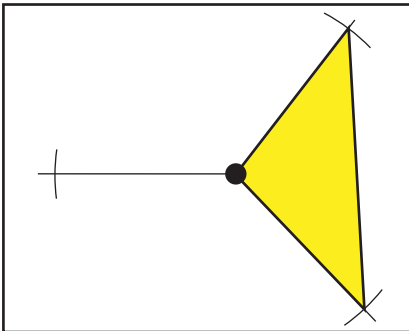
- 1) having **verifiable source** material
- 2) **familial ties** according to that specific indigenous community's customs/traditions
- 3) ability to **rationalize/defend** the art created



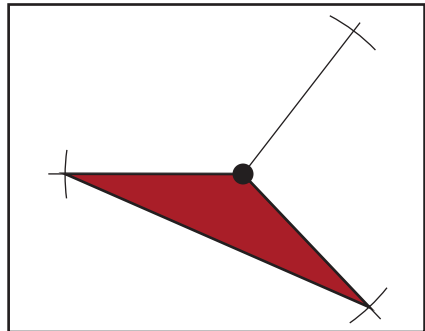
*Preferably you want all three components, but in the case you don't here are some suggestions*



Avoid works that are indefensible.



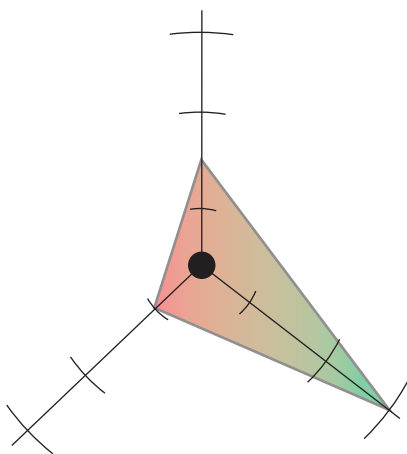
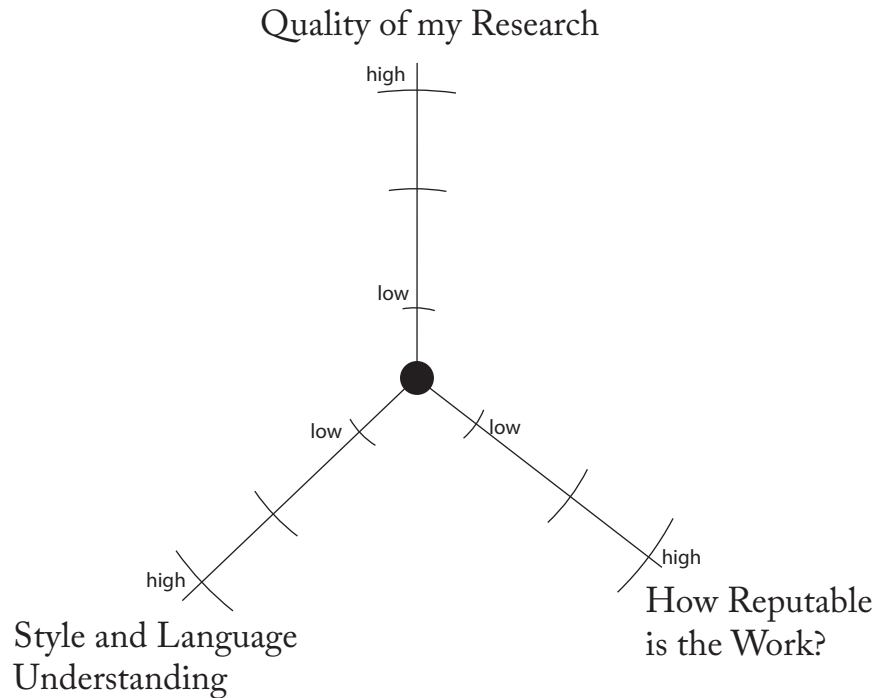
Be cautious using works that are available outside of reputable sources.



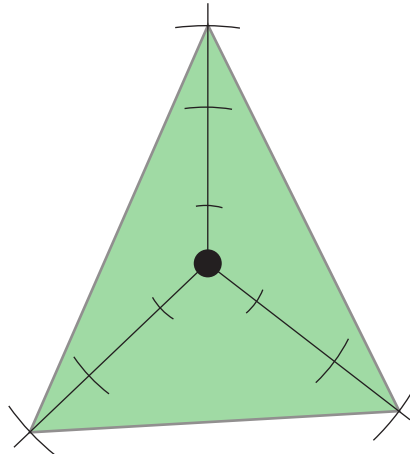
Avoid works that are created by composers with no ties to the community they are representing.

There is constant controversy within these communities regarding who has the “right” to disseminate culture, but as long as the person has valid connections to the community, then they are from that community and have every right to create artwork, good or bad, regardless of stereotypical/societal/racial proclivities. It is the job of academics and time in general to decide the “quality” of the work.

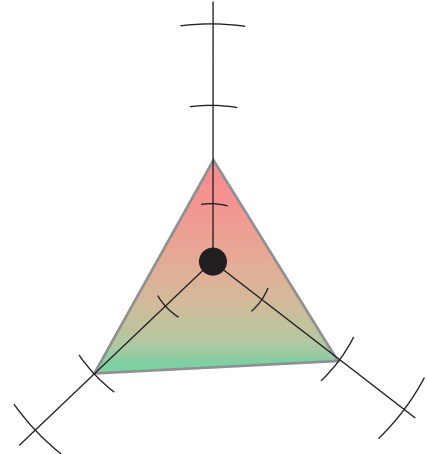
# Checklist before Programming/Performing a Work of Cultural Art



This performer chose a reputable work, but conducted little to no research. This will most likely result in a low-quality performance and reception.



This is the ideal situation. Well researched and reputable sources, with extra diligence afforded to learning about the culture and proper artistic considerations to bring an authentic representation to desired audience.



This performer chose to research works of cultural art but did not search reputable sources. This will likely result in choosing a work that is questionable in multiple areas and can be avoided with higher quality, reputable sources.

**Potential issues with a publication:**

- 1) no verified sources for the music style.
- 2) language is entirely inaccurate and unrelated to any dictionary/orthography.
- 3) the person claiming to be of indigenous decent is unknown and non-researchable.
- 4) Arrangers are not tied to an indigenous community in any way. They only claim to have permission.
- 5) claimed the piece to be traditional, inspired by an “original poem” as remembered by a generally unknown indigenous person, then written by a composer who is not tied to the indigenous community.
- 6) Arrangers are all passing responsibility to each other for the cultural components. Nobody wants to take ownership of the content. (i.e. words and style.)

**The arrangers could be claiming to:**

- a) be tied to the indigenous communities
- b) to have actual indigenous words with proper translations
- c) use a “traditional” indigenous melody/text.

**The reasons an arrangement can be problematic are as follows:****(these are examples of appropriation)**

- 1) they are selling/marketing inauthentic arrangements as authentic indigenous music
- 2) they are selling a culture they knew nothing about and had no community ties to
- 3) they are using nonsense words and translations and passing them off as authentic
- 4) they are relying on non-verifiable source material that has no visibility

**Censorship is not a useful tool for advancing social equity, however, sometimes it is necessary to address appropriation when appropriation actually occurs through the process of retracting publications.**

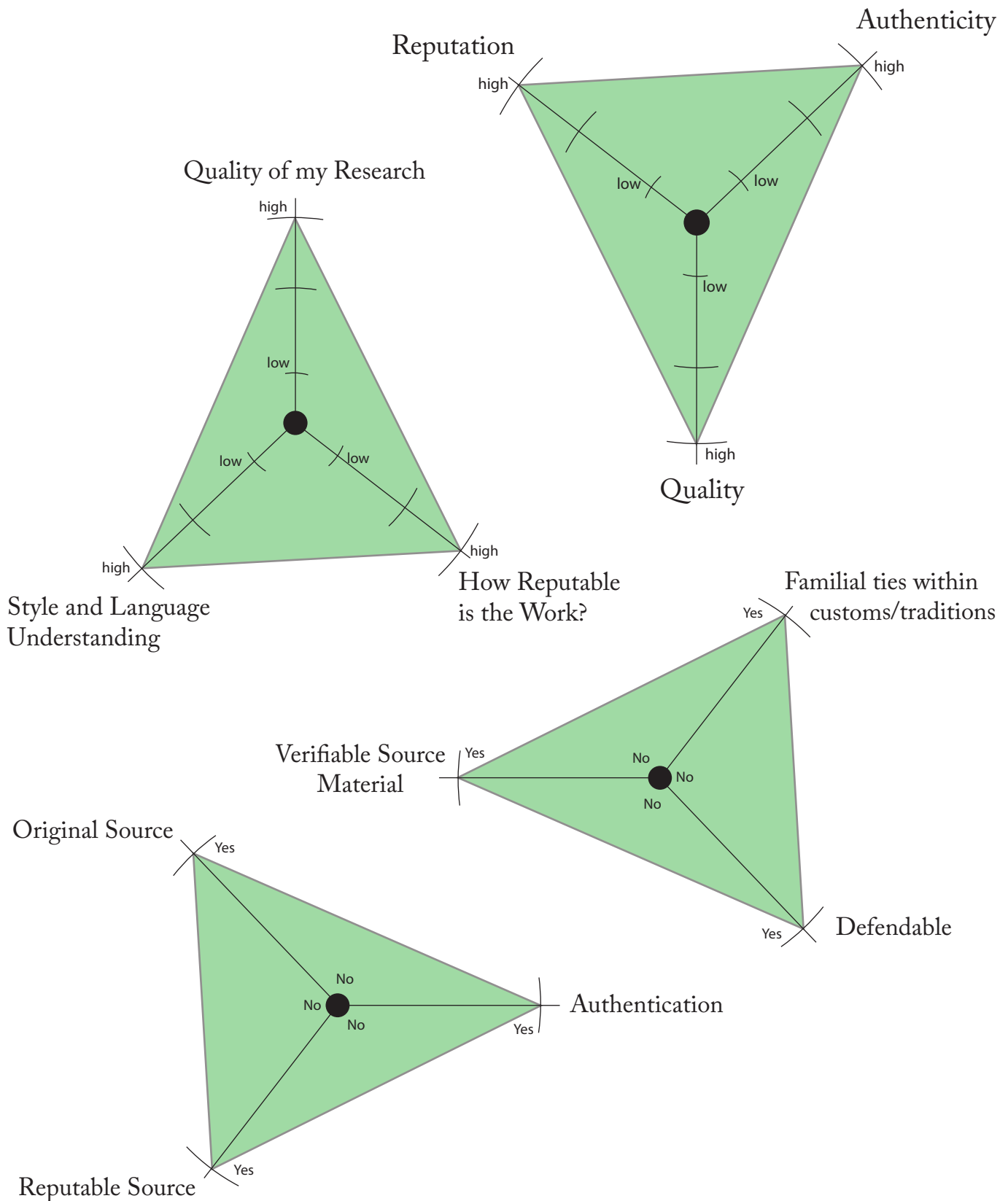
**Possible scenario resulting in a retraction:**

- 1) publisher contacted by cultural community scholars and recognized contributors to *The Arts* asking questions about the authenticity, origin, and purpose of this music.  
and
- 2) publisher unable to defend/authenticate the music



# Graphical Summary of Analytical Tools

## Examining Artists Representing Cultural Groups



## ~FINAL THOUGHTS~

**Questions worth asking before composing a work based on culture:**

- 1) Am I tied to the community of the culture I want to write about?
- 2) Do I need copyright permissions to use any of the works for an arrangement?
- 3) What is the purpose behind composing this work beyond entertainment?
- 4) Am I willing to face controversy?

**Questions worth asking before publishing a work based on culture:**

- 1) Is the composer/arranger reputable?
- 2) Is the composer/arranger authentic?
- 3) Is the music written of good quality and purpose?
- 4) Am I willing to face controversy?

**Questions worth asking before programming a work based on culture:**

- 1) Why do I want to program this work?
- 2) What does the work mean and is it appropriate to use for this program?
- 3) Have I done all the research necessary to be informed enough to defend my program?
- 4) Am I willing to face controversy?

**Questions worth asking before performing a work based on culture:**

- 1) Why do I want to perform this work?
- 2) Do I understand the style/language and its purpose/intent?
- 3) Am I willing to face controversy?

*Culture is a shared system of values, customs, and artwork that belong to all people willing to learn and participate in its beauty. Every culture on this planet began with indigenous roots, but some put down their feathers sooner than others.*