



## ASPECTS

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# NATANAEL ILLINIARTITSIJOK: Inuk Composer

BY TOM GORDON



Friedericke and Natanael Illiniartitsijok

THIS STORY BEGINS WITH AN ACCOUNT, PUBLISHED FIRST IN MARCH 1911, OF THE DEDICATION OF A NEW CHURCH IN NAIN, THE FIRST CHURCH AMONG THE MORAVIAN SETTLEMENTS TO HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED FROM LOCAL MATERIALS AND LARGELY BY INUIT LABOUR:

THE KEYS OF THE NEW CHURCH WERE CARRIED ON CUSHIONS BY AN ESKIMO BOY AND GIRL. THE BAND WAS STATIONED A SHORT DISTANCE OFF, PLAYING HYMN TUNES. OUTSIDE THE CHURCH ANOTHER VERSE WAS SUNG, THE BISHOP SPOKE THE WORDS: 'ENTER INTO HIS GATES WITH THANKSGIVING,' ETC., AND IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY TRINITY BOTH DOORS WERE UNLOCKED. WHILE THE CONGREGATION WAS ENTERING THE CHOIR SANG AN ANTHEM, WRITTEN AND COMPOSED BY OUR OLDEST CHAPEL-SERVANT AND ORGANIST, NATANAEL ILLINIARTITSIJOK.<sup>1</sup>

This assigns a place in history to Natanael Illiniartitsijok, school teacher, chapel servant, Elder, organist and, significantly, first known Inuk composer. Natanael's historic accomplishment was echoed across mission publications as a testament to the innate musical skill of Inuit musicians and their admirable stewardship of the musical life of coastal Labrador. Natanael's achievement migrated to history books, such as Joseph Hutton's *History of the Moravian Missions*<sup>2</sup> and Paul Woodford's 1988 history of music in Newfoundland and Labrador.<sup>3</sup>

A place in history confirmed, but beyond that, little more: a handful of posed photos, a sprinkling of anecdotes in official accounts of the life of the Moravian mission in Labrador, and a record of death—brief as his life was long. In an ironic twist on the phenomenon of “making history,” no one ever recorded the name of the composition that Natanael wrote. Natanael became a history-making Inuk whose history-making act was lost to memory.

### **Reluctant to accept Christianity; quick to embrace its music**

The history of the Inuit and Moravian interactions, however, is deeply documented. From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries from the Moravian Brethren or *Unitas Fratrum* began establishing mission stations along the Labrador coast, bringing the message of Christianity and European values to the Inuit. The first permanent settlement at Nain was established in 1771 by the Inuktitut-speaking son of a Danish missionary to Greenland, Jens Haven. Two more stations were soon erected: to the north at Okak in 1776, and to the south at Hopedale in 1782. The early years of the missions were difficult, and the process of conversion slow and discouraging. A breakthrough occurred in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, and by 1818 some 600 Inuit were attached to the three stations, as baptised Christians living within settled communities.

Reluctant though the Inuit initially were to accept Christianity, they were quick to embrace a distinctive feature of the Moravian church: its music. From their first encounters, music provided a conduit for communication between the Inuit and the Europeans. Even during Jens Haven's first encounter on the coast in 1764, the *Periodical Accounts* records a musical exchange:

Among them was Seguliak, the angekok or sorcerer, who seemed to have the authority of a chief. He was particularly friendly. Once when they began a dance in honour of their guest, accompanying it, in true heathen fashion, with terrible noises, Br. Haven sang a hymn in Greenlandic, whereupon they instantly ceased, and listened attentively to the end.<sup>4</sup>

The sophisticated musical tradition brought by the Moravians seemed at first to clash with the expressive culture of the Inuit. Shamanistic incantations, the playful game of throat singing as practiced by the women, and the ever-present beat of the drum—all literally fell on deaf ears among the missionaries. Brother Benjamin Kohlmeister, a beloved and respectful missionary who spent more than 30 years on the Labrador coast, expressed sentiments in step with his time when he reflected on indigenous Inuit music:

As to national songs, they have nothing deserving of that name; and the various collectors of these precious morsels in our day, would find their labour lost in endeavouring to harmonize the incantations of their sorcerers and witches, which more resemble the howlings of wolves and growlings of bears, than anything human.<sup>5</sup>

But over the next two hundred years the Labrador missions sent few reports that did not make reference to the Inuit aptitude and appetite for Moravian music. An 1806 report from the station at Okak offers an example:

One day, while we were closing the schools as usual, by singing a verse, there arose such an emotion among them, that all melted into tears ... Frequently the children met together and sang hymns, after the example of their parents, during which they were so much affected, that they burst into loud weeping.<sup>6</sup>

By the time that hymn singing had become firmly entrenched in the Moravian Inuit worship, the roots of a much more complex musical practice were established. In 1814, coincident with the arrival of a young missionary, the musically skilled Johann Ludwig Morhardt, manuscript copies of anthems for four-voiced choir with instrumental accompaniment arrived in the

church collections. The missionary accounts confirm that by 1824 some Inuit were singing anthems with the missionary families. Brother Kohlmeister writes in his valedictory report after 34 years of service in the Labrador missions:

Many of them show great capacity for learning to play upon any musical instrument. Violins have been introduced, and French horns, and a few of them accompany the voices with great precision and devotional effect. Some of the Missionaries have even succeeded in teaching them to sing short and easy anthems, in three or four parts, by which, on particular occasions, the worship of the congregation is much enlivened.<sup>7</sup>

The same year, the arrival of the first organ in Nain had created a major sensation. The new instrument was a source of endless fascination to the Inuit, many of whom traveled from other mission stations along the coast just to hear and see it. In 1830 Brother Morhardt reported:

The organ has remained in tolerable tune, and been in frequent use during our public and private services. All we have to regret is, that the compass is so small, and the pitch so high; the latter circumstance is productive of much inconvenience to our violin players ... When visitors from the other congregations at Ok kak and Hopedale attend our services, they are much struck with the effect of the organ, and loudly testify their gratification ... Some of the more intelligent of our people have come to me, and requested that I would shew them the interior, and explain the construction of the instrument. This being done, their wonder has been extreme.<sup>8</sup>

Morhardt, along with other missionaries and missionary wives, offered instruction on the organ as well as string and brass instruments. The enthusiasm and rapid progress of their scholars were frequently reported in the *Periodical Accounts*. By the 1870s, visitors observed that the stewardship of Moravian music had been transferred to the Inuit musicians, now clearly providing leadership in the musical life of their communities.

### **“Even small children pick up tunes in amazingly short time”**

By the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had become common for the organists also to occupy a major leadership position in their communities. Jeremias Sillitt of Okak is a prime example. Chief elder in his community, he was also identified as a superior and natural musician. Medical missionary Samuel King Hutton’s sympathetic accounts of his time on the Labrador coast offers a portrait of Jeremias:

Jerry, our Okak organist, plays by ear and coaxes splendid harmony out of our aged pipe organ with its octave of pedals and its row of half a dozen stops. For voluntaries he plays pieces from the oratorios or tunes from the newest collections; and when the hymns are announced he pulls out his stops and shuffles his feet on the pedals and with a mighty burst of music the congregation breaks forth into singing and Jerry, with his magical touch, leads the voices steadily on in perfect tune and stately time.<sup>9</sup>

Sillitt, whose son Gustav and grandson Jerry would succeed him as organist and choirmaster in Nain after Okak was closed, is but one example of dynasties of organists/community leaders who run through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Nochasaks of Hebron and Makkovik are another such family. The central character of our story, Natanael Illiniartitsijok, was one of the founders of this tradition of musician-as-community-leader.

Natanael—who bore no surname at birth—was born in 1849 or 1850. He and his family were attached to the Moravian settlement at Nain. Early in 1860s, the missionaries began offering additional instruction to those boys and young men whom they felt might make suitable teachers. Natanael was among them. In 1869 Natanael was appointed the first native teacher in Labrador. For the next 53 years—joined in 1891 by his wife, Friedericke—Natanael would oversee the early education of the youngest children of Nain. So central to his identity was his role in the community that when the Inuit were being encouraged to adopt surnames at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Natanael took as his “Illiniartitsijok”—meaning “school teacher.” His was the only instance of this surname in Labrador.

Music was integral to the curriculum and gave Natanael the opportunity to combine his two public roles. Brigitte Schloss, herself a Nain teacher in the 1940s, observed how central singing was in the school:

Singing has always played a great part in school over the years. Even small children pick up tunes in an amazingly short time and first and second graders can learn to sing rounds in two and three parts. To hear a group of Eskimos singing is an experience not easily forgotten.<sup>10</sup>

Natanael's name appeared frequently in the Moravian chronicles, evidence of the trust that his community and missionaries put in him. During the 1920 school year, Natanael and Friedericke established a boarding school for the children of Inuit families who would be spending the majority of the school season at their camps. When their own home burned to the ground, the missionaries reacted quickly by arranging for Natanael and Friedericke to move into the small building that had been erected as a school for Settler children.

The Eskimo school would have been practically impossible had not all those who went away been willing to leave their children behind in care, mostly of the venerable school teacher Nathaniel and his wife, who has also helped with the teaching for many years. As it happened, we had given the old people permission to live in the part of the school-house formerly used for the settler-school, until they were able to find a residence elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

But the advantageous arrangement with the venerable schoolmasters would come to an early end. In August 1921, just hours after the departure of the annual supply vessel, a fire started in one of the mission storage buildings and quickly spread, destroying almost the entire settlement of Nain and the stock of supplies for the coming winter. The devastation to the normal life of the community was compounded by the prospect of a long and hungry winter. It took its toll on Natanael; at the beginning of Advent Natanael retired as the Nain schoolteacher after 53 years of service. Now a very old man by Inuk standards, Natanael would die seven years later on April 3, 1928, of pneumonia, at the age of 79.

Friedericke survived, living with her daughter until 1940. She died on November 27 at the age of 74; cause of death is listed as dementia.

### **A confident improviser, an exceptional musician**

The traces of Natanael as a musician across the written and oral record balance those of his lifelong career as a teacher. In 1904, for example, Bishop Albert Martin, superintendent of the Labrador missions, commented in a report on Natanael's musical preferences as an organist. He described a Sunday morning service.

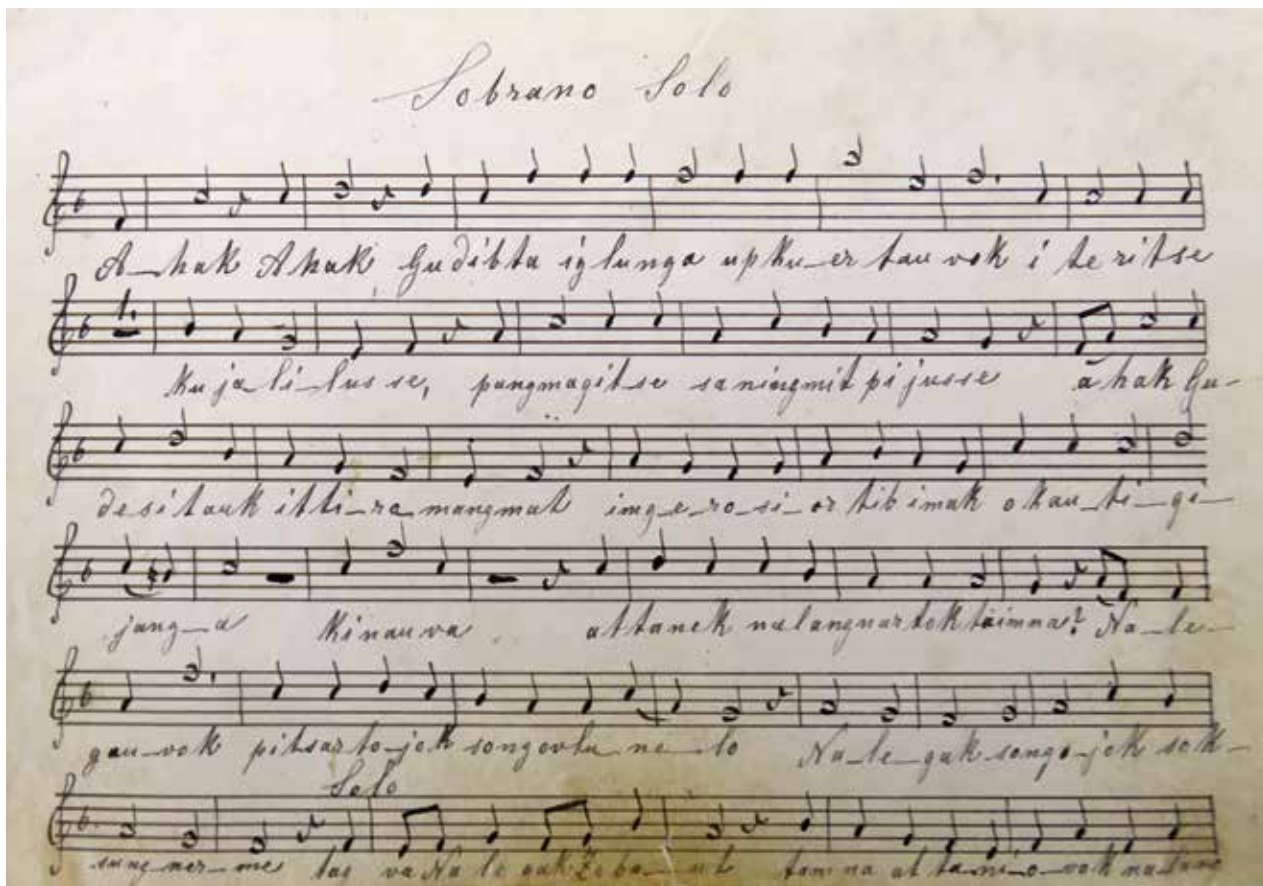
Natanael the schoolmaster and organist, started the Sunday morning service with a prelude, often with the melody that was a favourite of his, Johann Christian Heinrich Rinck's music to Hoffmann von Fallersleben's *Abend wird es wieder*.<sup>12</sup>

This innocent little tune carries a text that likens the gentle fall of evening and its quiet to the longed-for release from life's stresses that only God can grant. The child-like simplicity of the tune matches the purity of the faith expressed in the text.

However, Natanael's musical abilities were anything but childlike. As Bishop Martin's observation implies, Natanael was a confident improviser at the organ where his Sunday preludes riffed through the myriad of chorale tunes, Sankey hymns, and children's songs, as well as the elaborate Rococo anthems and voluntaries he held in his mind's ear. The late David Harris Sr, Nain's long-time chief Elder and principal organist there for 60 years, was two generations removed from Natanael. However, Natanael's reputation was well known to Harris Sr who described him as a truly exceptional musician. Harris Sr noted that Natanael could write down anything he heard from memory. He could hear any hymn just once, or summon it from memory and transcribe it with complete accuracy.<sup>13</sup> A large percentage of the almost 5,000 pages of music manuscript in the Nain choir collection is written in Natanael's hand. Harris Sr also knew that Natanael was an extremely accomplished organist and could play the most difficult of the anthem accompaniments with ease.

Which brings us back to his composition for the dedication of the new church October 19<sup>th</sup> 1910. Let's look again at this March 1911 report:





The keys of the new church were carried on cushions by an Eskimo boy and girl. The band was stationed a short distance off, playing hymn tunes. Outside the church another verse was sung, the Bishop [Martin] spoke the words: “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,” etc., and in the name of the Holy Trinity both doors were unlocked. While the congregation was entering the choir sang an anthem, written and composed by our oldest chapel-servant and organist, Natanael Illiniartitsijok. The dedicatory prayer was offered by Bishop Martin. The Rev WW Perrett preached the sermon from the words “My house shall be called a house of prayer.”<sup>14</sup>

Perrett’s account includes two eventual confirmations of the identity of Natanael’s anthem: the fact that it was sung as the congregation entered the church for the first time and Bishop Martin’s words—taken from Psalm 100—that immediately preceded the unlocking of the doors: “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving.”

These two clues had to be applied to a review of more than 200 anthems totalling approximately 15,000 manuscript pages. Natanael’s dedicatory anthem had to be somewhere within this collection, but there was clearly a needle-in-the-haystack dimension to the quest. The manuscript collections of the individual churches were organized—if at all—first by Inuktitut title and then indexed by liturgical use. A significant number of manuscripts also included the original German title of the anthem, but composer attributions were rare. The identity of a Kallunāk composer from a distant land was of little interest to the Inuit musicians for whom the music’s value was its ability to embody a spiritual lesson in song.

After years of tracking down concordances, about 15 anthems remained unattributable. Among these 15, there was one that had particular characteristics. It was called *Ahāk Gūḁibta iglunga*. In addition to the absence of a concordance for this anthem in any of the Moravian archives, *Ahāk Gūḁibta iglunga* is one of a very small number of anthems for which only one set of parts exists. Almost all of the more than 200 anthems that are

in the Labrador churches exist in multiple copies in two or more churches. *Ahāk Gūḁibta Iglunga* is only held in the collection of the Nain church.

Beyond the negative evidence, the manuscript itself is telling. The part set in the Nain church is of relatively recent origin. The paper stock on which it has been written can be dated from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The parts are all written in a single hand that does not appear to be the hand of a European missionary. This is a hand that is frequent in the Nain manuscripts and seems to date from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Harris Sr confirmed that the hand-writing on the manuscript is either Natanael's or that of his contemporary, Adam Igloliorte.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there are no string parts for this anthem, although it is quite likely that the SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) choral parts would have been doubled by strings. In the vast majority of anthems of European origin, independent string parts are included in the part set.

The single part for organ is skeletal, written in a kind of unfigured bass, plus soprano line, exactly the kind of musical shorthand that an Inuit organist would read from—and write. Even the most musically literate Inuit organists relied on aural memory and a tradition of improvisation to fill out a score. Natanael, whose remarkable aural memory has already been noted, would hardly have needed more than the skeleton score that this provides.

There is also internal evidence in the music itself that suggests composition by an Inuit musician. The harmonic language is consistent with the harmonic language (written and improvised) of congregational four-part singing in Nain. The vocal ranges, notably the high tessitura of the soprano and tenor parts, reflect the preferred vocal ranges of the Nain choir singers. At the same time, the rhythmic writing is awkward, symptomatic of the kinds of challenges that Inuit musicians face when confronted with metric organization in music. There's a long history of recorded commentary on this issue.<sup>16</sup> In *Ahāk Gūḁibta Iglunga*, it takes a while for rhythm and metre to come into sync—even within this rather simple construction. The

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anacrusis gesture of the first seven measures, for example, juxtaposes uncomfortably with the downbeat gesture of measure eight and the anapestic meters of measures nine and ten. Likewise the shift of the upbeat gesture to a downbeat placement in measure 14 speaks to a similarly ametric attitude toward temporal organization.

But while these rhythms are tricky against the context of Bach's chorales or Haydn's oratorio movements, there is a remarkable

alignment of musical rhythm with the inflection of the Inuktitut text as it would be spoken—an alignment almost unique in the Labrador anthem repertoire. Few musical marriages were as awkward as the rhythm of Moravian choral music to the structure of the Inuktitut language. A polysynthetic language, Inuktitut constructs word/sentences by adding a large number of suffixes to a single root morpheme. With a vocabulary of up to 700 suffixes that could be added to the root word, any manner of action on, to, or with the root can be shown. Most simple sentences can be expressed through a single constructed word. This highly fluid syntax never combined comfortably with highly symmetrical rhythmic structure of European musical declamation. In short, the Inuktitut translations never fit into the music, however valiantly the missionaries tried to shoehorn the new words into the music. But *Ahāk Gūḁibta Iglunga*, for all its musical metric awkwardness, fits its text comfortably; as though text and music were written together.

### **“Behold, behold, the doors to God's house are opened!”**

Finally, *Ahāk Gūḁibta Iglunga* has had a consistent performance history in Nain. The earliest extant records of sung service orders from Nain date back to 1911. *Ahāk Gūḁibta Iglunga* first appears in performance rotation on February 19, 1914. This could be consistent with an anthem written in 1910 since it seems possible that the work wouldn't be inscribed in the choir log until it entered regular rotation. The work has been performed in Nain annually on this date since 1914.

The liturgical placement on February 19 is not insignificant. February 19 is Katimmaviup Atujauvia,

the Church Anniversary Festival Day—a celebration unique to the Moravian Church in Labrador. On this day in 1776, missionary Johann Schneider baptized Kingminguse, who under his new name “Peter” became the first Christian Inuk in Labrador. Thus February 19 commemorates the opening of the doors of the church to the Inuit—their first spiritual entry into the church.

This festival continues to be celebrated in Nain with a sense of occasion equal to Christmas or Easter. The church fills up three times during the day, beginning with a sermon-based prayer service in the morning at which Kingminguse’s conversion is recounted. (Interestingly his notable falls from grace and eventual return to life as a shaman don’t figure in the story retold.) *Ahāk Gūḍibta Iglunga* is sung at the opening of this morning prayer service. By scrupulously observed tradition, it has a unique performance practice.

I learned about the ritual surrounding the performance of *Ahāk Gūḍibta Iglunga* firsthand in February when I had to stand in as organist for the morning service in Nain. Beni Andersen, the choir’s lead soprano, said that the organ prelude to *Ahāk* had to dovetail with the second bell, the bell that signified the entry of the congregation into the church. Chief elder Johannes Lampe corroborated, insisting that the choir needed to be singing the anthem as the congregants entered. That was the moment when a little bell finally went off in my own head.

After the service I paid a visit to Harris Sr. I began by asking him if there was any particular significance to *Ahāk Gūḍibta iglunga* and why it was performed before the actual church service began just at the end of the ringing of the second bell. His response was, “You know what the first line of the text means? ‘Behold, behold, the doors to God’s house are opened. Enter now!’ It is for this reason that it is sung as the congregation enters the church at the beginning of the first service of this day.” Implicit in his response were the dual levels of “entering” that are spoken of in the anthem: physically entering the church and spiritually entering the community of Christians. It is for this latter sense that the anthem has entered the liturgy for the February 19 anniversary celebration. But it was for the former, more literal sense, that it was originally composed for the dedication service for the second Nain church in 1910.

The text that Natanael Illiniartitsijok constructed for his dedicatory anthem was a paraphrase of the same Psalm 100, verse 4 that Bishop Martin had spoken as

the doors of the new Nain church were unlocked: “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving.” I ended my chat with Harris Sr with a direct question: “Was *Ahāk Gūḍibta iglunga* written by Natanael Illiniartitsijok?” His response was characteristic: “I don’t know.” But embedded in his response was another question: “Why would that matter?” I left pondering just that question: why does Natanael’s authorship matter?

### Honour through practice

White history has valued Natanael by recording and repeating his act of composition—a singular kind of achievement in a view of history which honours great men and great deeds. But Natanael’s singularity as the first Inuk composer—in a western European sense—was enough. No one ever actually recorded the title of the anthem he wrote. For the chroniclers and writers of history, Natanael’s accomplishment was a symbol of the power of civilization in white man’s terms. It denotes the embrace of the highest accomplishments of European culture; a full conversion, as it were. Ethnologist EW Hawkes said as much in his 1916 assessment:

The Eskimo have a keen appreciation of music and not unpleasant voices. One is considerably surprised in stepping into a mission (Moravian) service to hear the Eskimo congregation singing their native hymns to Bach’s old chorales, in perfect harmony and with deep feeling and evident emotion. Nathaniel, the choir leader at Nain, has composed an anthem in four parts, showing that the Eskimo are not incapable of constructive work in music.<sup>17</sup>

The Labrador Inuit, on the other hand, have valued Natanael in another way. As it turns out, the anthem he “made history” by writing, continues to be sung, and has been popular with the successive generations of the choir. Unattributed of course, *Ahāk Gūḍibta iglunga* is the first cut on the vinyl LP which the choir recorded in 1966 and was subsequently released in 1971.<sup>18</sup> If the Nain Moravian Choir were to assemble a list of greatest hits, it would be there. *Ahak* was valued by the missionaries and subsequent chroniclers as a mark of achievement, but by the community—despite the fact that attributions of authorship were muted—*Ahāk* was honoured by practice, by its prestigious place in the liturgy, and by elevating it to a symbolic status representative of the place of Christianity at the new

centre of Inuit values. This is a case where cultural values come to consider authorship as irrelevant, at least in so far as it is an expression of individuality. Its value lies in the degree to which it reflects a collective consciousness, an aesthetic commonality, a life of a communal spirit. For the Inuit musicians and congregants of Nain, the forgotten traces of authorship are symptomatic of an Inuk way of seeing things, honouring Natanael through practice and through ritual observance both liturgically and socially. **NQ**

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11 "Extracts from the last station report issued from Nain before the great fire of August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1921," *Moravian Missions* October 1921, 29 (10), 75.

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13 Interview with David Harris Sr, 19 February 2013, Nain, NL.

14 W[alter] W Perrett, "A High Day in Nain Labrador," *Moravian Missions* March 1911, 9 (3), 47-48.

15 Interview with David Harris Sr, 19 February 2013, Nain, NL.

16 For example Johann Ludwig Morhardt wrote in 1826, "it is well worth the while to teach the Esquimaux music, and our labour is not in vain. The most difficult part is keeping time, and that seems to puzzle them exceedingly. When seven years ago, I made a beginning to teach two young Esquimaux the violin, one of them grew so peevish about keeping time, that he declared, that it was impossible to learn it." "Journal entry, from Hopedale, 1826," *Periodical Accounts* 1826, 10 (109), 66-67.

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