For some Indigenous Southern Plains tribes, an original flute song is the first step toward marriage

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"Warrior with flute" by Timothy Tate Nevaquaya. Used with permission. Credit:
Every love story is unique, and in traditional Indigenous Southern Plains culture, it begins with an original ballad performed on the flute. In order to win a lover's affection, and respect among the tribe, each pursuer must compose one good flute serenade.

Paula Conlon, a former music professor at the University of Oklahoma, has researched the history and cultural significance of the Indigenous flute since the 1980s. Conlon presents her work Tuesday, May 14, at 9:45 a.m. EDT as part of a joint meeting of the Acoustical Society of America and the Canadian Acoustical Association, running May 13–17 at the Shaw Center located in downtown Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Conlon's deep dive into this tradition includes a focus on four aspects that make a flute song "good" music: characteristics of the musical elements within the song, features that epitomize quintessential flutes, the qualities of the individual flute player, and how the flute players serve in their respective communities as mentors and role models. She also found that a love worth pursuing inspires its own music.

"Traditionally, a flute player would not use the same love song to court multiple partners, similar to a love letter or love poem," said Conlon.

To study this romantic art form, Conlon looked to the works of flutists who helped maintain the tradition.

"The findings are based on an analysis of historical recordings of Indigenous flute love songs and the related literature, and the flute songs of Kiowa flutist Belo Cozad and Comanche flutist Doc Tate Nevaquaya," said Conlon.
The decline of this courting tradition followed the end of the Reservation Era in 1887. Cozad and Nevaquaya are recognized for the survival of the Plains' flute tradition, and nearly a century after the Reservation Era, in the late 20th century the tradition experienced a resurgence.

Nevaquaya was a leader in the Indigenous flute revival. He learned how to construct the flutes, personalized playing techniques, and put a spotlight on the old repertoire. He notably developed two new composition styles—one for modern courtship and the other to expand on the creativity of the individual flutist. His solo flute album, released in 1979, is regarded as a bridge between the traditional culture and the style of up-and-coming flute players.

"In 2024, it is another generation of Indigenous flute players, including Nevaquaya's sons, Timothy, Edmond, and Calvert, who are making their mark," said Conlon.

During her two-decade-long tenure in Oklahoma, Conlon developed relationships with many of the Indigenous flute players in the area. Now living in her hometown of Ottawa, she plans to continue this investigation by conducting comparable research on Indigenous flute players in Canada.
