

A Musician's Roots



faculty profile

Composer and pianist Curt Cacioppo's works, often inspired by Native American music and lore, have been performed around the globe. *By Brenna McBride*



PHOTOS BY JUAN KANES

Composer and pianist Curt Cacioppo's latest original work will premiere at Carnegie Hall in November.

You could say that Ruth Marshall Magill Professor of Music Curt Cacioppo owes his career to a childhood deal with his parents.

Although today Cacioppo is a celebrated musician and composer who has performed in national and international venues and has had works commissioned by numerous orchestras and ensembles (including the Chicago Symphony, the Emerson, American, and Moscow String Quartets, and Duo Alterna of Turin, Italy), he may have followed a different

path had his nine-year-old self not followed through on a family agreement. "The deal was that we would rent a piano for a month on a trial basis, and my mother would give me lessons," says the Ohio native. "If at the end of the month I could play some songs recognizably, we would keep the piano."

Young Cacioppo went on from there to master the works of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and other classical giants. He also made arrangements for the jazz quartet in which he played with his friends,

and began composing his own pieces at age 14. "I love creating music, generating something that wasn't there before," says Cacioppo, who majored in music at Kent State University, where he had given his first recital at age 11.

Cacioppo earned a master's in musicology from New York University in 1976 and a master's and Ph.D. in composition from Harvard in 1980. During the late '70s and early '80s his fascination with Native American music and culture—which have been hallmarks of his music for the past three decades—deepened. In truth, the roots of his interest can be traced back to his childhood, growing up in Ohio's Cuyahoga Valley. ("Cuyahoga" means "crooked water" in the Haudenosaunee language.) At the bottom of the Valley, he recalls, sat a boulder adorned with a bronze plaque bearing the image of an Indian carrying his canoe over his head as he crossed on foot from one bend of the Cuyahoga River to the other. "My grandmother would take me down to that spot," he says, "and I'd bring my sketch book and draw that image over and over." Later he became aware of distant Native American heritage in his own family—one of his ancestors had married an Indian woman during the Civil War.

In Massachusetts, Cacioppo made friends with members of the local Wampanoag tribe, including their Supreme Medicine Man, John Peters (Slow Turtle), and was invited to attend their gatherings and participate in their songs and rituals. He also found a mentor in professor David McAllester, an anthropologist and founder of the field of ethnomusicology, who had studied with Margaret Meade and was best known for his documentation of Navajo ceremonies. Cacioppo himself would eventually become instrumental in efforts to preserve the music of the Navajo Coyoteway healing ceremony, working with Navajo elder John Co'ii Cook. His string quartet entitled "Coyoteway" stemmed from that collaboration, and appears on his 2008 double CD set *Ancestral Passage*.

"These healing ceremonies were elaborate," says Cacioppo. "They involved not only medicinal treatments but also incantations, text, costumes, the impersonation of deities and characters from the tribe's origin history. You would be

diagnosed with a specific ailment, and the ceremonial treatment was chosen accordingly." The ceremonies fell into disuse during the 70 or more years that they were outlawed by the U.S. government; the Coyoteway ceremony was last performed in the early 1970's.

Cacioppo and Cook tracked down all recorded chronicles of the ceremony, digitized and restored them in their proper order and created 10 CDs of songs with text annotations. (All of these materials can be found in Haverford's Special Collections: "We wanted to make an archival document that would be accessible to humanities scholars in general, and to students of Native religious practice in particular," says Cacioppo.) The restoration of the Coyoteway was made possible in part by Haverford's Native American Fund, which Cacioppo and Haverford alumni Mitch Winn '54 and Benn Sah '62 established in 1998. Proceeds from sales of Cacioppo's CDs go towards the fund, which supports research, events and guest speakers.

In May of 2009, Cacioppo's latest Native American-themed work, "Lenape Refrains," was premiered by the Philadelphia Classical Symphony. The piece, commissioned by the Philadelphia Music Project with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, included Indian instruments such as rattles, a pueblo drum, and the traditional water drum ("There is water in the shell, and when you flip it over and wet the skin, it takes on a fixed pitch," explains Cacioppo). The composer participated in the performance, singing vocal passages in the Lenape language that, he says, is among an alarming number of Native tongues that are becoming extinct. "Lenape Refrains" also has a direct connection to Haverford's campus: Its first movement, "Intimations Under the Elm," refers to the tree that stands on Barclay Beach, the last remaining descendant of the tree under which William Penn entered into a treaty with the Lenape people in 1682 [For more on the tree see "Then and Now," inside back cover].

"Curt is a performer's composer," says Karl Middleman, artistic director and conductor of the Philadelphia Classical Symphony. "His music is frequently complex, but speaks with great authority and

bigness of heart; I think it reaches towards broad human emotions, gestures that move us whether we understand them completely or not."

Cacioppo is currently working on a commission for New York's American Composers Orchestra, which will premiere the piece at Carnegie Hall at the end of November. The work deals with a tragic episode in Native American history, a time in the mid-1860s when the Navajo were forced off their land by the U.S. government and marched to internment camps, while the sacred peach orchards in their ancestral canyons were chopped down by the Army. He also anticipates the release of a new CD in late fall, *Curt Cacioppo: Italia*, which features compositions inspired by his Italian family background and his travels in Italy.

Meanwhile, Cacioppo's wife and two sons are keeping the music in the family. Wife Christine teaches introductory piano classes at Haverford, and just finished a book based on her instructional method; older son Charles recently entered the doctoral program in composition at Cornell University, and last year was among the Walsum Awards Composition Competition winners; and younger son Nic, a drummer, who is pursuing jazz studies at William Patterson University in New Jersey, hopes to publish a book of his transcriptions of solos by the legendary Tony Williams.

Now in his 27th year of teaching at Haverford, Cacioppo continues to oversee the music department's keyboard studies program, and to bring his passion for performing, composing and music history to the classroom; he was honored with Haverford's Innovative Teaching Prize in 2007. "In many of Haverford's peer institutions, harmony is taught with a textbook, but Professor Cacioppo teaches the entire cycle with only scores, recordings, a piano and a piece of chalk," says former student Ben Finane '99, editor of the magazine *Listen: Life with Classical Music*. "His hands-on approach underscores his supreme knowledge of and passion for the material." 

For more information, blog, and sound and video clips, visit Cacioppo's website at curtcacioppo.com.