

Curt Cacioppo: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS

conversation #1 with Eric Massey - **performance prospects for the cycle**

EM: You have composed numerous cycles, both vocal and non-vocal. On the instrumental side, I am familiar with the *Ciclo metamorfico* and the *Three American Fantasies* for solo piano. In the chamber music genre, your *Women at the Cross* for piano quintet seems a cyclical portrayal of female witnesses to the Crucifixion, and complements another cycle, your a cappella choral work *Women of Ancient Greek Myth*. Each of these would occupy a major performance segment on any concert program, ranging from 35 to 45 minutes duration. WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS, your cycle of 4 string quartets, eclipses these in length, with its almost 2-hour long duration. Now that the complete quadriga is available for audio listeners on this commemorative Orenda Press release, what are your intentions for its performance?

CC: I've always envisioned the live presentation of the entire SACRED MOUNTAINS cycle as a dual concert offering that would take place within a 24-hour period. Quartets 1 & 2 would be performed in the evening, and 3 & 4 would be played at a matinee the following afternoon. This would lend a sense of ceremony, mirroring Navajo tradition. Prior to the performance of each quartet, a reading or storytelling would be given, to relate the particular episode of the Diné bahane' described by the succeeding music. The oral segment might also be introduced by a Native flute meditation.

EM: With the inclusion of the flute and oral elements, a definite liturgical flow is suggested. Are you thinking of a segue, with all performers on stage, lights down on flute and voice as they finish, lights up on quartet?

CC: That's what I would prefer, depending on the resources of the venue.

EM: In this case, would the fragile sound world of solo flute and spoken voice pale in comparison to the four abreast accordances of the strings?

CC: An astute question and valid concern! I gave this a great deal of consideration, and trust that because all but the last of the quartets begin softly and delicately, there is ample opportunity to ease into the full dynamic soundscape of the ensemble. With the last quartet, *Monsterslayer*, the reverse of this pattern will be welcome to the audience, and the narrator can rhetorically transition into the forceful opening of the first movement.

EM: Could the dual concert format be mounted in a more basic venue?

CC: By all means. It is very adaptable. The program model with the additional performers can be realized in an art gallery, for instance, or library, or other intimate space, without a stage or dramatic accoutrements.

EM: If the presenter cannot provide for the additional performers, is it possible to do the concerts as pure music, quartets only?

CC: Certainly. I think though that it would be good, in place of the flute/oral segments, to preface each quartet with a brief commentary, or a colloquy by the members of the quartet.

EM: Ah, the members of the quartet. That prompts me to ask, must it be the same quartet playing all 4 works, or can the labor be shared?

CC: Of course, there is a particular distinction in having a single quartet perform the whole cycle, but there is also strength in flexibility, so if more than one ensemble is to be engaged, I am amenable. A different group for each concert would be viable. Involving more than two groups might make for logistical difficulties, unless in a conservatory setting you had a lineup of four graduate student quartets, for example.

EM: What about spreading out the cycle over an entire concert season on an established series like that of the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society, or over the course of a festival like the those in Santa Fe or Taos? One thinks also of Rasmuson Hall at the National Museum of the American Indian.

CC: Wonderful ideas, all of those!

EM: Further on the topic of performance options, have you ever considered incorporating dance or media elements into the mix?

CC: Both possibilities intrigue me. Dorothy Massalski spoke with me at length after the world premiere of *...a distant voice calling...* in Tucson about choreographing it. And I am well acquainted with synaesthetics and film. What would really interest me would be to combine 7D max volumetric photonic imaging in live performance.

EM: We've covered an array of future performance ideas for the WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS cycle. It would still be possible for an ensemble to take up one of the 4 separately, would it not?

CC: Yes indeed. After all, they were premiered piecemeal, each individually, with multiple year intervals in between. To recall, the Emersons started things off in 1996 with *Monsterslayer*. Then in 2002, the Americans premiered *...a distant voice calling...* The Moscow introduced *Coyoteway* in 2007, and *Kinaaldá* was premiered by the Borromeo in 2011.

EM: May I interrupt? I was a little confused about this. *Monsterslayer* is the last in the cycle, but it was premiered first, in 1996?

CC: Correct, because for various reasons I chose to compose that one first. It became the goal toward which the other quartets would aim. Other than that, the compositional sequence followed the narrative chronology.

EM: Understood. And what might those "various reasons" have been?

CC: Well, the sheer dynamism of the story and the challenge to set it were at once inspiring and imminent. The opportunity to write my first quartet (and it was my first quartet ever) for the Emersons intensified that. (It is curious that Eugene Drucker, who played 1st violin in *Monsterslayer*, was coincidentally reading Zolbrod's Diné bahane' himself). And, personally, I had some monsters to deal with at that point in my life... At that stage, the notion of a quartet cycle hadn't yet materialized in my mind, but I strongly sensed that I was scripting a healing ceremony for myself. In fact, David McAllester, who sat next to me at the premiere, said just that - that I had written a ceremony. It was a ceremony in what would become a complex of ceremonies.

EM: Yet to date, the quartets of the cycle have been performed as individual, stand-alone entities?

CC: True. Among other ensembles who have programmed them, the Amernet Quartet did multiple performances of *Coyoteway* and also of *Monsterslayer*, *...a distant voice...* was done by the Del Sol Quartet; *Kinaaldá* was given a performance by the Dakota String Quartet at the "Native American Inspirations" festival at the National Cathedral in which Deb Haaland participated. The Left Bank Quartet was interested in putting the first movement of *Monsterslayer* on a program.

EM: Are you comfortable with that kind of excerpting?

CC: I wasn't at the time, but it depends on the segment. In that case, the movement is a substantial 13 minutes and very self-contained – it can stand alone. Even though I hedged on that occasion, I found myself further along the way excerpting on my own a movement from ...a distant voice... - I turned the third movement into a spin-off piece for Pierrot ensemble with the title *Tucson Scherzo*. Ex Novo premiered it in Venice at La Fenice, and I played it with members of the Pacific Symphony not long after.

EM: Getting back to the concept of a cycle, it was customary for publishers in Mozart and Beethoven's time to bring out quartet opuses in groups of six. Rarely were the works integrated in the ways that usually define what we associate with a cycle proper. The 6 quartets dedicated to Haydn, or the 3 Razumovsky quartets might possibly be exceptions, but in general, it is hard to cite a precedent for your SACRED MOUNTAINS cycle. You said that when you composed *Monsterslayer*, the idea of a cycle of quartets hadn't yet formed in your mind. At what juncture did the concept take root?

CC: There were other episodes in the creation story that excited me. The appearance of the 4 Holy People and their creation of First Man and First Woman utterly seized me. I simply had to realize it in ...a distant voice calling... By then, John Co'if Cook, who became my Navajo mentor and collaborator, had heard both *Monsterslayer* and ...a distant voice... and was very enthusiastic about me working with him on the *Coyoteway* healing ceremony, and devoting the next quartet in the cycle to coyote. John's family had propriety over the ceremony – both his father and grandfather were chanters. It is quite amazing to think of his grandfather (who lived to be 110, his father to 103) singing over survivors of The Long Walk to cure them of the trauma they sustained. So, with John's influence, the cycle was clearly unfolding. The importance of the number 4 in Navajo belief made 4 quartets requisite – 4 sacred mountains, 4 directions, 4 seasons, 4 stages of life. And with the principal Navajo deity being female, and the social structure being matrilineal/matrilocal, *Kinaaldá* had to be the theme for one of the quartets.

EM: Fascinating how this monumental cycle evolved so organically over time, step by step, with internal and external forces contributing to its formation. And how did you come upon the title, "WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS?"

CC: I graciously credit my junior colleague David Kasunic for guiding me toward an overarching title. David drew a correlation between what I was

doing another cycle of 4 (not quartets, but music dramas): Der Ring des Nibelungen of Wagner. He felt that the narrative thread similarly bound the works, which also shared and developed identifiable, recurrent musical motifs. I thought again of the sacred mountains, and how they articulate the geographical area within which the Diné were implanted and blossomed as a culture.

EM: Finishing out this first of what will I'm sure become a cycle of conversations, thank you for fielding my questions and for sharing so much about the genesis and future performance prospects for WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS. Who knows, maybe the SACRED MOUNTAINS will come here to Acacia Bay!

CC: Let it be! I have yet to visit Aotearoa!

EM: Next time shall we start with your thoughts on Arthur Farwell? Speaking of ceremonies, his HAKO quartet of a century ago, based on the Pawnee ceremony, would seem to hold some sort of ancestral meaning for you.

CC: A fascinating example! And heartfelt thanks to you, Eric, for your longstanding engagement with my work, and your generous and insightful writing about it.