

Curt Cacioppo: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS

conversation #2 with Eric Massey - influences

EM: We left off last time with the topic of ceremony, and I was wondering about your thoughts on Arthur Farwell, particularly his HAKO string quartet, which is based on the Pawnee ceremony of the same name. Beyond what you have written on this composer, could you say something about any direct influence of his work on your own? Did the Indianist movement that he espoused offer models for you?

CC: Farwell, like Busoni, provided at least as many examples of what to avoid as what to accept. And they were the best Indianists. Passages in both are compelling. In Farwell's case, there are two or three complete, totally convincing (though short) pieces that succeed in fusing Native and Euro elements. In 1923 he produced the HAKO quartet, his Op. 65, which was his - or anybody's - first sustained composition of this type, 18 minutes or more continuous in duration, strongly confident, mature and persuasive. I truly admire it, and regard it as the first major stride in American string quartet writing.

EM: You are very enthusiastic about it. Did it serve as a prototype for the SACRED MOUNTAINS cycle?

CC: Honestly, no. I only discovered Farwell's HAKO several years after I had finished my cycle. For whatever reason, Farwell's magnificent quartet fell into oblivion for almost a century after it was premiered, to be brought to light relatively recently by Joseph Horowitz. The first recording of it was issued just this past October on Naxos, a release that Joe had in the making for the better part of a decade. The first professional performance of it that I heard was in 2019 by the Dakota String Quartet, who also play it on the Naxos disc.

EM: Ah yes, the Dakota – you mentioned them before. They played your Kinaaldá quartet, did they not?

CC: That's right – a very fine group, all members of the South Dakota Symphony.

EM: If then you were acquainted only with the less admirable Farwell output, and avoided his Indianist counterparts, what *were* the models that you could look to? Louis Ballard, the Quapaw/Cherokee composer comes to mind. Did his work affect you?

CC: It was a privilege to have known Louis, and without question, he made a lasting impression on me. In addition to his music, he led me to probe musical and personal identity. His *3 Cities* cycle is something that pianists should be adding to their repertoire.

EM: I seem to remember that Ballard studied with Béla Rózsa, which prompts me to ask how much of an influence another Hungarian might have been on you, Bartók.

CC: Bartók, Schoenberg and Stravinsky: the 3 pillars of 20th century music. I'm indebted to each of them. Schoenberg I was most involved with, for one because of my leanings toward Expressionism. Stravinsky's 12-tone works speak most directly to me. Bartók, whose music is close to me, not least because of the way it is permeated by folk materials, has been most influential on me for his pianism. Not just in his own work -- hearing him play a fragment of Chopin, or Brahms Op. 76, No. 2, or Kreutzer Sonata with Szigeti is a revelation, an exegesis.

EM: Of the three, Bartók was the instrumental performing artist, and since you pursue a dual role as composer/pianist, it's natural that you would relate to him in this way. But returning to compositional influences on SACRED MOUNTAINS, what further contributes to the mix? People increasingly comment on your stylistic layering -- one critic wrote that the ending dance in *Monsterslayer* sounded to him like unabashed boogie-woogie. How do you plead?

CC: Haha! Well, it's no secret that I've absorbed a lot of jazz and other non-Classical idioms. When I was starting out on WOMB, Don Pullen, Sam Rivers, Don Cherry, Jim Pepper and a host of others were in my ears. The voices of Ulali (Native American women's a cappella group), Navajo singer Ed Lee Natay, the recitations of John Trudell (Lakota poet and activist), the flute sound of Mary Youngblood (Inuit/Seminole) -- all this and more resonated in me. And to address the layering idea, the quartets of the Costa Rican composer Alejandro Cardona were in my head, or more accurately, the poly-stylistic stratification technique used in them. And the *United Quartet* by Henry Cowell, which I haven't heard in a long, long time, but the premise of which appeals to me. Am I just blathering on now?

EM: Keep going!

CC: I was also a fan of a Concord Records LP by Jill McManus. She is a jazz pianist, activist, writer, filmmaker. This album was called *Symbols of Hopi*, an exemplary integration of jazz and Native musical elements. I learned about it from the Hopi artist and poet Michael Kabotie (Lomawyweya), who applauded Jill's earnest desire to learn from and collaborate with Hopi musicians and dancers. Louis Mofsie (Hopi/Winnebago) and Alan Star (Lenape), of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers are on that record, along with Dave Liebman, Tom Harrell, Marc Johnson and Billy Hart.

My sons were influences too -- Rage Against the Machine was prominent. Ultimately what guided me most in the WOMB project was the creation narrative itself, the music and imagery inherent in it, and being with Indian people especially in their context. I cherish the memory of participating in a Blessingway ceremony some 20 years ago. Not a day has passed since then that I haven't thought of it.

EM: From what I understand, Blessingway is central to the Navajo ceremonial complex, and the source of the well-known "Walk in Beauty" verses.

CC: Exactly. Its purpose is to ensure general well-being, heal physical and psychological ills, not just for the one sung over, but for the benefit of all the participants, the wider community,

including all flora and fauna, the hibernating ones in winter, the earth itself. It restores balance and realigns the relationship between self-nature-divinity. I was taught that the ceremonies are symphonies of healing, and that time itself is a ceremony in which we each play a part.

EM: The WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS cycle is your expression of these teachings?

CC: It is my hope.