

## **Curt Cacioppo: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS**

conversation #3 with Eric Massey – **compositional techniques and approach to string writing**

EM: In our first interview we talked about your hopes for the eventual back-to-back live performance of the four WOMB quartets within a two-day period. In our second conversation you shared a good deal about influences on these works. I am wondering today if you would be willing to entertain some questions about the compositional materials and techniques in the cycle, and perhaps about the string writing itself.

CC: Where would you like to start?

EM: May I ask you about the first chord of *Monsterslayer*? How did you come upon this 8 note block of dissonance? Obviously this is an exorcism and your purpose is to scare away evil spirits, but what led you to this particular stacking up of pitches?

CC: I needed a gesture fierce and arresting, that's true. But the chord is built carefully, according to the principle of narrowing interval from bottom to top. Think of our interval types – you have fifths, thirds, and seconds, and of course unisons. Four types. Their specifics vary (major, minor, augmented, diminished), and they have their complements (fifths flip to become fourths, etc). The chord has an octave in the cello, fifth in the viola, third in violin 2, and a second in violin 1 (although I voiced it as a 9<sup>th</sup>).

EM: Wider at the base, tapering up to a point. It seems like a metaphor for a weapon - a lance, or a missile.

CC: I may have been subliminally aware of that -- Monsterslayer and his twin brother are the war gods, after all, and they are about to launch a campaign. My main preoccupation, though, was with fourness, as it relates to the group of 4 deities, and to directionality - the cardinal points of the compass. In rooting the intervals that the instruments play, I chose notes of the diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord, which are all equidistant from one to the next - an allusion to North, South, East, West.

EM: There is a lot packed into that chord!

CC: Certainly no more than the first chord of the Eroica. If read from bottom to top, it spells out the notes of the main melody in close to perfect order.

EM: I remember someone revealing that secret in an orchestra rehearsal on some occasion! Maybe Celibidache, or Otto Werner-Mueller.

CC: Mueller was fond of bringing that to students' attention.

EM: Another question about *Monsterslayer*. Once the evil spirits have been banished and the *feroce* beginning subsides, there is a very lyrical, translucent passage all set, I think, above middle C, except for an occasional low pizzicato. This is roughly 6 minutes into the movement. It almost reminds me, at least in concept, of the duet imitation that we find in Renaissance choral writing. Could you say something about this spot?

CC: I'm so glad that this section appeals to you, and you are absolutely right about the duet imitation. At this point the score says "Blessing the colors" - white for East, turquoise for South, yellow for West, and black for North. Here I am working with the very same intervals as those in the *feroce* chord, but in a mild, legato manner. The imitation allows them to refract in all possible combinations with each other.

EM: This is one of my favorite moments in the whole cycle.

CC: Thank you for confiding that. It is one of mine, too. In fact, I just recently self-quoted it in a piano piece that I wrote for my friend Paul Orgel.

EM: You have written quite a few things for Paul, have you not?

CC: Indeed. And he has played more of my music than any other individual performer, over a period of years reaching back to 1988.

EM: He wrote a doctoral monograph on your *Pawnee Preludes* back in the mid-'90's, isn't that so?

CC: Exactly, which included a critical edition of them with meticulously entered fingerings and so on.

EM: And he has played those preludes many times.

CC: Yes, more often than I have myself. A short while ago he posted a remix of one of his most recent performances of all but two of the nine *Pawnee Preludes* here on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHzRq1tTuBs>

EM: In your notes about *Kinaaldá* you say that one of the Pawnee Preludes is recalled, the fourth one, *Spring is Opening*. This would be track 20, Variation VI, which appropriately is subtitled "Spring."

CC: Yes, it enters into quodlibet with Changing Woman's theme - the treble of the prelude overlays the chord structure of her theme in the cello, with an ongoing trill up above. It just wafted in naturally, and stayed for 9 measures.

EM: I'd like to focus on your cello and string writing in just a moment. Right now, since you have introduced the term quodlibet, could you say a little bit more about that, and about other devices that you use in constructing your music?

CC: Quodlibet is the practice of putting two or more disparate melodies together at the same time in a harmonious way. It's an ancient technique. Often the melodies pre-exist, or the composer may invent one or all of them.

EM: Doesn't Bach do this in the last variation of the Goldberg's, putting together German folk songs with the bass line and chord changes of his own Aria?

CC: Precisely. It's interesting that when this happens, it's often at the end of a movement or work - like bringing the whole cast on stage for a grand finish.

EM: As in the Tchaikovsky *1812 Overture*, when the "Marseillaise" battles it out with "God Save the Tsar"?

CC: Yes, a spotlight example. Another of his, using original materials, would be the Trio section of the Fourth Symphony Scherzo, where the woodwind theme and the brass theme, first stated in lateral succession, combine vertically in the most delightful synthesis.

EM: It strikes me that we've only cited Old World examples, from the Classical tradition. Would Charles Ives in his quotations of patriotic songs be a more contemporary, American "quodlibetist"?

CC: I think that whenever the process extends beyond a mere shout-out of a tune, you've got a case in point. Ives not only commands this principle, he pushes it well past the tonal sphere. And beyond Classical, although stemming from it, think of Broadway.

EM: Yes, the "Tonight Quintet" from *West Side Story* just came to mind as a possible candidate.

CC: Nothing to contradict there! The gangs sing their punchy, declamatory lyrics, Anita solos that; then Tony sings "Tonight" very legato and cantabile, followed by Maria who does the same (with a touch of canon from the first violins). Finally, Bernstein gives us the dramatic culmination by superimposing the one musical panel over the other.

EM: This is what they call "Broadway counterpoint."

CC: It's a convention in musicals to call upon this. Another example is in *The Music Man*, when Wilson puts together "Lida Rose" and "Will I Ever Tell You" -- again a livelier, more articulated tune aside a more lyrical, cantabile melody, each stated separately at first, and then combined simultaneously.

EM: So from Bach to Bernstein, Old World to New, quodlibet technique continues to be employed. What other tools do you avail yourself of? Do I detect fugue in track 19?

CC: It is both a courante and a fugue - imitative, discursive counterpoint, which is all descriptive of the narrative. I'm forever fascinated by fugal, canonic and permutational possibilities, I use cantus firmus technique extensively, and explore these in complete-chromatic and polymodal contexts. Passacaglia - building up the texture over a ground bass or ostinato - still arouses the creative impulse.

EM: You said that years ago while residing in Italy you discovered "truth in the old forms." Your chaconne *di cibo celeste* also testifies to that.

CC: Thanks for mentioning *cibo*. Yes, that was at the time I was writing my *Sonata trasfigurata*, reconnecting with the sonata principle, and as well as that of variation.

EM: Speaking of Italy -- the land of Stradivarius, Amati, Guarneri -- maybe we can turn to your writing for string instruments in WOMB.

CC: I love strings. When I think melodically, I'm thinking strings. In my piano playing, I carry over characteristics of string playing. The greatest piece of music ever written is the Schubert C Major String Quintet with 2 cellos. I studied in Cleveland when Lynn Harrell was principal and worshipped him - he lived in the same building as my piano and theory mentor, and I'd see him in the elevator now and then after concerts. He was so amiable, affable - and funny, too.

EM: Your treatment of the cello in *Kinaaldá* and *Monsterslayer* - all of the SACRED MOUNTAINS quartets, really - is non-accompanimental, to say the least. It is sonorous, soloistic, and also challenging.

CC: I take a soloistic approach to each of the 4 instruments. The cello part in *Monsterslayer* is the most demanding, because I ask for scordatura - at the end of the first movement, the C string is to be tuned down to a B, where it remains for till the end of the piece. This again has programmatic significance.

EM: I found it unique that you showcased the cello scordatura as a musical event as the narrative unfolds. It is usually done on the sly, isn't it?

CC: I suppose so. Schumann piano quartet tunes down in advance to a B-flat. Ralph Shapey 10<sup>th</sup> quartet goes down a half-step further to A, but again, in advance.

EM: How did your cellists react to this re-tuning?

CC: It's interesting. At first, I asked David Finckel if he would like the part printed at real pitch or at fingered pitch. He said fingered pitch. But then he decided it would be better at real pitch, and re-copied the entire succeeding 4 movements himself in the alternative notation. Also, he re-tuned much earlier than indicated, in the middle of the first movement, and then simulated the effect on the fingerboard when the time came. Jason Calloway, on the other hand, played from real pitch, as notated in the score, and read from full score on laptop screen (by that point people were doing this). In *Kinaaldá* I think I was quite gracious to the cello, although I realize that measure 181 might be cause for annoyance to some.

EM: Hey, there are passages in the last movement of the Barber piano concerto that, truly, are unplayable, but that doesn't stop dozens of pianists from learning and performing it each year.

CC: Thanks for bailing me out on that!

EM: And the cello in *Coyoteway* and *...a distant voice... ?*

CC: Cellists all love the opening of *Coyoteway* -- it's theirs and belongs to them. Finding the right inflection for the *appoggiature* is the main concern.

EM: And *...distant voice... ?*

CC: By and large the writing is, I hope, idiomatic and flattering. There was one spot in the first movement where I wanted a fingered note sustained with the bow, and at the same time a fingered *pizzicato* note plucked several times. It's very exposed, and the *pizzicato* sets up what the rest of the ensemble is doing. That went from "impracticable" to "piece of cake" in a matter of a few minutes at the first rehearsal.

EM: My impression is that each of the players in each of the works has the opportunity for *pizzicato, col legno, ponticello, sul tasto, con sordino*, harmonics, and so forth. There's even *pizzicato-glissando* here and there. How did players react when you asked for effects beyond these? I'm asking particularly about the footwork and knee slapping...those sorts of effects.

CC: It's interesting how I've encountered little or no resistance to this. Rehearsing for the premiere of *Monsterslayer* with the Emersons, I volunteered that if they felt uncomfortable about it (the beginning of the last movement calls for it), they could omit it. But they protested, insisting that not only would they do it, and had practiced it diligently - they were bringing special shoes to wear that would amplify the effect.

EM: As you were saying, your attitude toward part-writing for quartet is non-accompanimental, and you treat the viola and violins with same soloistic consideration as you do the cello.

CC: I do, most of the time. The quartet sounds marvelous when all the parts work homogenously. But that I try to reserve. The Farwell quartet that we were talking about in an earlier conversation - its one drawback, and it's a fair criticism, is that's it's too homogenous from beginning to end. The quartet can form sub-ensembles -- 1 against 3, 2 against 2, you can have a solo or cadenza, not all four have to be playing all the time. 2 can be muted and 2 not. So many options for contrast exist.

EM: In addition, you've evoked in these works the sound of the Apache violin.

CC: Yes, this is a traditional one-string bowed instrument. The body is made of century plant root (agave), and pitch is changed by applying the fingers to the string, usually sliding from note to note (portamento).

EM: We've talked about harmony, instrumentation, compositional technique, old classical forms adapting to a different cultural aesthetic. One parameter we haven't brought up is rhythm. Perusing the WOMB quartet scores, the frequent changing of time signatures stands out, and perhaps we can close today's conversation with a comment about that. For instance, it seems that on average you shift meter 4 times per page. The first page of *Monsterslayer* has 13 time signature changes.

CC: One of the fundamental attractions for me of Native American music is its freedom from the tyranny of meter. Yes, there is pulse, and it can be very strong. But drawing barlines and obeying a hierarchy within them is alien to the repertoire. This results in a fundamental asymmetry which I find thoroughly captivating. It's a quality that I have sought to make integral throughout the quartet cycle and elsewhere.

EM: Let our conversation conclude with that idea: the beauty of asymmetry.

CC: Amen.