

Curt Cacioppo: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS

conversation #4 with Eric Massey – **reception, identity, next steps**

EM: The “new musicology” brought with it an increased emphasis on reception history both in terms of secondary writing and audience response. While it’s still too early for critical reviews of the new integrated release of the SACRED MOUNTAINS cycle as a collective unit, certainly critical documentation exists on the quartets as they appeared separately over the years, as well as audience/listener feedback (correspondence, anecdotes, etc.). Even in the case of the WOMB release, listeners have already volunteered opinion. It must make you happy to receive comments like these: “THIS is an amazing recording! Entrancing music full of grace and power.” “Truly, something to celebrate.” “Truly inspired and inspirational – magnificent. Papa Haydn would be proud.” “Wado!” [Cherokee for “Thank you!”]

CC: I’m always delighted when my music connects with people - listeners, players, critics, whomever. How could I not be? If the primary impulse is to create something that communicates, the greatest satisfaction comes in being heard and in whatever manner or degree understood.

EM: It must have been exciting when choreographer Dorothy Massalski approached you about a dance realization of *...a distant voice calling...* after its premiere in Tucson. Could you share some other memories like that?

CC: That would have been a great adventure! I remember also at that performance a fellow who was probably the age that I am now, with a big white beard, in a red flannel shirt and denim overalls, and hunting boots. He came right up afterwards to say, “THAT was FUN!! It makes me want to go out and DANCE!”

EM: Great story!

CC: Loved that guy. Naturally the footwork that the players did in the last movement had something to do with his reaction, and Dorothy’s.

EM: But dance is a strong element throughout all the quartets, is it not? 4 of the 8 movements in No. II are dances, you have the courantes in No. III (even the “gently swaying, rhythmic” section in the “Fantasy” is very dance-like, and then the “Dance of Celebration” that ends *Monsterslayer*, No. IV, and caps off the entire cycle.

CC: Watching Native American dance, and joining in on occasion, made a huge impact on me. Dance is so fundamental cross-culturally.

EM: It's a behaviour seen even in other species. And there's the larger thought that Life itself is a Dance. Back to reception, and speaking cross-culturally, can you relate other responses to your work coming specifically from the Native community?

CC: I'm glad you ask this. If I think back to the late 1970's-early '80's, when I felt the first impulses to embrace Native music creatively, I played some of my *Pawnee Preludes* for a number of people to hear their reaction and resolve the question in my own mind whether to continue on this path or not. Among them were John Peters (Wampanoag), Inés Talamantez (Mescalero Apache), and David McAllester (part Mohegan, and a Navajo scholar). Peters, whose Indian name was Slow Turtle, was the Supreme Medicine Man of the Wampanoag, and head of the Massachusetts Council on Indian Affairs. I met with him on multiple occasions, at his office in Boston, and at Indian gatherings. His regard for my work was affirmative - he said that I was both honoring the tradition and helping to give it new life, particularly in widening awareness of it. He was very encouraging.

EM: This was at the time you were in Cambridge, at Harvard?

CC: Exactly. And at that time, Inés was there as a post-doctoral fellow. Her focus was Athabaskan religious texts and chants, and she was performing dramatic readings of these for select audiences. I was deeply affected, and asked if she would be willing to give me a reckoning on my music. She kindly agreed. I played her the preludes, and mid-way she became profoundly moved. It was at no. 5, "Beloved Emblem." After that we paused for a while, and she began to express desire that we perform together, alternating and overlapping narrative passages with these pieces that I had written. That came as approbation of a kind that I never could have imagined.

EM: And did you then collaborate?

CC: Well, as much as we wanted to, Inés was hired at UC Santa Barbara, and there established a PhD program in Native American religious studies, which understandably absorbed all the energy she had, and made the logistics impossible.

EM: And you met David McAllester in New England as well?

CC: Yes. John Ward, the world music authority at Harvard in those days, invited him to give a colloquium, and that is where we met. David was still teaching at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, but had a summer retreat an hour and a half northwest in Monterey, MA. It was there that I spent time with him talking about the direction that I was going in compositionally, and I played him these same preludes. He too was appreciative and encouraging, and paid a keen compliment, saying that in one spot in particular, I had managed to retain the vocal inflection of the original singing.

EM: And McAllester became one of your principal mentors.

CC: I considered him so. We were very close, all the way through his retirement years. I learned tremendously from him.

EM: Were there other Native voices conveying approval, either in those early days or later?

CC: The sculptor Retha Gambaro and her husband Steve gave me a lot of support. Retha was Creek, and both of them were adopted Hopi. Retha had gone on the Vision Quest and made the Sundance sacrifice. They were very involved in the initial stages of planning for the NMAI.

EM: The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

CC: Precisely. But in those early days, some constituency was trying to subvert the plan and reduce the Indian scope, making the Native American component just one of many within a "Museum of Man." Steve especially opposed this idea. Eventually the NMAI came into being.

In those days I was also in communication with the Laubins, Gladys and Reginald, whose comprehensive expertise in Native American dance was held in the highest esteem by Indians and non-Indians alike. Gladys warmly reinforced my creative efforts.

EM: You sought and found what would appear uniform approval as you set out on this cross-cultural path 40 years ago. Did you encounter any disapproval as you proceeded?

CC: There were two or three uncomfortable moments, but all amiably resolved. The truly hurtful experiences came from white folk who ridiculed what I was doing, or threw obstacles in the way. Probably the most distasteful episode occurred within the hallowed halls of one of our most prestigious arts institutions, when I was assailed at length by a senior composer member of that institution, himself ironically of mixed Anglo-Indian descent (and obviously quite unreconciled about it, even at the age of 76!).

EM: How toxic. So it must have been consoling when you came into contact with another whom you hold as a mentor, John Co'íí Cook, who became the guiding force behind the WOMB cycle.

CC: It seems to me now like meeting John was pre-ordained. Maybe it was destined by the Navajo Holy People, or maybe by the God of Abraham, or perhaps by an ecumenical council of them all. He appeared in the form of a coyote in my back yard the day before coming to my house. He is the son and grandson of Coyoteway chanters, and he made the English transcription of the Coyoteway ceremony that is published in Karl Luckert's book.

EM: Can we backtrack to the God of Abraham? And this will allow us to transition to the next topic, identity. You've described John elsewhere, but there's a side to him that we haven't yet discussed in any degree, and that is his stature as a Christian minister.

CC: John has dual identity in this respect. But it is an identity to which he is heir, as his father AND grandfather also were Christian ministers, as well as traditional Navajo ceremonial practitioners of the Coyoteway: *Ma' ijíí hatáál*. Two religions are better than one!

EM: Like Coltrane said, "All religions have a piece of the truth." Put two together and you have more of the truth.

CC: There you are! John, with our mutual friend, Owen Owens (also a minister), together have compellingly aligned Diné religious teachings with those of the Bible. We quoted some of the famous "Walk in Beauty" ceremonial text earlier. Can you think of a parallel in Christian writings? Here's Blessingway:

In beauty I walk
With beauty before me I walk
With beauty behind me I walk
With beauty above me I walk

With beauty all around me I walk
beauty enters within me

EM: Renegade Episcopalian that I am, I still can recite from verse 5 of St. Patrick's breastplate:

Christ within me
Christ behind me
Christ before me
Christ beside me
Christ beneath me
Christ above me

CC: Well, renegade Episcopalian that you may be, we never got to this at Methodist choir camp! Going further into the texts, both invoke the theme of restoration.

EM: The parallel could not be clearer. But Christ = beauty is for many a false equation today, and Christianity is maligned, vilified.

CC: Its evolution has been volatile since the early 300's when Constantine coopted it in the interests of the Roman state.

EM: Schisms, crusades, reformation, counter-reformation...

CC: Yet there are those who look past all that, finding value in the constructive tenets of Christian belief, some of them Native, and Navajo, John - Reverend Cook - being a case in point.

EM: What core Christian principles would you say comport with Diné traditional religious teachings in Rev. Cook's view?

CC: I am not John's vicar, nor do I want to put words in his mouth. But I think he has enabled himself to express the same themes two different ways, and to pair differences so that they complement one another.

EM: We touched upon commonalities a moment ago. What might an example of complementary difference be?

CC: One of the most distinct would be the contrast between the matriarchal (female) basis of Diné religion and the patriarchal (male) grounding of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Another would be that the Diné act as participants

in nature, rather than as rulers over it. The Diné slant in either case causes the Christian to search their own tradition for possible matching references.

EM: In the first case, we can think of the Catholic devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

CC: She comes to mind most readily. In related Christian writing, Dante's Beatrice is another woman occupying a superior position.

EM: And in the second case, to what would the Christian point? The "Dominion verses" in Genesis seem unequivocal.

CC: According to our friend Owen, who is also an environmentalist, these should more properly be termed the "Stewardship verses." Interpreted this way, humans are caretakers of Creation. Adam and Eve were gardeners; David was a shepherd in green pastures; Jesus was born in a barn surrounded by animals and slept in a feed box; St. Francis preached to birds and wrote canticles to the sun and the moon.

EM: In this view, these Biblical figures are enveloped by and interacting with nature, and not trying to dominate it. But it takes the Diné to bring this out.

CC: Yes, these aspects are latent, and have been marginalized.

EM: Conversely, what might the Christian be able to bring to light for the Diné in their teachings?

CC: Jesus's advocacy of forgiveness and its healing power is maybe the most unique of Christian teachings. My sense is that John came to accept Jesus as his savior through learning how to practice forgiveness. In forgiving, he found deliverance from the bondage of anger, the self-destructive poison of resentment. I'm not sure that Diné precepts offered recourse to him, and this is where his Christian training became of great benefit.

EM: You speak of forgiveness as a 'soothing unguent' in your poem *A Chanter's Parting*, written in honor of John, his father and his grandfather.

CC: I do.

EM: It saves the patient that John's grandfather is singing over from the "splintered log of hate that churns intractably inside, ulcerating soul and tissue."

CC: Yes, the chanter or *hataii* in these ceremonies administers psychological treatments, conversing with the patient, and here grandfather Cook is counseling the afflicted person about how to cleanse himself of this all-consuming animus.

EM: Your poem celebrates three generations of cross-cultural or dual religious identity. Shall we use it to pivot to our final topic of today's conversation, what are your next steps, what are we to expect from you on the horizon? You retired from academia in 2020, and have produced not only the WOMB CDs, but 3 others as well. I follow your activities very closely, and by my count, it looks like you've composed some 30 new pieces in this time. Your catalog shows 8 quartets, and your symphonies number 7. Would an 8th symphony be on the way at some point soon?

CC: In fact, I was doing initial sketches for a symphony based on this same poem, *A Chanter's Parting*, last summer, but got sidetracked by a succession of smaller projects that had imminent deadlines attached. Those have all been fulfilled, and since the WOMB cycle has now been released, I am anxious to return to the poem and the symphony.

EM: Will the symphony include voice? Will the poem be sung? Might Mahler IV be a model?

CC: I'm asking myself those very questions. At least the first two.

EM: Or if not Mahler, might you pick up where your Yeats Symphony (with soprano) leaves off?

CC: *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* (what you call my "Yeats Symphony") was such a long time ago. I should revisit it, though. The Yeats text is so very compact, 12 short lines, whereas this "Chanter" poem is 180 or more, not all of them conducive to melodic setting. I doubt that the treatment could be similar at all. I'm still wrestling with the concept. It might be that certain sections are sung, others recited, others chanted. Or I might take a purely instrumental approach, as I have in certain "silent melodramas" that I've done on poems by Luigi Cerantola.

EM: I saw that you had completed a set of these, and am intrigued. The idea is that the piece is to be played while one silently reads the poem.

CC: Yes. And the music is abstractly derived from structural features of the text.

EM: As when you translate *terza rima* into purely instrumental content in your *Songs with and without Words*? You were talking about that when our paths crossed at PostClassical Ensemble's "Native American Inspirations" festival at the National Cathedral back in 2019.

CC: Yes again, and those will at last be premiered!

EM: That festival was one of the last pleasant occasions before the Andromeda strain hit and lockdowns were imposed. How have you been affected by all that?

CC: My performing activities as a pianist have been curtailed, as have residency and lecture opportunities. And premieres keep getting postponed and cancelled. Composition has not been affected. You yourself are stationary these days as well?

EM: Yes, but given my reclusive nature, I'm fairly content to be sequestered at my perch here over the bay. I do miss the spur-of-the-moment freedom to fly off to a jazz or new music festival. And the mandates and restrictions are annoying - once on the continent, outbound to Madrid, mask required; same flight returning, no mask.

CC: This will pass, I hope. Dante and Petrarch managed to survive 4 years of plague. I don't think they wore masks, and certainly there were no vaccines.

EM: And in the midst of all that they produced sublime, enduring works.

CC: Let us keep that in the forefront of our minds.

EM: Amen. Thank you, Curt, for an eye-opening series of conversations.

CC: Always a pleasure, Eric. Thank you, and please stay well.

