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“an epic achievement, both artistically and spiritually”
Peter Burwasser, Fanfare ★★★★★

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“The greatest aspect of Cacioppo’s magnum opus is that it is an act of healing; its timing could never be better.”
Colin Clarke, Fanfare ★★★★★

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Feature Article by Peter Burwasser

A Chat with Curt Cacioppo about His Music Inspired by the Navajo Creation Story

It has been a quarter of a century since Curt Cacioppo embarked on what would become a set of four string quartets, now grouped together as *Womb of the Sacred Mountains*, all inspired by the culture and religious practices of the Navajo people. He talks about the origins for the project on the occasion of a 25th anniversary release of all four quartets.

How did your interest in this culture originate?

As a child I had a receptivity to the many cultural indicators around me—names, surely. Think of the names of the state (Ohio), our town, the river, the region (Cuyahoga), the many parks and paths in the area—for instance Tamsin Park, Geauga Lake Park, and Portage Path. The word portage referred specifically to the Indians carrying their canoes overland between the crooked river (the Cuyahoga—that’s what the name means) to the Tuscarawas. Then, in the various suburban utopias that popped up post-war, you’d see Cherokee Lane, Osceola Drive, Comanche Trail, and so forth. Somehow all these names resonated in me. Such impressions led me to deeper study, and I eventually became aware of some family connections to the Native community.

That resonates with my own experience. When I was in junior high school in upstate New York (in the early 1970s) an entire year was devoted to studying the Iroquois nations. I hope that is still the policy. Also, my late father, who was a research chemist by profession, had a lifelong admiration for the culture of the American Indians, and visited the Western reservations and participated in ceremonies several times. As a child, he would embarrass me and my brothers by cheering for the Indians in the movie theater when we went to see cowboy films. Now, of course, I relate that story proudly. But I digress; when and how did you decide to work your interest into musical forms?

There was a succession of events going into the early 1970s. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer, an LP collection on Everest called *Authentic Music of the American Indian* appeared, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* was published, Sacheen Littlefeather delivered Brando’s Oscar rejection, and world attention was focused

on the second Wounded Knee confrontation. I heard Momaday in a radio interview in which Native music was sung in the background, and that maybe gave me the initial spark. I listened to those Everest sides over and over. Dee Brown's book had transcriptions of Native melodies at each chapter heading. And in response to the Wounded Knee occupation, the pre-eminent Native American composer Louis Ballard wrote his *Incident at Wounded Knee*. It was also in this period that I became acquainted with the work of Kevin Red Star and other Native artists. In the later 1970s I had made quite a few Native friends, made contracts with elders, and attended gatherings. At that point I was living in Massachusetts and participated in the Wampanoag Spiritual and Cultural Training Council. One evening, the proceedings opened with two young Mashpee Wampanoag men drumming and singing an honoring song. These were Keesatonamook and Nannipashamet. It was life-changing. They set me on this path.

What, if any, are the native sources for your material?

Researching the transcribed sources, like those in Dee Brown's book, I examined all of the material published by Frances Densmore, for instance. I was particularly drawn to the Pawnee melodies and the texts associated with them. I was well aware of the treatments of Native melody by the "Indianists," and of their artistic failings and appropriationist motivations. Certainly I had no intention of repeating those violations. Privately, though, I sang those Pawnee melodies to myself, either in my head or aloud. Inadvertently one morning, at the piano, I played one of them to an accompaniment that somehow took shape on its own. At first I was ashamed that I had committed the "Indianist" sin that I had vowed never to do. Then I played it for others, including a Wampanoag leader, in search of guidance. The verdict was in my favor, and I allowed myself to write a whole set of nine *Pawnee*

Preludes, each of which honors the Native melody with the respect accorded to a *cantus firmus* in Western sacred music. Still, with the rare exception, I prefer to avoid direct quotation, and instead derive my material from more abstract features of Native melodic structure, or extra-musical elements.

The four quartets cover a broad range of harmonic languages. How do you relate this variety to the narrative of the work (I realize this is a very broad question!)?

Very recently a German writer asked me a similar question, with a slant toward the tonal/atonal aspect, which he finds stimulating. I answered, "At the age of 70 (and I'll be 71 in a matter of a few months), tonal and atonal are for me closely related. If by tonal we mean 'diatonic,' that is, having to do with the white notes on the piano, the black notes are right there flanking them, giving us both the pentatonic 'mode,' and, through combination, full chromaticism. Of course, even within the white note collection, we have the pentatonic mode and all the archaic modes as

well. Busoni and Bartók found 100 more scales within that. Much of what I do is conceived along the lines of polymodality, which can be expressed laterally and in vertical layering.” Harmony conveys character, and in the narrative, many characters appear and interact. One moment that illustrates character/harmonic layering starts at bar 681 in *Coyoteway*. Here, the very opening of this quartet comes back in the cello—this is C Minor, and depicts coyote in his emotionally distressed state. Above this is the Round Dance theme in a rarefied D Major, which represents coyote in his restored state. These are two different expressions of the same protagonist, in a vertically contrasting arrangement.

I think I hear a similar philosophy at work in the music of one of your important teachers, Leon Kirchner. I was surprised that his name did not come up in the interview with Eric Massey that is in the notes for the recording, particularly in the section on musical influences. If I am totally off base here, please set me straight! Leon was a major figure in my musical life, even before I met him—archetypal, in that he was a composer as well as a performer (pianist and conductor), like Bernstein. I had already learned from him well before I met him in 1977. I had heard the Guarneri play his First Quartet back in 1971 or 1972, and was taken with it in every respect—not the harmony particularly, but the overall intensity and authority of the writing. Then I learned his sonata of 1948, and performed it in my senior year in college, and also wrote an analysis paper on it. Technically, I was in his seminar at Harvard a grand total of only seven or eight months, but we shared a 33-year-long friendship. There was much love between us, and my son Charles, also a composer, was able to get to know him in his final years. Composers will teach you through the music they’ve written. With Leon, the larger lesson was given by example, that of the consummate creator/interpreter.

I was struck but what sounds almost like a hoe-down in the close of the rondo of “a distant voice calling,” which seems highly ironic. Was this intentional?

What, you’ve never been to a Navajo hoe-down? Seriously, what might come across on the surface is the melody outlining the major triad—Eb, G, Bb, and an occasional C keep arpeggiating to a dancing accompaniment. However—and this is a fundamental and beautiful trait in Navajo and other Native music—the metric structure is asymmetrical. The phrases count out differently: 6 for the first phrase, 7 each for the second and third phrases, then back to 6. And indeed, a huge number of Navajo melodies are built on the major triad in various positionings—it is very common.

I see that on the CDs, the earliest quartet is the last one on the program. Is there any significance to the chronology of the writing?

You are quite right. I “deliberately” wrote the last quartet first. Its story is the most dynamic and emotionally complex in the narrative, and the challenge of realizing it compositionally came upon me with great urgency.

As a father of two young adults, I was moved by your mention of the influence of your sons, Charles and Nicholas, on this music in particular. I really love this comment from your notes on Monsterslayer: “The brothers in the story further correspond to my two sons, Charles and Nicholas, who are represented in the musical material of the piece. In the Scherzo, one of the motifs that the instruments toss around is a little figure I heard Nic singing one morning during his pre-school days. The ostinato of the last movement originated in the following way. While packing to move house from Boston to Philadelphia years ago, I was repetitively writing Chuck’s name in magic marker on the many boxes of his belongings. The swish of the felt tip against the cardboard created a distinct rhythmic pattern, which eventually turned into the present ground.” That also seems to me to be in line with the spirituality of the subject matter. Do you agree?

Charles and Nicholas and I do share a lot on a very deep level, spiritual, non-verbal. So much is communicated between us directly through our musics. And there’s a learning cycle at play as well. From another standpoint, the Cree believe that the young are sent to bring new vision to the tribe; each newborn is a conduit for new vision and new songs. All songs pre-exist, but it takes one generation after another to discover and give voice to them so that the spirit of the people can be nourished and the tribe’s continuity be sustained. There’s a mutual balance between young and old, spiritual and corporeal.

Speaking again of spiritual matters, I had to smile when I saw your comment, “Two religions are better than one.” Of course, I realize that this was a wisecrack, and yet, as my mother often says, many a truth is said in jest. Care to elaborate? Your mother is right! (Your parents sound cool!) Two heads are better than one, two religions.... I guess the salient point has to do with breadth of vista. Do you want to go through life with blinders on, or would you prefer to take in more of the horizon? I may lean toward the integrative view because, in terms of background, I’m a mix myself: half Sicilian, half Anglo-Saxon. By definition, the latter is already a blend, and Sicilian ancestry is even more complicated.

I think it is fair to say that the veneration of nature and the exploration of human interaction with the balance of the natural world is central to most Native religious beliefs and practices. You have already described how you used music to represent different aspects of the coyote. How else does this view inform your music?

This veneration/interaction question is a big one. At the moment, the notion comes to mind that music is the common denominator between nature and the human being. Think of how many ways nature sings to us, and how the human heart pulses rhythm and sends the blood coursing through our veins like continuous melody. I used to reassure beginning music students that “you are made of music.”

CACIOPPO *Níłch’i dine’é (...a distant voice calling...).*¹ *Mą’ iijí hataál (Coyoteway).*² *Kinaaldá (The Rite of Changing Woman).*³ *Nayéñězgani (Monsterslayer)*⁴ • ¹American Str Qrt; ²Moscow Str Qrt; ³Borromeo Str Qrt; ⁴Emerson Str Qrt • ORENDA 1001/1002 (2 CDs: 110:03) Live: ¹Leo Rich Theatre, Tucson, AZ 3/3/2002; ²Marshall Auditorium, Haverford College, Haverford, PA 3/27/2007, ³Field Concert Hall, Curtis Institute, Philadelphia 12/18/2011, ⁴Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, PA 2/22/1996

The four string quartets known collectively as *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* were written by Curt Cacioppo over the course of 15 years, from 1995 to 2010. This new release featuring all four, as performed by the original dedicatees, marks the 25th anniversary of the project’s inception. Each of the quartets is inspired by a specific aspect of the Navajo creation story. What is remarkable about the overall project is how every quartet finds an individual manner of conveying particular elements of the Navajo story while maintaining, across the span of the four works, the singular voice of the composer.

The opening work depicts the Navajo concept of the creation of the world as a gradual process (as opposed to the biblical “let there be light” cataclysm, per Cacioppo). A free wheeling, lyrically Modernistic Fantasia is a very apt introduction to this music, which attempts to give voice to the Talking God, one of the four Navajo deities. This is followed by three movements that proceed without interruption, forming the most Classically structured quartet of the group, while still projecting the aura of “a distant voice calling.” Five years later, Cacioppo produced *Coyoteway*, which is the name of a Navajo healing ceremony. This quartet is comprised of eight relatively short sections, which, the composer recalls, mirrors the eight-sided structure of the Navajo structure known as a hogan. The music reflects several important elements of the culture, including crafts (rug making and beading), dancing, and, as the name of the ceremony suggests, the Navajo veneration for nature. Dance rhythms occur in all of the quartets, but are especially significant in *Coyoteway*, with syncopation that, perhaps ironically, suggests a connection to jazz. *The Rite of the Changing Woman* is a celebration of another deity, the titular Changing Woman, a key player in the creation story.

Here, Cacioppo employs a neo-Baroque format, including dance forms and a fugue, elegantly depicting the story of the mother of the Monsterslayer and his twin brother, Born for Water. This narrative makes it logical for Cacioppo to place his *Monsterslayer* quartet, which was actually written before the other three, at the conclusion of the cycle. It is also the darkest and most overtly expressive of the four quartets, even as it concludes with a rousing “Dance of Celebration.” This relatively youthful work (it was premiered in 1995), which depicts the destruction of the monster Yéitso at the hands of the twins, retains a stunning power a quarter of a century since it was premiered.

The Emerson String Quartet is probably the best known of the four ensembles heard here, but they all bring forth this music with great energy and virtuosity. The composer’s online notes to the music, along with a frank interview with a longtime colleague, Eric Massey, add vital context to the music. *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* is an epic achievement, both artistically and spiritually. **Peter Burwasser - 5 stars**

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FEATURE REVIEW by Colin Clarke

CACIOPPO *Níłch’i dine’é (...a distant voice calling...).*¹ *Mą’ iijí hataál (Coyoteway).*² *Kinaaldá (The Rite of Changing Woman).*³ *Nayéñězgani (Monsterslayer)*⁴ • ¹American Str Qrt; ²Moscow Str Qrt; ³Borromeo Str Qrt; ⁴Emerson Str Qrt • ORENDA 1001/1002 (2 CDs: 110:03) Live: ¹Leo Rich Theatre, Tucson, AZ 3/3/2002; ²Marshall Auditorium, Haverford College, Haverford, PA 3/27/2007, ³Field Concert Hall, Curtis Institute, Philadelphia 12/18/2011, ⁴Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, PA 2/22/1996

Previous positive experiences of the music of Curt Cacioppo are confirmed in this remarkable release. Previously, for *Fanfare*, I reviewed the album *Metamorphoses* (of which *Armed and Dangerous* is the first track) in 44:2 and *Italia* in 44:5. Both discs impressed, and to a great degree; the present release, though, eclipses them both in scope and invention.

The cycle *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* comprises four pieces, all of which are heard here in live performance. Three of those four performances are world premieres (the odd one out is *The Rite of the Changing Woman*, which is the Philadelphia premiere; the world premiere took place in October 2011). The composer envisages the ideal presentation of this cycle as split over two concerts

that occur within one 24-hour period, with the first two pieces played in one evening and the remaining two the following afternoon, invoking a sense of ceremony, itself relating to the Navajo tradition. In performance, a reading/storytelling would precede each piece (the original titles are in the Navajo language and are taken from the “Diné bahane’,” the Navajo creation myth that translates as “Story of the People”). There is also an option for a flute solo at those points as well. One can see how this would invoke a ritual space. Readings are not included on the recording, which offers an opportunity to experience Cacioppo’s astonishing invention.

The first piece, *Nilch’i dine’é (... a distant voice calling ...)*, represents the appearance of the four Holy People and their creation of the First Man and First Woman. The “four” is significant structurally, as that number is highly significant in Navajo belief (four directions, four seasons, four sacred mountains, which identify four stages of life). It opens quietly with atemporal—or so they seem—shards of utterly beautiful dissonance. This is a Fantasia; at times the string quartet is exactly that, but I did find myself wondering into the world of Modernist viol consort at times. Cacioppo’s music is fascinating in its ability to invoke earlier tropes while remaining absolutely of its time. There is a very detailed program to this music, which describes the ceremony that led to the creation of First Man and Woman, although the music can be heard purely in abstract terms. The lyricism of “Ode,” the slow movement of this first quartet, if you will, is beautifully projected by the American String Quartet, while their virtuosity is certainly on display in the playful yet somewhat frenzied Scherzo and in the finale (which includes enthusiastic stomping).

The title of the second part translates as “Coyoteway” and was written in 2006 for the present performers, the Moscow String Quartet. This time cast in eight movements, it is a celebration of the healing ceremony called “Coyoteway,” its eight sections perhaps reflecting the nature of the traditional, octagonal Navajo house. The somewhat dark, pensive “Emanations from the Underworld” has its own beauty, especially in a performance such as this. Vibrato is kept to a minimum to achieve a blanched sound; in “Incantation” the quartet not only stamps feet but intones, in Navajo, an “invocation” of the Long-Life Happiness One. (I would be interested to learn, in terms of ceremony, if this is actually the correct use of “invoked”—or asked to make itself present within the seeker—as opposed to “evoked,” in which the spirit arrives externally: this is a vital distinction in Western Esoteric praxis, and I suspect it might be in Navajo, also.) The next few movements fly by (“The Swallow’s Colloquy” is only 40 seconds) and represent the balancing of masculine and feminine (“Hogan Dance” and the gentler “Shawl

Dance”). The music contains within it a retelling of the legend of the coyote and the birds, which reveals the Navajo way with death, a transitory state in which the dead entity eventually revivifies, wiser for the experience. The final Round Dance, entitled “Fortyniner,” reminds us that growth is not always a one-stop shop, with continued learnings for the coyote.

The third part of the work is entitled *The Rite of Changing Woman* (“Kinaaldá” in Navajo) and was written in 2010. The lady in question is in fact a Navajo deity named “Changing Woman” and the “Kinaaldá” ceremony is a rite of passage. The guide here is the Borromeo String Quartet, rich-toned and expressive, their sound contrasting with the more febrile Moscow group. This section of “Womb” is divided into two parts. The first is simply called Fantasy, which describes the ceremony and its consequences: the Goddess’s pregnancy and the subsequent birth of the brothers Monsterslayer and Born for Water, both of whom prepare the way for humans to inhabit the Earth, with the planet’s population born from Changing Woman’s flesh. The levels of inspiration on Fantasy are off the scale, a colorful collage connected by a bubbling undercurrent of creative energy. There is something Bartókian in the shapes of the melodies that are heard in octaves here. The second part is a Theme and Variations (six of them) plus “reprise.” Here Changing Woman is in her prime, and every other variation is a Courante (representing the running Changing Woman has to do three times each day) while the second variation (“Fall”) is imbued with quasi-Baroque dotted rhythms. An unsettled courante, verging on a St. Vitus’s Dance tarantella, leads to the suspended animation of “Winter,” the instruments muted, huddling around middle C for reassurance and warmth. The performance of this variation by the Borromeo Quartet is spellbinding. (I was impressed previously by a disc of music by Malcolm Peyton on Centaur, *Fanfare* 38:2, and I am similarly impressed here.) They delineate the contrapuntal workings perfectly while maintaining intensity. As the music moves to “Spring” (Variation VI), the music opens out to a place of comparative repose before a reprise of the opening reflects the cyclical nature of universal forces. Tonal arrival points give a sense of arrival, while jerky inner voices suggest not everything is as complete as it might seem, something confirmed by the surprise nature of the work’s “conclusion.”

Finally, *Monsterslayer* was written in 1995 for the Emerson Quartet, the performers here. It is immediately virtuosic (“Exorcism”), a depiction of a battle that made the earth safe for humans. The players here are Sun Carrier, his wife Changing Woman (who is under the power of no one), their twin sons, and the extra-familial child-eating monster giant Yéitso (who it turns out is actually another family member, the product of their father’s infidelity). The twins are

represented by the two violins, the mother by the viola, and Yéitso by a detuned cello. Melodic and harmonic elements are derived from numerical and other abstractions taken from Navajo myth. Structurally, Cacioppo melds Western forms (sonata form, song form, scherzo, and rondo) with Navajo song structures, a wonderful intermingling of ideas.

At 13 minutes “Exorcism” is the longest movement, visceral and colorful, and including a section in which the performers “hit” the string with the bow hairs, reflecting a Navajo ceremony in which a beater is used to drive the spirits of the dead back into the ground. David Finckel’s cello cadenza, which eventually meets the remaining instruments’ icy chords, is remarkably expressive. The Scherzo is full of crystalline textures and unstoppable momentum. There are references embedded in this quartet to members of the composer’s family, too, particularly in the two final movements, but for this writer it is the Navajo inspiration that matters. Lawrence Dutton’s viola speaks eloquently; and in the finale, a “Dance of Celebration,” a disjunctive outburst crowns the piece. This is a live performance, and that really helps the extroversion of this closing movement to work. In addition to citing Bartók, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky as influential, Cacioppo also pays tribute to Jill McManus’s amazing 1984 LP *Symbols of Hopi* (on the Concord Jazz label, with McManus, piano; Dave Liebman, soprano sax and alto flute; Tom Harrell, trumpet; Billy Hart, drums; Louis Mofsie, cottonwood drum and rattles; and Alan (Shooting Star) Brown, bells and rattles). The musicians on that occasion had taken advice from two Hopi song poets, Mark Lomayestewa and Terrance Honvanteewa. The polystylistic stratification of Alejandro Cardona is another strand in Cacioppo’s tapestry.

Be in no doubt, Cacioppo’s *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* is a major work. Captured in four live performances, by four groups, this is a journey the listener may never forget. It feels to some extent like Cacioppo’s *magnum opus*; but something tells me there is more to come. Whatever the case, the greatest aspect of Cacioppo’s *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* is that it is an act of healing; its timing could not be better. **Colin Clarke - 5 stars**

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FEATURE REVIEW by Ken Meltzer

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Womb of the Sacred Mountains is American composer and pianist Curt Cacioppo's cycle of four string quartets inspired by the Navajo creation story. A new release from Orenda Press of the complete cycle commemorates the 25th anniversary of the premiere of music from *Womb of the Sacred Mountains*. All of the featured recordings were made in concert, played by the ensembles for whom Cacioppo composed the respective quartets. The performances by the American (March 3, 2002), Moscow (March 27, 2007), and Emerson (February 22, 1996) Quartets are the world premieres. The December 18, 2011 performance by the Borromeo Quartet was the Philadelphia premiere of *Kinaaldá (The Rite of Changing Woman)* (that same ensemble played the world premiere in Tucson on March 10, 2011). As part of his website, Cacioppo provides a wealth of materials about this cycle, including his program notes and a series of conversations with Eric Massey. They may be accessed at: <https://curtcacioppo.com/womb-of-the-sacred-mountains-25th-anniversary-commemorative-release/> (apologies for the lengthy URL).

Each of the quartets is inspired by a portion of the Navajo creation story. Cacioppo's program notes go into lengthy detail regarding the complex narratives. This text from the CD materials provides a briefer synopsis: "The journey begins with *Nilch'i dine'é (...a distant voice calling...)*, as four mysterious Holy People call forth life and bring into being First Man and First Woman. *Mq' iijí hatáál (Coyoteway)* then traces the impact of its nervy protagonist on human evolution. Blessing comes in *Kinaaldá (The Rite of Changing Woman—the principal Navajo deity)*. And the victories of her son *Nayénězgani (Monsterslayer)*, who makes the world safe for succeeding populations, are celebrated in the final quartet."

Cacioppo employs traditional structures as the foundation for the unfolding of his musical narrative. For example, the opening quartet (...a distant voice calling...) comprises a Fantasia, Ode, Scherzo, and Rondo. The third quartet, *The Rite of Changing Woman*, juxtaposes a Fantasy (Part I) with a Theme and Variations (Part II). In an interview with Massey, Cacioppo acknowledges the influences of "Bartók, Schoenberg and Stravinsky: the 3 pillars of 20th century music" on his approach to composition. Cacioppo elaborates: "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.” Those influences are evident in *Womb of the Sacred Mountains*’ harmonic world. Cacioppo characterizes his approach to the instruments of the quartet as “soloistic,” each having a voice in the narrative. Cacioppo depicts Navajo music’s “freedom from the tyranny of meter” by employing frequent time signature changes that impart a sense of free-wheeling pulse. Extra-musical effects such as chanting and foot stomping appear on occasion.

Cacioppo believes the cycle may be listened to either as absolute or as programmatic music. That said, Cacioppo’s ideal vision of a complete performance is in the form of “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.... 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.” Given how intertwined Cacioppo’s music is with the creation story, and how magically he evokes that tale, I think a detailed familiarity with the narrative offers the most productive gateway to enjoying the cycle. Cacioppo employs a breathtaking array of musical styles, voices, and techniques, cinematic in their scope and impact. There is also a palpable and irresistible energy that permeates the cycle. All of these qualities are realized in the marvelous performances by the respective string quartets. The presence of an audience adds to the sense of creation and occasion.

I think Cacioppo’s *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* is a work that requires some effort and dedication on the part of the listener. An acceptance of Cacioppo’s Expressionist harmonic world, as well as an intense study of the work’s source and narrative, offer the best opportunity to enjoy fully this impressive, all-embracing music. Those willing to undertake that journey will, I think, be amply rewarded. Curt Cacioppo’s *Womb of the Sacred Mountains* is an impressive and fascinating achievement, one I look forward to returning to and studying over time. This superb recording affords me that opportunity. **Ken Meltzer - 5 stars**

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