

CURT CACIOPPO: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS



I. ...a distant voice calling... (*Nítch'i dine'é*)

Like the others in the cycle *Womb of the Sacred Mountains*, this string quartet is inspired by teachings from the Navajo creation story. It may seem strange to put these two elements together, but there is a fundamental correspondence between the four members of the quartet and the four Navajo deities, led by Talking God, whose distant voice is heard calling to the wind-spirit people -- *Nítch'i dine'é* -- at the earliest stages of emergence. Cast in four connected movements, the quartet consists of a Fantasia, an Ode, a Scherzo with Trio and da Capo, and a Rondo. It follows the progress of evolution from the arising of colors to the creation of First Man and First Woman. You can listen to the piece as absolute music, or if so inclined, you may wish to track the narrative.*

In the Navajo story, there is no precise moment of creation, or dynamic imperative, "Let there be light!" Instead, the cardinal points begin to radiate with color -- white arises in the east, blue in the south, yellow in the west, and black in the north. Streams of water then begin to flow in all directions, with dwellings popping up along them. There are reeds, sumac trees, rocks and mountains. There are beetles, dragonflies -- twelve types of insects. We encounter characters like Coyote, Blue Heron, Red Wind, and Winter Thunder.

The progress of the wind-spirit people, who ultimately aid in the creation of mankind's most ancient ancestors, becomes the next main focus. They are a disorderly race, quarrelsome, adulterous, offensive to others. Slow learners, they repeat their sins. Threatened by a flood, they are ejected from the first world and emerge through a hole in the sky into the second. Now guests of the Swallow People, they proceed to offend their new hosts. One of them even becomes too free with the swallow chief's wife. Arrogant and disorderly, they are starved out of this world, and forced into a third. This is the land of the Yellow Grasshopper People. Again they commit sin and bring disorder. "You lack intelligence...get out of here," says the grasshopper chief. The airborne nomads are banished from this world too. They fly to the hard outer crust of the sky, and arrive in the fourth world.

Suddenly they hear a distant voice calling to them from far in the east. It repeats four times, and eventually they find themselves standing among four mysterious beings. They had never seen such creatures anywhere before. These are the Holy People, intelligent, immortal. They can travel far by following the path of the rainbow, and swiftly by following the path of the sunray. They can make the winds and the thunderbolts work for them so that the earth is theirs to control

when they so wish. These masked ones instruct the insect people to cleanse themselves, and prepare to witness a ceremony.

Talking God and God of Fire place a buckskin on the ground. Upon it they place a white and a yellow ear of corn. Under each ear they place an eagle feather of like color. Over these they spread another buckskin. Then from the east, the wind blows between the buckskins, while each of the Holy People -- House God and Water Sprinkler, along with Talking God and God of Fire -- in moccasined feet walks four times around the objects so carefully placed on the ground. As they walk, the eagle feathers, whose tips protrude slightly from between the two buckskins, move.

When the Holy People finish walking, they lift the topmost buckskin. And lo! the ears of corn have disappeared. And in their place there lie a man and a woman, our most ancient ancestors. The wind has given them life: the very wind that gives us our breath: the life-giving wind at the tips of our fingers. Look carefully at your own fingertips. There you will see where the wind blew when it created your most ancient ancestors, First Man and First Woman.

In the quartet, the Fantasia alludes to events through the ejection from the first world. The Ode evokes the barren terrain of the second world, giving way to an ecological dialogue between the violins. The Scherzo section alternates playfulness with argumentation, its muted Trio section has a quality of lesson and ritual. The Rondo depicts the creation ceremony of First Man and First Woman, and features the sound of the Holy People's sacred footsteps.

*The telling is paraphrased from *Diné bahane' The Navajo Creation Story* by Paul Zolbrod, University of New Mexico Press, 1984, pages 35 - 51.

The image of Talking God:



Mask of *Hastséyalt'i* with collar of spruce-twigs.

From The Night Chant, a Navaho Ceremony, by Washington Matthews (1902).