

CURT CACIOPPO: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS



II. Coyoteway (*Ma' ijií hatáál*)

This second quartet in the series was composed in honor of my Navajo friend, collaborator and spiritual leader John Co'íí Cook, who invited me to explore with him the Coyoteway healing ceremony and its music. The result turned out to be a work in eight sections. In this respect, I may have been thinking of the octagonal structure of the hogan, the traditional Navajo house. The flow of the eight sections follows this basic outline:

Emanations from the underworld. So many of the old Navajo stories about coyote involve him visiting the underworld. Here we find him in an afflicted spiritual state, trapped in his own brooding.

Incantation. The structure of this section somehow reminds me of Navajo bead-work. On the first morning of the ceremony, the fire-making song repeats "By sternness...the Firestick stands upright; by sternness...you are brought back." The Long-life Happiness One is invoked – here the members of the quartet are asked to chant the appropriate phrases in Navajo.

Hogan Dance. Navajo belief is based on the interdependence between masculine and feminine energies. This section represents the masculine, and has a real "stomp" feeling to it. The design of the hogan is thought of as an inverted eagle's nest. But it is not just a house. It is a metaphor for the universe.

The swallows' colloquy. In one of the coyote stories, the protagonist keeps brashly pestering the birds to instruct him how to fly. They explain that he was not intended to fly, and that his persistence is causing them annoyance. They take council with each other about what to do.

Shawl Dance. This section represents feminine energy, and contains elements of rug designs that Navajo women execute so brilliantly. The second violin introduces a staccato repeated note rhythm, which was suggested to me in the sound of a Navajo silversmith's hammer tapping on the anvil.

Coyote's Leap. The story of coyote and the birds continues. He demands that they reveal their secrets, and threatens that if they do not share it, he will study them so closely as to discover it anyway on his own. The birds are

swirling above, represented by the violins and viola. The cello, in its high register, proclaims coyote's arrogant intentions. The birds have resolved in council to do away with coyote, and kill him with volleys of feather arrows. As happens so often in Navajo legends, the slain perpetrator is eventually restored and brought back to life, wiser and more virtuous as a result of his ordeal.

Fire Dance. Our coyote is a very slow learner, though. In another story, one which to me demonstrates the worst weaknesses of his character, he winds up burning his children to death in an effort to beautify them with spots like the deer children of whom he is jealous. After placing them in the fires, he dances, and sees from the distance that the children are smiling. Approaching them closely, he realizes in horror that their mouths have been charred away to expose their teeth, creating the illusion. They do not respond when he pokes at them – they are dead, he has murdered them. I always wondered where Mrs. Coyote was during this episode. The viola lets out her cries of lamentation.

Fortyniner. Navajos have many Round Dance or Circle Dance songs. These are almost always in what we would describe as triple meter. Often they remind me of the pan-tribal “fortyniner” songs (the name has nothing to do with the gold rush), also in 3, and accompanied by a swaggering quarter-note eighth-note beat. The final extended section presents a new dance song in this style, while bringing back all the previous themes and developing them, transforming them into an animated coda.

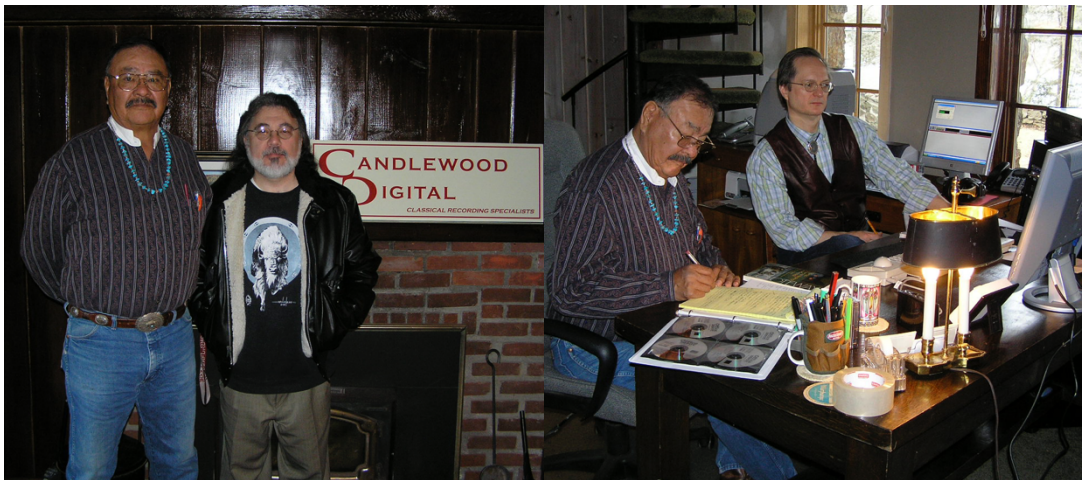


The ceremonial hogan in which the last performance of Ma' ijií hatáál was sung in winter of 1973. Piñon, Arizona, Upper Burnt Corn Valley, Navajo Reservation.

Cultural preservation

The chanter in that performance was Man with Palomino Horse, and the one sung over was Luke Cooke. Cooke's son, John Co'ii ("Johnny C.") Cooke was facilitator and interpreter for the recording and textual transcription of the ceremony made by Karl W. Luckert and published in his book Coyoteway: a Navajo Holyway Healing Ceremonial.

In the early 2000's, John became concerned that the tapes of the ceremonial music could no longer be accounted for. Attempts to retrieve them from the University of Northern Arizona archive where they had been housed had been unsuccessful. With the assistance of Curt Cacioppo, who re-established contact between Cooke and Luckert, the original collection of cassettes was located, a backup copy made, and a restoration/preservation project initiated. The result was a comprehensive 10 CD set of Coyoteway music (approximately 12 hours) as sung by Man with Palomino Horse, which was deposited for research purposes in the Quaker & Special Collections division of Magill (now Lutnick) Library at Haverford College in Pennsylvania (Rare Recordings SCAP 177, Cage 7R). Work on the project took place in the winter of 2007 at Candlewood Digital in Connecticut, under the technical guidance of chief engineer Richard Price.



Spiritual healing

A further product inspired by Coyoteway is the audiobook Healing the Coyote in Me by Cook and Owen D. Owens, which offers particularly to the mainstream Christian audience methods of restoring mental balance and physical vitality in one's life. By elucidating parallels between teachings both Indigenous and Biblical, the authors point the modern-day individual in the direction of right relationships and inner peace. Sponsored by Donna Auguste and the Leave a Little Room foundation, with Curt Cacioppo in consultation.



Ask about the workbook that pairs with this audio publication.