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Beyond the Four Hills, Aesthetics Panel

[MICHAEL MAULDIN · SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2017](#) 4 Reads

Panel: “New Mexico Landscapes in the Nonvisual Arts” American Society for Aesthetics, Rocky Mountain Division - Santa Fe, July, 2016

Foreword: Though musical gestures suggestive of shared physical phenomena populate all music, I won't discuss my use of them here. Rather, I share the narrative of how I became involved in trying to use my music to celebrate an environmental essence.

I've lived and written music in New Mexico for 40 years. Most of the pieces were inspired by its rugged beauty, ancient cultures and “spiritual” landscapes. I was drawn by its space, its light and its timelessness.

I grew up surrounded by the belief that nature was created—primarily for mankind to use and dominate, a “manifest destiny” for the whole planet. When I was young, it didn't occur to me to question such an entitlement. Instead I questioned myself—and nature. It took a lifetime to see that my early fascination with “magical” places, where the spirit of nature and the spirit of man seemed to meet with mutual reverence, was more than childish sentimentality. I now see it as child-like wisdom, an unpolluted trace of the still, small voice of “all that is.”

When I was eleven & twelve years old, my father—a Presbyterian minister in Dallas, Texas—brought our family to Ghost Ranch Conference Center for summertime seminars. Though we traveled over many Western states, my strongest attachment was to the Abiquiu area in northern New Mexico. The color and space of the land seemed to go through me and to open my mind. I composed short pieces on the piano in the convocation hall. On returning home I marveled at the music's expansiveness and color. I knew then that I wanted to live in a place like that.

Years later, after music study in various states, I acted on that desire by moving to New Mexico—with no job, no plan. I knew that adversity would play an important role in this paradise, but I also knew that harshness was part of its gift. The environmental essence I sensed here as a child included a timelessness that quickly put adversity into perspective.

The people I met here gently introduced me to the intriguing incongruity of the place—old with new, harshness with tenderness, tension with release. Since those are part of every creation, musical or otherwise, I thought New Mexico might be a great place to grow and to compose.

Fast-forward forty years to a recent trip to Chaco Canyon, where a young park ranger shared what was for me a new insight (even after much research) about one possible purpose of the grand cities of the ancient Puebloans. He acknowledged their descendants' celebration of sacred space, and of the “center-point” or “in between” place. But as we stood on the boulders of “threatening rock,” overlooking the remains of Pueblo Bonito's 700 rooms, he noted that the “south gap,” the ancient entrance to the canyon, was directly across from the great city. He imagined what effect, after a long trek over flat land, the first appearance of Bonito would have had on a youth such as himself.

Rather like the first sight of the United States Capitol, or the Statue of Liberty, it might have caused him to consider staying at this “melting pot,” to enjoy the combined efforts of various groups of people. Maybe they found it better to tolerate—even absorb—their differences, than to conquer and pillage.

When they left Chaco, they split into three main groups: Zuni, Hopi and Rio Grande Pueblos. The youth suggested that the groups may have been separate before their time together in the canyon. Perhaps during the several hundred years of Chaco's peak, the groups were attracted to a place, but also to an idea—a grand cooperative experiment. If so, the Chacoans were the quintessential Americans.

I now believe that when I first came to Chaco, I sensed a change from tribalism to universality, and a oneness with the cosmos, which led me—blind as I was—through my composing and teaching. When I subtitled my orchestral work, "Fajada Butte," with the words, "An Epiphany," I chose the phrase for its literary meaning, which the dictionary says is "a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something." The discovery of the amazing Sun-Dagger marker on the butte was, for all of us, a sudden insight into the depth of the Chacoans' child-like—yet powerful—belief in the movement of the cosmos through randomness toward order and wholeness. <https://soundcloud.com/michael-maul...>

Even before this, I had begun to try to infuse my life and my music with the essence of the land and its people. The first result of this effort was "Three New Mexico Landscapes for Clarinet and Piano," written in 1975 for a recital my wife and I gave. The first movement, "Enchanted Mesa," was inspired by a visit to the legendary mesa across from Acoma Pueblo, or "Sky City," as it's sometimes called. With my hands and feet in the hand-and-toe-holds, I felt "in touch" with the essence of the land and the people who lived and died there centuries before.

I decided there was something about this place that warranted its being celebrated in music. If landscape artists in New Mexico could move people (maybe heal them) with realistic paintings that were luminous, even numinous—like the place itself—perhaps composers here could write music that was more narrative and accessible, less abstract and reactionary. That need not make it saccharine or shallow.

The clarinet piece won a competition, leading to a Kennedy Center performance in 1976. Here's a clip from the first movement, "Enchanted Mesa," the original home of Acoma Pueblo <https://soundcloud.com/michael-maul...> My goal was to write music that was absorbing, that had some intrigue and spice in it, but which also respected human convention, and which would bear repetition.

In 1980, a work was commissioned by the state and national music teachers associations. I taught music all year at a prep school, and I had no time or energy to compose. When summer break came, I sketched a few themes, but they were false-

starts. My wife took our two-year-old son on a trip to visit relatives, so I trekked to Chaco for the first time, seeking inspiration.

The ancient Puebloans' great accomplishments radiated from this desolate mecca—beautiful cities and masonry; intricate artwork; straight, paved roads; a far-flung trade network, and an overriding fascination with the cosmos. It seemed as if they tried to bring order into their challenging environment by fitting even the layout of their cities to the cycles of the sun and moon.

Composers sometimes lament periods when we aren't composing, as if that's wasted time. But in this land, nothing is wasted—not even the brave green of the plant that bears no fruit. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mich...> As if in a reaction to not having written all year, I returned from the canyon and wrote feverishly for days, finishing the first movement and sketching the rest of “Voices from Chaco: Concertino for Piano and Woodwind Quintet.” It won a national contest, for which I was named Composer of the Year in 1980. I worked hard and used a lot of craft, but somehow I felt I didn't fully deserve the honor. I was blessed with “flow,” and I was most grateful for it. The piece was written to give talented young pianists a showpiece with a small instrumental accompaniment, to make it easier to assemble the forces needed.

Here's a clip from the first movement, “Invocation and Response.”

<https://soundcloud.com/michael-maul...> While working on it, I dubbed the first theme the “silent spring” motive. It seemed to fit the tragic tale of remarkable people who left their beloved home. Drought and social/religious change may have triggered the exodus. We may never know all the reasons for Chaco's abandonment, but I sensed that it held valuable lessons for us.

The second theme, heard first in the oboe, I call my “transcendental” motive. I've used forms of it in several pieces since. The repeating descending pattern is a half-step and major third. Though the melody descends, the harmonic motion ascends through the circle-of-fifths, converging upward and downward forces. In “The House at Otowi Bridge,” published by UNM Press, Peggy Pond Church said of the Jemez

Mountains, where the Chacoans cut the beams for their cities, “there are certain places in the earth where the great powers that move between earth and sky are closer and more available than others.”

The last musical example for today’s panel is a three-minute choral work entitled, “Introduction of the Child to the Cosmos.” <https://soundcloud.com/michael-maul...> The text, a Native American poem, was shared by my close friend, poet Robert Suefert, before the birth of my first child. Bob and I talked often about the Native American's desire to make his heartbeat match that of the universe. The text so perfectly matched my hopes for my son, that I quickly set it to music:

Oh ye Sun, Moon, Stars, all ye that move in the heavens, I bid you hear me! Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye I implore. Make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the first hill!

Oh ye Winds, Clouds, Rain, Mist, all ye that move in the air, I bid you hear me! Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye I implore. Make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the second hill!

Oh ye Hills, Valleys, Rivers, Lakes, Trees, Grasses, all ye of the earth, I bid you hear me! Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye I implore. Make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the third hill!

Oh all ye of the heavens, Oh all ye of the air, oh all ye of the earth; I bid you all to hear me! Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye all I implore. Make its path smooth that it may travel beyond the four hills!

One of the three tribes that left Chaco, the Hopi (known as the peaceful ones, or the hopeful ones), has a prophecy about fifth-world emergence that may give added meaning to the poem's closing prayer, asking that the new life be allowed to travel beyond the four hills:

“There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid; they will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly. Know the river has its destination. We must let go

of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water. See who is in there with you and celebrate. Gather yourselves! Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary; all that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.” --Hopi Bear Clan