

Brief Report

## Healing Ceremony: Perspectives on the Music by Composer Marc Neikrug and Music Therapist

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**Suzanne Hanser:** I met Marc Neikrug when he and Dr. Cheryl Willman decided to host a special conference in honor of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Maestro Neikrug is the Artistic Director of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and Dr. Willman is Director and CEO of the University of New Mexico Cancer Center. I was fortunate to be invited to join the Scientific Organizing Committee of this *Symposium on Music, the Brain, Medicine and Wellness*, which brought together distinguished scientists, physicians, musicians, researchers, healthcare professionals, and music therapists in the summer of 2012. It was then that I learned about the *Healing Ceremony*, a symphony that Maestro Neikrug had composed to honor Dr. Willman, and dedicate the University of New Mexico Cancer Center.

I had heard Marc Neikrug's music, and knew his renown as composer, conductor, pianist, and music director. I was also familiar with his theatre productions, *Through Roses* and *Los Alamos*. Maestro Neikrug wrote the music and text for *Through Roses*, which later became a feature film, and after being produced in eleven languages in fifteen countries, is now housed permanently in the Yad Vashem Archives, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. *Los Alamos* is an anti-nuclear opera with music, story and libretto by Mr. Neikrug. It spans 2000 years of the Los Alamos site, from its ancient Pueblo Indian roots into the future. So it appears that Marc Neikrug moves his audiences with significant social messages as well as beautiful music.

His discography led me to believe that there was more to the *Healing Ceremony* than the sounds and script. Scored for mezzo soprano, baritone, and symphony orchestra with percussion imitating Pueblo drums and rattles, Mr. Neikrug's description reads as follows:

*“Healing Ceremony is intended for a broad audience. Its purpose is to provide listeners with an experience that can help people faced with serious health issues, and those surrounding them, to find balance and calm. Music’s powerful influence on the human body is being acknowledged in scientific studies all over the world. Healing Ceremony combines indigenous rituals with the beauty of music to induce a state of tranquility and equilibrium, creating receptiveness to healing.”*

As a music therapist, my ears perk up when I read, “receptiveness to healing.” Because my work is based on the uniqueness of each individual’s response to music, I question the assumption that music can be composed to prepare someone for healing. But since visiting Santa Fe, I had been studying the ways of the North American Indians in my quest to understand the potential healing role of music in ancient healing rituals and contemporary practice. In order to learn the vocabulary of these cultures, I needed to suspend my dependence on scientific evidence, and be open to new ways of thinking – new for me, but not for the members of these cultures. I was learning how to be holistic in my approach, and hold the natural world in greater esteem. Several of the sources I found spoke to the prominence of tradition, nature and spirit in practices, chants, dances, music, and ceremonies surrounding Indian life, and helped me appreciate the derivation of *Healing Ceremony* reflected below:

*It was the wind that gave them life. It is the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to blow we die. In the skin of our fingers we can see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created.*

- Washington Matthews, *Navajo Legends*, 1897 [1]

*There are four sacred paths to health:*

*North: The healing spirit runs through the body*

*East: The healing power of relationships*

*West: Restoring healing balance (Native healers)*

*South: The healing life cycle – from birth to death to the next world [2]*

*You have given different ways to different people all over the world.*

*As we know, this earth is round like a wagon wheel.  
In a wagon wheel, all the spokes are set into the center.*

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Suzanne Hanser, EdD, MT-BC, Berklee College of Music, 1140 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02215, E-Mail: shanser@berklee.edu | COI statement: The authors declared that no financial support was given for the writing of this article. The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. *Healing Ceremony* is published on the eOne label. [Project Website] [Streaming Examples]

*The circle of the wheel is round and all spokes come from the center,  
and the center is You, Acbadadea, the Maker of All Things Above.  
Each spoke can be considered as a different religion of the world which has been given by You to different people and different races.  
All of the people of the world are on the rim of the wheel and they must follow one of the spokes to the center.  
The different paths have been given to us but they all lead to the same place.*

- Thomas Yellowtail, Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief [3]

I had the good fortune of meeting Marc Neikrug's wife, Dolly Naranjo, a Santa Clara Pueblo potter who sculpts magnificent pieces that awaken her native culture through form and color. She was kind enough to allow me to touch the clay she meticulously blends from her native earth, and see the washes of indigenous hues that she applies. I was privileged to learn from her wisdom, which prepared me more fully to understand the origins of *Healing Ceremony*.

**Marc Neikrug:** The *Healing Ceremony* [4] sprang from several related wells. Initially requested by Dr. Willman as a dedication ceremony for the Cancer Center, I thought extensively about the state of someone diagnosed with a serious disease, not necessarily cancer. What would you do if you knew that something was very wrong with how your body was functioning? I thought about what an enlightened person would do---a kind of self-induced therapeutic meditation of sorts.

I remembered one of Dolly's sisters, who had had cancer, and instead of chemotherapy, she went every day to a particular spot along the river and meditated, trying to have her body "flow" like the water. And she seemed to have cured herself. I believe my sister-in-law found a way to self-meditate in a consistent, long-term way that allowed her to influence the way her own body regulated. Through great self will, she made herself flow. She always spoke of trying to be like the river.

So I thought a great deal about the sheer power of music, if we really listened to it. I knew that I could write music that could calm and induce a sense of peace. And I knew that in and of itself, that should slow down one's pulse and heart rate. I thought that this would put one in a better state to receive therapy. I believe that we are not only aurally influenced by music, but actually genetically programmed to react biologically to it. I think that rhythm, harmony, and structure all can make our bodies tranquil, relaxed, receptive and centered.

Then I turned to Pueblo culture. Every ceremony I know is concerned with balance. Even the architectural layout of each Pueblo is concerned with this – there are always four plazas that are oriented in the four directions. There are sacred 'places' that radiate out in these four directions. So

there are spots one mile and five miles away, and further out in each direction.

Each dance ceremony includes a rotation of dances taking place in those plazas – four times in each plaza, in each direction. In other words, 4 x 4 x 4, equaling 64 times, which by the way, takes all day. And only when the dance has been done in that entire permutation is the ceremony 'complete' and everything (in the world!!!) is put in balance.

The structure of my piece became two sets of four pieces. The first is the ritualistic sound of the four 'directional' pieces: North, West, South and East. The order is also Pueblo style, with East as the last one, since the sun rises there – it therefore signifies rebirth. The listener should get a sense of being 'centered' from hearing and contemplating the four direction pieces. Interspersed with these is the second four-piece set, which is a contemplation of elements. As in the case of my sister-in-law, water is clearly a very important part of our bodies. Air, likewise, is a constant functioning part of our bodies. Earth is what we need to feel completely attached to, grounded on, and a part of. Lastly, I equated fire with love. I read some statistics regarding the well-being of patients who had good family and friend support versus those who didn't, and it became very clear how much that love meant to healing.

With this structure in place, I then turned to my own true source of communicating, and that is the music. So I knew that the directional pieces needed to be ritualistic, somewhat hypnotic, chant-like and easily recognized. As they reoccur four times, they would set a kind of 'base' area as well as reorient one into one's own center. They also would set a grounding tempo to which I believed the pulse would gravitate.

The Air music needed to be light, lilting and uplifting. I found that a Sicilian rhythm really worked for me. I structured a melodic contour that I could come back to later, as I had developed a plan for how the whole piece might come together at the end.

Earth needed to be the opposite – heavy, grounding in its harmonic structure, and fulfilling by itself. So I worked out a basic harmonic sequence which would serve my ending, as well.

Water was very elusive. I listened to lots of what we consider to be "water" music – Ravel, Debussy, etc., and what surprised me was that none of it actually sounds like what water sounds like. It all sounds like flowing and gushing – it's about the motion. So I found a kind of filigree-patterned passage work which fit.

And then for the finale – fire, love, and the culmination of the whole meditation – the closing of the circle, meant to leave one in a state of calm, relaxation, openness, but also fulfillment. I used the rich harmonic base of "Earth," along with the melodic Sicilian of "Air," and the filigree of "Water," all adding to a rich heartfelt music of "Love."

All musical forms, whether it is song form, sonata or rondo, serve the same purpose – bringing us back to a place that is known, within a shape that we can access, that makes sense. It is not an intellectual sense – it is also a physical sense

of recognition, and there is an emotional feeling of recognizing something that was once heard.

The most important but subtle Pueblo reference is to the natural elements – flower children, cloud people etc. This collectively helps in creating a strong sense of being part of nature. Balance in this piece means feeling a connection to the earth through gravity, and a sense of being centered in our solar plexus as well as feeling open and receptive. The center refers to the Cancer Center and any institution, as well as it might refer to one's home or family. It can be anything that relates to a healing, nurturing place. It also relates to one's own center or core. The cardinal directions also stem from the center. The purpose of thinking about direction is not to think about going outside, but to be in the center. It's not only about being in the center—it is about finding one's own center within that center.

The final words are the conclusion of many Navajo ceremonies, and refer to the beauty of completing the circle of the ceremony that aligns everything in balance. The musical finale seeks to do the same, 'completing' the structural, harmonic, and melodic expectations that were set up at the beginning of the piece. At the same time, the elements come together in the moment to give a sense of fulfillment.

We can teach people how to meditate, but all they have to do is experience music. There is direct impact that is more basic than anything else. I have witnessed a lot of people of very different backgrounds, from musically limited, to great performers, listening to this piece. The reaction is fairly identical – a sense of being focused, relaxed, balanced, but also fulfilled and content. The thought I always had starting out was: If I can manage to reach people, they can absorb good medicine, as opposed to starting the process in a panicky state. I think the music succeeds in accessing a deep emotional place. I'm quite certain the end state is conducive to healing.

**Suzanne Hanser:** Listening to *Healing Ceremony* inspires me. In my work as a music therapist, I continually seek new information about the latest advances, technologies, and innovations to inform my practice. I hear new music, and ponder its relevance to human emotions, mood and state of mind. I read the research, and struggle to absorb the neurological, immunological, and physiological models that underlie the response to music. I am overwhelmed by the abundance of the information available to me, and the magnitude of the rate at which new findings are communicated. The more I learn, however, the more I am in awe of the ancient teachings of those whose beliefs and practices have guided generations of musicians and healers. Forefathers and foremothers who sang lullabies, chanted affirmations, meditated, danced, and brought forth healing in natural and spiritual ways are once again guiding contemporary perspectives on music therapy. I would contend that composers like Marc Neikrug who bear witness to the potential of ancient intelligence and knowledge in informing today's music and music therapy practices, give us pause to consider the impact of music on healing and question the elements that contribute to healing music. Maestro

Neikrug's stirring musical contribution welcomes listeners into the private and sacred world of North American Indians. I urge readers of this text to hear *Healing Ceremony* with open ears, hearts and minds to determine its impact on their own bodies, psyches, and spirits.

#### References

1. Highwater J. Ritual of the wind: North American Indian ceremonies, music, and dance. New York, NY: Viking Press; 1977: frontispiece.
2. Peate WF. Listening with your heart: Lessons from Native America. Tucson, AZ: Rio Nuevo Publishers; 2003.
3. Fitzgerald MO, Fitzgerald J. Indian spirit: Revised and enlarged. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom; 2006:xii.
4. See original libretto by second author at the conclusion of this article.

#### Biographical Statements

Suzanne Hanser, EdD, MT-BC is Founding Chair of the Music Therapy Department at Berklee College of Music and Past President of both the National Association of Music Therapy in the US and the World Federation of Music Therapy. She is also a Founding Member of IAMM, and currently serves as Secretary.

Marc Neikrug is Musical Director of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and a renown composer, pianist, conductor, and music director. His discography includes symphonic and chamber works that have been performed by some of the most notable orchestras and ensembles, and his works for theatre, *Through Roses*, and *Los Alamos*, have achieved great acclaim.

#### Appendix A: Lyrics of *Healing Ceremony*

##### North

Soft clouds drifting from the North  
 Soft blue clouds crossing limpid skies, floating gently  
 We, who've been sitting on flowers, gather here  
 Here in this place  
 Here in the center  
 We feel the soft blue clouds  
 Drifting softly from the North  
 To this center place, this healing place  
 Our children are here in this healing place  
 Our mothers and fathers are here in this healing place  
 All our people are here in this healing place  
 Feel the center, feel the heart of this place

##### Air

Air, breath of life  
 We breathe in the breath of blossoms and flowers  
 We breathe in the breath of meadows and trees  
 The breath of granite and mountains  
 We breathe in the breath of mist and dew  
 And adding our moist breath to theirs  
 We merge our breath with that of all things  
 We breathe in the spirit, absorbing it,  
 adding strength to our bodies  
 We add our breath to the world, uniting us to the spirit of life  
 The life breath of all things flows into us, through us, out of us

Blessing us and giving us strength

**West**

Gentle breezes wafting from the West  
 Red light glowing from the West  
 Pink, purple, orange splash across the sky  
 We, the children of falling dew, bask in the twilight  
 Radiant embers bathing us in warmth  
 Feel the warmth in this healing place  
 Feel the heat of the waning sun  
 Feel this haven nurture and heal  
 Nurture and heal

**Earth**

Feel the earth like a tree,  
 roots grasping deeply into the dark, rich soil  
 Holding steadily, arm branches embracing the sky  
 Showered by the splendor of radiant sunlight  
 Adorned by flowering blossoms and fruit  
 Stand tall like a tree  
 Stand deep and majestic  
 Let gentle rain nourish you  
 Let the earth's force surge up through your roots  
 Feel the earth like a tree

**South**

Thunder and lightning arrive from the South  
 Thunder and lightning flowing towards us  
 Towards this center place  
 Thunder and lightning arrive from the South  
 Their power comes to join us here  
 We, the children of blossoms and pollen  
 We absorb the power thunder and lightning give  
 Thunder and lightning arrive from the South  
 Here to this haven  
 To this healing place

**Water**

Water-Water-Water  
 Bubbly sparkling rain fed streams  
 Splashing over stones and cliffs  
 Flowing swiftly, cool and clear  
 Rushing to the vast blue sea  
 Gushing currents, power surging  
 Bubbling, sparkling, rushing, pounding  
 Drink-Drink-Drink  
 Drink the healing pure clear water  
 Feel it pulsing through your body  
 Cleansing, purifying  
 Bubbling sparkling rushing pounding  
 Swiftly surging flowing clear  
 Water-Water-Water

**East**

Pure white radiance rises in the East  
 Breaking dawn birds glide towards us

White wings, blue wings, yellow wings,  
 Pure white radiance reborn rises in the East, luminous  
 A new day embraces us, children of the Earth,  
 children of the Sun  
 Blessing us with pollen  
 Blessing us with dew and blossoms  
 Here in the center  
 In this healing place

**Fire/Love**

Love is a tree with eternal roots  
 Breathe in the scent of love's blossoms  
 Love is a river, flowing endlessly  
 Feel it wash over you  
 Open your heart to the fire of love  
 Blaze with love's flaming splendor  
 Open your heart to mothers and fathers  
 Open your heart to children and grandchildren  
 Feel the spirit of love surround you  
 Bask in the blanket of love's embrace  
 Open your heart to the fountain of love  
 Love all things in glory  
 May you walk in beauty  
 May you walk always in beauty  
 With dew about your feet may you walk  
 On the trail with pollen may you walk  
 With beauty before you may you walk  
 With beauty behind you may you walk  
 With beauty above you may you walk  
 With beauty below you may you walk  
 It is finished in beauty  
 It is finished in beauty