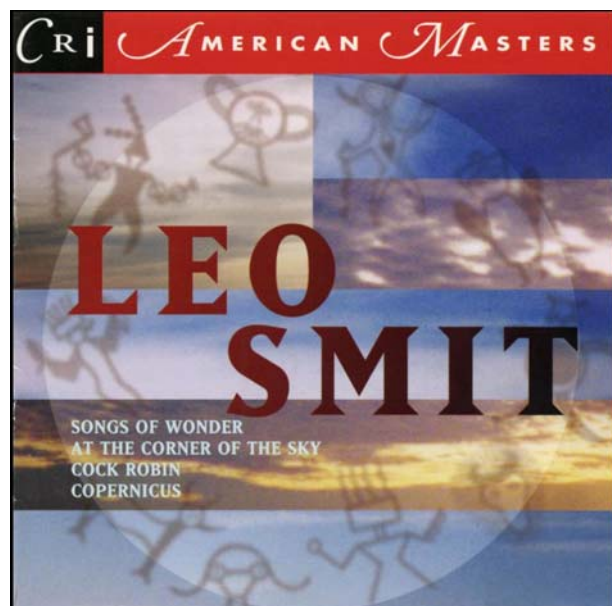


Leo Smit (1921-1999)



<i>At the Corner of the Sky</i> (1976)	(15:22)
Poems of North American Indians	
1. I Vision Event 1 (Sioux): fierce, tense .	(1:49)
2. II Lullaby (Tsimshian): serenely	(2:36)
3. III Vision Event 2 (Eskimo)	(1:05)
4. IV Mourning Song (Tsimshian): slow, moody, impulsive	(1:45)
5. V Animal Songs	(4:06)
Turkey (Navajo): raucous Deer (Yuma): slow, hesitant Coyote (Nez Perce): furiously Wolf (Sioux): mysterious, brooding	
6. VI Vision Event 3 (Eskimo): fierce and tense	(1:12)

7. VII Song of an Initiate (Huichol): fervently	(2:49)
Leo Smit, speaker; Men and Boys Choir of St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo, NY; Henrik Svitzer, flute; Nora Post, oboe; Frederick Burgomaster, choirmaster, conductor	
<i>Songs of Wonder</i> (1976)	(4:32)
Poems by Beth Frost	
8. I Untold Wonders	(1:15)
9. II The Horizons of Time	(1:09)
10. III A Magic Starry Night	(2:08)
Martha Herr, soprano; Leo Smit, piano	
11. <i>Cock Robin</i> (1979)	(13:22)
Rachel Lewis, soprano; Laurence Trott, piccolo; Jan Williams, percussion	
<i>Copernicus: Narrative and Credo</i> (1973)	(24:11)
Text by Fred Hoyle and Leo Smit	
12. I Introduction	(1:00)
13. II The Birth	(1:51)
14. III The Uncle (Lucas Watzelrode)	(1:26)
15. IV Cracow Student Song	(1:58)
16. V Columbus West	(1:50)
17. VI Italian Madrigal	(1:12)
18. VII Sorrow & Solitude	(1:39)
19. VIII The Teutonic War	(3:55)
20. IX Papal Disputation	(0:53)
21. X The Book	(0:33)
22. XI The Death	(1:31)
23. XII Laudemus	(1:46)
24. XIII Credo	(4:37)
Sir Fred Hoyle, narrator	

Total playing time: 57:48

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Notes

I met **Leo Smit** through Aaron Copland, who always referred to his friend and colleague as “dear Leo.” Copland was not only perceptive about the quality of the man, but admiring of his fine musicianship and extraordinary talents. Smit’s sweetness becomes lyricism in his compositions. Another basic characteristic, a sense of fun, results in pieces with rhythmic energy and vitality. If there was ever a case for music sounding like its composer, here you have it!

Another of Leo Smit’s talents is the shaping of programs that are unusual and yet designed to delight audiences. Although he often performs the music of his American colleague-composers, Smit’s dedication to music of all periods and places reflects an acute awareness of the continuity of the art. Leo Smit as composer has sometimes been eclipsed by this strong reputation as performer and presenter. While not uncommon in the music world, it is unfortunate when the talent for composing is as big as this one.

“My first ballet, *Virginia sampler* [1947],” Smit has said, “was written in Aaron’s loft, which I rented when he went off to Europe.” And it was Copland who introduced Leo to

Leonard Bernstein, who became another life-long friend. They played each other’s music for decades. Smit has been a constant presence on the chaotic scene of contemporary American music. What a treat it is to have the opportunity to hear his chamber works, which belong right up there with those of his buddies.

—Vivian Perlis

At the Corner of the Sky

I composed *At the Corner of the Sky* to celebrate the spiritual example of the ancient American people who inhabited this continent for many thousands of years. Though the way of life of the American Indian has been virtually destroyed by the republic which now commemorates its 200th birthday, the profound religious beliefs and ceremonies of the first Americans still live in their myths, poetry, songs, and dances.

The three *Vision Events* define the tripartite, though continuous, form of this work. They also reveal the nature, source, and technique for locating inspiration. The first *Vision Event* (Sioux) invokes the release of emotion in a remote and isolat-

ed place. This is followed by a lullaby (Tsimshian), telling why a little girl was born. The second *Vision Event* (Eskimo) describes hypnosis, which can result when a simple act is carried to repetitive extremes. This is followed by *Mourning Song* (Tsimshian), an outpouring of depressed, broken, emotions wrenched from the bottom of the human abyss. Next come four *Animal Songs*—Turkey (Navajo), Deer (Yuma), Coyote (Nez Perce) and Wolf (Sioux). *Vision Event 3* dares us to share the ultimate experience, to face death, and to feel its chill terror, then to tell what we have seen. This is followed by the *Song of an Initiate* (Huichol), who climbs the blue staircase to heaven, where the roses are singing, where the gods are waiting, but hears nothing, hears only silence. *At the Corner of the Sky* was commissioned by, and is dedicated to, St. Paul's Cathedral and its music director Frederick Burgomaster."

—Leo Smit, 1977

Songs of Wonder

Composed during the summer of 1975, which I spent in Santa Fe, New Mexico, near the Indian pueblos of the Rio Grande, the brooding Jemez mountains, and the clefted Sangre de Cristo range. In this ancient and sacred land of ceremonial dance and song, I received several poems by Beth Frost, written when she was twelve years old. I found the twin themes of nature and metaphysics (so characteristic of young children and old cultures, only to be exchanged in time for the less poetic subjects of man and physics) in perfect harmony with the extraordinarily beautiful landscape, and chose three poems for the song cycle, all of which are suffused with the sense of awe and wonder. They are *Untold Wonders*, *The Horizons of Time*, and *A Magic Starry Night*, set for high voice and piano. *Songs of Wonder* was composed for Lynne Milstein, who, with Beth and all the sisters of Astraea ("the starry maid"), understands the lines of a great Wintu poet: "The stars streaming in the sky are my hair / The round rim of the earth which you see / Binds my starry hair."

—Leo Smit, 1977

Cock Robin

Cock Robin (1979), for soprano, piccolo, and percussion, is a set of eleven variations on two contrasting motifs, stated in the first verse of the famous nursery rhyme: "Who killed Cock Robin? / I, said the sparrow, / with my bow and arrow. / I killed Cock Robin." Lists of things make excellent texts for musical settings, such as, for example, Leporello's catalogue-aria from *Don Giovanni*, and Cole Porter's *You're the Top*. The objects inhabiting *Cock Robin* include:

a fly, who saw him die; a fish, who caught his blood; a beetle, who'll be the parson; a lark, who'll be the clerk; a dove, who'll be the chief mourner; a kite, who'll carry the coffin; a thrush, who'll sing a psalm; a bull (finch), who'll toll the bell; and "all the birds of the air, / who fell a-sighing and a-sobbing, / "when they heard the bell toll / for poor Cock Robin."

In writing for the piccolo as a solo instrument, I decided to treat it as a normal member of the woodwind group, with good family connections, generally bright personality, and having an exact range of attacks. The family it graces is, of course, the flute, which includes the avuncular bass-flute, the maternal alto-flute, and the flirtatious, cousinly grande-flute, the entire clan claiming a territory of some five octaves. The troublesome problems of playing certain kinds of figures on the piccolo has guaranteed the unpredictable and necessary sounds I hoped for. An example of this is the *Thrush* variation: here, the difficult descending tremolos and flutterings, flashing through the air, create unexpected coughs,

wheezes, whistles, overtones, and other unidentifiable bird noises. This brief blast is my tribute to that spectacular avian singer, the veery-thrush.

I have given the piccolo a two-part cannon in the *Rook* variation, and have also combined the piccolo with the vibraphone in the *Bull* (finch) variation, making a nimbus to the tolling bells. The voice carries the varied melodic line with considerable fidelity to the themes announced in the opening. The percussion part employs a large number of instruments, from pitched anvils (Owl), to a small wind machine for the opening and closing episodes. *Cock Robin* was commissioned by Laurence Trott through the Piccolo Society.

—Leo Smit, 1977

Copernicus: Narrative and Credo

Commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences, through the generosity of the Copernicus Society of America (Edward J. Peszek, president), to commemorate the Copernicus quincentenary. It was given its first performance on April 22, 1973, in the Academy's auditorium in Washington, D.C., composer and author participating. The piece is scored for narrator, mixed chorus, and an ensemble of nine instruments: flute/piccolo, clarinet, bassoon/contrabassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, viola, contrabass, and bells. The musical sources of the works are drawn from the little-known but highly-developed music of medieval and renaissance Poland.

The text and music of *Copernicus* fall within twelve sections:

1. *Introduction* ("From the Dark Ages onward") explodes over a few shattered notes on the "Broken-note Signal" of the Trumpeter of Cracow.
2. *The Birth* ("The birth of a new child"). This chorus was born of the inspired madrigal *Oezy me mile*.
3. *The Uncle* ("Lucas was a tornado of a man") acknowledges the sturdy two-voice Cracow scholars' song, *Breve regnum* (1430), as the motivating force.
4. *Cracow Student Song* ("Our rulers work day and night") quotes the entire melody of the University of Cracow's anthem, *Laude Mater Polonia*, the trombone leading the ironic parade.
5. *Columbus West* ("Round; turn; spin; whirl") utilizes a fragment by the 15th Century Italian composer Tromboncino.
6. *Italian Madrigal* ("Non mi piango, non lamento"—no more tears and lamentations) is based on the subtly-syncopated satirical song from the Zamosc Songbook (c. 1558).
7. *Sorrow and Solitude* ("Copernicus was suddenly alone") seeks consolation in the composer's own harmonies.
8. *The Teutonic War* ("The storm clouds of war were gathering") calls upon the Trumpeter of Cracow to resist the German invader.
9. *Papal Disputation* ("Quod omnibus," "Sic," "Quodlibet," "Non") fuses an argument for four rhythmic patterns, each in a different tempo. The book ("De revolutionibus orbium caelestium: Libri VI") is illuminated by the interval E-G#.
11. *The Death* ("To the citizens of Frombork") releases the dominance of the musical art of ancient Poland, allowing the composer to reflect on a theme of his own.
12. *Laudemus* ("So let us praise a man") pays homage to another unknown Polish composer of the 16th Century, whose organ Chorale and Prelude *Hail Hierarchy* is recomposed to praise a man and an age, leading to the concluding *Credo* ("I believe in one world"). The composer takes sole responsibility.

—Leo Smit, 1973

Born in Philadelphia in 1921 and living over a Chinese laundry, I migrated first to Cincinnati, following my father, violinist with Fritz Reiner; to Moscow at the age of eight with my mother, where I studied with Dmitri Kabalevsky (who taught me *adagio*); then via a Curtis Institute scholarship to New York City, and Isabelle Vengerova (who taught me *legato*), and José Iturbi (who taught me *forte*); Nicolas Nabokov, who taught me music, and ordered my first composition (my father by now with Arturo Toscanini at NBC); Igor Stravinsky, who rehearsed me as pianist, at age fifteen, in three of his ballets for George Balanchine's American Ballet; and Aaron Copland, who freed my lingering musical inhibitions, and who conducted my *Capriccio for String Orchestra* so beautifully one lovely afternoon at the Ojai (CA) festival. Then Valerie Bettis, who danced to my music (*Virginia sampler, Yerma*), lifting it off the ground; an afternoon with Béla Bartók, when I played Schumann, Debussy, and his *Mikrokosmos*, and he brought me a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice, with a rare smile; the golden years in Rome with the high-spirited companionship of Alexei Haieff, Harold Shapero, and Lukas Foss; later in California, drawn into the galactic mind of Fred Hoyle, who guided me down the Grand Canyon ("Even Bartók cannot compete with nature's stridency," I overheard him saying to the canyon),

and who taught me some of the facts of matter in a great and subtle masterpiece, *The Intelligent Universe*; the profound poets, Theodore Roethke (who asked me for the "poop on Mozart"), W. H. Auden (who had the poop on Mozart), and Anthony Hecht (who loved the poop on Mozart); Frank Brown, whose vast knowledge and dramatic gifts brought the ancient Roman world to life; Paul Pascal, who translated amorous Ovid, and bawdy Martial, for my private pleasure, and Naomi Pascal, who taught me how to write English (I already knew how not to); the painters Jennings Tofel, who gave me drawing lessons when I was five; Seymour Drumlevitch and Harriet Greif, who allowed me to watch how pictures are painstakingly and miraculously made; and Eugene Berman, who mentally drew me as a pianist-centaur (did he know that Liszt had been so described?); Leonard Bernstein, who set a high-jump record while conducting the climax of my *Second Symphony*; Mary Goodwin, and her friends from the Taos pueblo, singing, dancing, and drumming under the New Mexican night sky filled with an infinity of cold, clear stars; and Emily Dickinson, who has been running my life for the past ten years, and inspiring me to write songs to eighty-three of her stupendous poems.

—Leo Smit (April, 1999)

Production Notes

CD digitally re-mastered by Darcy Proper, engineer at Sony Music Studios, New York, NY.

from CRI/SD 370:

At the Corner of the Sky recorded March 1977

Songs of Wonder recorded January 1977

Produced by Carter Harman; original recording financially assisted by St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo, NY.

From Spectrum SR131

Cock Robin; recorded in 1981, recording engineers: Vincent Morette, Robert Grotke, Stephen Bradley.

From Desto DS7178

Copernicus; recorded in New York City 1973.

All works published by Carl Fischer (ASCAP).

Cover design: Bernie Hallstein;

Interior design: Gwen Deely

CRI production manager: Allison Wolf