

**The Flute Music of G. Wiley Smith  
and Its Cultural Inspiration**

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## The Flute Music of Grace Wiley-Smith and Its Cultural Inspiration

The flute music of Oklahoma composer Grace Wiley Smith shows the influence of her Native American Muscogee Creek culture balanced with a devotion to her Christian faith. Smith's works have been performed throughout the United States by high school, university, and professional flutists. *Momis Komet* for Flute and Piano (2001) was premiered at the 2001 National Flute Association Convention in Dallas by Smith's daughter, Andrea. *Winter Moon* (1996), *Eagles Leave No Path* (1999), *Where Rivers End* (2000), and *A Distant Dream* (1995) were all performed at previous NFA conventions. *A Distant Dream* is included in the *Contemporary Anthology of Music by Women*, Indiana University Press, 1996, and in the *National Flute Association Repertoire Guide*. *Whisper on the Land* is included in the National Flute Association Collection at the University of Arizona's library and *The New Plains Review*, University of Central Oklahoma, 1986.

The influence of the Native American flute, readily apparent in Smith's music, is but one component of Smith's compositional voice. Further communication with Smith and her daughter, Andrea, reveals a combination of Christian *and* Native American influences that guided the composition of these works.<sup>1, 2</sup> Religion and hymn singing have long been an important part of Muscogee Creek Nation culture and that continues today. The Germanic sense of spiritual expression found in hymn singing and its relationship to functional harmony form the backdrop of this paper. Native American flute music with its more linear orientation is then explored.<sup>3</sup> These two avenues

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Grace Wiley-Smith.

<sup>2</sup> Interview, Andrea Smith.

<sup>3</sup> Payne, Richard W., *The Native American Plains Flute* (Oklahoma City: Toubat Trails Publishing Co., 1999), p. 49-52.

converge in the music of Grace Wiley Smith as we witness the European-based musical heritage of Christianity meld with Native American aesthetics.

### *Smith's Life and Works*

In 1946, Grace Wiley Smith was born to Harmon Wiley, a full-blood Muscogee Creek Indian, and his wife, Anna Lee Snider, a white woman. Harmon and his two younger brothers grew up in a boarding school in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, where they were not allowed to use their native language. As each boy reached 5<sup>th</sup> grade, they joined the white students at the local public school, but were still required to live at the boarding school. Their mother, Melissa Wiley, moved to a home provided through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. the boys visited on weekends. All three Wiley sons grew up to marry white women.

Harmon and Anna Lee, both strong Christians, brought their four children up in the English-speaking Baptist Church in Sapulpa, Oklahoma. Andrea, Grace's daughter, describes her grandparents as "true prayer warriors." She remembers Harmon as a "soldier for Christ" and a great encourager of others.<sup>4</sup> Smith recalls visiting her own grandmother's church, Little Cussetts, and hearing hymns in the Muscogee language. This Baptist church served the Native population and was designed to replicate the stomp ground. Arbors were included and the door facing east was left open to await the coming of Christ. The men and women sat on opposite sides of the room. A cow's horn, similar to the Jewish *shofar*, was used to signal the beginning of the worship service.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, Andrea Smith.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, G. Wiley Smith.

In this atmosphere of devotion to Christian moral truths, Grace grew into adulthood, eventually attending the University of Central Oklahoma (then called Central State University), where she received her B.M.E. and M.M.E. degrees in music. An accomplished flutist, Smith is now on the faculty at UCO and also teaches Native American cultural and language classes for Indian Education with the Edmond Public Schools. Her husband, John Smith, is a band director in the Edmond School District.

During her university training, Smith's favorite class was arranging. Despite good intentions, she did not make use of her new skills until several years later when she was invited to perform at a banquet feting the Native American flute player, Doc Tate Nevaquaya. Smith chose to perform Debussy's *Syrinx* and a short Native American (Comanche) song by Doc Tate. Smith had heard the tune on a cassette tape and then notated it; the resulting performance delighted the aging Doc Tate. This small bit of melodic material became the foundation of Smith's first piece, *Whisper on the Land*.<sup>6</sup> Sometime after she finished this composition, Smith's flute teacher, Feodora Steward, urged her to analyze the work harmonically. Much to Smith's surprise, the work was written entirely in the Dorian mode.

As Smith continued writing, she focused on pedagogical pieces that could introduce important musical concepts to young players. *The Silver Swan*, intended for beginning students, contains simple 16<sup>th</sup>-note patterns, one trill, two quick Native-style grace notes<sup>7</sup>, and a “mini-cadenza” – perfect for developing flutists. *Where Rivers End* is an unaccompanied piece also suitable for a younger player. Here, pedagogical aspects include double-tonguing, quick runs, and *a cappella* playing.

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<sup>6</sup> See the annotated list of Smith's works for further information about the origin of her compositions.

<sup>7</sup> Native-style grace notes are played immediately before the beat with a sharp accent.

Smith's daughter, Andrea, retells the story behind the composition of *Whippoorwill*. Andrea had insisted that a cadenza be added to the piece, much to her mother's chagrin since in her mind, the work was finished. One day after the composition was done, Andrea, and her mother and father discussed what to name it. Her father suggested the name, *Cokpelvpelv*, which translates to "Whippoorwill," because he thought the melody sounded like a bird. After looking up the sound of the whippoorwill online, the family was surprised to hear how closely Smith had unknowingly mimicked the exact sound of the whippoorwill, especially in the cadenza<sup>8</sup>.

Smith has gone on to write six more works for flute, all exhibiting her unique compositional voice. Her melodies spring from three different traditions: Muscogee Creek hymns, Native American flute songs, and the present-day classical music of the flute.

### *Muscogee Creek Hymns*

In *Momis Komet* and *Whippoorwill*, Smith directly quotes Muscogee Creek hymns. Historically, these hymns come from both Baptist and Methodist traditions, but some melodies are unique to the Creek people. The Germanic origin of these congregational hymns from the Protestant Reformation in the Baroque Period reveals an emphasis on functional harmony to heighten the meaning of the text. The sense of rising expectation, tension, climax, and resolution provide multiple avenues for expression, as the Baroque composers so aptly demonstrated. This doctrine of affections created a musical form that continues to inspire people to worship, whether it is a Native American or a traditional White church.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, *Andrea Smith*.

### *Native American Flute*

The Native American Plains flute can be dated back to approximately 1850. Made of wood, the instrument is end-blown and typically has six finger holes. A block device called the “bird” sits on a flattened area of the flute called the “nest,” approximately where one would expect the lip plate of a modern flute to be. On some flutes it is tied on with a leather strip; on others is it permanently glued. Distal to the bird are two openings, one is an air chamber and the other is the sound window. The block is usually placed over the first opening and immediately above the second.

Tuning and pitch are complicated issues when considering the Native American flute. Originally designed to be played alone, there was no need for any kind of standard pitch. Because of the shape of the tone holes and the distance between them, scales and pitches varied significantly. Two prevalent scales used were G#, B, D#, F, G and G#, A#, C#, D#, F, G.

Characteristics of Native American flute playing include an unmetered style with unique ornamentation. A song typically begins and ends with the fundamental pitch. Trills and tremolos, flutter-tonguing, quick, biting grace notes, pitch bending, vibrato, and upward slides add to the special flavor of this tradition. Most songs were meant to be played alone and unaccompanied. To the Western ear, one may hear some implied harmonies, but the music is conceived in a linear fashion, not horizontally.

Many different legends give us clues to the purposes of the Native American flute. Generally, it was used in courting, healing, and in religious ceremonies. In all cases, there was a strong sense of reverence associated with the instrument. During the 1930s and 1940s, a decline in the playing of the Native American flute occurred, primarily due

to the suppression of the Native culture by white Americans attempting to assimilate the Native population into the dominant white culture. A revival of Native American flute music began in the 1970s, primarily due to the commercial recordings by Doc Tate Nevaquaya in Oklahoma. Since then, its popularity has only grown, as evidenced by compositions for modern flutes in the Native style<sup>9</sup> and by the renown of Native American flute players themselves, such as R. Carlos Nakai, a Navajo flutist and educator.<sup>10</sup>

### *Classical Flute Background*

Smith also relies on her classical training in flute performance when crafting her melodies. During her studies at UCO in music, Smith learned not only theory, composition, counterpoint and arranging, but also the standard flute repertoire, which includes many compositions by French flutists. In her work *Legende*, the Native American flute melody is presented after a short introduction that is meant to denote a stream. After Smith states the Native-inspired theme, she develops it in a style that holds more to the French Flute School. That legacy is particularly idiomatic to the modern flute and consists of swooping runs spanning different registers and expressive *legato* writing with extremes of dynamics and colored with vibrato.

### *Harmonic Background*

A closer look at the harmonic analysis of Smith's works gives additional insights into the harmonic underpinning. Smith is fond of 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and even 11<sup>th</sup> chords, as they

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<sup>9</sup> *Kokopeli and Winter Spirits* by Katherine Hoover.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Worlds of Music* (Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 2005), p. 64-5.

provide a timbral richness as well as tension that can precede resolutions. Frequently, a resolved major triad is only heard on the final cadence of a composition. As previously noted, *Whisper on the Land* is in the Dorian mode, but most of her other pieces are in a minor key.

### *Inspiration*

In seeking inspiration for her works, Smith acknowledges a desire to honor her father not only because of his Muscogee Creek heritage but also because of his faith in Jesus Christ. Smith approaches the composition of each piece with heart-felt prayer and feels that each note is “God-led.” Andrea echoes this sentiment, saying that her mother’s music is divinely inspired. Drawing upon their Indian heritage, Andrea notes how her mother’s music exhibits the spiritual reverence of Native American flute playing that had been lost.

### *Conclusions*

In these compositions by G. Wiley Smith, we have seen the combining of Native American, Euro-American, and Christian influences. In understanding her works, it was crucial to see the part Smith’s Native American heritage and educational training has played, but it was also just as important to consider the inspiration she received from her Christian faith. To edit out the Christian component, which other authors have done,<sup>11</sup> would be a disservice to Smith and to her music.

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<sup>11</sup> John Swanton, *Creek Religion and Medicine* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) Forward by James T. Carsen, p. vi-vii.

This study into the life and works of G. Wiley Smith explains the response this author had upon hearing her works performed at a *Norton Series* concert in Morris R. Pitman Hall on the University of Oklahoma campus in 2004. Andrea Smith performed eight of her mother's works to a receptive audience. A frenzied and late arrival precluded my enjoyment of the night's first offering. But throughout the concert, my soul was touched in some visceral way by the music that I was hearing. I could not put my finger on it at the time, but the music that came to my ears and entered my heart that night made a deep connection within my soul. Now I know why.

The music of G. Wiley Smith unites the Native American and Christian cultures in a novel presentation which reaffirms the essence of both traditions. The Native American flute playing aesthetic is honored as it is infused with functional harmony and an inspiration from a faith in Jesus Christ. Smith has resurrected the spiritual significance of the Native American flute and transferred it to the modern instrument, inviting us to join her in the journey.

## Works by G. Wiley Smith

*A Distant Dream*, for flute and piano, (Edmond, OK: Harmon Richard Music, 1995).

“This is like the dream that when it comes, seems to impart great wisdom. As it fades into consciousness its answers elude recall leaving the solitary dreamer nothing to do but watch the stars make their slow journey across the sky.”

*Eagles Leave No Path*, for flute and piano, (Edmond, OK: Harmon Richard Music, 1999).

“As an eagle soars across the sky, there are no paths to leave. There the eagle is free to soar on a river of air.”

*Legende*, for alto flute or flute in C, (Edmond, OK: Harmon Richard Music, 1995).

“Whether passing information by spoken words, through paintings, or through music, Indians are natural storytellers. The story of *Legende* begins near water where an Indian flutist begins to describe the nearby scenery. The teller continues as he reflects on his cultural heritage. One can imagine the wealth of proud experience from which the story unravels and fades in quiet melancholy.”

*Momis Komet*, for flute and piano, (Nashua, New Hampshire: Falls House Press, 2001).

“*Momis Komet* means “keep striving” in the Muscogee Creek language. The Creek Hymn by the same name provides much of its thematic material. Religion and hymn singing have long been an important part of Muscogee Creek Nation culture and that tradition continues today.”

*The Silver Swan*, for flute or piccolo and piano, (Edmond, OK: Harmon Richard Music, 1995).

A pedagogical piece for beginner flutists.

*Where Rivers End*, for flute or alto flute alone, (Edmond, OK: Harmon Richard Music, 2000).

“*Where Rivers End*” begins at the top of a mountain. As the rivulets flow down they blend into fewer waters and eventually into the ocean. In a like manner native culture being the first in America, has blended with other cultures until they all come together.”

*Whippoorwill*, for flute or piccolo and piano, (Nashua, New Hampshire: Falls House Press).

Solos for piccolo with the Native American influence are rare to nonexistent. This is what prompted G. Wiley Smith to write this piece for the instrument.

*Cokpelvpelv*, the Muscogee Creek word for *Whippoorwill*, denotes Native American flute style with a beautiful melody and brilliant bird-like sounds.

*Whisper on the Land*, for flute and piano, (Lemars, Iowa: Medici Music Press, 1988).

*Whisper on the Land* reflects Native American musical sounds and particularly reminiscent of the Native American Indian flute at the beginning of the piece. There gradually begins a battle between the cultures as more and more contemporary western influences are introduced. This conflict which many generations of Native Americans have experienced continues today. Although the Indian culture has been all but eliminated it still remains a “whisper” as heard in the closing measures.”

*Winter Moon*, for flute and piano, (Edmond, OK: Harmon Richard Music, 1995).

“This piece pictures a moonlit night as it reflects on the liveliness of a day gone by. In the stillness you can hear the celebrative call of a night bird.”<sup>12</sup>

*Oklahoma Landscapes*, for flute quartet, expandable to flute choir (2007). Commissioned by the Oklahoma Flute Society, this piece has been composed to commemorate the Oklahoma Centennial in 2007. Oklahoma is the Choctaw word for “land of the red people”. The Oklahoma State Flag displays an Osage warrior’s shield with an Indian peace pipe and an olive branch, symbols of peace and unity from the cultures of the American Indian and settler. Oklahoma was the 46<sup>th</sup> state to join the U.S. in 1907. Today, Oklahoma has the largest American Indian population of any state.

This work is written for flute choir but may also be performed as a flute quartet. The first movement has 4<sup>th</sup> flute and/or optional alto flute. The second movement includes piccolo and bass flute (optional contra bass flute) for flute choir performances. Some melodies used in “Oklahoma Landscapes” originate from the Muscogee hymn, “My Peace I Leave with You”. All the important melodic passages have been marked as they are passed from one part to another through markings of solo, soli, melody and dynamics. Care should be taken that they are always heard in the overall balance. The composer marked the names of sections only in the score. If the performer feels that they would get a better picture of what the music is saying they could notate them from the score.

| I               | II                 |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| Quartz Mountain | Tall Grass Prairie |
| Black Mesa      | Kiamichi River     |
| Little Sahara   | Red Rock Canyon    |
| Turner Falls    |                    |

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<sup>12</sup> All quotes are from notes provided by G. Wiley Smith.

## Bibliography

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An article published by The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, discussing the individual stories of several prominent Native Americans in history who became Christians.

Payne, Richard W. *The Native American Plains Flute*. Oklahoma City, OK: Toubat Trails Publishing Co., 1999.

A short and concise book which covers the development, history, and physical characteristics of this flute. Some tablature charts are also included.

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