Eco-ing in the Canyon: Ferde Grofé's Grand Canyon Suite and the Transformation of Wilderness
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Eco-ing in the Canyon: Ferde Grofé’s
*Grand Canyon Suite* and the Transformation of Wilderness

BROOKS TOLIVER

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

—Walt Whitman, *Pioneers! O Pioneers!*

Transparent and intangible as sunlight, yet always and everywhere present, [the desert] lures a man on and on, from the red-walled canyons to the smoke-blue ranges beyond, in a futile but fascinating quest for the great, unimaginable treasure which the desert seems to promise. Once caught by this golden lure you become a prospector for life.

—Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

From shortly after its premiere in 1931 through the middle years of the twentieth century, Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite* was regular fare on American concert programs, radio hours, and record shelves.¹ The work’s popularity, combined with Grofé’s own genuine affection for it, led the composer to reflect from time to time on his attachment to the Grand Canyon and, more generally, to the American Southwest. It is clear in his writings that he felt a deep love of the land, one based in part on an appreciation of its natural features:

I treasure my recollections of the place I am writing about; recollections sentimental, pictorial, romantic; recollections of grandiose Nature, of vast areas of

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¹ Evidence of the work’s popular legacy can be found in the fact that it recently made the list of National Public Radio’s “Top 100,” or the hundred most important American musical works of the twentieth century as voted by listeners. For the movement titles and program of *Grand Canyon Suite*, see Appendix A.


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eloquent solitudes, towering heights, silent deserts, rushing rivers, wild animal life; of health-giving ozone, magic dawns and resplendent sunsets, silvery moonshine, iridescent colorings of skies and rocks; and before all else, of a stock of men and women who breathe deeply and freely, live bravely and picturesquely, speak their minds in simplicity and truth, and altogether represent as typical and fine a human flowering as this land of ours has inherited from its pioneer days.2

I write “in part” because the features alone do not add up to the high value Grofé places on the region: above all else, he emphasizes, the land has enriched American character. The idea of a rugged environment challenging and improving those who encounter it stems from pioneer ideology, as Grofé makes clear by the end of the quotation. Certainly there is nothing unusual about an American artist situating nature in this conceptual framework. Historian William Cronon identifies the settling of the frontier as a central theme in Western landscape painting of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one sometimes contested and infinitely varied, but nearly always critical to the meaning of a given work.3 What makes Grofé’s thoughts striking is not that he had them, but that he chose to include them in an article entitled “Story of the Grand Canyon Suite.” Grand Canyon National Park was, after all, a wilderness preserve, where human flowering was to be kept to a minimum.

Elsewhere Grofé links American character not only to the settling of the frontier, but to the development of natural resources as well. In 1938 he wrote, “Musical creation in America is daily soaring to new heights; and, more than this, it is becoming distinctly American, reflecting the dynamic industrial power of our country, [and] our virile pioneer spirit.”4 The thirties were an important decade for what Grofé termed his “industrial music” genre.5 His works from this era include Symphony in Steel for the American Rolling Mill Corporation (whose score calls for a compressed air drill, a pneumatic drill, and a siren), Wheels for Henry Ford, and, of course, Grand Canyon Suite, whose famous “burro rhythm” was inspired by a battery of pile drivers Grofé heard outside a Chicago hotel.6 The industrial theme would culminate in Niagara Falls Suite (1961), where the chronologically arranged movements flow from settlers and Indian wars to the New York Power Authority’s Niagara Power Project. In the years leading up to Grand Canyon Suite, Grofé

2. Ferde Grofé, “Story of the Grand Canyon Suite” (1938), reprinted in Arizona Highways 71, no. 4 (1995): 14–16; for excerpts from this article, see Appendix B.
6. See Grofé’s description in Appendix B.
himself put the Southwest environment to similar use. At one time he co-owned a mining company in Chloride, Arizona. At another he “formed partnership in several hundred head of livestock.”

None of the above should suggest that Grofé opposed the establishment and protection of Grand Canyon National Park. Chloride, Arizona is not in the canyon, nor presumably were Grofé’s cattle. These circumstances do suggest, however, that he brought to his suite a way of appreciating nature that was theoretically incompatible with leaving it alone, and it is the broader implications of this curious situation that form the basis of the following essay.

“Eco-ing in the Canyon” is more than a bad pun: it refers to ecocriticism, a field I must briefly encapsulate in preparation for discussions to come later. The past decade has seen a greening of the humanities, most notably in the study of literature, art, and history. While “ecocriticism” usually refers to the first of these, I shall use the term as a shorthand for green scholarship in general. Taken this way, ecocriticism reveals three tendencies. First, in addition to its cross-disciplinarity, it is interdisciplinary, meaning that the various disciplines frequently borrow from each other. Like many ecocritics, Thomas K. Dean sees in such interrelatedness an emulation of ecosystems: “In order to understand the connectedness of all things—including the life of the mind and the life of the earth—one must reconnect the disciplines that have become sundered through over-specialization.” Second, ecocriticism, like healthy ecosystems, is diverse; there is little consensus regarding what ecocritics do or how they should do it, aside from the few general points of convergence noted below. Nature usually figures into the picture, but even this is not guaranteed, since the absence of nature may also be significant. Collating various position papers and sketches of the field, I offer this loose definition: Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between culture and the physical environment.

The third tendency, lurking in that very definition, is for ecocritics to adopt an environmentalist perspective. Cheryll Glotfelty offers a context for this penchant in her introduction to the first collection of ecocritical essays, dating

7. For mention of Grofé’s mining and ranching ventures, see Appendix B.
8. To cite just one example: since its formation in 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) has grown to more than six thousand international members. The phrase “greening of the humanities” comes from the title of an article by Jay Parini in the New York Times Magazine, 29 October 1995, 52–53.
from the mid 1990s: “If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth’s life support systems were under stress.”

The context is clearly political, and Glotfelty expands on that point by noting similarities between the various interests she names. Understanding how one social order is established and privileged at the expense of others is one of the many goals of those studying race, class, and gender. Likewise, ecocritics often explore how humans privilege themselves at the expense of other living things. This line of inquiry takes many forms, of course. Just as some feminist critics examine attitudes toward women as revealed in novels or operas, ecocritics study the relationship between the way nature is handled in a work and the way it is treated by the culture surrounding that work (Cronon’s “Telling Tales on Canvas,” cited earlier, is an example of this approach). Also, just as some feminists draw attention to literature by women, ecocritics tend to privilege what they see as the neglected genre of nature writing. Thus literary anthologies and survey courses are more likely now to make room for the likes of John Muir and Aldo Leopold, much as music history surveys are increasingly likely to include Fanny Hensel and Amy Beach. These similarities are no coincidence, of course, given the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism. In short, ecocritics and cultural critics are often one and the same, a circumstance reflected in a good deal of current scholarship, as well as in the larger arena of environmentalism, with its subgenres of ecofeminism and social ecology.

Similarities duly noted, there is nonetheless a significant difference between ecocriticism and other areas of the humanities, one that may lie behind its comparably late arrival as an academic discipline. This difference may be glimpsed in a point made above in which nature writing is equated with literature written by women. And yet for the equation to hold true, one would need a literature written by nature. The nonhuman world in fact has no voice, however, a circumstance that simultaneously motivates and challenges ecocritics. On the one hand, the ways in which people presume to speak for nature provide ecocritics with much of their material. On the other, the way ecocritics presume to speak for nature creates unease in anyone accustomed to the

11. Glotfelty, “Introduction,” xvi. I base the following elaboration loosely on Glotfelty’s own comparison of ecocriticism to feminist criticism (pp. xxii–xxiv).


notion that descriptions of reality are inherently subjective. Do ecocritics really speak for nature, or do they simply speak for themselves?14 At stake is not the existence of a real world beyond our various cultural orientations; most of us will duck an airborne rock, to borrow the reality test Edward Abbey purportedly gave a “solipsist.”15 At issue ultimately is the relative significance of constructions of reality (hereafter called “texts”) and reality itself. In the humanities, texts are generally given more weight, for obvious reasons; from this perspective, what ecocritics say about the world is more valuable for what it reveals about ecocritics than for what it reveals about the world. In ecocriticism, the opposite is usually the case; ecocritics study, critique, and make texts, surely, but all such activity is held accountable to the reality of a failing environment.16 One might say ecocritics are trying to duck the rock of global warming, topsoil depletion, massive wildlife extinctions, and other calamities. If some read into this a rather transparent move to control the discourse, for their part ecocritics find a troubling anthropocentrism in an outlook that privileges the exclusively human realm of texts.17

Is there already an “ecomusicology”? Most definitely, given the longstanding connections between music and nature. Studies of music and the pastoral tradition, the sublime, and impressionism (to name but three) would all fit the general definition of ecocriticism given above. More to the point, several recent works show musicologists in the process of building bridges to that movement. This is happening chiefly in the United States, the U.K., and Germany, countries where ecocriticism and/or green politics have taken firm root. Richard Leppert has shown how music sometimes acknowledges—and even tries to heal—nature’s wounds.18 In an article entitled “Eco-Musicology,” Alexander Rehding works ecological concerns into the


15. This was actually just a suggestion; according to his friend Ernest Partridge, Abbey once commented: “If a man says he is a solipsist, throw a rock at his head. If he ducks, he’s a liar” (cited in Partridge, “Yes Virginia, There Is a Real World!” The Online Gadfly (1996), http://gadfly.igc.org/pomo/virginia.htm) (accessed 2 May 2004).

16. Having said that, ecocritics certainly worry over problems involved in holding a text up to reality. For a sample of that discussion, see Aaron Dunckel, “‘Mont Blanc’: Shelley’s Sublime Allegory of the Real,” in The Greening of Literary Scholarship, ed. Rosendale, 207–23.


traditional—and always thorny—discussion of what “nature” has meant through time, and uses this discussion as a basis for reviewing three recent books on music and nature by German authors. The papers in “Musical Landscapes and Ecologies,” a session of a recent national meeting of the American Musicological Society, all deal in one form or another with the issue of how art, environment, and attitudes toward nature come together. Perhaps the closest ties thus far established between musicology and green studies are to be found in Mitchell Morris’s treatment of John Luther Adams and George Crumb, both of whom are shown to imbue their music with the values and politics of the modern environmental movement.

For the current study I have borrowed from a wide range of ecocriticism in hopes of understanding the role Grand Canyon Suite might have played in both what contemporaries thought of wilderness and how they handled it. In particular, I explore the possibility that Grofé’s own complicated stance in regard to wilderness is typical of his time (and thus central to the suite’s popularity), and that grasping this dynamic can help make sense of the paradox of a wilderness that is both critical to a country’s self-identity and always in the process of disappearing. The first section, “Early Environmentalism in America,” outlines a growing awareness of that disappearance, while the next, “Environmentalism Reconsidered,” counters the implicit view that there is actually no paradox here at all, merely a battle between those who would transform wilderness and those who would not. In “The Overlook” and “Musical Four by Fours” I make two attempts at placing both impulses—a desire to celebrate wilderness and a desire to change it—with Grand Canyon Suite.

As this encapsulation suggests, I seek to ferret out attitudes that contemporary audiences would likely not have acknowledged, had they been asked.


Such speculation is undoubtedly disconcerting to some, and yet it is necessary when faced with the historical discrepancy between rhetoric and action in regard to wilderness. The best I can offer under the circumstances is a clear distinction between what contemporaries articulated and what I am interpreting from the surviving record of policies, speeches, essays, artwork, and other documents. This distinction is particularly important in regard to two terms, conservationism and preservationism. At the time Grand Canyon Suite was composed, the former generally meant using resources sparingly (as in “conserving resources”), the latter, not using them at all (as in “preserving wilderness”). 22 In what follows, I take conservationism no further than the meaning just given, while finding a deeper significance in preservationism, namely a desire to fetter that which maintains an unfettered appearance. In light of the theoretical connection between Grand Canyon Suite and preservationism (via the National Park Service), this reading is critical, for it helps to explain why the work tells the stories I ascribe to it.

Early Environmentalism in America

As a wealth of scholarship on the American West makes clear, variety and complexity mark the relationship of humans to nature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 23 This is to be expected, given the diversity of peoples and environments, and it makes one wary of generalizing about the meaning of nature in Grand Canyon Suite. To the tourists and concertgoers of the 1930s, the wilderness of Grand Canyon National Park surely signified something other than, say, what the Pacific Northwest had signified to those who took the Oregon Trail in the previous century. 24 There is, however, one

22. Joe Buchdahl and Sue Hare, eds., “Earth and Man: Conservation and Preservation,” in Encyclopedia of Sustainable Development (site published by Atmosphere, Climate and Environment Information Programme), http://www.docm.mmu.ac.uk/arc/esd/index.html (accessed 5 May 2004). I use a third term, environmentalism, throughout my essay in a general sense that encompasses both conservation and preservation. The word is anachronism, technically speaking, in that it came into use only in the 1960s. The movement to which it refers, however, began in the nineteenth century, a fact that explains why historians do use “environmentalism” to describe events that took place before its invention. Thus Ramachandra Guha discusses a “first wave of environmentalism” in the nineteenth century, in Environmentalism: A Global History (New York: Longman, 2000), 3.


24. Along these lines, Beth Levy examines differing conceptions of the frontier found in music from the Indianist works of the turn of the century to the cowboy populism of the 1930s and 1940s; see her “Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West, 1895–1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002).
generalization that the ecocritic must make, and this concerns what humans meant to wilderness, as opposed to what wilderness meant to humans: wherever humans went, wilderness was transformed into something else. From “nature’s perspective,” as we imagine it, it matters little whether wilderness was conceived of as a pastoral paradise or a savage land to be made pastoral, or whether the transformation answered to religious, political, or economic ideology. The way or another (and technology permitting), arable land was inevitably farmed, minerals mined, timber logged, and so forth. But my goal is not to imagine “nature’s perspective,” for that would lead away from Grand Canyon Suite. It is, rather, to trace the history of others doing so, and then to establish the suite’s relation to that development.

Concern over vanishing wilderness extends at least as far back as 1831, when Alexis de Tocqueville wrote after a tour of the Great Lakes region: “It is this consciousness of destruction, this arrière-pensée of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with a melancholy pleasure; one is in some sort of a hurry to admire them.”

By around the middle of the century, Thoreau had developed this vague unease into a thesis that excessive civilizing was harmful to both human and nonhuman nature. His concern for the latter separated Thoreau from earlier champions of natural living and led him in 1864 to recommend preserves where “bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be ‘civilized off the face of the earth.’” A more systematic criticism of land management policies, together with a forest protection plan, appeared in 1864 in George P. Marsh’s Man and Nature. While there is little evidence that Tocqueville, Marsh, or even Thoreau changed the outlook of contemporary Americans, it is clear that succeeding generations found their ideas increasingly relevant. Several events account for this shift in the public perception of wilderness. Foremost among them was the appearance of a census report in 1890, which revealed that one could no longer draw a clear geographical line between settled and unsettled portions of the United States. Also in 1890, the massacre at Wounded Knee


27. Thoreau, “The Maine Woods,” quoted in Strohmeier, “Wild West Imagery,” 269. Thoreau does not identify the source of his internal quotation, but it is possible that it was Dickens, who in 1853 published an essay, “The Noble Savage” (Household Words, 11 June), in which he wrote, “I call [the Indian] a savage, and I call a savage something highly desirable to be civilized off the face of the earth.”

capped the Indian wars, further shattering the illusion of a limitless West. Alarms over the “closing of the frontier” now sounded regularly in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. 29

By the turn of the century, wilderness was regularly idealized in the press, and “savage” and “primitive” evolved into its attributes. The notion of a “land ethic” began to take shape, one that—as the term implies—attached moral significance to environmental policies. In 1904 George S. Evans equated undisturbed nature with nobility, and exploitation with greed:

You know that while Nature sits enthroned in the midst of this mountain kingdom, man needs but the words “gold here” to spur him into a campaign ending in the dethronement of the monarch. At the touch of the magic words “gold here” the trees would go down like wheat before the sickle, the rock heaps of the ages would be rent asunder by the blast, streams would be harnessed, mountains tunnelled—man enthroned. 30

In 1913, William T. Hornaday likewise faulted human character—and short-sightedness in particular—for the recent extinction of the passenger pigeon and the earlier decimation of the buffalo. 31 That ever larger numbers of Americans adopted such viewpoints is reflected in the growth of politically oriented environmental organizations. A number of these groups, including the Sierra Club, nearly checked a project to dam the Hetch Hetchy Valley in 1908–13. 32

While the best-remembered activists of this era were men, women in fact accounted for a good deal of the period’s organized environmentalism. Groups such as the Sempervirens Club (later the Save the Redwoods League), the Women’s National Rivers and Harbors Congress, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, and the Audubon Society (where by 1915 women outnumbered men) publicized issues and directly lobbied decision makers regarding specific policies. 33 According to Carolyn Merchant, a mixture of progressive and traditional qualities accounts for the impact women made in the battles over Hetch Hetchy, the Sequoias, Niagara Falls, and elsewhere:


without the suffrage movement, women would likely have neither demanded nor received a voice in debates surrounding the environment, and yet in the absence of the conventional associations of woman-as-protector and woman-as-nature, they probably would not have succeeded in swaying the public to the extent that they did. One can sense the strategic importance of such traditionalism in Mrs. Overton Ellis’s words to the Conservation Congress of 1909: “Conservation in its material and ethical sense is the basic principle of the life of a woman.”

In the 1920s, environmental problems specific to the Southwest began to surface in the national press. One was the death of sixty thousand deer just north of the Grand Canyon. What caused the Kaibab herd to starve is still under discussion, but the prevailing wisdom of the time indicted a longstanding governmental program in which native predators were exterminated in order to improve hunting. The environmental impact of a particular policy thus became the material for dinner-table conversation, and a mournful tone pervaded mainstream articles on degraded or vanishing wilderness. In a piece on the Kaibab Plateau published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1922, popular novelist Emerson Hough wrote metaphorically, “We have sold our fresh beauty of youth on the open streets—and cheap, so ghastly cheap.”

Another problem involved livestock, whose overgrazing had by the late 1920s severely injured the vegetation and eroded the landscape (the familiar look of the Southwest is largely the result of this). It is unclear from Grofé’s reminiscences exactly when he owned cattle in the region, but if he did so at any time from the 1920s on, he would have found himself at odds with a government intent on limiting the damage of such enterprises. These efforts culminated in 1934 when Congress passed the Taylor Grazing Act, which established America’s first permit system designed to restrict grazing on public lands.

Whereas the Taylor Grazing Act followed the principles of conservation, the National Park Service leaned toward preservation. It is true that from the establishment of the first park in 1872 (Yellowstone) through the early decades of the twentieth century, preservation had less to do with maintaining the integrity of habitats than with safeguarding the magnificent scenery that was America’s answer to European culture. It is also true that legislation surrounding the Grand Canyon partially reflects this spirit. But preservation in the environmental sense was at work here, too: the establishment of Grand Canyon National Monument by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908, its reclassification as a national park under Woodrow Wilson in 1919, and the park’s subse-

34. Quoted in ibid., 128.
36. This is a recurring theme in the prologue and first three chapters of Alfred Runte, National Parks: The American Experience, 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1–47.
quent expansion in the 1920s and later, all answered in large part to fears that public and private interests would fundamentally change the canyon’s status as wilderness.37

Environmentalism Reconsidered

While the history sketched above is accurate as far as it goes, nothing in it accounts for the mixed views Grofé expressed in regard to nature, much less for the mixed messages I hope to pull from *Grand Canyon Suite*. To frame the problem in the terms that opened this essay, one would expect a work about a national park to resonate with environmentalist sentiments of the sort just noted, not with those that environmentalism ostensibly opposed. Why look for the latter, then?

The beginnings of an answer lie in recognizing that the ideological distance between environmentalists and those they squared off against was not nearly so great as the battles themselves suggest. While it is true that environmentalists generally opposed developing wilderness, most continued to evaluate nature’s worth by longstanding utilitarian criteria. Conservationism is the clearest example of this, given its goal of sustainable use. A speech given in 1908 by perhaps the most famous conservationist, Theodore Roosevelt, demonstrates how comfortably environmentalist rhetoric could coexist with the promise of future development:

We began with an unapproached heritage of forests; more than half of the timber is gone. We began with coal fields more extensive than those of any other nation and with iron ores regarded as inexhaustible, and many experts now declare that the end of both iron and coal is in sight. . . .

. . . we began with soils of unexampled fertility, and we have so impoverished them by injudicious use and by failing to check erosion that their crop-producing power is diminishing instead of increasing. In a word, we have thoughtlessly, and to a large degree unnecessarily, diminished the resources upon which not only our prosperity but the prosperity of our children and our children’s children must always depend.38

The same point can be made regarding the women activists discussed earlier. What survives of their speeches, notices in journals, and motions put forward


at meetings suggests that some of them broke—or at least intended to break— with the habit of appreciating wilderness for what could be made of it. At the same time, most could not entirely let go of that mode of appreciation, for as Merchant notes, it was an element of the very traditionalism that made women effective lobbyists for the environment: “Feminist and progressive in their role as activists for the public interest, they were nevertheless predominately conservative in their desire to uphold traditional values and middle-class lifestyles rooted in these same material interests.”

Despite their fundamental opposition to such “material interests,” preservationists too could invoke wilderness in the traditional context of exploration and conquest. This kind of thinking surfaces in the writings of one of the movement’s iconic figures, Aldo Leopold:

Many of the attributes most distinctive of America and Americans are [due to] the impress of the wilderness and the life that accompanied it. . . . If we have such a thing as an American culture (and I think we have), its distinguishing marks are a certain vigorous individualism, combined with ability to organize, a certain intellectual curiosity bent to practical ends, a lack of subservience to stiff social forms, and an intolerance of drones, all of which are distinctive characteristics of successful pioneers.

Whether Leopold targeted sportsmen with this sort of argument, as one writer has suggested, or was simply speaking his mind, the fact remains that the value he places on wilderness is contingent on its change; as his reference to “pioneers” makes clear, it is the settling of the land—not the land itself—that builds character.

If a preservationist with the impeccable credentials of Leopold could retain such values, it should come as no surprise that the National Park Service did so as well. While the organization’s role in protecting wilderness is undeniable, for much of its early history it pursued this goal in a way that ultimately reaffirmed the priority of development. In a chapter entitled “Worthless Lands,” Alfred Runte has shown that the early parks were proposed and granted largely on the condition of their economic insignificance; up through the formation of Grand Canyon National Park, candidates for park status were not just usually, but rather always, beautiful places where mining and logging had been deemed unprofitable. Additionally, stipulations often laced park legislation to the effect that should such activities ever become feasible, they

40. Aldo Leopold, quoted by Nash in The Nervous Generation, 85. It is important to recognize that this quotation comes from relatively early in Leopold’s literary career (1925), and its reasoning is not characteristic of his best-known work, A Sand County Almanac (1949).
42. Runte, chapter 3 of his National Parks, 48–64. According to Runte, 1934 marks the first time that the establishment of a national park—the Everglades—answered almost exclusively to concerns for preservation (pp. 130–37).
could be pursued. The Grand Canyon fits well within this history. As early as 1858, government-sent explorer Joseph Ives spoke of it in terms that, in retrospect, would make it the perfect candidate for a national park: “The region last explored is, of course, altogether valueless. . . . Ours has been the first, and will doubtless be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality.”43 When minerals did turn up in the canyon, the cost of transporting them over the rim usually proved excessive. But neither this lack of promise nor the resulting status as a national park could ensure the canyon’s preservation. In the 1920s, the government surveyed two potential sites for damming the Colorado River within park boundaries, projects that would not be rejected definitively until 1968.44

All of this suggests that there is indeed good reason to listen for the control and transformation of nature in Grand Canyon Suite. But there remains one strong argument against doing so, and it hinges on the work’s status and function as art. Several historians have traced the presentation of scenery in the national parks to the aesthetics of the picturesque in the eighteenth century, when landscapes began to attract attention as focal points, not merely as backdrops to something else.45 Painting was the primary medium of the picturesque tradition, but there were others: English gardens also rendered landscapes, as did the mind’s eye, when viewers “composed” picturesque scenes by positioning themselves relative to hills, brooks, forests, and so forth. A common aid was the Claude glass, a handheld mirror with which the viewer, back to the scenery, created a small, two-dimensional landscape. The picture was enhanced by a frame surrounding the mirror, and by a covering of smoky glass meant to simulate candle soot on canvas. For evidence of the National Park Service’s reliance on picturesque aesthetics, one need look no further than the Grand Canyon, where a version of the Claude glass rings the Watchtower overlook on the south rim.46 One might even think of entire parks as collections of wilderness landscapes enclosed within the frame of park boundaries.47

44. See Roderick Nash, “The Perils and Possibilities of a Park,” in Grand Canyon of the LivingColorado, ed. Roderick Nash (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1970), 102–5. The year 1968 marked the passage of the Central Arizona Project bill, which effectively guaranteed the unobstructed flow of the Colorado River through the park. Not even this legislation could ensure the integrity of the river, however, for its water quality and periodic flooding cycle have been altered since the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam in 1963.
46. Solnit, Savage Dreams, 262–63.
47. Byerly, “The Uses of Landscape,” 58; and Solnit, Savage Dreams, 263.
In a more general sense, an orientation toward the visual arts figured in the establishment of Grand Canyon National Park in 1919 and the campaigns for its expansion in the years immediately following. Both objectives hinged on the support of the public, who to a large extent used aesthetic criteria to determine what wilderness was worthy of preservation. In 1916, Park Service director Stephen T. Mather issued the *National Parks Portfolio*, a coffee-table book offering up landmarks as photographic art. Mather’s intention was to make a case for the future Grand Canyon National Park by canonizing it alongside the splendors of Yellowstone and Yosemite.\(^48\) Popular magazines joined the *National Parks Portfolio* in disseminating countless other images of the canyon to the public.

Enter *Grand Canyon Suite*, a work that similarly recasts the canyon as art. In many ways Grofé belongs among those magazine editors who toured the West and subsequently threw themselves into the promotion of its scenery. He explored Arizona intermittently from 1917 through 1926, and began composing the suite in 1929, which generally coincides with the activity described above.\(^49\) Grofé did more than render the canyon in art; there is a specifically visual quality to the work that corresponds to both the aesthetics of the picturesque and the period’s magazine-feature approach to the national parks. This visual emphasis is evident in the titles of movements (“Sunrise,” “Painted Desert,” and so on, rather than “Sounds of the River” or “Wind on the Plateau”), in Grofé’s own references to the pictorial nature of his music, and in the original title of the work, *Five Pictures of the Grand Canyon*.\(^50\) His choice of genre is also significant, in that early suites were often composed of highlights from larger works. Likewise, national parks were conceived of as the highlights of American nature, with their scenic overlooks providing the best views. Grofé thus encourages one to “see” the work as a series of photographs or postcards, perhaps corresponding to famous perspectives from the canyon rim.\(^51\)

This brief history of the picturesque movement supports the premise that art can be environmentally friendly. It has long been used by the National Park Service to accompany preservation, whether as a means of taking in scenery or as a promotional tool. But as we have seen, preservationism itself can house remnants of the ideology it opposes, and something similar applies to art. As it turns out, it is not so easy to take pictures and leave only footprints, to para-

\(^{48}\) Morehouse, *A Place Called Grand Canyon*, 43.

\(^{49}\) Grofé establishes this chronology in “Story of the *Grand Canyon Suite*” (Appendix B).

\(^{50}\) The original Whiteman jazz charts bear this title, which also survives in reviews of the Chicago premiere. For Grofé’s reference to the suite’s pictorial quality, see Appendix B. Note as well that the program repeatedly refers to the musical simulation of visual effects.

\(^{51}\) On a larger scale, Grofé’s career-long preoccupation with suites on American landmarks (*Niagara Falls, Mississippi River, Hudson River, Death Valley*, and so on) conjures up Mather’s *National Parks Portfolio*.
phrase park literature. 52 To take two examples: fire belongs in the wilderness, but it does not belong in the wilderness aesthetics of most nature lovers. This disparity between reality and aesthetics helps explain the National Park Service’s otherwise puzzling strategy, pursued through much of the twentieth century, of suppressing fire. Casting nature as art has thereby served the outward purpose of preservation (i.e., preserving what many of us want to think of as wilderness) while in effect controlling and altering habitats. Similarly, as lands surrounding the national parks change in response to global warming and the proliferation of nonnative species, the parks themselves become artificial islands—aesthetic in the sense that they are maintained by ever greater intervention. 53

One might object to the implication that these examples show art scratching the itch to control nature. Yet this is precisely what Jonathan Bate has found: the aesthetics of the picturesque guides such policies. As he points out, according to the traditional meaning of “picturesque,” the land so labeled resembles a painting. 54 The movement is thus among the first in modern times to turn on its head the classical precept that art should imitate nature. 55 While this need not directly result in the alteration of real environments, it can do so (think of the English garden). More importantly, it offers philosophical support for changing the environment to suit human needs, and this has ominous indirect ramifications, according to Bate: “In valuing art above nature whilst pretending to value nature above art, the picturesque took to an extreme a tendency of Enlightenment thought which has had catastrophic ecological consequences.” 56

In the discourses of preservation and conservation there is an inevitable contradiction: wilderness transformed is no longer wilderness. At one time, when the supply of wilderness was apparently inexhaustible, the contradiction was primarily abstract. But as demand for land and resources grew and the remaining wilderness dwindled, the problem showed itself to have very real consequences. And while there were undoubtedly some who learned to value wilderness in more or less new, nonexploitative ways, others were caught between an old value system and a new reality. In my opinion, this is where art became useful. To say that it offered an environmentally sensitive way of appreciating nature is only partially correct, as I have shown. The complete picture is that it allowed Americans a means of “acting out” the conquering of wilderness without acting out policies that would ensure its disappearance.

52. “Take only pictures, leave only footprints” has long been associated with the National Park Service. But over the years, many other organizations have used the slogan as well, and I have been unable to trace it back to a single source.


55. Ibid., 136.

56. Ibid.
What my discussion thus far lacks is any developed sense of how *Grand Canyon Suite* could accomplish what I claim for it. I turn to that issue now and propose two ways of reading into the work this dual metaphor: art is a tapestry whose surface depicts untamed nature, but whose weave encodes domination. Nature is thus spun from the very fabric of conquest, and the result is a fantasy much like that provided by the National Park Service. It is the fantasy of a wilderness seemingly enhanced, rather than diminished, by the act of controlling it.

**The Overlook**

The Hudson River School of the nineteenth century has caught the attention of ecocritics, and for good reason: it constitutes America’s first significant landscape movement, and it coincides with the vanishing of Eastern wilderness. More than one writer has wondered if the two developments are related and, more specifically, if the works themselves harbor an impulse to control the land. In short, the Hudson River School has been treated in much the same way as I propose to analyze *Grand Canyon Suite*, and some of the work done there provides a useful model.⁵⁷

A perspective common to the Hudson River works—and indeed, to a good deal of landscape painting before and after—is that of the overlook. This viewpoint can work along much the same lines as the tapestry metaphor: taken at face value, the overlook serves the purpose of expanding the horizon; from it one can imagine a nearly limitless—and thus sublime—wilderness. In less transparent ways, however, it invokes containment under an authoritative gaze; from it, one surveys the land in the cartographical sense.⁵⁸ In *The Oxbow* (1836), Hudson River artist Thomas Cole depicts two landscapes corresponding to these divergent ways of seeing nature (Fig. 1). On the left is the sublime view in the form of a wilderness whose inaccessibility is underscored by precipitous drop-offs, craggy trees, and a storm. On the right is a gentler, peopled environment. This is no mere juxtaposition; the profile of the nearest hillside, which runs from wilderness to farmland, functions as a narrative line relating the taming of wilderness.⁵⁹ *The Oxbow* departs from what I propose

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for *Grand Canyon Suite* by making the appropriation of wilderness an overt theme, not a hidden desire. But the effect is much the same if one allows for the difference in historical circumstances; unlike the suite, *The Oxbow* stems from an era of seemingly inexhaustible wilderness, and this impression is reinforced by the fact that in spite of the narrative of domestication, wilderness is always visible on the left side of the painting.60 What is ultimately at stake here, however, is the ability of the downward gaze both to celebrate wilderness and to dominate it symbolically, and *The Oxbow* exemplifies this well.

Given the Hudson River School’s position as a watershed in American landscape painting, it makes sense that the overlook became standard in depictions of the West, and that scholars continue to read conquest into the perspective. Stephen Germic draws exactly this connection between Cole’s *Oxbow* and the frontier works of George Catlin, and I see no reason to exclude Grand Canyon art from such hypothesizing.61 By the time Grofé wrote *Grand Canyon Suite*, the overlook was well established there by such artists as William Henry Holmes and Thomas Moran, by numerous photographers, and by National Park Service architects.62 It should thus come as no surprise that the suite consistently implies this view as well (with the possible exception of the third movement, “On the Trail”).63 There are nevertheless obstacles to studying the overlook in relation to *Grand Canyon Suite*, one of which is that the symbolic power of the perspective is diluted by there being neither struggle nor triumph behind it. Elsewhere one must climb to obtain the downward view, and the ascent serves as a metaphor for triumphing over the environment (one need only read logbook entries stashed on summits to gauge the

60. I speak of general attitudes toward wilderness in Cole’s time, not necessarily of Cole’s own views. Cronon finds in *The Oxbow* a sense of foreboding regarding the passing of wilderness, one Cole worked out in the *Course of Empire* (1836), in which he charts the development, overdevelopment, and subsequent decline of civilization (“Telling Tales on Canvas,” 43–44). By contrast, Clark, Halloran, and Woodford see no such ambivalence in Cole’s valorization of conquest (“Thomas Cole’s Vision of ‘Nature,’ ” esp. 273–76).


63. The view from “On the Trail” itself may be from on high; the tempo (allegretto poco mosso \( \dot{=} 72 \), rehearsal letter A), along with the concluding presto, suggests that this burro is pointed downhill. The idea that the rest of *Grand Canyon Suite* assumes a view from the rim is based on more than the history of depicting the Grand Canyon in visual art; relatively few visitors to the Grand Canyon descended into the canyon before the popularization of river rafting in the late 1960s (see Pyne, *How the Canyon Became Grand*, 155). Also, in a taped interview, Grofé traced the inspiration behind the first movement to a sunrise he had witnessed from the rim (replayed on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered,” 29 October 2000).
prevalence of this thinking). The Grand Canyon reverses this dynamic; the typical visit begins at the top, from which one must struggle to reach the bottom. The summit of a mountain also confers a godlike status. This is due not to the preceding struggle (God presumably made no such trek), but rather to topological symbolism: the top of a mountain is smaller than the bottom and is thus an exclusive position. It is no wonder then that the view from on high is, according to traditional iconography in the monotheistic West, that of God.64 In keeping with its inverted topology, the Grand Canyon offers more space at the top than the bottom, whose very center is indeed home to the creator, the Colorado River. In a word, the rim of the Grand Canyon threatens to be less godlike than touristlike. None of this dislocates Grand Canyon Suite from the tradition of the downward gaze, but it does interfere with hearing there the equivalent of what we saw in The Oxbow. For that matter, how does one hear a downward gaze at all? The movement titles and program may indicate it, but little if anything in the suite insists on it.

I believe that The Oxbow suggests a way around these difficulties. In the lower right quarter of the canvas, the narrative line is broken by an umbrella whose placement, given the nature of this painting, is at least partially symbolic. Undoubtedly Cole’s own, the umbrella functions reflexively in drawing attention to the fact that we are viewing art, not the real thing.65 What is more, it reminds us of who occupies the high ground, and implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the artist who planted it and the civilization to which it points. Cole thus goes beyond the implication that the painter is to his painting what God is to the world (a point he frequently articulated); he equates the painter’s construction of landscape with humankind’s alteration of nature. I stress: it is not reflexivity alone that embodies dominance here, but rather reflexivity working in tandem with our awareness of the “overlook perspective.” And herein lies one possibility for recognizing the theme of conquest in Grand Canyon Suite: Grofé refers back to music much as Cole refers to painting, and this reflexivity becomes the sound of the overlook perspective we cannot otherwise hear. It is the sound of the canyon transformed into music, and, metaphorically, of wilderness transformed into civilization.


65. Cronon surmises that the umbrella belongs to Cole, whom he spots in nearby bushes (“Telling Tales on Canvas,” 41).

Several moments in Grand Canyon Suite remind us of their status as music. Grofé’s sunrise (first movement) evokes several others, most notably Debussy’s in La mer and Ravel’s in Daphnis et Chloé. And the melody of the burro (“On the Trail,” third movement), with its scherzo character, double-reed timbre, increasing animation, and sequential repetition, conjures up another beast of burden, the broom of Dukas’s L’apprenti sorcier (Exx. 1 and 2).67 Perhaps these similarities reveal a derivative composer, nothing more. But elsewhere in the suite we find Grofé deliberately filling his canyon with “musical umbrellas.” The horn call that opens “Sunset” (fourth movement) is quite literally that; were this music played by another instrument, we might be able to lose ourselves in the imagery of wild animals indicated by the program. But the horn timbre, along with the stereotypical “horn-call” triplets and unavoidable melodic references to Siegfried’s leitmotif, conjures up music more than it does animals (Ex. 3). Finally, near the end of “On the Trail” a music box plays a variation of the burro melody heard earlier in the movement (Ex. 4; see Appendix A for an identification of the celeste solo with a music box). I have called these instances the musical equivalent of Cole’s umbrella, but in fact Cole would have needed more than an umbrella to match the explicitness of this last reference; he would have needed a painting of The Oxbow within The Oxbow. These moments jar us from the illusion of an autonomous, self-representing canyon, suggesting instead an environment subject to human control. But control remains elusive, as I have argued it must under the circumstances. Reflexivity in Grand Canyon Suite thus captures the double effect of the downward gaze, portraying nature as unbridled while weaving a symbolic bridle. The net effect is the anticipation of conquest so deeply insinuated in the American appreciation of wilderness.

Grofé conjures up the sound of the overlook in one other way as well, and this has to do with the cowboy melody introduced in the third movement. Unlike most of the examples cited above, there is no ambiguity regarding this tune’s identity as such (as opposed to a symbol for something nonmusical), nor can there be much doubt that it indicates a human presence in the landscape; the program announces a singing cowboy, and in a piano reduction published shortly after the premiere, the first statement of his melody is overlaid with lyrics by Gus Kahn (Ex. 5).68 When we first encounter the cowboy in the third movement, he is evidently headed down into the canyon and thus assumes a position that, as I have earlier suggested, is not incompatible with that

67. All examples of Grand Canyon Suite derive from the original full score (New York: Robbins, 1943) and have been reduced by the author.
68. The piano reduction (by Domenico Savino) was published by Robbins Music Corporation in 1932. I have found no indication that Grofé sanctioned these lyrics, and point them out as only an accentuation of the obvious. This score, while in fact the earliest to be published, has a program attributed to “The Publishers” that differs in several details from that of the full score. These circumstances, plus the fact that Grofé did not actually make the reduction himself, make the score a questionable record of the composer’s intentions.
Example 1  “On the Trail” (third movement), burro melody

Example 2  Dukas, *L’apprenti sorcier*, broom melody

Example 3  “Sunset” (fourth movement), opening

Example 4  “On the Trail,” music box rendition of burro melody

of the overlook. But it is his recurrences in the suite that most correspond to that perspective. He is musically absent from “Sunset” (the fourth movement), but then opens and closes the final “Cloudburst.”\(^{69}\) In view of the central place he has in that movement, it is remarkable that the program makes

\(^{69}\) Opening: measures 1–8; closing: four statements (plus the start of a fifth), beginning eight bars after rehearsal number 17.
mension of him neither there nor anywhere other than in “On the Trail.” This lack of acknowledgment has the effect of disembodying the cowboy; he plays no role in the canyon’s goings-on, but rather watches. What is more, his ethereal presence suggests that he has been with us all along (or at least since his introduction in “On the Trail”), watching the sunset and cloudburst, preparing a human perspective for us to step into. In short, he is the *personification* of the downward gaze, whose definition vis-à-vis the landscape is usually just this ambiguous.

In what ways, then, does the cowboy convey the opposing qualities of the downward gaze? The first way—consisting of a celebration of boundless nature—is clear enough; through the cowboy we see the beauties of a sunset and storm in the desert. The second—the containment of nature—makes itself heard in the final section of “Cloudburst,” during which (according to the program) “nature again rejoices in all its grandeur.” A more accurate concluding line would be, “the cowboy rejoices in his symbolic mastery over nature,” for it is indeed the cowboy’s music that Grofé recapitulates so triumphantly here. The theme enters as a brass fanfare for which the raging storm has been but an extended dominant preparation. At its second statement, a rather Tchaikovskian countermelody enters, one first heard in the calm moments before the storm. For lack of a better choice, *this* must be nature rejoicing in all its grandeur, and yet for the most part it remains subservient to the cowboy’s music. I say “for the most part” because it is true that Grofé alters the cowboy tune to fit this countermelody; he metrically shifts the tune’s initial upbeat and stretches out its pauses to accommodate repetitions of the countermelody (Ex. 6). These are but temporary concessions, however; by its fourth and last statement, the cowboy melody has jettisoned nature altogether, crashing to a close on its own original metrical terms (as represented in Ex. 5 above). It is worth noting as well that during its brief moment of rejoicing, nature was in the wrong meter, or an implied 12/8 within the larger 4/4. This has a history of sorts, for when the cowboy first entered in the third movement, he brought his 4/4 meter into a 6/8 that both preceded his entrance and then continued in the background. I do not mean to suggest that Grofé consis-
Example 6  “Cloudburst” (fifth movement), cowboy melody and “nature rejoicing”

(Nature Rejoicing)

(Cowboy)  ff

Yet another way of hearing the overlook in *Grand Canyon Suite* depends on the work’s vague sense of place. Ecocritics tend to focus on regional dialects, in-depth knowledge of local environmental conditions, and anything else that tightly attaches a work to its locale. To a like-minded musicologist, *Grand Canyon Suite* offers little. Burro and cowboy aside, the music could be about nearly anywhere. Its sunrise, sunset, and storm could just as well have been observed from an alpine meadow, a bank overlooking the Rhine, or a rooftop in the city of the suite’s premiere, Chicago. In short, this vagueness captures a central component of the overlook: distance. The overlook draws the eye to the farthest horizon (or at least to a remote valley, in the case of *The Oxbow*), and this tendency is particularly true of Grand Canyon overlooks, whose abrupt drop-offs effectively sacrifice foreground for background. One thus marvels not at an individual rock or plant, but rather at eons of geological activity encapsulated in a broad panorama. The point is not to deny the visual distinctiveness of the Grand Canyon, but merely to establish the precept that distance minimizes difference; were that panorama viewed from yet a higher overlook—somewhere in outer space, perhaps—it might indeed resemble the alps or Chicago.

70. According to photographer and writer Fred E. Basten, Grofé originally called the work *Santa Monica Canyon Suite* (*Santa Monica Bay: Paradise by the Sea* [Los Angeles: General Pub. Group, 1997], 156). Basten cites no source for this claim, and whether or not it is true is less important than the point that it could be true.
The distancing effect of the overlook has additional significance: whether explorers, artists, or tourists, most visitors to the Grand Canyon have come from afar. The void they encounter at the rim thus mirrors one between personal experience and the environment, and as Stephen Pyne notes, their impressions tend to reveal more about themselves than about the canyon itself. Visitors photographed at the rim attempt to fill both voids at once: they create a foreground where there was none and, in constituting that foreground themselves, offer up personal in place of local detail. This sort of concocted intimacy is precisely what Grofé accomplishes in pairing a place-specific program with nonspecific music; the latter’s familiar sound allowed listeners the impression of knowing an environment most of them would never more than visit. That Grofé strove for such an impression is further suggested by his published comments on Grand Canyon Suite, reminiscences which similarly blend familiarity and distance. “Story of the Grand Canyon Suite” shows a composer at pains to establish his own personal ties to the Southwest (see Appendix B), as does this line from another article: “This was first-hand experience for me, for I knew the terrain of the Grand Canyon region, its animal and bird life, its people and their habits and customs.” Likewise, he sometimes argued for an explicit connection between his musical language and the landscape, one manifest in his disconnection from the European tradition, as well as in the ethnic overtones that one critic purportedly heard in the suite (quoted here by Grofé): “Grofé actually gives you the spirit of the Grand Canyon, its gorgeous beauty, its vastness, its part in the Indian history of the Southwest.” At other times, Grofé deemphasized the work’s local color, announcing that he began “Sunrise” in California and finished it in New Jersey, heard “On the Trail” in the sounds of Chicago road construction (as discussed earlier), “did ‘Sunset’ at the Saddle River Country Club near Hackensack,” and worked out “Cloudburst” during a storm on the Chippewa Indian Reservation in the upper Midwest. The implication is clear: as far as the music is concerned, a storm is a storm, a sunset a sunset.

An assumption underlying much of this discussion is that Grofé chose to set the canyon in a general—and thus familiar—musical style, which implies that he had options. There was in fact a regionally specific musical language available for the Grand Canyon, or rather four of them: Hualapai, Havasupai, Southern Paiute, and Dineh. Grofé had at least a rudimentary awareness of these peoples, and his decision to acknowledge them in neither program nor

71. Pyne makes this a central theme running intermittently through How the Canyon Became Grand.
73. Grofé, “The Story of Grand Canyon Suite.” Regarding his departure from the European tradition, Grofé wrote in the same article: “The greatest of symphony writers were Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms, and as none of them ever was in Arizona, I do not quite see how they could have done musical justice to the Grand Canyon.”
74. Ibid.
music (claims to the contrary notwithstanding) was thematically consistent with national park policy.\textsuperscript{75} From the inception of Grand Canyon National Park in 1919 through the 1920s, officials pressured the Havasupai to stay on their reservation along Havasu Creek (a tributary within the park).\textsuperscript{76} To the Havasupai, this meant confinement to a flood plain they had traditionally inhabited only during the dry months; to the Park Service, it meant rendering them invisible from the canyon rim, much as they are absent from Grofé’s music.

Neither Grofé nor the Park Service broke new conceptual ground here, for in American visual art, the distancing effect of the overlook had long been used to erase Native American presence. In the nineteenth century, Indians were omitted from visual panoramas of Yellowstone in order to make the area appear safe for tourists and developers.\textsuperscript{77} It is nevertheless important to recognize that the nature and exact function of this symbolic removal differed according to time and place. In the case of Yellowstone, erasure was quite literally a facet of conquest. While later Native Americans no doubt understood their invisibility at the Grand Canyon in similar terms, to tourists such editing was less a matter of genuine conquest than a prerequisite for the spinning of a wilderness fantasy. By the 1920s and 1930s, the history, physical appearance, and lifestyle of many Indians eclipsed whatever iconographic value they might have had to whites as symbols of wilderness, and their ongoing legal battles with the government served as uncomfortable reminders that the land had never actually been free for the taking.\textsuperscript{78} Like the National Park Service, Grofé invited the public to overlook that the land had been—and continued to be—inhabited by others, and the result is a work simulating “the untouched American West,” to quote from a recent account.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{75} In “Story of the Grand Canyon Suite” (Appendix B), Grofé writes that he “hobnobbed with Indians” during the time he spent in the Southwest, and that he “often heard the Indian drums beating all night during their powwows.” I offer just one interpretation of the absence of Native American references in Grand Canyon Suite, but there are undoubtedly others. Regarding the music of Harris and Copland, Levy sees the trend away from Indian melodies and toward cowboy tunes as serving to define and mythologize a distinctly American West (“Frontier Figures,” 21); the point is clearly relevant to Grand Canyon Suite, given the centrality of its own cowboy music.

\textsuperscript{76} Anderson, Living at the Edge, 15. According to Mark David Spence, several Havasupai families lived near Grand Canyon headquarters as well, until park officials tore down their village in 1934 (Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 135).

\textsuperscript{77} Geremie, American Green, 91–96.

\textsuperscript{78} As this sentence suggests, erasure was but one strategy among many for dealing with Native Americans in art. Elsewhere their inclusion functioned as a symbol of wilderness beyond the frontier; see Barbara Novak, Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–75 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 189. In yet other contexts (including the western), Indians battled unsuccessfully against pioneers and thus were evoked to dramatize the claiming of territory.

\textsuperscript{79} National Public Radio, “All Things Considered,” 29 October 2000; emphasis mine.
Musical Four by Fours

In the “Natural Beauty” section of Aesthetic Theory, Theodor Adorno contends that works depicting nature in fact symbolically exploit what they celebrate. In his words, “all naturalistic art is only deceptively close to nature because, analogous to industry, it relegates nature to raw material.”\(^8\) Whether in a sawmill or a tone poem, trees are processed into four by fours, and the end product—be it boards or musical phrases—conforms to a logical design that has rendered nature functional (i.e., fit for further manipulation as lumber or music). Adorno does not claim to know what nature is, only what it is not: it is not tangible, and art that insists otherwise is fundamentally coercive.

Adorno’s ideas are as challenging as they are valuable, and we had best acknowledge those challenges before attempting to reap the rewards. His argument rests on two assumptions, the first being that rationalism—and specifically the subject-object duality so central to the West in recent centuries—has alienated humans from the very nature they have sought to understand. Given art’s participation in this dynamic, Adorno offers little hope that humans could connect to nature through either a work like Grand Canyon Suite or a picturesque-oriented encounter with the canyon itself: “Planned visits to famous views, to the landmarks of natural beauty, are mostly futile. Nature’s eloquence is damaged by the objectification that is the result of studied observation, and ultimately something of this holds true as well for artworks.”\(^9\) I call this a challenge because I have associated naturalistic art with something very different, namely fulfillment. The solution lies in recognizing that both views are true. The sense of loss and disconnection accompanying some artistic portrayals of wilderness supports Adorno’s view.\(^8\) At the same time, to suggest that Americans have not found fulfillment in conquering wilderness is to twist the meaning of the word. The nation as a whole sustained itself by this very process, and a cultural memory of that fact likely accounts for the nearly complete absence of pathos in Grand Canyon Suite. One might think of the discrepancy in terms of backward versus forward glances: Adorno looks back on the domination of nature with regret, whereas Americans have a history of both doing this and looking forward to it with enthusiasm.\(^\)\(^3\)

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81. Ibid., 69.

82. Elsewhere in this essay he writes: “The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound, and little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the artwork—a pure artifact—inflicts on nature” (pp. 61–62). Leppert elaborates on this idea in his discussions of Adorno (“Paradise, Nature, and Reconciliation,” nos. 10–14) and Puccini’s La Fanciulla del West (nos. 23–34).

The second assumption amounts to an indictment of popular music. By the 1930s, depictive works of the sort Adorno targets here had become the province of mass culture, and what he has to say about this music forms but a component of a larger argument. Adorno hears a reconciliation with nature in the period’s abstract modernist music, one achieved precisely by leaving nature alone: “The pure expression of artworks, freed from every thing-like interference, even from everything so-called natural, converges with nature.”

The convergence is one of analogy: in avoiding both depiction and the tonal conventions on which depiction depends, modernist music is estranging, and experiencing it is thus analogous to experiencing unmediated nature.

The challenge here consists in aligning this assumption with an ecocritical perspective. Is lowbrow art really more complicit than highbrow in environmental damage? In 1933 Webern characterized musical innovation as “the ever-extending conquest of the material provided by nature,” and “an ever growing appropriation of nature’s gifts!” The year before, American composer and critic Warren Storey Smith rationalized musical progress in similar terms, if more ambivalently: “This tapping of music’s expressive resources so enthusiastically pursued during that time [the nineteenth century] may be likened to man’s greedy quest for those of the earth. If a ton of coal or a barrel of oil may be burned but once, so a new chord or progression may be used effectively but a limited number of times.” Both men invoke the age-old understanding of harmony as a development of nature’s acoustical materials (meaning overtones). Adorno would obviously discourage us from hearing this in Webern’s own works, but expecting an ecocritic to ignore Webern’s choice of metaphor may be asking too much. I will add that the Grand Canyon supports a separate-but-equal reading of cultural complicity in environmental tampering: over the course of the twentieth century, lowbrow converged along the rim of the canyon, in the form of tourist shops, planned viewpoints with their built-in reactions, postcards, and Grand Canyon Suite. Highbrow, defined here as intellectual innovation in the form of earth sciences and hydrology in particular, settled at the bottom (ironically), where it crystallized as the Glen Canyon Dam.

In different ways, then, both lowbrow and

84. Adorno, “Natural Beauty,” 78.

85. I paraphrase Julian Johnson, who encapsulates Adorno’s view of Webern: “[Webern’s] music reaches a sound world that is analogous to an unmediated nature—or rather, one that stands as a symbol for unmediated nature, which is therefore experienced as strange and estranging” (Webern and the Transformation of Nature [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 228).

86. Anton Webern, The Path to the New Music, ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: T. Presser, 1963), 17, 15 (lectures of 7 March and 27 February 1933 respectively).


88. I follow Pyne in equating highbrow culture with scientific pursuits (see “Canyon and Cosmos,” in his How the Canyon Became Grand, 115–58), but depart from him in implying highbrow’s continued presence in the canyon. Pyne writes of the exodus of highbrow culture from the
highbrow have tamed the canyon, lowbrow by commodifying it into safe, predictable images, highbrow by harnessing the Colorado River. One is not necessarily more egregious than the other. In fact, they define a symbiosis: from the rim one cannot perceive the effects of the dam. What is important here is not the symbiosis itself so much as the fact that it includes an assessment of mass culture that Adorno would likely have agreed with.

As suggested earlier, “Sunrise” tells a standard tale: amid scattered birdsong, a rising four-bar pattern symbolizes dawn (Ex. 7). The repetitions of this pattern grow louder, higher, and denser over several minutes, leading to a climax at rehearsal number 10, where the sun evidently bursts above the horizon (see Ex. 9 below). Three more detailed observations enhance this general picture:

1. In the opening, predawn measures of “Sunrise,” Grofé renders music of the spheres quite literally as string harmonics. As morning approaches, the overtones alternate with birdsong in the piccolo/flute. Grofé thus translates one image, that of sunlight blotting out the stars, into another, birdsong drowning out celestial harmony. But the alternation of birdsong and overtones expresses more than this: birds evolve from cosmic matter much as themes grow from basic musical material. In a word, Grofé draws to the surface the latent association of musical organicism with natural processes. That the slow coalescence of the sunrise invokes an introduction simply takes this type of association to the higher level of the movement as a whole: Grofé infuses his sunrise with the creation-ex-nihilo symbolism that accompanies an introduction.

2. Archetypal man appears in measure 37, symbolized by the rustic-sounding English horn (see Ex. 8). He echoes the birdsong, thus suggesting his intimacy with nature and his place in the cosmic chain extending back to the stars.

3. The placement of “Sunrise” at the beginning of the suite establishes a pattern: the second and third movements are explicitly daytime scenes (“The Painted Desert” and “On the Trail”), the fourth captures a sunset, and the concluding “Cloudburst” takes place at night. Grofé did not have to align the progressions of day-in-the-canyon and life-of-a-suite. In doing so, he supports his program with the rudimentary symbolism that accompanies large-scale musical form.

Whether or not Grofé intended these exact messages is relatively unimportant. He expressed something like them, at any rate. We can be more certain of the images that Grofé did not set out to express—the ones that bury themselves in the weave of the fabric, where they are more readily felt than seen.

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canyon over the course of the twentieth century, as experimental artists lost interest in natural depiction and scientists increasingly turned their sights on the cosmos.
Example 7  “Sunrise” (first movement), opening

(String Harmonics)

(Timpani)

(E Pedal in Bass Throughout)

Example 8  “Sunrise,” man and bird

(English Horn (Man))

(Flute (Bird)) (etc.)
The generic quality of Grofé’s first movement runs deeper than thus far acknowledged. It is not just that this sunrise resembles others; it is that this evocation of nature, with its rhythmic undulations over static harmonies, falls squarely in a stylistic tradition. The use of “static activity” to depict landscape extends at least as far back as the madrigals and Parisian chansons of the sixteenth century. Its longevity, together with the variety of scenery it has evoked, counsels against reading into the style a single attitude toward the environment. In one case it might serve to place an Arcadian paradise at a safe distance from contemporary human activity, where in another it might symbolically silence and objectify nature. Or as a cliché, it may reveal nothing. Given the dangers of broad interpretations, I claim little for the static style per se. Instead, I explore the possibility that what Grofé does to these sounds of nature corresponds to what his contemporaries did—or imagined doing—to the real thing.

“Nature music” has little sense of teleology. This is not to say that it creates no expectations. One simply expects it to continue repeating in a cyclical, non-developmental way. (That one senses major changes to come is another matter entirely.) Accordingly, there is nothing about the opening of “Sunrise” that prompts us to anticipate the interlocking of large blocks of material; the rising four-bar pattern is devoid of any reference to open and closed endings, harmonic tension and release, or any interdependency between statements other than that forecast by the one-step-higher pattern of repetition (see Fig. 2). The birdsong at rehearsal number 2 offers a hint that the rising pattern will group into four-plus-four measures, but only a hint (see Ex. 7; the song spans a double statement of the pattern, but then waits several measures before resuming). Likewise, little in either the rising pattern itself or the music surrounding it encourages us to subdivide at the level of two-plus-two. The internal repetitions of the birdsong imply units smaller than four bars, but the irregular acceleration of those repetitions, along with Grofé’s clear evocation of a canyon wren, suggests that the repetitions answer to something other than rational principles of construction. In sum, this is raw material, the stuff Grofé will use to build his piece.

The building process begins with the introduction of “man” at rehearsal number 4. Man asserts his dominance immediately by interrupting the natural cycle established by the rising pattern. Were the repetitions of that pattern to

89. I paraphrase Carl Dahlhaus, who characterizes the style in these terms: “Regardless of whether the scene is a bucolic idyll or a thunderstorm . . . the music remains riveted to the spot motivically and harmonically, no matter how gentle or violent its rhythmic motion” (Nineteenth-Century Music, trans. J. Bradford Robinson [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989], 307).

mirror the pattern itself, there would be eight full statements per cycle. By entering on the eighth statement, man effectively lops off the final repetition, thus construing the seventh statement as an extended leading tone and making himself the resolution of it (Fig. 2).

Earlier I wrote that the man echoes the birdsong, but this is only partially correct. In fact, he rearranges fragments of the song into new melodies that the wren then sings back to him (rehearsal numbers 4 and 5). This act of domestication forms part of a larger project of imposing a design on the surroundings: the man works the wren’s melodic fragments like a tool to organize the rising pattern into symmetrical units (mm. 37–38 and 39–40) and a functional harmonic progression. His sustained B at measure 39 brings out the dominant-chord implications of that pattern, and his 5–1 leap at the end of measure 40 fashions the end of the pattern into a cadence. In this way the pattern no longer merely ascends; now it maps out the territory between tonic outposts, leaving a systematically partitioned landscape of two-bar segments in its wake (Ex. 8). The emerging sense of organization replicates itself on a higher level as double statements of the rising pattern alternately underlie the man and the bird. As I will explain, yet more expansive structures ensue when the lush string section takes over the civilizing work begun by our rustic frontiersman, beginning at rehearsal number 6.

I have come dangerously close to blurring the distinction between the scene on the tapestry and the weave of the fabric. This is particularly true where I note that the wren adopts the man’s structuring influence; would this not be part of the scene? If so, then the unspoken fantasy of exploitation gives way to the trivial story line “man conquers bird.” But it is precisely their ridiculousness that pushes literal readings underground and transforms them into deep symbolism. The repetitions of the rising pattern make this point well, for unlike Grofé’s deployment of birdsong, they brook no literal interpretation at all (man alters sunrise?). Rather, they lend themselves to more generalized narratives having to do with the disruption and manipulation of nature. From the man’s entrance onward, the repetitions no longer consistently
rise. At first (rehearsal numbers 4–5) they remain at a fixed level, thereby se-
curing the “home territory” of E. From rehearsal number 6 to the end, they
cycle higher or hold even in subordination to a long-range tonal logic that cul-
minates in a resolution at the moment of sunrise (Fig. 3). The net effect of this
arrival is remarkable. To switch from territorial to industrial metaphors, it is as
if Grofé has fractured the tranquil surface of “nature music” and fabricated
crude machinery from it: dominant tension levers the sun up to the horizon,
and tonic resolution holds it aloft.

Harnessing nature inevitably has consequences: as dominant pressure
builds (beginning at rehearsal number 9), the rising pattern must work ever
harder to meet the demands of its new, load-bearing function. In its final state-
ments before rehearsal number 10 it accelerates three times (\(\downarrow\rightarrow\downarrow; \downarrow\rightarrow\downarrow; \downarrow\rightarrow\downarrow;\)
Ex. 9), in the process falling out of synchronization with the meter. Resolution
comes only after the pattern has been stretched two steps beyond its normal
scope (to a tenth, m. 133). From here to the end, the overheated figure runs
amok; neither its scope nor its level of repetition is consistent, and its collapse
at measure 149 coincides with a prolonged dissonance (Ex. 10). Why would
Grand Canyon Suite insinuate such things? Because nature broken on the
wheel of human enterprise is ultimately part of the fantasy of conquest. Those
inclined to hear the ending differently are surely in the majority. After all, this
is not the story the program sets forth. For that, we must move from the en-
gine room back to the viewing hall, or in terms of the tapestry metaphor, from
the weave to the surface. There we see what all this has wrought: a magnifi-
cent sunrise. In this way, the piece is thematically consistent with a novelty of
its time, the road trip, where tourists tapped natural resources to arrive at real
Grand Canyon sunrises.

Conclusion

In “Surveying the Sublime,” Rick Van Noy notes that many of those explorers
who charted the West—including John Wesley Powell on his trip through the
Grand Canyon—carried within themselves this conflict. On the one hand,
they desired wilderness to be an expression of the sublime, and their personal
reactions to it thus turned on its overwhelming vastness. On the other (and as
I have suggested in “The Overlook” and “Musical Four by Fours”), the busi-
ness of mapping terrain constituted an act of containment. The result was one
in which, as John Tallmadge puts it, “their discoveries destroy[ed] the very
mysteries that allured them.”91 The pioneers who followed would write this
contradiction into the land itself, thus leaving subsequent immigrants keenly

91. John Tallmadge, “Western Geologists and Explorers: Clarence King and John Wesley
1996), 1178; cited by Van Noy in “Surveying the Sublime,” 182.
(a) Rehearsal number
(b) Pitch level of pattern (opening bass note)
(c) Underlying pedal
(d) Implied harmonic motion

(a) 6 7 8 9 10
(b) D E F# G A B C# D C# E F# G A A A A A B C# D B
(c) G A A B E
(d) D: IV I V V (V7) I

Figure 3 “Sunrise,” subordination of rising pattern to long-range tonal logic

Example 9 “Sunrise,” climax
aware of the real—not merely conceptual—fragility of wilderness. Cronon sums up the problem they faced: “The frontier narrative was about settling a new land; it offered little wisdom about how best to live once the settling was done and the new land had become old.”  

This is the collision of values I have sought to capture in *Grand Canyon Suite*. Grofé’s overt and sincere appreciation of a wilderness preserve has never been in question. What I have attempted to question, rather, is his—and his audiences’—ability to break with the frontier narrative when the latter was inappropriate. Grofé once described American music metaphorically as a natural resource, one that “surges forth from our land.” Perhaps it is a vein of ore or an oil deposit, or maybe a bubbling spring in the desert, as his elaboration suggests: “Our land is rich in music. If you listen you can hear it right now . . . our music . . . surging forth . . . singing up to everyone of us.” This bounty is available to all, and Grofé stakes a claim only to what he can extract through sweat and technology: “This music is mine only in the technical sense that a copyright has been filed away with my name on it [ . . . ] . . . the only line that separates Grofé from you is the lucky fact that I have been trained to jot down these musical impressions.”  

However generous the sentiment, it is unlikely that a music born of it (and Grofé cites *Grand Canyon Suite* first in this essay) could avoid exploiting the park it celebrates.

The collision leads to more than conceptual wreckage; it creates a dialectic where one view of nature is inextricably linked to the other. The tapestry metaphor suggested as much in regard to *Grand Canyon Suite*, given its implication that the work’s glorification of nature was woven from domination. In the broader context of environmentalism, one might think in terms of tectonic plates: as one geological layer is subducted, it lifts another up. In the Southwest, this lifting has contributed to the very erosion of the landscape that makes the Grand Canyon spectacular. By this analogy, Americans’ lofty views of wilderness rest on the impulse to conquer, and the eating away of wilderness has made them prize it the more. I have characterized the dialectic as a particularly modern phenomenon, but in truth it has been with us for some time. Earlier I quoted from Tocqueville’s 1831 recollections of the Great Lakes region. An expanded citation makes clear that the disappearance of wilderness is as much a source of pleasure as regret:

It is this consciousness of destruction, this *arrière-pensée* of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with melancholy pleasure; one is in some sort of a hurry to admire them. Thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilization. One feels proud to be a man, and yet at the same time one experiences I cannot say what bitter regret at the power that God has granted us over nature. One’s soul is shaken by contradictory thoughts and feelings.94

This form of loving does not bode well for our future, but that is another story. More immediately, the dialectic encourages us to look closely at works that may overplay the notion of harmony between humans and nature. Underneath could lie something less flattering but more environmentally relevant.

**Appendix A**  Program of *Grand Canyon Suite*95

Movement I: “Sunrise”

It is early morning on the desert. The sun rises slowly spattering the darkness with rich colors of dawn. The sun comes from beyond the horizon and a brilliant spray of colors announces the full break of day.

The movement begins with a soft roll on the kettledrums, and a series of chords played by the woodwind follows. The main theme is played by the English horn. The development of the movement is taken up by other instruments reaching a triumphant climax that depicts the dawn of a new day.


95. Published in the original full score (New York: Robbins, 1943). The score does not identify an author for this version of the program. Given that the latter appears both here and in subsequent printings of the score, I assume that Grofé approved it and most likely penned it himself.
Movement II: “The Painted Desert”

The desert is silent and mysterious, yet beautiful. As the bright rays of the sun are reflected against majestic crags and spread across the sands in varying hues, the entire scene appears as a canvas thick with the pigments of nature’s own blending.

The movement starts with a mysterious theme played by bass clarinet and viola accompanied by weird chords in the lower registers of the orchestra. It is interrupted by strange harmonies from the woodwind and the upper register of the piano. A contrasting melody of lyric quality follows. This is succeeded by the mysterious music which opened the movement.

Movement III: “On the Trail”

A traveler and his burro are descending the trail. The sharp hoof beats of the animal form an unusual rhythmic background for the cowboy’s song. The sounds of a waterfall tell them of a nearby oasis. A lone cabin is soon sighted and, as they near it, a music box is heard. The travelers stop at the cabin for refreshment. Now fully rested, the travelers journey forth at a livelier pace. The movement ends as man and burro disappear in the distance.

This is the most popular movement of the suite. It starts as the orchestra simulates the loud bray of a burro. After a violin cadenza, the first theme—a graceful melody in a rhythmic pattern—is established. It has the feeling of the burro walking. The second theme of the movement—a melody in Western style is played contrapuntally to the first. This is followed by a suggestion of an old music box, which is played by the celeste. The opening theme is heard again in a faster tempo. The movement is concluded with the bray of the burro and the musical ending, itself, is short and incisive.

Movement IV: “Sunset”

Now the shades of night sweep over the golden hues of the day. As evening envelops the desert in a cloak of darkness, there is a suggestion of animal calls coming from the distant rim of the canyon.

A wild, animal-like call, played by the horns, opens this movement. This is followed by the main theme, which is introduced by bells and violins. In the development, the theme is repeated by oboes and violins, then by woodwind and violins, again by cellos and horns, horns and flutes. Finally the horns again play the calls heard in the opening bars and the movement ends as the tones fade into the distance.

Movement V: “Cloudburst”

This is the most pictorial movement of the suite. We hear the approach of the storm. Lightning flashes across the sky and thunder roars from the darkness. The torrent of rain reaches its height in a cloudburst, but the storm disappears rapidly and the moon comes from behind the clouds. Nature again rejoices in all its grandeur.

Glissando effects in the violin section describe the approach of the storm. It is interesting to note how in the development of the movement Grofé uses all the resources of the orchestra to portray the battle of the elements. The agitated movement subsides, and then follows a gradual crescendo that reaches its climax at the very end.

Appendix B  Excerpts from Grofé’s “Story of the Grand Canyon Suite” (1938)

There are things in this world that we love passingly, or long, or always, and that applies particularly to persons and places. It is to such a place that I dedicate this article with all the love and gratitude in my heart.
The place I mean is large, very large, but I think I know most of it, as well as the best of it (to me there is no worst), and it has become an abiding part of my fondest memories. I treasure my recollections of the place I am writing about; recollections sentimental, pictorial, romantic; recollections of grandiose Nature, of vast areas of eloquent solitudes, towering heights, silent deserts, rushing rivers, wild animal life; of health-giving ozone, magic dawns and resplendent sunsets, silvery moonshine, iridescent colorings of skies and rocks; and before all else, of a stock of men and women who breathe deeply and freely, live bravely and picturesquely, speak their minds in simplicity and truth, and altogether represent as typical and fine a human flowering as this land of ours has inherited from its pioneer days. If you have read this far, and not guessed the name of the place I am eulogizing, let me relieve your mind. I mean Arizona.

I first went to Arizona in 1917, when the war urge sent me to volunteer for the cavalry band in Douglas. I played the baritone, and my practice hours were spent on the desert, much to the relief of my neighbors in the city. Then came the (World War I) draft, and I had to return to Los Angeles to report.

After the war, I lived in Arizona at different periods in 1918, ’19, ’20, ’21 and ’23. I was familiar with the Prescott rodeos, made frequent visits to the Grand Canyon, camped everywhere from the border to Mohave County, felt at home in Flagstaff and Tombstone, the State ranches, mining camps. I hobnobbed with Indians, did some gold prospecting with an old friend, who at one time controlled an interest in the famous Ivanpaw Mine in the Hualapai Mountains; often heard the Indian drums beating all night during their powwows; had some ownership in the New Jersey Mining Company at Chloride; formed partnership in several hundred head of livestock with a cattleman and got to know the packing houses and their methods of slaughter and dressing; fished the Colorado River above Needles; experienced marvelous floods; spent wonderful nights on the desert; and rode all over the state in a cut-down Ford roadster. I had by that time considered myself almost a native Arizonan.

My last extended visit to Arizona was in 1926, and on that occasion came to me the irresistible impulse to put into music what I felt about the state and its wonders of Nature. To me they were epitomized, before all else, in the awe-inspiring magnificence and towering mystery of the Grand Canyon, which had always stimulated my imagination to form tonal impressions. I saw color, but I “heard” it, too.

[The Grand Canyon] seemed to call for a tonal language not that of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, or even symphonic moderns, but for a truly American idiom, falling easily on the average ear and completely understandable by ordinary Mr. And Mrs. John Citizen and even their adolescent offspring. Whether I have succeeded, I leave it to others to judge.

The Grand Canyon Suite has five movements: “Sunrise,” “Painted Desert,” “On the Trail,” “Sunset,” “Cloudburst.” Strange as it may seem, I did not write the movements in that order, except that I started with “Sunrise,” for which I made the first sketches at Santa Monica, California, in 1929, and finished it later at my home in Teaneck, New Jersey. I next (also in 1929) did “Sunset” at the Saddle River Country Club, near Hackensack, New Jersey. Now followed “On the Trail,” which became the “best-seller” of the series, and engaged my leisure when I was a member of the Whiteman band in Chicago during 1931. The theme of the burros, which struck the popular fancy so strongly, came to me while wheeling my son along Sheridan Road. Five pile-drivers were thumping in some building operation, and their peculiar broken rhythm at once suggested its adaptability for musical use, a recollection of the metrical hoof-tap that I had heard so often from the little beasts of burden in Arizona. For
“Painted Desert” (1931, Chicago) I went again to memories and envisioned a scene at Holbrook, where I had been on the rim of the desert at early morn and gazed in rapt amazement at the changing colors and shadows. The fifth movement of “Cloudburst” had me guessing for a while, in order to find the impressive dynamic effects I desired for Nature at its utmost fury, even though I had in mind a vivid mental record of a terrific electrical storm I encountered in Arizona. Then providence aided, for a similar watery deluge, with thunder and lightning, raged before my eyes during a visit to the Chippewa Indian Reservation. Immediately, “Cloudburst” took shape and soon was transferred to paper, as the conclusion of the Grand Canyon Suite.

Its world premiere took place November 22, 1931, in Chicago, with Paul Whiteman conducting, and I trust that I shall not be considered as lacking in modesty if I add that the composition scored impressive success, and since then has been performed all over the world.

Of course the usual critics arose here and there to put me in my place, and I remember especially one who objected to the fact that I did not orchestrate the work in the accepted fashion set by European composers! He said that the new type of American orchestration “did violence to the grandeur of the Grand Canyon,” and that it is a fitting subject only for “the greatest of symphony writers.” The greatest of symphony writers were Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms, and as none of them ever was in Arizona, I do not quite see how they could have done musical justice to the Grand Canyon. . . .

An outstanding New York critic also made me happy when my opus was first played there, with his praise of my “coloring, melody, imagination, and instrumentation of evocative atmosphere. Grofé actually gives you the spirit of the Grand Canyon, its gorgeous beauty, its vastness, its part in the Indian history of the Southwest.”

Every composer’s output generally includes one number that is most dear to his heart, perhaps because he considers it his best, or maybe because of the cherished associations in the music. In my case, that favored example is the Grand Canyon Suite, and for both of the reasons I have mentioned.

It is my fervent hope that I may be able to do something to rank with it. But where is there another such subject to move me similarly? Do you wonder that my heart is filled with enduring love and lasting gratitude for Arizona and its grandest glory?

Believe me when I say that I am looking forward to the time when I shall have a small ranch of my own, not far from Flagstaff and my beloved Grand Canyon country, where I may relive my younger days in the great open spaces and find a finale of peace that passeth understanding. So let the day arrive soon when I may sing, “Arizona, here I come!”

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Abstract

In the early decades of the twentieth century, many Americans harbored mixed feelings toward wilderness. On the one hand, the recent closing of the
frontier increased an already strong affection for the nation’s remaining open spaces. On the other, the land’s potential for development had traditionally determined its value. The result was a contradiction discernable in both the ideology of the National Park Service and the best-known composition about a national park, Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite* (1931). Borrowing from the relatively new field of ecocriticism, I propose several ways of hearing in the work a simultaneous celebration and conquest of the Grand Canyon. The goal is a better historical understanding of a love for wilderness that forever promises to turn wilderness into something else.