

Recent String Quartets

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THEY ARE FOUR ORNAMENTED boxes with some strings attached. No, I am not referring to someone's Christmas shopping, but rather to the components of a string quartet: two violins, a viola, and a cello. These instruments of sophisticated technology date back some four hundred years, with their antecedents, the viol family, much older than that. They, and the bows that go along with them, were originally made of various woods and animal materials, and are objects of physical beauty. But their primary purpose is not to beguile the eye but to create beautiful sounds; sounds that express the human soul, and that, when organized into a quasi-linguistic framework, are called music. They are played with the fingers and hands. They also transmit something of the physical nature of their human performers, as well as something of their soul. It is no

secret that while it is not so complicated to reproduce electronically many wind and brass instruments, those most difficult to duplicate include these string instruments as well as the human voice. It is as if their singular voices, a mixture of the human body and spirit, refuse to be copied or synthesized. Which is to say that the music formed directly of human experience is irreducible to some other medium.

Recordings can capture and reproduce much of the sound, but this is not the same as lived experience. The best recordings, however, can lead us into new vistas and allow us to experience something new that otherwise we most likely will not be able to access in any other way.

Recordings weren't around at the time of "Papa" Joseph Haydn, who invented the string quartet in the eighteenth century. And as with many inventions, it seems so

obvious. Two treble (or high sounding) voices, a middle voice, and a low voice, which does somewhat replicate that of our voice types, soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. After Haydn's first explorations of this new chamber music medium, which consisted of music generally for the players themselves or with small audiences, Mozart and then Beethoven followed, and of course Schubert and Brahms. The mother lodes of the earlier part of the twentieth century are Bartok's six quartets and Shostakovich's fifteen.

Composers of the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first are still very much interested in the medium. While the instruments themselves have a somewhat limited sound palette—as they are an acoustical family—that has certainly been expanded of late. This expansion includes all sorts of rappings and tappings (including playing the instrument with pencils or chopsticks!); sound transformation from the normal to *sul tasto* (playing on the finger board, producing a gentle wan, contracted sound) to *ponticello* (a glassy sound with little of the fundamental tone but rich in high harmonics); there are now electronic versions, and composers have also amplified the older instruments. Nonetheless, many composers have found it of interest to write their quartets more or less in the “tradition,” finding more to discover in the patterns of communal communication and their own individual musical languages than in the extension of the instruments' sonic possibilities.

Elena Reuhr has contributed six quartets to the genre. Her music is generally genial, tonal, and evocative of past and present folk musics. It often resides on relatively long tonal plateaus and is somewhat reserved and laid back. It unfolds gradually and the ear is easily able to ascertain almost all of its moves; it signals well its intentions and is in accessible and hearable forms. The first can

serve as an instructive introduction to all six of Reuhr's quartets. It is comprised of four movements of considerably varying character.

The first movement is lyrical, almost pastoral, and has a quiet sense of yearning. A clear sense of background and foreground is present; it is quite tonal and simple, but not dumb. A seemingly Celtic figure closes the first movement against a quietly held drone, and it ends on an octave, securing the tonal nature of the materials. The second movement is more textural and bustling with a busy buzzing, and it is shorter than all the other movements. Against the busy texture a tune, graceful and *leggiero*, is played in the cello and violin at a two-octave distance. There are also syncopated folk-like materials, or maybe further reminiscings of country fiddling. The third movement is slow, mysterious, and quiet for the most part. Scalar passages are present in imitation, overlapping with major and minor seconds creating a web of sound within a restricted middle range. This is then offset with the same web presented in a very high register in the violins and viola while the cello plays quite low. Reuhr's attention to registral placement makes this music vivid. The fourth and final movement begins directly after the previous with no break. It is much more dissonant than previous movements. Dynamics are generally loud and the music is boisterous. The music is again folk-like, in a Bartokian Eastern European sense, as there are sections of music played *pizzicato*. Materials are octatonic, with scale fragments with simple ornamentation. Unison lines occasionally burst out, and the structure is clear with repeats of materials that are of high enough definition to be grasped. This is music that is well heard, well sculpted, and well thought out. It is a pleasure to listen to its evocative world.

I was fortunate to hear the premieres of two new works by Robert Maggio, as they were commissioned by my hometown organization, the Arizona Friends of Chamber Music. AFCM champions new music, with numerous new commissions performed every season. Maggio's pieces, *Songbook for Annamaria*, and *Rain and Ash*, are highly successful works, somewhat similar to Reuhr's work, in that they are based on folk materials.

Songbook for Annamaria is in four movements, each based on a well-known folk song. This time-honored tradition of borrowing from vernacular music stretches all the way back to the Middle Ages and is found in the more contemporary music of Aaron Copland (e.g. *Rodeo*) and Robert Beaser (e.g. *Mountain Songs*). The tunes referred to include *Shenandoah*, *All the Pretty Little Horses*, *jimmy crack corn/ Blue Tail Fly*, and *I've Been Working on the Railroad*. The use of these well-known melodies is often done with them present only in the background, which is to say, they never are presented in an insipid way, although sometimes they bubble to the surface just to humorous affect. Each tune and movement is conveyed with an individual approach to sound and a sense of unfolding storytelling. Even in slow music,

but of course in faster music, there is a vibrant rhythmic intensity, that obtains throughout. The overall arch of energy and structure is sure, and the final close of this quartet is, well, verging on the magical, as it ever so gently glides into a tonal resolution.

Rain and Ash (String Quartet No. 2) presents two starkly contrasting movements. *Rain*, a compact rondo that alternates between weighty, rhythmic materials and more lyrical episodes, is celebratory in nature.

The second movement, *Ash*, begins with a quietly soaring melody, over a gentle weave of lower strings. This serene atmosphere is interrupted by angry and aggressive chords. The piece involves the working out of, or the interaction between, these two radically contrasting emotive states. It leads to the most unexpected and charming events. Time sometimes rushes on and at other times comes to a complete stop. The effect is mesmerizing. Its extended coda might be a touch too long, but since it is formed of sinuous lines of gorgeous harmonics, I am willing to forgive this minor lapse. Or then again, maybe I am wrong, and on further hearings I will find it just right. This is what makes listening to fine works so engaging—how one hears them changes with each encounter.

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Shulamit Ran's "*Glitter, Doom, Shards, and Memory*," is the title of her third string quartet. Like Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, it is a meditation on the Shoah, the Holocaust. Whereas Reich's is a somewhat personal reflection—placing his story in relation to world-shaking events—Ran's meditation is to be seen through the eyes of the Jewish artist, Felix Nussbaum, who

perished at Auschwitz. She makes no suggestion in her reflections on the piece that the work or movements have any direct correlation to any of Nussbaum's paintings, but rather that the spirit of his paintings inform the music. And a reminder, that we should not, will not, forget. In working with this subject, Ran has worked her way back to the terrain of

one of her earliest pieces, *O the Chimneys*, a work based on the texts of Nelly Sachs, dating from 1969, and written when she was just twenty. At the same time, she also wants this newer music to be viewed and understood only as music, which is to say that while there is a program of sorts, the music must work and speak as music.

The first movement is titled “that which happened,” which is what poet Paul Celan called the Holocaust, given our inability to comprehend it. Ran says that her title refers to normal life being utterly and irrevocably shattered. It begins quite pastorally with a lyrical melody in a clear, tonally based language. This is immediately interrupted by a more expressionistic music in an atonal, but never harsh, idiom. These two worlds alternate or abut each other as the shattering process proceeds. An extended siren effect leads into a more maniacal music, much more dissonant and “broken.” The music is made of short, interrupted phrases.

The second movement, *Menace*, is a distorted waltz. Ran describes it as mechanical and unstoppable. It is, again, broken, misconfigured, occasionally grotesque, and at its conclusion, expresses a last wheeze of life.

“If I perish—do not let my paintings die” are the words of Felix Nussbaum, and in this third movement Ran “imagine(s) ...the conflicting states of mind...to continue to live and practice one’s art...(and) bearing witness to the events.” The music is filled with aggressive outbursts, and the occasional appearance of quarter-tones produce a somewhat world-weary quality, a *weltschmerz*. The use of *col legno battuto*—striking the strings with the wood of the bow—produces the sounds of bones. There are semi-tonal wanderings, blank and empty silences, and downward glissandi suggest a loss of energy or the life force itself.

The stillness of high harmonics, and fragments and sequences of unrelated materials, seem to represent the disjointed, depleted nature of mind when confronted with the destruction of the bodily self. Towards its conclusion, crescendos are abruptly cut off followed by segues to new material. The melodic material is hyper-romantic and there is a climax of rising pitch with *pizzicato*, but the movement ends with the resolution of a consonance of affirmation. While Nussbaum didn’t survive, his paintings did.

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The fourth movement is all about “*Shards, Memory*.” It is slow-moving, of course, with notes of longer duration. A descending minor second is prominent in its well-embellished melodies. The texture is often thin and transparent. It is rigorously expressive and, not surprisingly, often mournful, sometimes keening. It is music of reflection. This fine work covers complicated and expressive musical and world-historical territory. Ran has more than succeeded at what is not an easy task.

Dzubay's Astral Quartet was written for the Orion String Quartet in 2008. It references the heavens, in all of their primordial wonder; and is in five movements whose lengths range from just less than two minutes, to an expansive six and a half.

The first movement, *Voyage*, provides materials for the entire work. It is a mini-world that is then replicated on the macro level, as the following movements are each based on an idea or two presented here. It contains different divisions of the beat, starting with a quickly loping figure that segues to a quicker and more articulated rhythm. The pitch materials are quite open and consonant, as the original fragment contains a major second and minor third. This motive will be presented in both more consonant and dissonant settings, and thus this sound world is rich in tension and repose. The opening texture features an accompaniment in the lower three instruments with a wild, free, and flexible melody, high up in the violin which starts with a Mannheim Rocket, as the line shoots upwards with a scalar passage. The next section presents high trills, low strings on warm consonances, and a pizzicato figure in the cello that sounds like the fragments of a jazz walking bass. This is a rich and sonorous movement formed of a kaleidoscopic range of emotive gestures, but the return to its opening makes for a clear and satisfying form.

Starry Night portrays just that: a quiet look at the celestial canopy. It is in slow, meditative time. It is even languorous as high harmonics create a sense of stasis, as calm counterpoint unfolds in the lower parts. It is sometimes chorale-like, perhaps lending a certain religious undertone in this music of reflection.

S.E.T.I. refers to the institute founded by the astronomer Carl Sagan: the Search for

Extraterrestrial Intelligence. This is the shortest and, not surprisingly, the most out-of-this-world movement. It is formed of a compendium of extended techniques, exploiting pizzicati, col legno battuto, ponticello (playing very close to the bridge producing a thin, glassy, eerie sound), and glissandi. All these techniques are used in the context of very rapid nervous gestures with non-tonal pitch materials; they are self-contained, brief utterances of sound with quickly alternating dynamics. Most of these disconnected moments occur in the higher registers, sounding almost disembodied, and there is seemingly little coordination between the various parts. The entire effect is quizzical, whimsical, and fantastical, appropriate for portraying the unfettered and uncontrolled sounds of the universe.

Wintu Dream Song is a setting of a funereal song of that West Coast Indian tribe. It is repetitive—in a nice way—and quite tonal, respecting its lineage. Expansive, gentle, calm, and lulling, it suggests a simple and primal response to existing in a bewildering universe and the mystery of our living and dying. When written, it must have been thought of as an homage, while now it might be seen as appropriation—while the world turns and the universe expands.

Supernova is the final and concluding movement. It “begins with music of constrained energy, explodes in a wild development of earlier ideas, and then dissipates into the expanse of space,” as per the liner notes. Which is to say that this entire piece ends with many of the materials with which it began and toyed with throughout the following movements. It is a fine summarization and it, and the entire work, with a series of overlapping Mannheim Rockets, ends with a bang. **A**