

String Quartet no. 2
Program Note

The composition of my second string quartet was the result of a happy and fortuitous three-way collaboration. Charles and May Westheimer are among the most dedicated patrons of the arts, and good friends. Typically, they decided to commemorate their fiftieth wedding anniversary by commissioning a work from a composer whose work they admired, and connecting it to a string quartet whose members were also friends, and whose playing they also admired. The result was my string quartet, which was given its first performance by the Shanghai Quartet in January of 1995 in Richmond, Virginia.

The circumstances of this commission certainly encouraged me to compose a work that would be musically connected to the Westheimers. Although I usually think of my music as rather abstract, this piece really is an exception: while beginning to work out musical ideas, I found myself thinking a great deal about the phenomenon of fifty years of marriage. The string quartet also seemed to me (as it evidently has to many other composers) to be ideal as a medium in which one could explore these sorts of things meaningfully and deeply--and without trivializing them.

So, the meditative opening section--in which all four musicians play in unison--really does have symbolic as well as structural meaning. In the same way, the various musical relationships between four musicians that are found throughout the piece serve (at least for me) as metaphors for the complex and ever-changing entity that is marriage. Of course, understanding of the music is not dependent on a deciphering of these metaphors--I would hope that the quartet can stand alone on its own terms.

My string quartet is in one continuous movement. There are nevertheless a number of clearly articulated sections within, and these are distinguishable by changes in speed, density and melodic material. Several of the musical ideas are heard more than once in the piece, and as such they serve as markers or signposts.

String quartet no. 2 is dedicated with great admiration to Charles and May Westheimer.

Joel Hoffman