

String Quartet 3
Program Note

It seems to me that almost every composer who has written a string quartet must have felt the obligation to confront the special case of this medium--first of all, a genre in which such great music has been written and continues to be written; then because of its unique property as an ensemble that at the same time offers four voices so completely independent from each other yet so perfectly matched as well.

With this quartet--my third--I have tried to face this obligation squarely. And the point of departure for me is the legacy of Bartok's quartets. This might not be obvious given that I was a student of Elliott Carter, who is generally agreed to be the most significant composer of string quartets since Bartok and Shostakovich. But the model of Bartok appealed to me as the strongest in this instance, since I was after a concise, lean, serious approach to the medium and that is what Bartok is all about--at least to me.

This quartet is structured in a rigorously symmetrical fashion (inspired by but not really imitating Bartok in any particular piece). There are five movements, of which the first, third and fifth are all at precisely the same fast tempo, and last almost exactly three minutes each. The second and fourth are slower, and last about six minutes each. The musical materials used in 1, 3 and 5 are the same, and yet I tried to find the ways in which each movement could express these materials in a unique way.

Movements 2 and 4 are, on the other hand, quite different from each other--and yet each works with materials that are derived from 1, 3 and 5. Another rigorous factor in this piece is that the entire quartet is built upon one scale, which never changes in any way. Every note is invariably fixed in its register, which means that the freedom and inventiveness of the music has to be achieved through the overcoming of this rigidity. These fixed structures of form and harmony were deliberately self-imposed in the hope that the effort to go beyond them would effectively take the music to the place I wanted it to go--a vivid world of fantasy and musical play. To me, this paradox (the relationship between carefully controlled musical construction and the resultant musical fun) is what makes music so compelling and powerful, as well as a mirror of human life.

String Quartet 3 was commissioned by the Caramoor Festival in upstate New York for the Amernet Quartet, which gave the quartet's first performance in July, 2005.

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