

## Notes on Richard Festinger's *String Quartet*

The quartet is a piece very consciously situated in the rich history of the genre—distant echoes of the classical composers Festinger cites appear through the quartet, especially in the more scherzando music, and also commingle with echoes of more assertive ones of Bartok and (especially) of Berg's Lyric Suite—but unusual in the emphasis it places on the idea of the ensemble as “almost.. .a single mind.” Innumerable “orchestrational” touches in the texture demand that two or more players abruptly become a kind of composite instrument. Two widely-spaced lines suddenly veer into the middle of the texture, converging on a close interval. A viola line, arco, is doubled by the cello playing the same line pizzicato (or vice versa). The finale's feisty stream of sixteenth notes migrates naturally, practically imperceptively, from player to player, the transitions all but inaudible.

The piece begins with a slow introduction (Adagio) that almost deserves to be called a separate movement, as it is nearly as long as the first movement proper. It is muted and mysterious music, colored by harmonics, ponticello, and tremolo, but much of the music in this opening turns up later in quite different character. The Allegro that follows (marked Più mosso) is a muscular romp for the quartet, full of sudden shifts of gear, and calling on the players much of the time to speak in rhythmic unison.

The second movement (Alla breve) consists of a theme and five variations. The theme is not a succession of pitches or rhythms or harmonies, but a complex of all three. The succeeding five variations take up and juggle materials from the theme in unpredictable ways. The material becomes progressively more intricate and playful, until the last variation is almost a distillation of its model. A vigorous rondo finale rounds off the piece—a virtuoso etude in syncopation ending in a triumphant flourish.

- Michelle Dulak

In a short talk preceding the world premiere of his “String Quartet,” Festinger spoke of his intent that, at a certain level, this work, commissioned by the Alexander Quartet, presented musical portraits of the performers. The composer's program notes referred to the Alexander's “refined and elegant style” as a force in the composition's inception, and surely this phrase epitomizes the work as a whole. “String Quartet” commences with an Adagio introduction, forming almost a movement unto itself. The music proceeds lyrically with occasional pizzicato passages and tremolo effects germinating the thematic material of the ensuing movements. The Allegro highlights short modules of notes, distributed among the players in a graceful colloquy of asymmetrical rhythms and engagingly expressionistic, even pointillistic, texture. The succeeding movement begins broodingly but quickly spins increasingly energetic variations into fairly static and restful chordal passages. A concluding Allegro Ritmico evokes a sense of the composer's experience with jazz, in restless utterances foiled by an angular ritornello. “String Quartet” encompasses the tradition -- both classical and modern -- of its medium, and engages the ear with a taut, athletic lyricism evocative of the whole of that tradition.

- David L. Barry

And they said then, "But play, you must,  
a tune beyond us, yet ourselves..."

The poet Wallace Stevens' words from the opening stanza of his masterpiece, "The man with the blue guitar", mirror the conception at the heart of my String Quartet. When asked by the Alexander Quartet to compose a work for them, my first thoughts were of their superb renditions of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, their refined and elegant style in the tradition of great quartet playing, and I sought to write a quartet that would take full advantage of their marvelous abilities, born of the classical style, to move and emote almost as a single mind. Yet even while admiring this classicism, it is essential for me that every new work should strive to push beyond the constraints of the tradition of which it is a part, to find a new voice which is nevertheless universal in its resonances, "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves..."

My *String Quartet* begins with an *adagio* introduction which becomes so expansive that it almost assumes the proportions of an opening movement in slow tempo. The music here is at its most coloristic, and as it progresses, this introduction either foreshadows or presents in embryonic form the material of all three movements which follow. The first of these movements is a sweeping *allegro* full of metrical twists and turns, and culminating in a music of great angular force. Following this comes a set of variations on a spacious and introspective theme, marked *a la breve*. The first three variations become progressively more active, while the last two subside towards a reminiscence of the opening theme. The lively finale, marked *allegro ritmico*, is built around a highly syncopated *ritornello* which holds in check the increasingly centrifugal energy of wide ranging episodes.

- Richard Festinger