

String Quartet No. 3 (2015)

My String Quartet No. 3 is the product of a collaboration planned in 2008, when the Afiara Quartet performed my second quartet, an experience that both the quartet and I found so satisfying and energizing that we immediately began to lay the groundwork for a new work for string quartet. Many projects intervened, but with the strong support of a commission awarded last year from the Serge Koussevitzky Foundation in the Library of Congress the project finally came to fruition.

As an aside, Serge Koussevitzky, A native of Switzerland, came to the U.S. in 1942 to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra, a post he held until 1949, building the B.S.O. into one of the world's great orchestral ensembles. Throughout his distinguished career, he displayed a broad international interest in contemporary music, his foundation's mission to make manifest his "gratitude to the creators to whom we owe our musical heritage and who are providing our legacy to the future."

For me this was the opportunity I had sought to write for these four brilliant young performers. From my earlier experience working with them on my second quartet I had a good idea of their capabilities, as well as some first-hand knowledge of their playing style, and had that knowledge firmly in mind while composing this new quartet. In my mind as well was the performers' desire that the new work capture something of the quality of excitement of the finale of my second quartet.

This newest of my string quartets is in five movements. The emphatic, declamatory opening of the first movement, marked *maestoso*, persists in accelerating or breaking out into mercurially insistent passages of fast, running figures. The center of the movement is a kind of focus on what a visual artist might call "negative space", in which the music slows and descends to a quiet nadir in the ensemble's lowest register, a quiet that reduces finally to a silence, after which the movement regenerates itself.

The second movement is an elegant and graceful *andantino*, almost like a stately dance if it weren't for the absence of a sense of regular meter. It is full of arabesques, including a cadenza-like passage for the first violin at the movement's climactic moment.

The third movement, marked *allegretto*, is an essay on rhythm, and for that reason it is played entirely *pizzicato*, for the rhythmic incisiveness of the plucked, rather than bowed string. The harmonies and melodic contours are mostly simpler here. The movement features rapidly shifting cross-rhythms, where the tempi of two opposing groups of instruments (either in pairs, or the cello against other three) rapidly diverge and converge to create a kaleidoscopic, or, better yet, moiré-like effect of rapidly shifting rhythmic patterns.

Movement four, marked *non troppo adagio*, is serene and poignant, a little distanced owing to a somewhat trenchant harmonic palette. The counterpoint is canonic, the instruments imitating each another's angular contours. Moments of arrival are punctuated by brief, muted outbursts that become longer and more dramatic over the course of things, before settling back into the serenity of the beginning. The *con brio* finale takes wing to conclude the quartet.

The work is dedicated, in gratitude and admiration, to the Afiara String Quartet, and to the Koussevitzky Foundation, whose support made the project a reality.

- Richard Festinger