

A Sense of Style: Composers, Inc. and the Alexander String Quartet

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Composers, Inc., presents the Alexander String Quartet in the world premiere of Richard Festinger's "String Quartet" (1994), Robert Greenberg's "Among Friends (String Quartet No. 3)" (1995), and Lou Harrison's "String Quartet Set" (1978-1979). November 19, Green Room, Veterans Building, San Francisco, CA.

Composers, Inc., hosted the Alexander String Quartet, November 19, at the Veterans Building in San Francisco for performances of Richard Festinger's "String Quartet" (1994), Robert Greenberg's "Among Friends (String Quartet No. 3)" (1995), and Lou Harrison's "String Quartet Set" (1978-1979).

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 shot 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.



Robert Greenberg's notes characterize his "Among Friends" as also being about his friends and colleagues of the Alexander String Quartet. The work is certainly about the idiosyncracies, colors, and performance practices of the constituent instruments. In this expansive work, the composer delights in aural intrigues, as layers of music alternately unfold and dissolve. The first movement, "With Friends Like These," draws upon a large musical vocabulary to suggest argument, irritation, obfuscation, and debate. The ensuing "Inner Voices" parleys gentle glissandi and unobtrusive ostinati into a quiet parley between second violin and viola. The third movement, "Little Hands and Little Feet" allows the first violin to dominate the ensemble in quiet passages, culminating in high sustained notes. "Freund Barry" -- a musical portrait of Dr. Barry Gardiner, titularly inspired by the second movement ("Freund Heine" of Mahler's "Symphony No. 4" -- is a rollicking dance of additive rhythmic figures, in an abstract tonal language simultaneously projecting both Mahlerian impetuosity and warmth. The penultimate "Friendly Persuasion" recalls the first movement's staccato reiterations and discordant figures, while the final "All for One and One for All" abandons disharmony and wraps up the work with brisk unison passages in uncomplicated meter and tonality. "Among Friends" infuses contemporary technique with a lush, if perhaps repetitive, romanticism. The work's manifold qualities and the Alexander String Quartet's bravura performance produced a standing ovation from the Green Room audience.

An altogether different sensibility issues from Lou Harrison's "String Quartet Set." Essentially a suite written in artificially archaic musical language, the absence of complication mesmerizes: the mind focuses on what is not there. The "Variations," on a song by the 12-century Walter von der Vogelweide, was conceived in the 1940's and presents the ear with the contradiction of rhythmically regular, *con moto* stylization of music in quintal counterpoint. "Plaint," a quieter response to the first movement, is composed for forces tuned in pure fifths, and evolves sectionally and repetitively towards a slightly dissonant culmination. "Estampic" involves the ensemble in a roughhouse ostinato punctuated by rhythmical *battuto* on the body of the cello. "Rondeaux" evokes the French baroque through characteristic cadential techniques and ornamentation in a manner which still sounds incongruously, delightfully modal. "Usul," denoting a Turkish rhythmic mode, consists of sedate Eastern ostinati, the cello part consisting almost entirely of an open fifth.

The exquisite artistry of the Alexander String Quartet concluded rather inexplicably with an encore of the concluding movement from Haydn's "Quartet," opus 76, no. 5.