

Benoît Mernier - String Quartet No. 3

My *String Quartet No. 3* was composed at the request of the prestigious Pro Arte Quartet, which celebrated the occasion of its 100th anniversary by commissioning several composers, mainly American, but one Belgian in honor of the quartet's inaugural members who came from the Brussels Conservatory.

This work was written just after the composition of my second opera, *La Dispute*, after Marivaux, which premiered in March 2013 at the Royal Opera of the Monnaie in Brussels. In the life of a composer, the writing of an opera is a singular adventure. You live with the work in progress, inhabited by its spirit, for many months (two years in my case), and each note you write is related to a specific theatrical dramaturgy, the music is indelibly connected to a text, the musical form is connected to the scenic action. To move immediately to another compositional project, especially when that is a string quartet, is not simple: there is no narrative, no characters to bring alive, no vocal line . . . it was necessary therefore to find another manner of conceiving and creating it. In doing so I wanted, in writing a string quartet, a complete break with opera, to assume the change of genre fully and completely.

My quartet is about 25 minutes long, and is composed of nine short movements, ranging in length from only 50 seconds to more than 5 minutes (my opera, in contrast, is almost two hours long in a single movement). There is no program that inspires the music of the quartet, no text, no idea other than the music itself, it is "pure" music as opposed to "programmatic" music.

The musical drama of my quartet is found in its form. I tried to invent a linear and discursive form paradoxically organized out of smaller units (9 sections). These sections maintain a specific but varied relationship between themselves that offers the listener the sense of an overarching form that transcends the pauses and spaces between movements (in fact, four of the movements are linked without pause: 3-4 and 8-9).

It is only when the work concludes that the listener is finally able to apprehend the overall form. It is as if in looking at a scene too closely one cannot distinguish the details, but upon stepping back one is able to understand the whole – the relationship among the parts, the play of colors, lines and perspectives all become a part of the larger scene.

There is a ploy in each movement that suggests the sense of a piece complete in itself (the 7th movement, for example, could be independent of the rest). Sometimes this is rather open: the third movement, for example, clearly sets up the ensuing movement, and the fourth clearly evolves from the preceding movement; the fifth movement, meanwhile, is initiated from the silence between movements.

Certain movements from early in the work are not developed until very late, for example, the very short second movement is expanded in the eighth, the last movement returns to and develops the third. A section might function as transition, or as parenthetical, or even at other times it can have a

more autonomous function, presenting new musical gestures distinctive to its movement (for example, the third and fifth).

This interplay between the movements strives to create a form of temporal ambiguity so that the listener loses sense of real or actual chronological time . . . does the quartet appear long or short?

The treatment of the instruments is equally diversified: each one may change roles at any moment. In certain passages the texture can seem entirely equalized – each instrumental participant contributes equally to the development and elaboration of the texture (fifth movement); at other moments an instrument functions as a soloist, disassociating itself to sketch or develop a motif eventually taken up thereafter by another instrument (for example, in the second movement the viola plays a solemn solo accompanied by a texture of trills played by the three others). At certain times the quartet sounds like it is multiplied into several quartets, while at other times it is treated like a single voice.

This quartet was commissioned by the Pro Arte Quartet and the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, and is dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky.

Benoît Mernier, October 2013
Translation by Sarah Schaffer

String Quartet No. 3 (2013)

I Misterioso

II Calmo

III Energico

IV Flessibile

V Energico e secco

VI Lontano

VII Calmo e flessibile

VIII Calmo

IX Energico