

CHOU WEN-CHUNG

String Quartet

("Clouds")



duration: ca. 35 minutes

ALLE RECHTE VORBEHALTEN • ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

EDITION PETERS

LEIPZIG • LONDON • NEW YORK

First String Quartet “Clouds” (1996)

For decades I have been developing ways of synthesizing the concepts and practices of Eastern and Western music. I consider chamber music the ideal medium for the realization in sound of the results of this aesthetic and theoretical thinking. Because of its exceptional homogeneity, the flow of sound of a string quartet—like that of the music for the qin (zither)—is a close aural equivalent to the flow of ink in brush calligraphy. I believe calligraphy is the foundation of all artistic expression in China and that qin music is the essence of Chinese musical expression. Both have influenced me deeply. In my quartet I attempt to fuse my musical thoughts with the legacy of the string quartet.

The title *Clouds* refers to the quality shared by cloud formations and calligraphy: the continual process of change. The phenomenon of mingling and melting clouds—in transformation, aggregation, and dispersion—is the aesthetic impetus for the musical events and progressions in the quartet.

This ephemeral phenomenon is expressed through viable modes based on permutations in the I Ching (Yijing, or Book of changes), the concept of yin-yang duality, and various modal theories of the East and West. The octave is divided into three contiguous minor thirds, each either yin or yang, depending on how it is further partitioned into major and minor seconds. Each modal formation consists of a permutation of these tripartite segments, in ascending and descending orders. Each mode may consist of, in either direction, six to twelve pitches, according to the number of partitioned segments and the division of major seconds.

This continual mutation in the progression and interplay among modes results in alteration of intervals by a half-step—a musical phenomenon confirming the concept of yin-yang exchangeability as well as that of chromaticism in Western music. This process not only influences the changing pitch and interval content in the flow of sound but also conditions progressions in duration, dynamics, register, and contour.

As various types of stages of energy, momentum, and stability, the modes interact with and transform each other into all possible permutations of yin and yang elements. The yin-yang exchange, partitioning process, and ascending-descending ordering interact to create transformed reflections that appear to be inexact, as if an object is seen reflected in a meandering brook. Thus, even when two lines move in parallel motion but in different modes, the aural impression may be equated to that of two edges of a single brushstroke.

The structure of the quartet as a whole, and its movements and sections, is also related to the transformation and interaction of the changing modes in motion. Each of the four parts progresses through its own modal succession and tonal continuity. Formally, the quartet conforms to the Western multiple-movement tradition and to the classical Chinese form of perpetual transformation of a single thematic idea. The piece is in five movements, or ten sections, most of divergent character, although all are transformations of the nuclear theme presented in the first section. The quartet’s introduction, in accordance with Asian as well as early European tradition, delineates the modal properties of the work.

The Asian flavor of the second movement appears to be the result of the various pizzicato and saltando sounds that recall such Asian stringed instruments as the sanxian, yueqin, biwa, and komun’go. These timbres, however, emerge from the close juxtaposition of ascending and descending orders of each modal segment rather than from a preconceived simulation of the performance characteristics of these instruments.

The third movement is reminiscent, although unintentionally so, of the poems of Li Qingzhao (1084-ca. 1155). One of China’s greatest musical poets, she was a master of alliteration, onomatopoeia, and other auditory effects. The frequent reiteration of pitches in this movement, however, is the result of the modal phenomenon of shared common tones between the juxtaposed ascending and descending orders. Portamento, *con sordino*, and different types of vibrato further contribute to the mood that echoes Li’s poetry. (Li is known by her pen name, Yi’an, which coincidentally is the name of my wife, to whom this quartet is dedicated.)

—Chou Wen-chung

Commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition
at Brigham Young University

First performance by the Brentano Quartet

December 1, 1996

In passages marked *senza misura* note values are approximate and/or non-proportional.
Accidentals in these passages refer only to the notes they precede (and any notes they tie to).



even *gliss.* from one pitch to another



quick, even *gliss.*



even *gliss.* as far as possible for the duration of the note

V

wide vibrato

nv

normal vibrato

sv

senza vibrato



Pronounced portamento – partial slide between two pitches

to Yi-an
STRING QUARTET

("CLOUDS")

Chou Wen-chung

Andante con moto

♩. = ca. 72-76

senza misura

Violin I: pizz. *fff*, arco, legato ad lib. *mf*

Violin II: pizz. *fff*, arco, legato ad lib. *p*

Viola: pizz. *fff*, arco, legato ad lib. *mp*

Violoncello: pizz. *fff*, arco, legato ad lib. *pp*

Violin I: *pp* < *f*

Violin II: *pp* < *f*

Viola: *pp* < *f*

Violoncello: *pp* < *f*

Tempo markings: *alla misura*, *senza misura, accel.*, *alla misura, a tempo*

Violin I: *pp* < *f*

Violin II: *pp* < *f*

Viola: *pp* < *f*

Violoncello: *pp* < *f*

Tempo markings: *senza misura, accel.*, *rall.*, *alla mis., senza misura, accel.*, *a tempo*

alla misura, a tempo *senza misura, accel.* *alla misura, a tempo* *senza misura, accel.*

ff *p* *ff* *ff* *sf* >

p *ff* *p* *ff* *sf* >

alla misura, a tempo

pp *mf* *p* *f* *mp* *ff* *p*

pp *mf* *p* *f* *mp* *ff* *sfff* pizz.

pp *mf* *p* *f* *mp* *ff* *sfff* pizz.

pp *mf* *p* *f* *mp* *ff* *sfff* pizz.

senza misura

espr., ad libitum