

CHOUU WEN-CHUNG

STRING QUARTET No. 2
("Streams")



duration: approximately 18 minutes

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EDITION PETERS

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Program Notes

My second string quartet is meant to be a humble tribute to the universality of the genius of Bach. When I was commissioned by the Brentano String Quartet for a short work in response to the Art of Fugue, I immediately decided to follow the commissioned fugue with ensuing movements on the same subject, as a quartet. It bears the subtitle of Streams, suggesting the ebb and flow of distinct ideas sprung from a single source or the confluence of currents from different sources into a single entity.

The first movement is a strict fugue. Where it is different from a conventional fugue is that its theme undergoes radical transformations throughout the fugue according to the elasticity central to the Chinese theories of yin/yang and I Ching. If the western transformation of a fugal theme can be characterized as viewing oneself in a mirror—exact reverse image—then the transformation in this quartet is more like seeing one's own face undulating in a running brook or a rippling pond. Another difference is in the emphasis on the gradual “process” of change as against a single “instance” of change. This characteristic is found throughout the quartet.

The second movement is an elegy, set as a canon in two pairs, based on the yin/yang forms of the fugal theme. The Chinese subtitle, “Zhaohun,” refers to a millennia old poetic form, meaning literally “calling for the spirit of the deceased.” It is in turn mournful, tender, explosive and delirious but always constrained, and often in juxtaposition of each other. This wide range of emotion is expressed by the strings with mutes, in imitation of each other. This movement reminds me of the extraordinary *a cappella* polyphonic singing of villagers from an isolated locality in southwest China that I heard some years ago, which employed flexible but complicated imitation that is remarkably in spirit with that of this elegy. The Elegy is dedicated to the memory of my brother, Wen-tsing, who died unexpectedly shortly before I began to sketch out this movement.

The next is an extremely brief scherzo-like movement in the character of a “perpetual motion,” although technically again a double canon. The interest here is the process of a relentless drive towards an ever increasing tension by means of a constant expansion of the number of notes within each phrase, and of repeated bowing attacks within each beat. This steadily tightening mood is however counteracted by the ebb and flow in the tempo and the fluctuation in the dynamics. All of these means of expression in sound are in accordance with the same aesthetic principles in Chinese calligraphy, where a single brushstroke in action can suggest an increasing mobility and tension while at the same time exhibiting fluctuations in texture and density. In short, this movement appears to be all about how a single calligraphic stroke completes its course of action. For a long time after the movement was composed, I was puzzled as to why I chose to depict such a theme. It finally dawned on me that over the months when I was composing this quartet, I was suffering a severe recurrent pain in my body that would intensify mercilessly to an unbearable climax when it would suddenly subside, very much in the manner of the arpeggio that abruptly concludes the movement.

The last movement is a recapitulation of the three principal expositions of the fugue. It opens with a canonic imitation in double-stops, making it practically a canon in eight parts. The superposition of double-stops on the strings made me feel sublimated while composing the movement. It is followed by a cadenza-like section leading to another eight part section which is now homophonic with a strong sense of searching for the meaning of life—to be one with nature. A brief coda brings the music back to where it started in the beginning, reminiscent of the introduction to the fugue. In deference to the monumental dimensions of Bach's Art of Fugue, Streams is conscientiously kept brief and concise.

—Chou Wen-chung

Notes for Performers

In my first string quartet, *Clouds*, I attempted to express in sound the continual process of change through permutation and superposition as elucidated in I Ching (Yijing, Book of Change) and founded on the concept of yin-yang duality. I chose the string quartet as the most appropriate musical medium of expression because its characteristic flow of sound is an ideal equivalent to the flow of ink in brush calligraphy — an art that embodies the process of change. As explained in my notes on *Clouds*, the musical structure for achieving such an aural phenomenon in that work is based on my concept of the *pien* (variable) modes. The mutation and interplay in the progression of such modes result in remarkable conceptual parallels to fugal procedures and chromatic alterations in European heritage.

Therefore, when I was commissioned by the Brentano String Quartet for a work in response to the Art of Fugue (as part of their commissioning project, “Point/Counterpoint: Bach’s Art of Fugue”) I immediately decided to follow the commissioned fugue with ensuing movements on the same subject, as a quartet. The result is my Second String Quartet, *Streams*. The subtitle suggests permutations and transformations of the same source flowing alongside each other.

The quartet opens with a brief Introduction that illustrates the expansion and contraction of the interval cells in both ascending and descending orders, and, on the two opposing forces, the yin and yang hexachords that interact to generate harmony and melodic progression. *Contrapunctus Variabilis I* (variable counterpoint) is a quadruple fugue with five expositions. There are eight versions of the prime subject: the four traditional transformations, such as inversion and retrograde, and four additional ones resulting from descending interval orders (similar in nature to the two versions of the melodic minor scale). At times, all eight serve as subject, countersubject or episodic passages. The traditional contrapuntal procedures of augmentation and diminution are applied not only to duration but also to register and dynamics as well as density (i.e. degree of chromaticism and quantity of attacks). All these are integral to my *pien*-modes concept which includes expansion and contraction as part of the continual process of change. Instrumental effects are, however, mostly excluded from this movement because the beauty of a fugue, I believe, is in the unadorned clarity of the interaction, permutation, and transformation of its components. Only on occasion is an effect used subtly to foreshadow certain colors that will be prevalent in subsequent movements.

Exposition 1 presents the prime as subject and answer, with the seven transformations as countersubjects. Cross meters that are the result of transformation serve to distinguish the character of the countersubjects from the subject. In Exposition 2 the subject exhibits the contrasting character of the prime in descending order and is chromatically expanded. The answer shows similar traits of the inversion, but in ascending order. Ascending retrograde and descending retrograde inversion function as countersubjects. This gradual introduction or pairing of transformations of the prime is part of the *pien*-modes principles which regard the continual process as a primary vehicle for expression. The subject and answer of Exposition 3 explore the timbral implications of the retrograde and retrograde inversion, while the countersubjects built on prime and inversion assume a similar process of chromaticization. Exposition 4 brings together all of these processes of change in stretto and in expansion. Exposition 5 is a double exposition returning to non-chromatic tonalities and two-against-three rhythmic texture. The reappearance of the opposing tutti chords from the Introduction concludes the movement.

Contrapunctus II, subtitled *Elegy* (the Chinese term, *zhaohun*, literally means “calling for the spirit of the deceased”) is a canonic episode on an expanded statement of the prime subject. The predominance of reiteration, *glissando* and *con sordino* once again echoes the poetry of the great Chinese woman poet, Li Qinzhaohao, as in *Clouds*, although the sonic quality actually recalls the extraordinarily expressive prosody of the *ci* poetic genre.

But, surprisingly, the imitations characterized by intervallic expansion and contraction, intrinsic to the *pien*-modes, remind me of a rare but meticulously preserved heritage of *a cappella* polyphonic singing at the village of Azha River in Yunnan, the Chinese province with the greatest number of indigenous ethnic groups. A lament that I was particularly enthralled with involves tightly knit but flexibly transformed imitations that miraculously stir the emotion with frequent intervallic alteration and interchange of ascending and descending orders. The common ground for expressiveness shared by Bach, Li, the Hani villagers of Azha River, and this movement points to the intercultural versatility that I was looking for in evolving the *pien*-modes over the decades. The Elegy is dedicated to the memory of my brother, Wen-tsing, who died unexpectedly shortly before I began to sketch out this movement as one of the earliest ideas for the quartet.

Contrapunctus III is a quadruple canon in the spirit of a *perpetuum mobile*. The four voices take turns articulating all the transformations of the fugal subject while sharing the same contour and speed, much in the fashion of the ink flow of a single brush stroke that reveals subtle variation in texture and density. The momentum of the canon derives from a continual growth in the number of interval cells within each voice and in the number of attacks within each beat, again conforming to the calligraphic principle of gradually varying the density and stress with the brush in motion. This steady expansion is further enhanced by a concurrent acceleration in tempo. To counteract this directional drive, the differentiation between prime and inversion, or ascending and descending, is accentuated by cross meters and staggered accents. This again reflects another calligraphic principle of mixing and varying stresses in a single stroke.

Contrapunctus IV is a recapitulation of Expositions 1, 4, and 5 from the first movement. They are, however, much transformed and are presented as a series of episodes. The first, though retaining the same pitch order, is now a sustained statement of a sublime nature, in double stops, expanding the texture into eight-part polyphony. The fourth is now a sequence of cadenza-like phrases that build up to the concluding exposition, the fifth, again expanded into eight parts. The extensive double stops in this movement represent another dimension in the process of growth: density in verticality. A much abbreviated recapitulation of the opening Introduction serves as a coda, concluding the quartet.

The following are some comments on performance:

1. The subject, countersubject and their derivatives appear throughout the Quartet. They are marked, when needed, as S (subject), CS (countersubject), SV (subject variant) or CSV (countersubject variant). The appearance of any of these must be given appropriate but relative prominence, even if all parts are given the same dynamics. The degree of emphasis is in declining order of S – CS – SV – CSV.
2. In Contrapunctus I, the difference in character among the subjects of the five expositions (at measures 2, 28, 52, 72 and 88) should be prominently delineated.
3. The dashed slurs in Contrapunctus I, as well as II, suggest overlapping or interrupted continuity.
4. The dominantly soft dynamics in Contrapunctus II are given to ensure a deeply restrained expression of intense sorrow. Loudness in execution and intensity in expression are not equivalent in this score, nor is deeply felt sadness.
5. The opening double-stop passage of Contrapunctus Variabilis IV should sound meditative, searching and sublime. To achieve the sonority desired, all double-stops should be meticulous and balanced in pitch and dynamics. The phrases should be flowing without accentuation as much as possible. In measure 74, etc., the chords are opposite in nature: the first covering a wide range and dissonant, to be attacked with a great sense of sharpness and vibrance; the second within a narrow range and consonant, to be articulated with the opposite mode of softness and quietude.

—Chou Wen-chung

Notes on notation



Pronounced portamento; partial slide between pitches

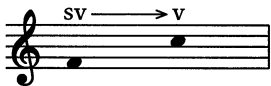


Glissando; complete slide between pitches, evenness not required

v = wide vibrato

nv = normal vibrato (also applicable where no signs are given)

sv = senza vibrato



an arrow indicates movement from one type of vibrato to another

commissioned by the Brentano Quartet
STRING QUARTET No. 2
 ("Streams")
 Contrapunctus Variabilis I

Chou Wen-chung

Introduction and Fugue

Allegro con brio
*senza misura**

Violin I
 Violin II
 Viola
 Violoncello

sf *mf* *ff* *mf* *ff*

Subito lento
sotto voce *sul tasto*

sfff *ppp* *poch.* *p* *pp* *poco* *p*

mp *più* *p* *f* *poco* *mf* *poco*

mp *più* *mf* *poco f* *poco*

mp *più* *mf* *poco f* *poco*

attacca

*Note time values are relative, not proportional.
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