

Christopher James

FOUR INTERMEZZI

For Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello

(2001)

1. Largo e mesto (3:54)
2. Allegro inquieto (2:34)
3. Poco allegretto e grazioso (5:08)
4. Moderato assai (5:24)

Max Lifchitz, Piano; Aaron Boyd, Violin; Ah-ling Neu, Viola; Ruben Kodheli, Cello

Introduction and Notes

Four Intermezzi, completed in 2001, is an integrated cycle of short pieces in a predominantly lyrical style. As the title might seem to imply, there are Brahmsian precedents, but there are also significant differences, both in style and substance. As to some obvious externals, there is for instance very little in the way of unison or octave doublings, regular metric periods, harmonic sequences, block chordal passages, all of which are to be found in abundance in Brahms. With reference specifically to Brahms' three Piano Quartets - those magnificent, titanic works - the design and working out of my pieces is quite different: there is much less opposition between piano and strings and the piano does not tend to dominate the ensemble; there is more overlapping, sharing and fragmentation of material; there are fewer featured solo passages (or passages for the string trio alone); and the writing is more contrapuntal, less expansive, and more concentrated. My outlook in this work, vis-a-vis Brahms, is more subjective, less architectural, more decorative, with greater emphasis on fantasy, rapid shifts of mood, and harmonic chiaroscuro. I felt that this was an appropriate point of view given the modest size of the movements.

The work is without a doubt tonal, in a comprehensive sense, but with the crucial distinction that functional dominants are largely suppressed. The tonal thread is occasionally tenuous. Free chromatic modulation is a constant, connecting local diatonic areas. Each piece is clearly organized about an unambiguous tonic: in the first piece, C sharp minor; in the second, A minor; in the third, D major; in the fourth, F sharp major.

The generative impetus in the first and third of the pieces is melodic and contrapuntal ("web-like"); in the second and fourth it is more harmonic ("chorale-like"). Two slower movements enclose two more rapid ones. The movements present faces of contrasting physiognomy, which at the same time possess a clear familial resemblance.

The first movement initially presents a broad, arching theme in a full texture which is gradually infiltrated by a nervous accompaniment figure, giving rise, after further lyrical episodes, to a stormy climax. A brief, spare-textured epilogue comments on the preceding violence in a detached voice, as if numb with shock. The second piece surges forward valiantly, its motion generated and sustained by a motive in quick triplet rhythm underpinning the broader harmonic flow. Its development section consists of a passage and its literal repetition, as regards the notes, in which however the piano and strings reverse roles (a typically Brahmsian technique). The movement ends forcefully, on a note of triumph. The strings are muted throughout in the sprightly third movement, and the contrapuntal web is airy and delicate. The intricate harmonic complexities are resolved ultimately in favor of a shimmering, Lydian D major diatony. The final movement is a song-like form in three varied strophes, with a lullaby-like *alternativo* following the second and third strophes. The strophic theme is declaimed passionately by the cello over a progression in quartal harmonies. The theme undergoes a transformation of mood in the successive variations, becoming gentler and more intimate. A coda presents the initial quartal harmonies repeated hypnotically as motivic fragments from the theme are recalled in brief wisps.