

Christopher James

STRING QUARTET NO. 1

(1985)

1. Comodo, amabile
2. Scherzo - Molto vivace
3. Tema con variazioni - Adagio molto espressivo
4. Rondo - Allegro ma non troppo

The Guinness Quartet
Juilliard "Focus!" Festival, 1986

Duration: about 38 minutes

Introduction and Notes

I wrote my String Quartet No. 1 between January and April 1985. I resolved from the start to resist the temptation to try to amalgamate or distill the achievements of the recent past in this medium, or to emulate the masterpieces of the not-so-recent past (Bartók and Schoenberg) because, for all my admiration for these works, I felt hemmed in by their historical proximity and dominating influence, and I was concerned lest my quartet become yet another casualty to be piled on the heap of postwar works whose composers, by assuming the mantle of one of the other of these masters, have invited fatal comparison. So instead, realizing that much of my work has in some degree been concerned with a rapprochement with a more distant past, that of tonal music, I turned my attention to the late quartets of Beethoven and the string chamber music of Brahms for edification and guidance. In so doing, I had to be careful to avoid writing parody, or adopting a mannered style, such as "wrong note classicism." I wanted to be the architect and sculptor of my work, not a carpenter erecting a building from a blueprint, or a foundryman casting from a mold. The composition proceeded from an abstract, subjective view as to what constitutes the "Beethovenian thematic process" and "Brahmsian developing variation"; these general notions served as a means for controlling, ordering and rationalizing my musical impulses. I am prepared to entertain the objection that my quartet may not actually have a great deal with Beethoven or Brahms.

Still, I find the outer movements to be the more "Brahmsian", the inner movements the more "Beethovenian". There are in the quartet also certain elements of homage (though no quotations): the cantabile theme of the Variations movement resembles up to a point the theme of Beethoven Op. 127/II, while the second variation recalls perhaps the march movement of the Piano Sonata, Op. 101, or the little march in Op. 132. I found my model for the first theme of the Rondo in Brahms' Sextet, Op. 18 - the beginning of this rondo finale - and I invite this comparison, though otherwise the two movements behave very differently.

The string quartet is an unforgiving medium, and there is no faking it. My quartet is long, dense, expansive, perhaps at times discursive, but, I would hope, never diffuse. I have tried to keep in mind at all times the ideal of a chamber music style that is richly textured, exquisitely ornamented, well proportioned, with breadth, power and generosity of spirit, which is, of course, the legacy of the Viennese masters. I have not tried to cover my tracks.

Christopher James, March 1989