String Quartet No. 4

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Inspired by the genius of Haydn, this work was written for the Celebrating Haydn Conference in Toronto, an event supported by The Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies, The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and York University, Toronto.

It was first performed in August 2009 by the Windermere String Quartet at the Port Milford Chamber Music Festival and at York University, Toronto, in a project made possible by The Wirth Institute.

It is offered as a mark of respect for those of all nations whose lives were ended or ruined in hostilities in and around Gaza in January 2009, and as a vision of reconciliation.

PERFORMANCE NOTE

This quartet was written for The Windermere String Quartet using period instruments tuned at A=430; the second violinist and violist are asked to “double” on modern instruments tuned at A=442, a quartertone higher.

The work is performable by non-period ensembles, but similar “doubling” and a similar (but not necessarily identical) tuning discrepancy will be required.

- In the first and third movements, VI.II and Vla begin with period (or lower pitched) instruments and change where directed to modern (or higher pitched) instruments.
- In the second movement, they begin with modern (or higher pitched) instruments.
- In the fourth movement only period (or lower pitched) instruments are required throughout.
If Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony was written “as Haydn might have written it had he lived in our day”, then I suppose that this quartet is my Classical String Quartet - I have tried in my work to find something of the drama and astonishing musical and emotional scope of the Op 20 string quartets especially, and the layout of the quartet, into four roughly equal movements, is particularly classical. But how different is our world now from that of Haydn in 1771 or that of Prokofiev in 1918!

The work was forming in my mind in January 2009, whilst I was in the Middle East. A short distance away war was taking place in Gaza. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the first movement presents melodic ideas which begin peaceably enough, but little by little descend into unease, and for a short time into a soundworld of destruction and despair. Only when the conflict and chaos has passed, and the birds venture to sing once more, can the original music be brought back.

Whereas a Haydn sonata form first movement might lose its tonic key and strive to regain it, the music here descends to the point where even the pitch basis of our normal musical language – the 12-tone division of the octave – is broken. You will notice that two of the members of the quartet swap from time to time to instruments tuned fractionally sharper to facilitate a quartertonal soundworld.

The scherzando second movement, although it grows out of first movement ideas and uses quartertonal harmonies, is playful. Its syncopations and contrasting textures eventually take us right into the D major Minuet and Trio of Haydn’s Op 20 No 4, and for a while we straddle the two musics.

The third movement, Molto adagio, is perhaps the most classical movement – measured and deeply calm – but even here we are not entirely free of the unease of the opening movement. The final movement presents all of the ideas that have been pervading the quartet and strives to knit them all together contrapuntally into a coherent whole. The fugue which finishes the work leads us into a chorale-like section – a point where at last we are free of conflict and can begin to find hope for peace and unity.
Take quartertone sharper violin (senza sord.)

mezza voce

poco cresc.

impercettibile

senza vib.
Scherzando

\( \dot{\text{crescendo sempre}} \)

\( \text{f con energia sempre} \)

\( \text{p poco cresc. Sempre} \)

\( \text{p poco cresc. sempre} \)
pochiss. meno mosso ad lib.

pizz.

ppp sempre

expressivo ed etereo

(non dim.)

expressivo ed etereo

(non dim.)

ppp sempre

stringendo
tempo scherzando

af sempre poco cres.

af sempre poco cres.

af sempre poco cres.

af sempre poco cres.
Co-ordination between Vl.I and Cello, and between Vl.II and Vla must be precise;

Coordination between the two pairs of instruments need be approximate only (until molto rit. bar)