

Essay After a Quartet

After completing the short work for string quartet (videoscore: <https://youtu.be/K9CRWpmqiWA>) that is the pretext for this essay, I was eager, hasty even, to try to put the project behind me and lose myself in another, but found my mind keep being drawn back to rumination on the work that now stood before me in a different relationship than it had when I was writing it. This new relationship was not a very comfortable one; I felt both exhilarated and deeply depressed. Not depressed out of disappointment with what I had done—despite the evident limitations of the work I was satisfied that it existed, which was as much success as I could hope for. Rather, I felt that by writing the piece, I had let an uncomfortable secret out of the bag of my unconscious that I was obliged to confront, namely, my own deep sense of pessimism and futility about any effort I might make, as a living creature, to act upon my own most natural hopes; and that the piece itself was somehow about that. My perception of the work now took form around this interpretation, which soon became fleshed out for me in great programmatic detail, somehow convincing me that in some sense this is what I meant by the work all along, even though in composing it I thought only in purely “musical” terms (although by “musical” I mean something that includes all the emotional and energetic life that is brought into musical experience). Once I realized that I was having a kind of synthesesic fit in which my musical thought was coming back on me in verbal form, I felt I must write it down to preserve the manifestation. Hence this essay.

I have never been given to conceptualize music in programmatic terms, and when musicians have told me of their explaining pieces to themselves with narrative glosses (as one pianist once told me he did, perhaps plausibly, with the *Les Adieux* sonata) I have always found that alien. Even with vocal music, I have great difficulty in hearing the words, as the operation of my musical faculties tends to suppress my linguistic functions. (Schoenberg described something similar in saying that when hearing a Schubert song, he would only be able to catch a few words of the text.) So the emergence in my imagination of a way of accounting for the twists and turns of my quartet in terms of a kind of story surprised me. But upon reflection, I realize that I have not travelled too far along the paths of the programmatic, since the story, such as it is, is a very abstract one, having no real characters, situations or events in it, but only characterizations. The only programmatic projection is that it is about a person—and for a composer to feel that way about his own piece is perhaps understandable. Playing Beethoven I feel that in some sense I am channeling a voice, Beethoven’s voice, which becomes mine; I am an actor playing the character of Beethoven (or of whatever Everyman Beethoven the actor is playing). In my quartet I feel the unified presence of a protagonist also: myself, but also everyone else; and I feel such a unity of ego in much music. It may even coexist with a multiplicity of selves in a profoundly polyphonic context. Whether this mode of perceiving music is an affordance provided by the specific music or a category of my capacity to perceive music in general, I won’t dare to judge; it is enough for the moment

to say that I can't hear this work of my own without feeling it is in some sense about the experience of an individual human being.

To tell the story of this protagonist, the “hero” of the quartet, I must first describe the piece formally. It consists of 36 very short sections in a continuous stream. Each section is set off from the next by a subtle change of tempo—there are four different tempi used—but the music often does not stop. Almost all the sections are just one musical sentence, sometimes longer or shorter, a clear statement in itself that might lead to something, but instead of being continued in the same manner is succeeded by another sentence that continues the music in a slightly different way that might emerge organically from what directly preceded it. “Bridge passages” or smooth transitions are avoided; instead of seeing an object be gradually transformed, we cut away from it cinematically to something else, perhaps returning later to see it in a different state. Each statement is also very concise, often internally having a simple binary grammar. Because of this concision, and the omission of transitional material, the work may feel less like it tells a story than it gives a Borgesian summary of one, tersely conveying salient points and skipping much detail and, especially, not allowing much immersion in the imaginative space of the narrative; that one is not allowed to linger is the quartet’s fundamental existential premise. The extreme brevity of many of the episodes and the rapid transitions between them make the concision less conversational than a conventional summary, and more surreal; each element is crystallized very clearly, but as soon as we settle into the norms established by each statement we are jettisoned out of them, often uncomfortably, into a new image, a new crystallization and a new set of norms. Even the individual utterances, while they cling to the ready intelligibility of an at times nursery-rhyme-like binary cadence, increasingly tend towards an internal instability, introducing some new idea or manner with a subversive force in their brief course towards caesura.

The following is a play-by-play of the 36 sections, which are clearly marked in the score. I’m also indicating higher-level phrase divisions as well, denoted alphabetically. While I think them convenient, there is nothing absolute about them, and there are other valid ways to construe the larger emergent structure.

A) Basic material:

1. The initial statement enters boldly, rawly, even roughly, like a young knight: loud, jutting, unslurred, with many rising fifths (a motive throughout the piece), ending on a high note in the 1st violin (a high D) with a kind of naive aspiration and a cheerful readiness for conquest. We return to this material often later, in varied guises, almost as a main theme, and always at the same tempo (q=72).
2. We abruptly shift to sequences of three chords, falling or rising, with pregnant pauses in between. It is as if something unfamiliar is from time to time darting quickly around us, and the hero, bewildered, looks around to see where it went, unclear how to move or act.
3. Next is a gesture of a kind of dissolution, notes in treble and bass falling

away slowly in opposite directions while there is a very soft *sul ponticello* oscillation between them. This is a different kind of musical substance that we've seen in either (1), which represents active agency or will, or (2), which represents external forces; here there is a principal of inaction, stillness, letting go. The *sul ponticello* effect used here does not appear again until the end of the piece, when this passage is explicitly echoed. (Unfortunately the MIDI/VST realization does not include that effect.)

B) The next phrase unit is a kind of replay of the above, in which the constituent parts reflect off each other and the whole ends up in a different place:

4. We return to material like in (1), but it has picked up from (2) a kind of contrary motion; now the players begin to slide against one another rather than moving en bloc, and end with more of a downward gesture, which includes the first pizzicato sound.
5. A sort of shrug, as if one does not know quite what to do but is picking oneself up to try again.
6. A return to the darting music of (2), picking up momentum, and continuing without interruption into the next section. The hero is developing greater familiarity with external phenomena.
7. A sort of conclusion of the parts up until this point, with a reaching toward high notes; like (4), it ends with a downward gesture that includes pizzicato (and open fifths).

C) The next phrase is in two parts:

8. We return to something like the stillness of (3), but more extended and less final: long notes with pizzicato ostinati rotating around them. The 16th-note ostinati also harken back to the short chords of (2); this is night music, music of observation of something external rather than identification or reportage of an internal state. The long notes are a melody in hocket, divided among the instruments. (Throughout the piece, melodies are almost constantly divided between instruments, with much crossing of voices; there is constant polyphony, but at the service of a homogeneous texture.)
9. This section begins with an attempt at returning to the jutting assertion of (1), with its motivic material, but falls back into the lethargy of (8).

D) This phrase has three sections:

10. As if the hero has gotten the hang of how to impose his will on the external world, we combine here the activity of (3) with the agency of (1).
11. A brief energetic interjection, violently interrupting, although it is ambiguous whether in enthusiastic assent or vociferous disagreement—but lending energy to the ongoing search, which has become passionate. There is a dramatic glissando in the second violin (not realized in the MIDI/VST version, unfortunately); it should be performed as a rapid portamento towards the end of a held note rather than a long siren-like smear.

12. We return directly to the very energetic music of (10). The pizzicato here is mixed with arco playing, often at a higher dynamic than the bowed notes, so that the plucked notes stick out like thick impasto. There is something tangibly material about this effect, like a soldier's armor. This is the longest passage so far, a kind of sortie or expedition that seems to have found something, or be about to.
- E) The next unit seems to conclude the process underway with the first clear triumph or achievement of the hero, but one that segues immediately to doubts that undermine that success, and then is followed by an uncharacteristically prolonged rumination:
13. We return to base with material that starts off like (1), now with variations in divisions (decorations in 16th notes where we had 8ths before—we can consider those 16th notes as an artifact derived from the (2)-ish material we've been busy developing). The material is driven farther, too, to the most complete climax we've had so far, one that however cadences unexpectedly, though not unnaturally, on a minor triad sonority with a major 7th jabbing ominously in the bass in pairs of sixteenth notes left over from the decorative divisions with which the section began.
14. The tonal reference we arrived upon in the last section is transmuted into slow chords with dissonant overtones played on harmonics by the cello. The material hovers slowly, gradually evolving, with a long melody undertaken largely by the viola (a conscious reference, not that it matters, to Morton Feldman's *The Viola in My Life*). The melody is derived from the jutting theme of (1) but now its aspirational rise is full of yearning. This too is a kind of night music, but unlike (8), this is inward-looking and confessional.
- F) Development now moves quickly, with a series of violent interruptions and changes of direction, which however brings us back to our starting point:
15. A startling transition to the loud shrug gesture from (5), which this time however leads to a dramatic acceleration.
16. A return to the darting music of (2), but become terrifyingly loud and impressive, passing to the next section with an allargando.
17. The motive of three chords is now present at a more deliberate tempo, but now furious and brutal. The striving, jutting theme from (1) is made into an aggressive tune, with imitation between parts; the passage is like a snapshot of battle.
18. We pass suddenly into a zone of quiet, with a lyrical diatonic song fragment and hushed, weird high chords; but we end drawn up short.
19. We are back to the slow, Feldmanesque material of (14). The cello gets the slow tune this time. There is a quality of retreat and communion to this passage and to its sister (14); we try to linger in them, but they do not last.
- G) In the next unit the hero's search has begun to go seriously astray:

20. A new departure: the cello tune is briefly transformed into a jazzy dance number, even to the point of being slightly sleazy: the misdirected sexualization of the knight's yearning, as it were.
 21. Also new: in reaction to this yearning, something dark, nugatory and pessimistic appears. But it is almost immediately succeeded by a quickening determination and transition into the next section.
 22. Eight effervescent if desperate bars of something akin to a Viennese waltz (despite being notated as 4 bars of 6/8 time), with some hint perhaps of Wozzeck's "Brandwein". (This is for some reason my favorite passage.)
 23. The desperation and underlying terror of the previous enthusiasm is laid bare. We are now openly fleeing from something in pursuit, with material derived from both (1) and (2).
 24. The flight continues with the same mixture of materials, including a hallucinatory recollection of the "jutting theme". The slight lessening of tempo from the tempo change, despite the forward-moving momentum, gives rise to a strange effect of weightlessness, like a Loony Toons cartoon character running off the edge of a cliff for some distance without immediately falling. The cadence at the end here has a sort of fluffy texture, quite different from the rest of the piece.
- H) Here we become quite explicit that things are going badly:
25. We return to material from (1), but the mood is quite different; rather than affirmative and hopeful, the sense of terror has been internalized and continues to grow. The cello opens up its jutting fifth into ever larger intervals; finally the section ends on a hellishly gaping twelfth between it and the viola, while the high D of the first section, which there expressed high hopes, finally reappears as a desperate shriek, and the second violin concludes with a tumbling gesture.
 26. Collapse: we fall into the hell of fear that opened up in the previous section, with closely voiced clusters and furiously flickering dark lights of tremolos.
 27. The furious energy now continues in denial of what has happened, or even in cynically Satanic embrace of it, with a wild and degenerate dissolution.
 28. The energy of the previous section continues in a pizzicato texture. It is as if we have put on glasses that enable us to see people's skeletons, or to reveal their spiritual paucity.
- I) The final unit begins in mockery, passes through self-pity, and ends in final defeat, with an ambiguous tinge of transcendence:
29. A parodic recapitulation of the initial material of (1) that puts me in mind of parts of the *Diabelli Variations* (such as the first march, or the *Notte e giorno faticar* variation). It is quickly enveloped by mounting terror.
 30. Again, a transformation of elements of (1) that this time is a shrugging admission of defeat. The minor-major 7th chord sonority of (13) returns with its stalking bass notes. The hero's level of energy is noticeably diminished; he's on the way out.
 31. A clear expression of regret and wistfulness, tending perhaps towards a

sentimentality that reveals its fundamental uselessness, with a brief, but not very convincing, attempt to rouse oneself into action.

32. The attempt fails and is followed by lament.
33. A prancing but funereal utterance: dust to dust, whereupon we begin to be drawn into the orbit of death.
34. A reminiscence of (3) with the same oscillating texture and *sul ponticello*, this time with the violin drawn upwards.
35. The final spasms: life being drawn out, with a final effort to raise oneself up for a moment before falling back in exhaustion.
36. Unmistakeably, death, with finally the high note we had been reaching for all along (a high E, the highest note we've heard).

It is apparent from the above, then, that I see this work as scenes from a life, a series of tableaux, in which the hero tries many things, but his efforts are ultimately futile, perhaps essentially or inevitably so. When I realized that this was, for me, in a way the message of the work, I found this quite hard to endure; indeed, I felt destroyed by what I had made. I did not expect to write so pessimistic a work, pessimistic as perhaps Brahms' late music may be construed to be (although I should not be too surprised, since that was my first musical love). However, how it turned out was really quite logical, considering that I had decided in the work's earliest planning stages to write something both unified and epigrammatic, with little room for transitional passages. This naturally resulted in a sort of "bonsai" compositional situation, in which the overall framework both affirmed the role of each fragment in a larger arch and denied it the ability to expand and have its own space to grow. These precompositional decisions lent themselves to depicting a stunted aspect of human aspirations.

In composing the work, that the final passages were as short as they were, and that the piece stopped "developing" at section 30, instead "declaring defeat", was a surprise to me. I felt I needed to compose it that way but also felt guilty not to be leading the work onwards into a situation that engaged the various energies it had called up, making a "success" of them. But what I wrote felt more truthful to me in the end. Indeed, now that I see how this programmatic subtext functioned for me unconsciously in composing the work (and may I hope function in some way for others, if the work functions for them at all), I see that it was necessary that the piece frustrate a certain desire that it develop or succeed. We have an expectation that art will not let us down: it is supposed to tell us that somehow, perhaps not in a clear way we can use in real life, but nonetheless, we will get our reward, we will transcend the vicissitudes and find a kind of fulfillment. Can a work of art tell us that our desire for fulfillment will in the end be frustrated, and remain a valid work of art? If it succeeds as art, does it not disprove its own statement?

Much pessimistic art seems to lavish great care on its own sheer beauty: Leopardi's rapturous lyricism, Celine's delirious imagery and language, his attachment to luminous memory. Beauty and futility seem to be one two-headed creature in passionate embrace with itself. This quartet of fragments, each salvaged as if a

precious dream from a broken life, expresses this kind of futile, hopeless love.
—Jacob Smullyan (2019)