

Kirsten Johnson: String Quartet

I wrote this String Quartet in Oxford in 2015. The first movement, *Maestoso*, is based on a tone row. It opens with the retrograde version presented by the first violin and joined by the other members of the quartet in falling quintuplets. The material is presented in measures metered through the Fibonacci series – 1/4; 2/4; 3/4; 5/4; 8/4. The tone row then enters, harmonized through sets of pitches in various permutations. The second subject is the retrograde row in a Fibonacci-inspired rhythm of two single notes; a duplet; a triplet; a quintuplet. The tone row material is divided into two groups of six notes, forming the basis of a developmental section in 5/4. This grows more frantic, culminating in a return of the opening material in unison.

The second movement, *Adagio*, is one of stark beauty in dissonance, juxtaposing textures in fugal development. It opens with the cello playing the melody in B minor. Violin I next takes the melody, but now the intervals of the melody are augmented, creating an unsettled parody of the beautiful opening. This texture thickens as the viola takes the melody, inverted this time, with Violin I juxtaposing an eerie obbligato. The piece grows in tension and volume, finally allowing Violin II her turn with the inverted, augmented melody. All four instruments grow to a fortissimo climax, from which the cello emerges with a simple return of the opening melody.

The third movement, *Minuet and Trio*, is inspired by the Indian raga tradition. The subtle shifts of melody and rhythm allow the initial material to develop in layers between the instruments. The Trio is a fugue whose subject is derived from notes of the Minuet melody. In four parts, each instrument enters in turn. Motives are developed sequentially and the material builds episodically to a climax before winding down to a restatement of the Minuet. The return of the Minuet, faithful to the raga tradition, undergoes fresh permutations before bringing this dance to a gentle end.

The fourth movement, *Con brio*, was the first movement I composed in what became the String Quartet. The rhythm came first – then the melody. It opens with the theme around C major. The second theme soon follows, three measures of quintuplets followed by descending tonic triads. This second subject is developed with elements of the first theme superimposed. There follows a third theme, a jaunty chromatic tune which mimics the opening rhythmic pattern. Later, the second movement melody notes are used in the jaunty rhythmic pattern. In 6/8, the material is decorated with running eighth notes, leading to a restatement of the opening subject. There follows the return of the second theme, the development of both first and second themes, and then a Coda which utilises elements of the third theme with quintuplet patterns from the second theme. The dynamism and energy of all these themes coming together culminates in a final statement of the opening bars, bringing the movement to a rousing conclusion.

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