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Britten Quartet #3

Benjamin Britten's Third String Quartet written in autumn 1975, is among the very last works he completed. Decades had passed since his first two quartets, written in the early 1940s, just before the opera *Peter Grimes* catapulted him to international fame. After that event, Britten was first and foremost a composer of vocal works, especially opera and large-scale choral pieces; in fact, after *Grimes* nearly every purely instrumental composition he wrote was at the urging of one performer or another (for example the five cello works written in the 1960s, for which we have Mstislav Rostropovich to thank).

In the case of the Third Quartet, it was the Amadeus Quartet who approached the composer, being well acquainted with him from his festival in Aldeburgh. String quartet writing could not be further from the operatic genre for which Britten is best known; one wonders how he felt as he re-engaged with this tightly-wrapped, economical medium, which he had not used for thirty years. The resulting work is ephemeral, fantastical, delicate, and characterful, a five-movement piece that the composer briefly considered entitling *Divertimento* for its many colors and contrasts.

The first movement, "Duets", is in a way the most abstract of the five. As the title suggests, it is an exploration of how two voices can be paired. At the opening we hear not so much a duet as a double helix; the two voices are closely twinned, murmuring, nudging each other into gentle, dancelike gestures. Later the idea of a duet becomes more adversarial, with a shift from the easy, triple rhythms of the opening to a rougher, battering duple rhythm. This ultimately melts away to a return of the opening idea, followed yet later by a coda section of great intimacy, marked "very quiet," where the opening twinned idea is now played between strummed and bowed chords. The movement evaporates with an ethereal chord which is intoned a few times between fragments of the opening idea -- a duet of materials, so to speak -- with the ethereal chord coming last and softest.

The second movement, "Ostinato", evokes a feeling of helpless mania. Writing in a kind of C major, Britten uses the Lydian mode, where one of the scale degrees is raised a half step, with a slightly giddy effect. The idea of an ostinato, where a musical pattern is repeated over and over in the background, here takes the shape of a rising, jagged, quarter-note figure, that is used to drive the music onward. Disconcertingly, total silences interrupt this forward momentum from time to time. In the middle of the movement, a more lyrical section intervenes (with the ostinato still chugging quietly behind the scenes),

ultimately winding up in a blissed-out B major world. The more robust music from the opening returns for a short time, reaches a furious climax, and then ultimately fizzles; the final bars are a kind of musical shrug.

The third movement features the first violin as its “Solo”. The writing here is quite spare, and we feel as if we are in a very high place, with thin air and a stark landscape. The lone violin line, moving trancelike through wide intervals, is accompanied mostly by only one other voice at a time, ascending slowly up an alpine slope. In the middle, this suspended texture gives way abruptly to a sudden outburst of bright, hard birdsong, ringed around with major-key triads; it is as if the composer is contemplating his great contemporary, Olivier Messiaen, across the English Channel, and refracting him through a Brittenesque prism.

With the fourth movement, a brief “Burlesque”, we are rudely shoved back into the world of parodic entertainment, a violent-textured scene of buffoonery. The main section is full of off-balance, rhythmic jokes, but the atmosphere is rough and almost hostile. This melts away quite suddenly to a middle section of stilted delicacy, a music box on the verge of breaking. After a frozen moment, the main section re-erupts, this time larger than life, muscled and euphoric to the end.

The fifth movement is entitled “La Serenissima”, a reference to Venice. The movement’s ties to this city are twofold. First, the opening section of the movement, a disembodied, swaying texture punctuated by free solos for each instrument, quotes liberally from Britten’s own last opera, *Death in Venice*. Secondly, Britten was actually staying in Venice when he wrote this movement, and the walking bassline that underpins the main passacaglia section is based on chiming bells that Britten could hear from his hotel room. The effect of this main section is mesmerizing: a slow, stepwise melody, played in syncopation against the patient walking bass, evokes a state of deep meditation and sadness. At the same time, the key of E major seems to bestow a special radiance on this sunken state. Gradually, as the theme passes to each of the four instruments, the texture diversifies, awakens, and reaches a swirling, arpeggiated climax. As the music subsides into a quieter texture, the first violin introduces a second theme which is distinguished by an upward sweep to a glowing harmonic; this is passed to the inner voices for a time, and finally the old theme reappears one more time. This time around, it seems not to have the strength to complete even one full cycle, coming to rest on a sustained note while gentle plucked notes ascend into the ether; the passacaglia is breaking down. Finally the bassline makes one last attempt, and the music freezes on an unresolved, forte chord, which Britten called “a question”. If this movement

depicts an old man confronting death, there is beauty and resignation, but also uncertainty: a life does not close neatly like a book in its two hard covers.

Note by Misha Amory