

String Quartet No. 2 (1946)

John Weinzwieg's String Quartet No. 2 was written in 1946, the same year as the composer's popular *Divertimento No. 1* for flute and strings. It is contemporary with, among other works, the second quartets of Shostakovich and Britten, and the first works for quartet by Weinzwieg's pupils Harry Somers and Harry Freedman. Commissioned by the Forest Hill Community Centre, a local arts group in Toronto, the work was premiered on 21 April 1947 by the Parlow String Quartet. It was subsequently performed in Prague, Tel Aviv, Los Angeles, Spoleto, and Paris, among other places. The Canadian String Quartet recorded the work in 1962 for a Columbia Records LP album (ML 5764/MS 6364).

A program note for this quartet by the composer reads in part: "The viola introduces the principal theme and the generating material of the first movement. Its sombre mood soon gives way to a vigorous transformation which is sustained until the viola recalls a familiar ostinato figure to conclude the movement. The second movement is lyrical, somewhat nostalgic in feeling, and tempered by muted strings and flute-like harmonics. The final movement, in the rondo manner, displays a capricious rhythm with a twist of humour."

The quartet bears many traits of Weinzwieg's neoclassical idiom. Textures are sparse, with frequent use of contrapuntal writing, and the rhythms are Mozartian in their clarity and simple elegance, notwithstanding the use of changing metres. The music is characterized by frequent shifts of mood, with much witty writing. The use of rhythmic ostinati, particularly in the second movement, recalls the music of Shostakovich. Weinzwieg was undoubtedly familiar with the Soviet composer's music, though only two of Shostakovich's fifteen quartets had been completed when Weinzwieg began work on his second quartet. Shostakovich's third and Weinzwieg's second quartets were premiered within four months of each other.

Weinzwieg's String Quartet No. 2 was the first quartet by a Canadian composer to use twelve-tone techniques, though in a free and idiosyncratic way (e.g. there are frequent doublings at the third and the octave). The row appears in its four basic forms and various transpositions; it is used to form melodies, but is not deployed harmonically. The prime form of the row is given in the opening viola solo, and as is characteristic of the composer's technique at this time, the row is revealed a few notes at a time, with much repetition of notes before the entire row is revealed. The frequent use of intervals smaller than a major third is also characteristic of the composer's style. The quartet is cautious in its incorporation of twelve-tone techniques, but merits recognition as the first Canadian string quartet in which these techniques are used.

Written by Robin Elliott