

### **String Quartet No. 3 (1962)**

John Weinzweig's String Quartet No. 3 (1962) was premiered by the Canadian String Quartet on 17 January 1963 (two months before the composer's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday) in the University of Toronto Faculty of Music's newly opened Edward Johnson Building, and was subsequently recorded by the Orford String Quartet in 1975. It is conceived in intimate terms and serves as a memorial to the composer's mother, who died during the composition of the quartet. Weinzweig stated that it is "a 'surrealistic' work ... in that its creation was influenced by the free association literary method of James Joyce. It is a work of shifting moods, fantastic images and considerable unrest and turmoil."

The quartet is in five movements, of which the first, third and fifth are all in exactly the same slow tempo (*Adagio*, dotted quarter note = 46) while the second and fourth are contrasting fast movements. The last movement is titled "In Memoriam" as a tribute to Weinzweig's mother. Towards the end of the "In Memoriam" (starting in bar 51) the composer alludes to the opening motive of *Kol Nidre*, a Jewish chant which introduces the service for Yom Kippur. This ancient melody also appears in Beethoven's String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131 and in many other works by numerous composers.

There are few places in the quartet where the melodic line is sustained for more than two or three bars, which results in the "shifting moods" that the composer mentions. Short motives are passed from instrument to instrument, in slightly different rhythmic configurations. Driving rhythms are very much in evidence in the two fast movements, but the three slow movements are reflective in nature. Thematic development is largely done away with; instead a wealth of motivic ideas is presented, and these are often turned into ostinato figures. Apart from a brief recapitulation in the first movement (bars 55 to 69) the return of previously heard ideas at a later point in a given movement usually has the nature of a reminiscence rather than a recapitulation. As a result the formal plans of the movements are additive rather than repetitive. Weinzweig perhaps had this sense of freedom and spontaneity in the melodic writing and in the formal structure of this quartet in mind when he spoke of this work as surrealistic and mentioned that it was influenced by the literary techniques of James Joyce.

Weinzweig avoids octave sonorities in this work, with the one important exception of the dramatic conclusion to the final movement when all four instruments play in octaves; the music soon settles onto a long held C (the last note of the row). The twelve notes of the row are then unfolded by the four instruments from top to bottom in such a way as to emphasize tonal outlines. These closing gestures grow organically out of the *Kol Nidre* quotation, and provide a peaceful and deeply satisfying conclusion to the quartet.

Written by Robin Elliott