

One can pretty much accept on faith the notion that individuals who write music are unusually inventive people. But to paraphrase a line from George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*, all composers are creative, but some are more creative than others. With the oeuvre of Sebastian Currier, we enter a world that uniquely embraces fresh outlooks in conceptualizing, organizing, and spinning out material.

The piano work *Theo's Sketchbook* (1992), for example, presents a series of short movements excerpting the life's work of an imaginary composer. Encompassing fictional examples from the character's concert output, his research into Eskimo folk tunes, and his personal utterances commemorating family milestones, it's a wonderful novella cast in musical language. Scored for violin/clarinet/piano trio, *Verge* (2003) dangerously flirts with the notion of creative failure, consisting of nine movements designated as "almost too fast," "almost too slow," "almost too much," "almost too little," and the like. Of course, Currier never really produces a poor product, relying instead on the tension found in the musical equivalent of nearly tumbling from a high wire. *Entanglement* (1992) imagines how two diametrically different composers—one measured and contemplative, the other spontaneous and demonstrative—might approach fleshing out the same violin and piano construct, then interweaves the two results to create an unusual yet satisfying opus. In doing so, it stands the idea of standard variations topsy-turvy; while such formats normally alter surface parameters and maintain underlying concepts, *Entanglement* keeps the outer skin consistent while making deeper aspects such as language and viewpoint the wild cards. Perhaps most striking of all, *Vocalissimus* (1991) reverses the standard procedure followed when constructing song cycles. Instead of employing several verses by one author, this entry for soprano and small mixed chamber ensemble takes a single poem, "To the Roaring Wind" by Wallace Stevens, and sets it eighteen different ways. That the writer of this text also penned the classic "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is no accident; here, Currier turns the tables on Stevens—spying on the spy, pointing the microscope in reverse. Furthermore, one sees text setting for the subjective business it is. Despite what some listeners and composers may think, there's no one right way to present verse in musical context; each of the eighteen settings of this poem prove perfectly viable and effective. Currier has characterized all this as "music in the third person," peering beyond the composer's usual self-referential vantage point to another dimension entirely.

Given Currier's staunchly artistic background, this perhaps isn't so surprising. Born in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, on March 16, 1959, and growing up in Rhode Island, Currier was surrounded by accomplished musicians from day one; his brother Nathan and his mother are composers and his father is a violinist. Young Sebastian started off learning the violin at home, but was granted the freedom to spend much of his teenage years playing guitar and writing rock songs. One imagines such a nurturing family environment strongly encouraged the free thinking and fanciful experimentation that characterizes his work today. And recognition in the form of artist residencies—Currier's impressive credentials include fellowships at MacDowell, Yaddo, and the American Academies in Rome and Berlin—have furnished him with welcome opportunities to gather thoughts and produce truly meaningful music.

But imagination without follow-through is worthless—any successful composer must be able to turn concepts, no matter how original, into notes on the page. And Currier's music is always structurally viable and sonically compelling. His craft is evident without unduly drawing attention to itself, honed in part through study with Milton Babbitt at The Juilliard School and George Perle at the Tanglewood Music Festival.

He rarely utilizes traditional movement structures (his 1997 orchestral work *Microsymph* comes closest to doing so), though he clearly subscribes to their concern with contrast, opposition, tension, and release, expressing such concepts through non-prescriptive architecture. And while larger overall formats are sometimes employed, they always masterfully tweak the listener's expectations. If the aforementioned *Theo's Sketchbook* can be seen as a collection of character piano pieces, it owes precious little to Schumann, Brahms, or Schoenberg; one can perceive a gradual evolution from its fictional composer's juvenile utterances to his confident mature works to his reflective final statements. While producing music that challenges fingers and bows, Currier invariably makes his players sound terrific once they have achieved technical fluency. This is not grindingly nasty fare that makes performers wish they had never opened up the score. Best of all, Currier's manner of musical speech is polished without being glib, lucid without being empty, and substantial without being forbidding—this is fluid stuff that tantalizes the ear.

His style of writing resists easy pigeonholes. Calling Currier's oeuvre "eclectic, with a scalar, often tonal basis" tells the listener something, but ignores many crucial features of this music. Unlike other composers who glean from highly varied waters, for example, Currier goes to great lengths to carefully integrate his disparate tendrils of choice. He creates edifices that possess organic unity on various levels. There's nothing slapdash or sloppy going on here whatsoever.

Currier has penned four pieces for string quartet so far, consisting of two numbered works dating from the 1980s as well as a pair of suite-like collections written for the Cassatt String Quartet entitled *Quartetset* (1995) and *Quiet Time* (2004).

Clocking in at well more than half an hour, *Quartetset* is one of this composer's lengthiest utterances. And like much else he has written, there's an "alternative universe" spin put on its conception. Here, Currier comes to terms with the dichotomy between the standard repertoire he grew up with and the contemporary literature he encountered during his college studies. For Currier, as with several composers his age, the triadic works of Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert proved decisive in his decision to pursue a musical career. But much has changed since the common practice period, with avant-garde icons as varied as Cage, Carter, and Stockhausen producing a body of pieces that simply cannot be ignored. Currier responds to this by neatly combining elements of the two aesthetics, contrasting passages of straightforward tonal writing with measures of dissonant clangor, the latter sometimes enhanced with special effects such as playing near the bridge. Its seven movements suggest a palindromic effect—movements three and five are subtitled "Muted," while the work begins and ends with subdivisions bearing the description "Divided"—though Currier deftly subverts the conventional by having the sixth movement last more than twice as long as any of its cabin mates.

Movements one and seven take different approaches to interpreting the concept of style schism. The initial "Divided" entity states the same humorous triadic oom-pah accompaniment four times—and each time but the last, the first violin enters with a tortured, winding chromatic melody that spawns a nervous Expressionist dissonant tremolo. The inventive finale concerns itself with the second violinist stubbornly sticking to tonal material (often borrowed from the first movement) in the face of *au courant* interjections emanating from the other three players; its climax finds the lone traditionalist holdout nearly seduced by the rest of the ensemble, only to revert back to type and insist on quietly having the last word.

The two divisions marked "Muted" show clear similarities while still containing enough contrast to avoid becoming clones. Both employ a sectional sense of organization suggestive of rondo principles, though the first divides into nine parts while the latter groups roughly into five. Both juxtapose late Romantic writing evocative of Mahler, with material (employing long-held sonorities and/or tremolos) that veers between tonality and atonality. But the first of these movements presents its quasi-pastoral melody up front while the latter saves its slow waltz idea for later.

Juxtapositions come to a climax in *Quartetset's* central scherzo, "Scatterbrained." Gritty repeated note cells and swirling chromatic snippets repeatedly slam headlong into a goofy pizzicato waltz figure, producing a movement that seems on the verge of reeling out of control without descending into utter chaos.

Movements two and six concern themselves more with synthesis and less with dichotomy. Subtitled "Forceful," the first of these entities is cast in a sound world that subtly vacillates between clouded tonality and mildly pungent dissonance; not surprisingly, Currier's writing here salutes the great quartets of Bela Bartók, down to conspicuous use of fast repeated-note accompaniments and driving rhythms. The latter of these, "Contemplative," serves as the quartet's slow movement and center of gravity. Much of the music traffics unashamedly in standard functional harmony, with occasional excursions into slightly more chromatic territory. And again, the composer obliquely references a past master of the genre; here, one encounters the timeless, weighty feel of Ludwig van Beethoven's slow movements, such as the "Hymn of Thanksgiving in the Lydian Mode" from the Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132.

What's especially interesting is Currier's refusal to use the work as a vehicle to take sides in a debate on the merits of the two styles in question. In a world where we still have a few composers, impresarios, performers, and listeners intent on assigning value judgments to traditional and progressive approaches, Currier amply demonstrates that these are simply thought processes to use or omit as suits the musical point being made. In that sense, *Quartetset* forces the more polarized among us to give their closed-minded beliefs a second look.

*Quiet Time* shares similarities with *Quartetset*, such as its division into seven movements and expression of contrast between two concepts. It was composed for the Cassatt's twentieth anniversary and is deliberately meant as a loose reflection of that earlier piece. But much is different here, most notably the apposition of music meant to portray natural versus artificial sound, specifically source and processed material—not employing "process" in the sense of minimalist styles like those of Philip Glass or Steve Reich, but taking an analog-based signal and digitally processing it via computer. *Quiet Time* adopts a less nuanced approach to the use of contraposing material than its predecessor. And the overall architecture here is not

strictly a palindrome; movement three does not contain a large-scale echoic division, while the finale, subtitled “Traces,” serves as a disembodied summing up of what came before instead of a modified restatement of the opener. It’s a much shorter work than *Quartetset*, too, with a duration of just over twenty minutes. Here, we see the composer asking himself yet another outside-the-box question: “How might I approach writing the same piece ten years later?”

Movements one and three most clearly point up the analog-digital concept. “Antiphon,” the quartet’s opener, consists of several full-throated phrases followed by their processed repetitions, as if the material had been pushed through a ring modulator and low-pass filter. Absent actual computer alteration, this effect is achieved through use of octave displacements, substitute pitches, tremolos, glissandi, on-fingerboard playing, and quarter tones. The third movement, “Reverberation,” neatly conjures up the effect of echo chamber employment, taking its fractured yet warm second violin line and surrounding it with harmonics that are sustained, trilled, and reiterated; these pick up on the second violin’s output, shining a ghostly mirror on the notes of its melody.

“Time’s Arrow” and “Time Flow,” the second and fifth movements respectively, are scherzos that use string techniques to produce surprisingly non-acoustic-sounding textures. The former sets up a tapestry teeming with overlapped patterned figures, shot through with attacks generated through a felicitous combination of on-bridge bowing, left-hand pizzicato, and tapping both the strings and bridge with the wood of the bow—which then morphs into a combination of fast repeated notes, snaking chromatic shards, normally-bowed punctuations, and forceful cadential figures. The effect in the movement’s initial measures notably suggests that of music fed through a high-pass filter. “Time Flow” features a rather more unified sonic carpet, consisting primarily of fast arpeggiated gestures subtly enhanced with repeated notes and trill-like material. And the existence of canonic writing (seen at the outset in inversion between the first violin and cello parts) approximates the concept of digital delay.

Movement six, “Memory Filter,” takes “Antiphon”’s initial phrase and reiterates it in greatly altered fashion, slowing the material down and stating it in a more disembodied way, even going so far as to alter some of the pitches contained in the chords while maintaining a reasonable semblance to the original. The effect is enhanced further when “Memory Filter”’s first measures recapitulate—now, even more detail is forgotten, though this is still undeniably a recognizable repetition. It’s as if a computer file has slowly degraded over time, shedding information as it ages none-too-gracefully.

Both the fourth and seventh movements consolidate disparate concepts into a single unit. This middle movement, “Two Chords Separated by a Scherzo,” unites the still and busy music found elsewhere. Perhaps not surprisingly, the first of these two chords is not a static entity, heightened by the same trills and repeated notes encountered earlier. And the scherzo develops fragments first encountered in “Time’s Arrow” while hinting at the arpeggiated material of “Time Flow”; its ever-malleable figuration shifts suggesting the application of time compression principles. “Traces” is the work’s finale and incorporates ideas from several earlier movements, notably “Reverberation”’s echoic sheen of harmonics, “Antiphon”’s ring modulation-like tremolos, “Time’s Arrow”’s high-pass filter combination of thrown bow and left-hand pizzicato, and “Time Flow”’s harmonics in arpeggio. The effect is magical, a disembodied movement that flickers like a handful of fireflies.

But all this talk of computers and such should not convey the notion that the piece is anything less than marvelously musical. *Quiet Time* proves an apt title, as the prevailing feel is one of enveloping twilight fare, highly evocative yet surprisingly energetic given its low-key manner of speech. And in his program notes to this piece, Currier states that the title evokes the circumstances under which it came to life—during a fruitful period of solitude spent at the MacDowell Colony.

These two works are important additions to the string quartet literature—intelligent, sensitive, carefully considered creations that travel outside the usual well-worn ruts to offer music unlike that of anyone else. Combining an approachable manner of speech, impeccable workmanship, and a unique world view, they pay dividends from first hearing to last.

—David Cleary

*Composer/critic David Cleary has written reviews for the Boston Herald, New Music Connoisseur, and All Music Guide to Rock, CD liner notes for CRI and New World, and articles for Women and Music in America since 1900 (Greenwood Press) and The Performing Arts Career Directory (Gale Research).*

The music of composer **Sebastian Currier** has been performed worldwide in such major cities as Paris, Rome, Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Tokyo, Beijing, Moscow, London, and Toronto. In the United States his works have been performed in Carnegie Hall in New York, Symphony Hall in Boston, the Kennedy Center in Washington, and Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco.

His work *Aftersong* was written for the world renowned violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, who, with pianist Lambert Orkis, premiered the work at the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, performed it at the Salzburg Festival, and then throughout the rest of Europe and the United States. Ms. Mutter and Mr. Orkis also performed another work of Currier's, *Clockwork*, in major cities in Europe and Asia.

He has received a Berlin Prize, the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, several awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Friedheim Award, a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Tanglewood Fellowship, and has held residencies at the MacDowell and Yaddo colonies. Commissions include Meet the Composer, Fromm Foundation, Koussevitzky Foundation, Barlow Endowment, Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust and the American Composers Orchestra.

His works have been performed by such orchestras as the National Symphony, the Gewandhaus Orchestra, the American Composers Orchestra, EOS Orchestra, and the San Francisco Symphony. *Microsymph* was recently recorded by the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra. Other recordings are on New World Records, Albany Records, Crystal Records, and CRI. He is currently on the faculty of Columbia University. He holds a DMA degree from The Juilliard School.

Now established as one of America's outstanding ensembles, the **Cassatt String Quartet** celebrates its twentieth anniversary, and has captivated audiences throughout North America, Europe, and the Far East. It has performed at New York's Alice Tully Hall, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, the Tanglewood Music Theatre, the Kennedy Center, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, and Maeda Hall in Tokyo.

The Cassatt maintains the highest level of commitment to a wide range of the string quartet masterpieces, while leading the way into the future of chamber music through the commissioning, performance, and recording of new works from a wide array of eminent composers.

The Cassatt captured First Prizes at the Fischhoff and Coleman Chamber Music Competitions, along with two top prizes at the Banff International Competition and two Chamber Music America/ASCAP awards for Adventurous Programming.

The Quartet has received grants from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, the Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation, the Grand Marnier Foundation, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, the E. Nakamichi Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council, as well as the Southern Arts Federation. Additionally, new works have been commissioned through the National Endowment for the Arts, the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, and the Fromm and Barlow Foundations.

Based in New York City, the Cassatt holds residencies at the University of Pennsylvania and Syracuse University, where it created the Louis Krasner Graduate String Quartet Program. Its summer residencies include the Seal Bay and the Bowdoin International Music Festivals. The quartet is named for the American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Intimations*. Nathan Williams, clarinet; Audrey Andrist, piano. Albany Records 311.

*Verge*. Verdehr Trio. Crystal Records 943.

*Vocalissimus*. Includes *Theo's Notebook*, *Whispers*, and *Vocalissimus*. Mosaic. New World Records 80527-2.

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CASSATT QUARTET

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*Quartetset* (1995) 35:45

(publ. by Carl Fischer)

1. I. Divided 2:28
2. II. Forceful 3:40
3. III. Muted 2:56
4. IV. Scatterbrained 4:01
5. V. Muted 4:50
6. VI. Contemplative 11:41
7. VII. Divided 5:41

*Quiet Time* (2004) 22:36

(publ. by Carl Fischer)

8. I. Antiphon 2:50
9. II. Time's Arrow 2:38
10. III. Reverberation 4:02
11. IV. Two Chords Separated by a Scherzo 1:32
12. V. Time Flow 3:33
13. VI. Memory Filter 3:38
14. VII. Traces 3:55

Cassatt Quartet: Muneko Otani, Jennifer Leshnower, violins; Tawnya Popoff, viola; Caroline Stinson, cello

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TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685  
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