

Carnatic String Quartet

I

Robert Morris

① ♩ = 84

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

6

© 2020

First page of *Carnatic String Quartet*

THE INTERESTING THING about **Robert Morris's** remarkable career as a composer (and a theorist) is how free he is to move from composing works of great rigor with intricate integrity in his use of pitch-class design, to works of sonic beauty to be performed in a natural outdoor environment, to imaginative electronic/computer music, to the music of acculturation. There is no loss of the meticulous in any of these. Indeed, in a conversation I had with him about his acculturated music in 2011, he told me, "All of these works explored processes of musical accommodation and change in different ways."

Full disclosure: I have known Bob (everyone I know calls him Bob) since 1971 at the Yale School of Music. From 1972 onwards I was a graduate composition student of his, then a colleague at Yale and then a close friend. It was a rich time for composers at Yale as there was a group of us, all about the same age: the late Jonathan Kramer, Martin Bresnick, the late Bruce MacCombie, Robert Moore, Bob and myself as a sort of "rat pack" amidst the likes of Yehudi Wyner, James Drew, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Jacob Druckman. The stylistic diversity represented by the more senior composers was equally true among the rest of us more junior composers. What was particularly wonderful about our group was the mutual support and respect that was naturally given by and to each. There were none of the usual fiefdoms among the composers that academia can spawn present in either the School of Music or the Department of Music. We were too interested in what came next for each of us.

It was in this open environment that Bob composed what I consider to be groundbreaking compositions of musical acculturation. He views this as a trilogy of works

from that time, represented by his work in electronic music—*Thunder of Spring over Distant Mountains*, five chamber music pieces, and his large-scale *In Different Voices* for 5 wind ensembles. *Not Lilacs*, *Variations on the Variation on the Quadran Pavan and the Quadran Pavan by Bull and Bird*, *Motet on Doo-Dah*, *Bob's Plain Bobs*, and *Varnam* are the five chamber works. Each of these works draws upon Bob's love of counterpoint and transformation and begin a compositional trajectory that I believe eventually culminates in the *Carnatic String Quartet*. Of course, there are many, many works in between those Yale days of the '70s and the near present when the Carnatic was written. But the reason that I refer to those much earlier works is because they ably explore a number of compositional interests while offering the surface of different musical material and admirably refer to the ethnic, cultural, and temporal origins from which the source music is chosen. However, the resulting music is transformed and is never derivative or imitative. Nor could it ever be construed as appropriation.

So much of listening to music is about style and/or the surface. Most listeners' choices are based on that because there is comfort in music that is familiar. I remember a time when jazz musicians found greater success by memorizing and performing live the same solo as their popular recorded one, however antithetical that was to the genre. Audiences simply wanted to hear those solos performed live.

Similarly, many European composers find diversity in a composer's work perplexing—I know this from discussions with Penderecki. Although he never said it, I viewed his interest in creating and evolving an identifiable musical style as a kind of composer's branding. Certainly, many North American composers have long felt free to move from piece to piece in a way that makes creative sense. This is an exploratory liberty that is honest and relates to the pursuit of an evolving musical vision rather than remaining within the constraints of an evolution of craft. There is the question of whether or not the creation and reiteration of a musical style is necessary for success as a composer. Is

musical identity worthy of being the driving force for a composer? Is it a matter of intent? Of course, these are questions each composer will have to answer for him/herself.

Furthermore, differing musical visions that allow for musical experiences beyond the norm are a welcome to any listener who is adventurous. Each composition can, and I believe should, offer a unique experience. Now we're in Bob's territory because this is so true of all of his music. You might wonder how it is that the composer of the *Thirty-Nine Webern Variations* could create the electro-acoustic piece *Mountain Streams* or the outdoor work *Playing Outside*? It's in the integrity of the composition, the inner workings of the music. That integrity is a constant throughout all of his music. You'll recognize it by giving yourself up to the Carnatic as you listen. From my perspective, I'd recommend listening the same way as to the late Beethoven string quartets. Listening repeatedly over time yields more and more of the depth and the beauty. Bob has both a composer's and a theorist's knowledge of the Carnatic (and Hindustani) music of India. He first encountered Indian music as a fourteen-year-old through his piano teacher's wife's work in modern dance, which included an interest in the intricacies of Indian dance. She lent him recordings of the music and the Alain Daniélou book, *North Indian Music*. Perhaps the music was initially exotic for a fourteen-year-old but Bob's professional investigations into the music have given him expert knowledge. I often listened with him to great performances of Carnatic music by renowned veena artists while I studied composition with him in the '70s. Along with Bob's Doctorate in composition from the University of Michigan is a cognate in ethnomusicology and we often discussed many non-Western musics. The sound worlds and methodologies, thus offered by these musics, provided so many possibilities for inspiration and investigation.

Last fall Bob was recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award in Melharmony by the Melharmony Foundation. In 2001 he began collaborating with Chitravina N.

Ravikiran on Melharmony resulting in some ten different published articles on Indian music. Travelling frequently to India for the classical music festivals, he astonished native experts by being able to listen and identify even obscure ragas. I believe it would be fair to say that, despite being highly regarded as a music theorist, Bob's motivation for such comprehensive investigation into music is the result of an incredible curiosity into the workings and nature of musical material which feeds directly into his work as a composer. A completely circular creativity.

But you might want to know that part of this circularity is Bob's interest in investigating the Wisdom traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism (I call them Wisdom traditions since they are more experiential than most belief-based religion). These traditions have affected him personally as well as impacting upon his music. From our frequent conversations I can attribute Bob with both a scholar's approach and a sincere personal attraction to the transcendent. I view this as completely consistent with Bob's investigations into musical material. He is inherently both the scholar and the seeker. He is both the composer and the theorist.

Then there is Bob's love of nature which, in some ways, arises out of Asian philosophy and poetry. At least he has found resonance in these evocations of the mysterious and the numinous found in not only special places, but wherever nature is abundant. He has been an enthusiastic hiker in not only the proximity of upstate New York woodlands but in places of stark singularity such as Arches National Park in Utah or the canyon lands of Arizona. His encompassing sensitivity to the sights and sounds and wonder of the natural world reminds me of both Olivier Messiaen's and Toru Takemitsu's relationship with nature. In his book *The Whistling Blackbird: Essays and Talks on New Music* Bob writes, ". . . There's a keen beauty in just walking in a place without urban signs or conveniences; this promotes a sense of what one might call natural elegance, of being in tune with one's surroundings. One soon understands that all parts of the trail are the

goal—not just the vista at its so-called end. The result is a loss of self-consciousness; you are no longer other than the landscape; you are simply your perceptions.”¹

And he writes, “. . . I began to notice that the angular, rugged landscapes of Northern Arizona and Utah seemed a perfect reflection of my musical sensibility; I felt I had found the physical nexus for the expressive content of my music. The kinds of motions and forms I had been “composing” in(to) my music were all around me.”²

It's an interesting question to consider: Where do composers find their inspiration? With Bob the answer would be as diverse as his openness to experiences in life and how those experiences inspire creativity. In my mind, this puts him squarely in the American lineage of Charles Ives, Henry Crowell, Carl Ruggles, Lou Harrison, and others. And would it surprise you to know that he equally admires John Cage and Milton Babbitt?

Along these lines he writes, “My song cycle *Cold Mountain Songs*, written in 1993, represents a way I often think about music, especially my own music. I conceive of a musical composition as a world—a world to be discovered, cultivated, lived in, enjoyed. Gone is what I consider to be the outmoded idea of unidirectional musical communication as embodied in the roles of sender (composer), transmitter (performer) and receiver (listener). Rather, composition is the act of creating musical worlds of novel design and coherence; the composer, performer, and listener all explore and find their own way within it.”³

He further writes, “By the mid-1980s I was avidly reading Eastern religious and philosophical texts and becoming acquainted with Chinese painting and poetry. About

¹ Robert Morris. *The Whistling Blackbird: Essays and Talks on New Music*. University of Rochester Press, 2010, p. 269.

² Ibid, p. 268.

³ Ibid, p. 214.

then I began to think about my compositions as if they were gardens—composed places but without privileged paths or areas—pieces in which compositional detail is used not simply to guide the listener (or program his or her experience) to a “successful resolution,” but to make a piece that rewards a listener’s active participation in its musical parts and processes. The only problem with this analogy is that it characterizes such music as static, when in reality the music flows in time . . . there are multiple paths through a piece, and . . . each listener may hear a piece of mine in their own way from their own point of view.”⁴

This revealing assessment in which he shares his sensibilities of the musical listening experience should help you to realize how open and generous—encouraging even—he is to your experience of the music. In our friendship, I am well aware that we hear music differently, for example, he has perfect pitch and my relation to pitch is both kinaesthetic and relative, but often we talk about musical events and gestures in ways that lead me to surmise we arrive at the same thing from different directions.

During our time together at Yale in the ’70s, Bob composed a remarkable piece, *Rapport*, which he and I premiered and performed around a dozen times in the Electronic Music Studio for small audiences (the studio was not very large). It consisted of several prerecorded tapes of music inclusive to eras and cultures that serendipitously would come together through various states of delay and loops while Bob provided synthesizer improvisation. It was as though each music, whether it was an aboriginal didjeridu emerging out of Tibetan ritual orchestral music and suddenly transforming into Beethoven and then receding into a shakuhachi solo overlaid by a Charlie Parker improvisation, was governed by an exquisite ordering of appearances and interactions. It was magical.

⁴ Ibid, p. 214

So, in this broad context, we have the *Carnatic String Quartet* for you to listen to. I would posit that in its comprehensive Melakarta evolution, the music evokes the sacred river Ganges. Not in any way programmatic, but in Essence. I cannot help but recognize the impact that Bob’s frequent trips to India have had on him, visiting many temples and sacred sites and certainly the river, in its overwhelming majestic presence and spiritual significance, plays through the music of this quartet. Please. Go and bathe.

—David Mott

David Mott is a composer, baritone saxophonist, improviser, and Senior Scholar Emeritus, York University.

Composer’s note

Carnatic String Quartet (2020) is my fifth string quartet. As the title might imply, there is a connection between this work and Carnatic classical music of south India. While I do not try to imitate the styles and performance practices of Indian music in the quartet, the piece is based on the 72 fundamental 7-note “melakarta” musical scales as set forth by Venkatamakhin in his treatise *Chaturdandi Prakaasikaa* as amended by Govindhacharya in the mid-17th-century. These scales include all western scales and modes and are well known to every musician in south India.

My quartet presents these Indian scales over its three movements in an order that pre-serves the greatest number of common tones from scale to scale in the sequence. Therefore, the quartet is a series of 72 sections divided into three movements of 23, 25, and 24 sections each. The rhythmic language in the quartet has some connection to various rhythmic patterns in Indian music such as systematic permutation and repetition, especially in groups of five or seven units. Other rhythmic devices involve composed-out *senza misura* passages and parlando styles.

The first movement commences with the quite chromatic scale called *Raghupriya* whose notes are C Db Ebb F# G A# B. The body of this movement introduces most of the textures and musical processes that occur throughout the entire quartet. By contrast, the second movement begins in a new direction involving a free rhythmic form of heterophonic counterpoint. (The first scale in this movement is *Chitambari*, C D E F# G A# B, transposed to A). Perhaps this section and ones like it will seem “Eastern” to the listener, and indeed there are similar textures in Arabic classical music, called *taqsim*. While there is nothing wrong for listeners to make such connections to what they may know of non-Western music, the quartet was not composed to make such allusions but to take advantage of the structural properties of each of the melakarta scales. The last movement contains many of the (church) modes found in Western music, such as the Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, etc. Thus, this music has affinities with the pan-diatonic styles of 20th-century Western music by composers such as (middle period) Igor Stravinsky, Benjamin Britten, (early) John Cage, Lou Harrison, etc. The music eventually returns to the chromatic sound of the opening movement with the scale *Pavani*, C Db Ebb F# G A B (just one note different from the opening scale of the piece).

—Robert Morris

Robert Morris (b. 1943) has taught composition, electronic music, and music theory at the University of Hawaii, Yale University, and the University of Pittsburgh. In 1980 Morris joined the faculty of the Eastman School of Music as Professor of Composition with additional affiliation within the theory and musicology departments. He retired in 2024.

Morris is the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the A. Whitney Griswold Foundation, the American Music Center, the Hanson Institute of American Music, and the American Council of Learned Societies. In 1975 he was a

MacDowell Colony fellow, and in 2008, a Djerassi artist. He has been guest composer at many festivals and series of new music.

Morris’s works, including computer and improvisational music, are written for a wide diversity of musical forms and media. Some of his music draws upon compositional principles from non-Western music. His music conceived to be played out of doors has been performed throughout the United States, including *Playing Outside* (2001), *SOUND/PATH/FIELD* (2006), and *Sound, Trees, Meadows* (2022-3).

In addition to his music, Morris has published four books and over fifty articles and reviews contributing to theories of musical analysis and aesthetics, compositional design, and electronic and computer music. Morris also served as co-editor of *Perspectives of New Music* and Contributing Editor of *The Open Space Magazine*. Morris has also contributed to the study and analysis of Carnatic music of south India and helped develop a theoretic foundation for Chitravina N. Ravikiran’s concept of *Melharmony*.

Morris was the recipient of the “Outstanding Publication Award” of the Society for Music Theory in 1988 for his book, *Composition with Pitch-Classes: A Theory of Compositional Design*, published by Yale University Press, and in 2001 for his article “Voice Leading Spaces” in *Music Theory Spectrum* 20/2. In 2023 the Society for Music Theory Executive Board awarded Morris with “Lifetime Membership in recognition of truly outstanding contributions to the field of music theory.” *Perspectives of New Music* published a special issue (volume 52/2) in 2014 entitled *Perspectives on and Around Robert Morris at 70* with a three-CD recording of *Compositions and Performances in Celebration* (PNM/OS compact disc). <https://ecmc.rochester.edu/rdm/>

Momenta: the plural of momentum—four individuals in motion towards a common goal. This is the idea behind the **Momenta Quartet**, whose eclectic vision encompasses contemporary music of all aesthetic backgrounds alongside great music from the recent

and distant past. The New York City-based ensemble has performed at the Library of Congress, National and Freer Galleries, Rubin Museum, Miller Theatre, Institute for Advanced Study; at chamber music societies including Cincinnati, Louisville, and Philadelphia; abroad at Festival Internacional Cervantino, Hong Kong's "Intimacy of Creativity," Ostrava Days, and Jakarta's Salihara Arts Center; and since 2015 at the annual member-curated NYC Momenta Festival, featuring premieres and samplings from Momenta's unique personal repertoire. Momenta has presented performances and educational residencies at Binghamton, Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Hawaii Pacific, Michigan State, New York, Temple, Tufts, Washington, and Yeshiva universities; Bard, Barnard, Bates, Haverford, Hunter, Ithaca, Lehman, and Williams colleges; and Boston, Cincinnati, Eastman, and Mannes conservatories. Momenta has recorded for Albany, Bridge, Centaur, Furious Artisans, Innova, Navona, New Focus, New World, and PARMA. Their discography includes more than a dozen composer portraits, including Alvin Singleton's complete quartets (New World), and the upcoming complete quartets of Mexican microtonalist Julián Carrillo (Naxos). More information is available at momentaquartet.com.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Arc, Beautiful Beast; strange flowers, occasional storms; Cuts; sung song; Roundelay; Refrains; Tigers and Lillies. PNM-OS CD 4.
Channing Fragments. Vynes. AMP Recordings Amprec 021.
Cold Mountain Songs, Wye (Lynes Composed for Tinturn Abbey). Open Space CD 30.
In Variation, gradually, Drawn Onward. Centaur CRC 3696.
Motet on Doo-dah. Included on *New Music for Virtuosos.* New World Records 80541-2.
Mountain Streams, Mysterious Landscape. Renova Records RR7981.
Phases for two pianos and photo-cell mixers. Included on *Hammers and Bows.* New World Records/CRI NWCR346.

Quattro per Quattro. Open Space CD 32.

RADIF IV (GALAX VERSION) "Stars of Highest Magnitude." Music and Arts 1297.

Still, On the Go, Fourteen Little Piano Pieces, Out and Out, Meandering River, About the Same. Albany TROY779.

This Bubble of a Heart. Innova 795.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Robert Morris. "Compositional Spaces and Other Territories," *Perspectives of New Music*, 3333:1–2 (1995).

—. *Composition with Pitch-Classes: A Theory of Compositional Design.* Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1987.

—. "New Directions in the Theory and Analysis of Musical Contour," *Music Theory Spectrum*, 18/2 (1994).

—. "Notation Is One Thing, Analysis Another, Musical Experience a Third: What Can They Have to Do with One Another?," in *Music in Time: Phenomenology, Perception, Performance*, edited by Suzannah Clark and Alexander Rehding, Harvard Department of Music, Cambridge, MA, 2016.

—. "Recent Developments Coordinating Melody and Harmony," *Journal of the Music Academy*, Madras, Volume 89, reprinted in *Analytical Approaches to World Music Journal*, Volume 11.1 (2023).

—. "Ravikiran's Concept of Melharmony: An Inquiry into Harmony in South Indian Ragas," (with Chitravina N. Ravikiran) *Music Theory Spectrum*, 28/2:255–76 (2006).

—. "Some Musical Applications of Minimal Graph Cycles," *Theory & Practice*, 35 (2010).

—. "The Survival of Music: Musical Citizenship in South India," *Perspectives of New Music*, 42:66–87 (2004).

—. *The Whistling Blackbird: Essays and Talks on New Music.* The University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2010.

Producer: Robert Morris

Engineer: Lou Chitty

Recorded October 25, 2023 at Hatch Hall, Eastman School of Music, New York.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Cover art: After Melakarta and Janya Raga Chart, compiled and designed by A. Krishnaswami. Madras, Sakthii Priya Publications, Madras—600 05.

Design: Jim Fox

Carnatic String Quartet is published by the composer.

Thanks to Jamal Rossi, Joan and Martin Messinger Dean of the Eastman School of Music.

FOR NEW WORLD RECORDS:

Lisa Kahlden, President; Paul M. Tai, Vice-President, Director of Artists and Repertory

ANTHOLOGY OF RECORDED MUSIC, INC., BOARD OF TRUSTEES:

Amy Beal, Robert Clarida, Emanuel Gerard (Emeritus), Lisa Kahlden, Herman Krawitz (Emeritus), Fred Lerdahl, Larry Polansky (Emeritus), Paul M. Tai.

Francis Goelet (1926–1998), In Memoriam

For a complete catalog, including liner notes, visit our Web site: www.newworldrecords.org.

New World Records, 915 Broadway, Suite 101A, Albany, NY 12207

Tel (212) 290-1680 Fax (646) 224-9638 E-mail: info@newworldrecords.org

© & © 2026 Anthology of Recorded Music, Inc. All rights reserved. Made in U.S.A.

The image displays a musical score for a string quartet, consisting of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 1122 to 1124, and the second system covers measures 1125 to 1126. The music is written in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. Measure numbers 1122, 1125, and 1126 are indicated at the beginning of their respective staves. Dynamic markings include *mp* (mezzo-piano), *p* (piano), and *pp* (pianissimo). Performance instructions such as *3:sl*, *7:sl*, and *5:sl* are present above the notes. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the final measure.

Last page of *Carnatic String Quartet*