

NWCR682

Martin Bresnick

Music for Strings



String Quartet #2 “Bucephalus” (1984)	(19:10)
1. I – Bucephalus	(1:48)
2. II – Around To The Sun	(3:28)
3. III – Alexandrine	(6:16)
4. IV – At Jhelum	(3:48)
5. V – The New Advocate	(3:50)

The Alexander String Quartet: Eric Pritchard, violin; Kate Ransom, violin; Paul Yarbrough, viola; Sandy Wilson, cello

<i>Wir Weben, Wir Weben</i> for String Sextet (1978)	(21:38)
6. I – Anfänge (Beginnings)	(4:22)
7. II – Die Weber (The Weavers)	(9:59)
8. III – Anhänge (Indices, Addenda)	(7:17)

Musical Elements: Robert Beaser and Daniel Asia, music directors; Syoko Aki, violin; Peer Sacco, violin; Marshall Coid, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Chris Finckel, cello; Dennis Masuzzo, bass; Daniel Asia, conductor

9. <i>B.’s Garlands</i> for Eight Cellos (1973)	(11:25)
The Yale Cellos: Francois Salque, Ole Akahoshi, Carol Ou, Robert Maine, Claude Giron, Minhye Clara Kim, Pansy Chang, Brandon Vamos, celli; Martin Bresnick, conductor	

String Quartet #3 (1992)	(19:19)
10. I – Calmo, Risoluto, Teneramente	(7:35)
11. II – Feroce, Cascando	(4:20)
12. III – Pensieri, Oscuri, le Stelle (Dark thoughts, The Stars)	(7:24)
The Harrington String Quartet: Dawn Harms, violin; John Meisner, violin; Amy Brandfonbrener, viola; Emmanuel Lopez, cello	

Total playing time: 71:55

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Notes

Martin Bresnick: Music for Strings

Martin Bresnick’s music seems a veritable compendium of the genres and styles of the century’s end. In addition to distinguished works for traditional ensembles—orchestras, choruses, piano trios, and the like—he has written theater pieces that recall and update Kurt Weill, hard driving works for amplified instruments, ground-breaking music for extended-technique virtuosos, and delicate solo works for marginalized instruments like the piccolo, mandolin, and toy piano. This range of output, and Bresnick’s fluency within it, speaks not merely to his considerable skills, but to his always-open ears and mind. His appetite for all the music that surrounds him is matched by an ability to synthesize and integrate those same diverse musical elements. This formal and stylistic eclecticism locates him firmly in the American school of Ives and Nancarrow. But this is not the whole story, for it is in Bresnick’s “orchestrational” most conventional music—in particular the string music that appears on this disc—that he displays the full breadth of his vision.

Bresnick is well aware of Western art music as a *choice* among many, for his scholarly work has included ethnomusicological research into the music of Waterbury, Connecticut, as well as extensive contact with the music of

the former Yugoslavia. Yet by choosing to work within the Western art music tradition, his concern has not been to exalt that tradition, to assert its primacy, nor to work toward its continued ascendancy, but rather it is to stock-take, to reflect on what it means to be a composer within this tradition, at this time, and at this place.

Although Bresnick’s music has the trappings of both Romanticism and Post-Modernism, it can neither be listened to simply linearly, as an unambiguous progression toward a clear goal, nor purely “in the moment.” Rather, passages in this music, especially those of clear emotional intent, must be considered in tragic or ironic opposition to the moments that surround them. An example of this is the end of the last movement *Wir Weben, Wir Weben*, where the Mahlerian rush to climax, seemingly inevitable, is interrupted, and the sad, resigned lines familiar from the beginning of the piece fill the void. Juxtaposed, the romantic intensity and the melancholic longings shed strange light on each other. It is like taking us almost to the mountain top, and then self-consciously stepping back and forcing us to examine both the peak and the path we took to get there.

Though Bresnick’s pieces are carefully calculated and minutely structured, they can sound as expressive and as

personal as the music of late Brahms and early Schoenberg. His music is often scored for massed forces of a single sound—eight celli, as in *B.'s Garlands*, or groups of strings playing similar gestures, as in *Wir Webern*—and yet this collective energy sings of personal, individual longing. His music is generated out of cycles, repeating patterns and recurring events, yet each piece moves forward with a narrative logic. In sum, the music seems poised between impersonality and expressivity, individuality and collectivity, circularity and linearity, all generated by a masked rigor.

Micropolyphony, a technique developed by Bresnick's teacher, György Ligeti, is the starting point for much of Bresnick's music. Over the years, his use of this technique has widened and changed, to the point that its original intent—the blurring of distinct meter and harmony as seen in the beginning of *B.'s Garlands* from the mid-1970s—is turned on its ear and is used to project a clear sense of the transformational mood and feeling, as in the Second Quartet (1938-84) and the Third Quartet (1992). This growing sense of clarity is demonstrated in other ways as well. In the early pieces, formal processes work behind-the-scenes to create, for example, the canonic effects at the end of the second movement of *Wir Webern* and the quasi-unisons in the middle of *B.'s Garlands*. By the Third Quartet, these processes have become exoskeletal: the compositional design is worn right on the surface, articulated clearly, and then played out with no bones about it.

Surprisingly, Bresnick's flair for structural clarity challenges the programmatic nature of the music. The political message of *Wir Webern* is unambiguous: the piece is based on Heinrich Heine's poem in support of the 1844 Silesian weaver's strike, and is infused with a strong commitment to social causes. Contrast this with the subtle Brechtian message of the later Second Quartet "Bucephalus" based on Kafka's aphoristic commentary on the emasculating ironies of modernity. The final movement, "The New Advocate," self-consciously and surreally recapitulates all the previous material in the piece, giving nothing but context-free gestures. In this way compositional designs are turned against themselves and rendered deliberately ambiguous. The last work of the disc, Third Quartet, has no programmatic content at all. Bresnick's formal clarity has itself become the narrative—the playing out of the structures is the message. This is perhaps Bresnick's final irony: the expansion of narrative scopes leads to no narrative at all.

Through this dance of structure and design—a blending of literature, historical critique, and music—there emerges a consistent melodic voice of sweetness and sadness, of almost nostalgic reminiscence. One hears it in the oscillating middle section of *B.'s Garlands*, in the simple iso-rhythms at the end of the second movement of *Wir Webern*, in the elegiac "At Jhelum" movement of the Second Quartet, and in the first movement of the Third Quartet. Are these more of Bresnick's games of opposites, pitting soulful melodies against mechanistic rigors? Or is it a way of proving that rigor can produce sweetness and that order can produce melodic beauty? Perhaps these movements are Bresnick's remembrance of things past, his tribute to the tradition that trained and inspired him. I think this music is, most importantly, Martin Bresnick's true voice, his song to himself and to his listeners, the song of his spirit, singing through the structures of his mind.

—Evan Ziporyn

String Quartet No. 2 "Bucephalus" (1983-84), commissioned by the Alexander String Quartet with support Chamber Music America and the Connecticut Commission for the Arts. String

Quartet No. 2 was written in honor György Ligeti's sixtieth birthday.

The titles of the five movements were drawn from a number of events, real or imaginary, in the lives of Alexander the Great and his warhorse Bucephalus. The concluding movement, "The New Advocate" is based on a Kafka short story. Kafka imagines Bucephalus today in the quiet lamplight of law school, "his flanks unhampered by the thighs of a rider, free and far from the clamor of battle, he reads and turns the pages of our ancient tomes." The score includes this quotation from Brecht:

Every page a victory
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
So many questions.

Wir Webern, Wir Webern (1976-78), originally composed for string orchestra, the version recorded here for string sextet was created by the composer and given its New York premier by Musical Elements under the direction of Daniel Asia in 1980.

The title *Wir Webern, Wir Webern* (We're Weaving, We're Weaving) is taken from the refrain of Heinrich Heine's poem "The Silesian Weavers." The poem was written in sympathy with a strike by German textile workers in 1844. The musicians' repeated melodic and contrapuntal patterns imagine the work of the weavers—an audible realization of the terrible beauty of repetitive labor.

B.'s Garlands (1973): Despite the density and seeming uniformity of musical texture in *B.'s Garlands*, the eight cello parts are graded in difficulty – from the virtuosic first three to the relatively simple last two.

The work is a divertimento written to celebrate the birth of my daughter Johanna. It is music for *Johannisnacht*, the German equivalent of our magical "Midsummer's Night." As in Wagner's similarly situated "Meistersinger," the Night Watchman may be heard now and again, especially following Wagner's concluding direction at the end of Act II – "Auf dem Horn, sehr lang" (On the horn, very long...).

String Quartet No. 3 (1992) was commissioned by the Alexander String Quartet with the support of a grant from the Meet the Composer/Reader's Digest Commissioning Program, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lila Wallace – Reader's Digest Fund.

In contrast to String Quartet No. 2 "Bucephalus," String Quartet No. 3 has no explicit program. The three movements, all widely different variations on the same subject, have Italian performance indications. These offer some guide to their musical character. The first, "Calm, Resolute, Tender," is a kind of lullaby and farewell to my daughter (but who is leaving?). The second movement, marked "Ferocious, Cascading," suggests a diabolical scherzo. The final movement, "Dark Thoughts, ...the stars," refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The opening passage from *The Inferno*, Canto II accompanies the score:

The day was departing, and the darkening air
Relieved the spirits of the earth
From their labors; and I, myself, alone
Prepared to undergo the struggle
Of the journey and of the pity involved,
That my memory, unerring, will retrace.
Oh muse, oh high genius, help me now...

—Martin Bresnick

Martin Bresnick (b 1946) studied composition with György Ligeti and computer music with John Chowning at Stanford University (where he received his doctorate). His compositions have been widely performed and he has received numerous awards, including the Rome Prize, a Fulbright Fellowship, NEA grants, and First Prize in the Premio Ancona, Sinfonia Musicale, and Composers Inc. competitions. He has been commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, the Fromm Foundation, Chamber Music America, and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest/Meet the Composer Commissioning Program, among other societies and ensembles. He has been a highly influential teacher at the Yale School of Music where he is currently professor of composition and coordinator of the composition department.

The Alexander String Quartet is both First Prize and Audience Prize winner of the 1985 City of Portsmouth (England) International String Quartet Competition, with a debut following in London's Wigmore Hall. Twice selected for the C. Michael Paul Residency Program under the auspices of Chamber Music America, it is also the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Connecticut Commission for the Arts, and, among others, the Institute of International Education's Laurence Korwin International Music Competition Project.

Music Elements, established in 1977, is a contemporary chamber ensemble that has commissioned and presented numerous world, New York, and American premieres. Consistently praised by audiences and critics, Musical Elements, beyond its own concert series, has performed in conjunction with the "Ars Nova" series on national television and the League of Composers/ISCM.

The Yale Cellos are an ever-changing ensemble of primarily graduate students from the studio of master teacher and cellist Aldo Parisot. They give several concerts each season on the university campus and on regional tours.

The Harrington String Quartet, since capturing the coveted Grand Prize in the prestigious Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition in 1987, has performed throughout the United States, France, and England. Heard on national radio broadcasts in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, the ensemble has collaborated in chamber music performances with violinist Kazuhide Isomura, pianist Lee Luvisi, and violist Walter Trampler. The Quartet is in-residence at the Sybil B. Harrington College of Fine Arts and Humanities at West Texas A&M University, where the members are artist-teachers of applied music. The members are also principals of the Amarillo Symphony Orchestra.

Production Notes

String Quartet No.2 and *Wir Weber, Wir Weber* produced by Martin Bresnick and Michael Friedmann and recorded at the Yale University School of Music Sprague Hall, New Haven, CT on July 25, 1985 and October 7, 1985 respectively.

B.'s Garlands produced by Martin Bresnick and Michael Friedmann and recorded at the Yale University School of Music Sprague Hall, New Haven, CT on January 16, 1994.

String Quartet No.3 produced by Martin Bresnick, Michael Friedmann, and Stephen Coxe, and recorded May 21, 1994 at West Texas A&M, Canyon, TX. Recording Engineer: Eugene Kimball.

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