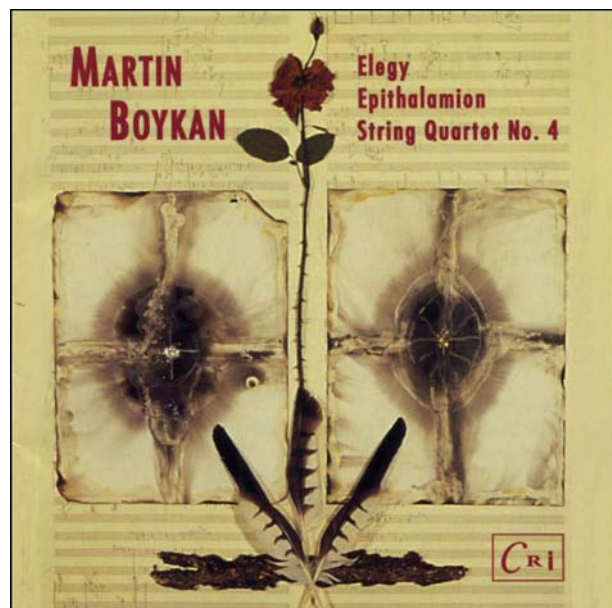


NWCR786

Martin Boykan

Elegy, String Quartet No. 4, Epithalamion



Elegy (1982) (33:19)

Part I

1. I Ist alles denn verloren (Goethe) (5:25)
2. II A se stesso (Leopardi) (5:34)
3. III Agonia (Ungaretti) (5:10)

Part II

4. IV Der Spinnerin Lied (Brentano) (1:56)
5. V The Winters are so short (Dickinson) (3:29)
6. VI Um Mitternacht (Goethe) (4:36)
7. VII A Bronze Immortal Takes Leave
of Han (Li Ho) (7:09)

Jane Bryden, soprano; The Brandeis Contemporary Chamber Players: Christopher Krueger, flute; William Wrzesien, clarinet; Nancy Cirillo, violin; Rhonda Rider, cello; James Orleans, bass; Sally Pinkas, piano; David Hoose, conductor

String Quartet No. 4 (1996) (17:49)

8. I Vigoroso, II Adagio espressivo

Lydian String Quartet: Daniel Stepner, violin; Judith Eissenberg, violin; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello

Epithalamion (1986) (11:01)

10. I Love Song (Ammons) (Prelude) (2:54)
11. II Anon., sixteenth-century poem
(Scherzo) (1:51)
12. III Epithalamion (Spenser) (Invocation) (6:17)

James Maddalena, baritone; Nancy Cirillo, violin; Virginia Crumb, harp

Total Playing Time: 62:22

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Notes

I.

Looking into Shakespeare's sonnets, Helen Vendler observes a subtle, almost paradoxical relationship between form and emotion. Her description applies to music as well as poetry:

"I take it that a Shakespearean sonnet is fundamentally structured by an evolving inner emotional dynamic, as the fictive speaker is shown to 'see more,' 'change his mind,' 'pass from description to analysis,' 'move from negative refutation to positive refutation,' and so on. There can be a surprisingly large number of such 'moves' in any one sonnet. The impression of an evolving dynamic in the speaker's mind and heart is of course created by a large 'law of form' obeyed by the words in each sonnet."

(Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*)

Vendler directs her comments at small, fixed forms and stable, verbal tropes; we might require different terms to describe the "moves" (and the ways they are stratified) in a musical composition—a sonata is (usually) not a sonnet. However, her assured formulation suggests a critical vocabulary and a complex aesthetic economy that are impressively musical. Form projects, orders and intensifies the emotional dynamic of the artwork; but, at the same time, a densely articulated emotional trajectory generates its form. Form and emotion are separate aspects of artistic structure

and experience, but they are somehow interdependent. More than that, each seems to predetermine the other, to call its complementary dimension into being.

The kind of vision Vendler describes, of an intimate interplay between artistic form and emotion—exacting, delicate, unbounded in its ramifications—is realized in extraordinarily vivid and compelling detail in the music of Martin Boykan. The opening of his String Quartet No. 4, for example, may be heard as an object lesson in the ways music may assert and organize "a surprising number of moves" in a short span. Here's a précis of its first minute, a stunningly compressed and dramatically focused sequence of expressive/structural actions, a furious dialectic of fixity and volatility: at the outset, a single, stubbornly repeated note (middle C), leads three times to harmonically and registrally disparate chords (together comprising the full pitch class collection). Then, in a kind of afterthought to the sustained, third chord, the stuttering entrances of a fourth chord dislodge the (so quickly, so briefly) established premise of rhythmic simultaneity. This in turn seems to motivate further rhythmic and contrapuntal differentiation among the parts. A number of motives come into play. The fixed middle C is itself dislodged, as the counterpoint intensifies and the motivic types multiply. However, the repeated note motive attaches to other pitches, functioning now as a dynamic element of the contrapuntal texture. The intensified action culminates as the first violin sweeps down from a newly established high point—and the

first part of the first section ends. These and a myriad of other small moves and relationships develop from the opening dialectic of fixed tone and chord, creating an impression of “an evolving dynamic” that comes from “the mind and heart.” But at the same time, the work’s pitch material obeys various “laws of form,” notably a tightly controlled principal of chromatic circulation. In this context, the initial fixed note is the focal point for rapidly reconfiguring pitch structures that will echo in various ways throughout the piece.

The spirit of late Beethoven presides over the Quartet, providing a model for the strategy of developing variations that so often affects the course of the large form. The Quartet extends, unfolding at various speeds, and through various degrees of tumult and tranquility, across two movements that are played without pause. In the broadest terms, the work moves from an agitated first movement to a more contemplative Adagio. But it is difficult to describe the large progressions of such nuanced and volatile music in a few words—music in which slow and fast music alike project a rapidly evolving emotional dynamic, and a persistently rich and vivid constellation of structural relationships that unfold in obedience with large laws.

II.

Of course, analogies between musical and poetic organization will be especially pertinent to text settings, where the “laws of form” and the “emotional dynamics” of each may come to bear on the other in intimate and exacting ways. In text settings that connect otherwise disparate poems—as Boykan’s *Elegy* and *Epithalamion* both do—the intricate interweaving of form and emotion within and between music and poetry may spread across the entire fabric of the extended work. Boykan explores this potential with subtlety, self-awareness, and—especially in the *Elegy*—with extraordinary boldness and scope. He has called the *Elegy* “a sustained meditation on a familiar theme: loss, rejection, the suffering that flows from passionate experience.” This theme yields an overarching emotional dynamic, a two-part progression from direct, almost uncontrollable experiences of despair to memorialization, self-containment, and acceptance. Correspondingly, the seven poems of the cycle divide into two parts, 3 + 4, in which the movements of the second half respond variously to those of the first, until the final movement, which stands as a peroration to the set as a whole.

These overarching emotional dynamics and their formal correlatives play out throughout the *Elegy* in many ways and on multiple structural levels. The work moves from asymmetrical forms in the first half to balanced, strophic forms in the second. The large-scale emotional dynamic also seems to control the nature and flow of cadential articulations throughout the piece. In section I, we find cadences that are truncated or otherwise thwarted by exhaustion and ambiguity. These lead to points of clarity, closure, and release, in section II, with its persistently strophic formal regularities. In the opening song, “Ist alles denn verloren” (Goethe), Boykan retains the poem’s catalogue of despair (lost hope in the spirit, in history, and in “exemplary men”), but he bluntly suppresses the last line of the passage—leaving the text syntactically incomplete and withholding its sole glimmer of hope (however ironic: “God granted me the gift to say I suffer”). Musical/emotional closure is withheld as well. The only compensation Boykan offers serves to redouble the irony: a wordless, instrumental quotation from the third act of Verdi’s *Otello*. The quotation is fleeting and elliptical—a

brief ornamental figure that invokes the culminating moments of *Otello*’s humiliation and loss, it intrudes where Goethe’s last line would be. The suppression of text at this moment and the substitution of something apparently incongruous and far more abject stunningly enacts the loss of “everything” adumbrated at the opening of the poem. But this moment has already been prepared subtly by another at least implicit loss, for the first movement is throughout a songless song, spoken rather than sung. This initial substitution of speech for song, maintained throughout the movement, itself evokes a sense of attenuated capacities; indeed the unsung pronouncement of the initial question “Ist alles denn verloren?” seems to contain its own answer.

These are powerful effects, but Boykan’s evocation of loss, like Goethe’s, is not static or unqualified. In the middle of the song, the music intensifies contrapuntally while the poetic speaker enunciates a series of compulsive, rhetorical questions, struggling for an alternative to the all-embracing despair of the poem’s opening. But the intensifying poetic-/musical interrogations lead not to culmination and closure but to Verdi quotation—and with it, the dissipation of the contrapuntal texture and its promise of progressing to a resolution.

The dissipated energy at the close of the first song erupts in the second, Leopardi’s “A se stesso.” Now the emotional dynamic virtually requires the soprano to sing, at first pensively, and then full tilt, as the questioning of the first poem gives way to a crescendo of imperatives: be still, rest still, lie quiet, despair, despise yourself: from the very low point of the first song’s conclusion, the emotional trajectory descends abruptly. But the mercurial animation of the music in the second song, like the vivid nihilism of Leopardi’s text, plays off (in what Vendler has called “intrapyschic irony”) the poem’s injunctions to quietude and stillness.

While the truncation of the first song’s energies motivates the eruptions of the second, the unleashed energies of the second movement spill directly into the third. The rage of no. 2, however, has been exhausting. The intensity abruptly dissipates, and the anger of the Leopardi setting is reduced to Ungaretti’s painful image of futile exertion, the fluttering wings of a blinded finch, represented by “skewed *ostinati*” (Boykan’s phrase) in woodwinds. The hyperactive surface of the second song gives way to an exhausted eloquence (listen, for example, for the gorgeous *melisma* on the word “mare”). But the final words of Ungaretti’s “Agonia” are spoken, recalling the first song and repeating its strategy of substitution and attenuation on a larger scale.

From this bleak destination, the calm melancholy and equilibrium of Brentano’s “Der Spinnerin Lied,” with its balanced musical/poetic strophes and unruffled piano accompaniment, provides unnerving relief. Boykan emphasizes the symmetry and formal periodicity of the poem, underscoring the sonority links of the first words of each verse (“Es sang”/“Ich sing”) with pitch class echoes (yielded by the row structure of the vocal line) in the corresponding openings of musical phrases. Tranquility and symmetry are sustained throughout. The opening of the vocal melody echoes in the piano at the close, and both verses cadence on the pitch class (F) with which the first section of the piece anxiously ended.

In moving from the first to the third movement of the second large section, the *Elegy* passes from a poignant memory of a lost song, the song of the nightingale, to the reclamation of another kind of song, a quotation from a vocal work by the composer, Seymour Shifrin. Each of the first three movements of section II explore variant facets of memory, from melancholy loss (Brentano), through a satiric,

sometimes loopy, review of escalating cataclysms in daily life, history, and myth across the seasons and ages (Dickinson), to a set of recollected experiences that comes to focus on the pure experience on commemoration itself—in a sense, all preparing the way for the Shifrin quotation (Goethe). The work's previous quotation, the intrusive, ironic allusion to *Otello* in the first song of the cycle (also a Goethe setting), seems to foreshadow this redemptive moment—in which the music of a beloved, deceased friend can be remembered, not as a source of anguish, incongruity or disruption, but as an integrated, cherished, recollection...

And as a precondition of musical closure, which concludes a large emotional/formal progression from the exploration of despair in part I through a consideration of variant aspects of memory in part II. The closing text, by the Chinese poet Li Ho, shifts away from the evolving movement of an individual mind (however represented and enacted through different poetic voices) to the evocation of an ancient scene, the theft of sacred bronze figures, seen from the perspective of one of the violated statues itself. The text setting is delicate and allusive, but hardly dispassionate: however long ago, far away, and elliptical the narrated events, the music conveys a sense of a whole story that must be emotionally assimilated. In this concluding movement, speech and song are reconciled in the vocal line, and a final, brief quotation from *Otello* appears. (It's from the "Willow Song" again in the cello, but now expansively melodic, an evocation of Desdemona's memory rather than Otello's abjection.) The conditions for cadence and closure that have been germinating throughout part II are fully articulated. The final Verdi quotation accompanies the line of text that Boykan has cited as a motto to the work as a whole: "if heaven had passions, heaven too would grow old."

By comparison to the magisterial *Elegy*, *Epithalamion* is modest and genial, less taut and ambitious in asserting relationships between music and text. Rather, *Epithalamion* delineates a simpler progression and an expansive emotional dynamic—from A.R. Ammons's ecstatic vision of a beloved (who merges visually with the landscape as night falls) to Edmund Spencer's encomium to marriage (and the wedding night) that merges prayerful diction with erotic images. The outer movements are separated by an interlude on an anonymous Elizabethan text: a brief scherzo that boastfully con-

trasts "artificial" to "natural" beauty. The unlikely ensemble of *Epithalamion* (violin, harp, baritone) was specified by the violinist, Nancy Cirillo, who commissioned the piece. Boykan deploys the combination shrewdly—enjoining the baritone to range widely in spacious *melismas* while requiring some extraordinarily fancy footwork from the harpist to permit astonishing progressions of luxuriant chromatic arpeggiations. The beautiful closing lines of *Epithalamion* ("Now none doth hinder you, that say or sing/Ne will the woods now answer, nor your echo ring") are set mimetically, but with a kind of inverted logic—that is, not with the silence described in the text, but with the echoes and answers that the text so eloquently shuns. Hearing the music in Spencer's poetry, Boykan hazards to represent an interior wedding music that has no worldly echo or response. And with this artistic leap of faith, the material and imaginary worlds (and musical/poetic forms and emotions) are once again reconciled.

—Martin Brody

Martin Boykan (b 1931) studied composition with Walter Piston, Aaron Copland and Paul Hindemith, and piano with Eduard Steuermann. He received a BA from Harvard University, 1951, and an MM from Yale University, 1953. In 1953-55 he was in Vienna on a Fulbright fellowship. Until 1970, he was active as a pianist, appearing with soloists such as Joseph Silverstein and Jan DeGaetani. At present, he is the Irving G. Fine professor at Brandeis University.

He received the Jeunesse Musicales award for his *String Quartet No. 1* in 1967, and the League ISCM award for *Elegy* in 1982. Other awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEA award, a Rockefeller grant, as well as a recording award and the Walter Hinrichsen Publication Award from the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1984 he was awarded a Senior Fulbright to Israel. He has received numerous commissions from chamber ensembles as well as commissions from the Koussevitzky Foundation and the Fromm Foundation.

Professor Boykan has been composer-in-residence at the Composer's Conference, visiting professor at Columbia University, and composer-in-residence at New York University and Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. His music is published by Mobart Music Press, and C. F. Peters, NYC.

Production Notes

String Quartet No. 4 recorded at the Wellesley College Chapel by Joel Gordon.

From CRI SD 566:

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