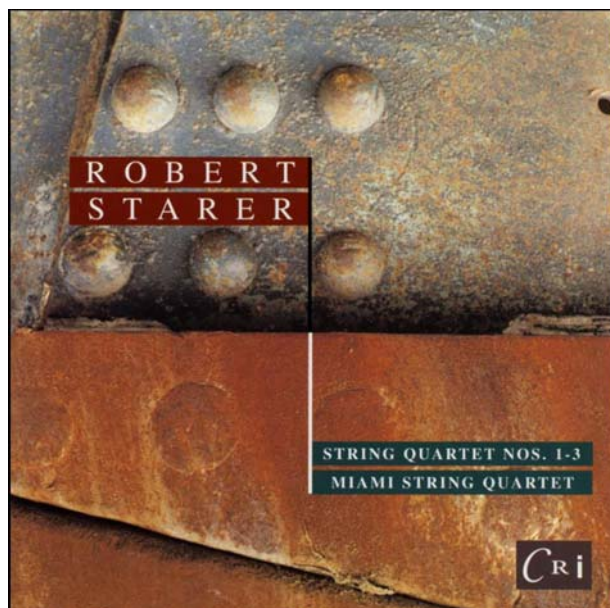


NWCR856

Robert Starer

String Quartets Nos. 1–3



- String Quartet No. 1 (1947) (15:32)
1. I. Allegro moderato (5:36)
 2. II. Andante cantabile (5:41)
 3. III. Molto allegro (4:15)

- String Quartet No. 2 (1995) (18:36)
4. I. Moderato (4:07)
 5. II. Poco presto (4:13)
 6. III. Andante (5:38)
 7. IV. Moso (4:38)
 8. String Quartet No. 3 (1996) (19:44)

Miami String Quartet: Ivan Chan, violin;
Cathy Meng Robinson, violin; Chauncey
Patterson, viola; Keith Robinson, cello

Total playing time: 53:52

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Notes

Now that we have entered the new millennium, it becomes much easier to look back on the twentieth century, and see the artificiality of many of the divisions which have driven it. The serial versus neoclassic debate, the struggles of traditionalists and experimentalists, the chasm between Uptown and Downtown—every one of these divisions, while real, nevertheless drowned out a constant hum of musical activity which didn't fit either side's agenda. Increasingly, we now hear only the echoes of these battles, the result being that another music from an entire generation and aesthetic bandwidth of composers, who never fell into easily defined postwar camps, is returning to critical awareness and appreciation. Most of these composers are fundamentally tonal in practice, have embraced certain aspects of American musical idioms, and have believed in more traditional ideals of classical craft. Some have been associated with mid-century nationalism (Copland, Thomson, Harris), others with more neoclassical ideals (Diamond, Persichetti, Schuman). Earlier on, it was easy for some to label them as "conservative" and dismiss them in light of the great radical innovations occurring almost daily. Now, it is easier to discern what was also progressive and individual in their art.

Robert Starer (*b* Vienna, 8 Jan 1924; *d* Kingston, NY, 22 April 2001) definitely inhabits this "creative middle." Beginning his studies at the State Academy of Music, Hitler's 1938 annexation of Austria sent him to Jerusalem, where he continued his studies at the Palestine Conservatoire, and then served in the British Royal Air Force during World War II. In 1947, he arrived in New York to study at Juilliard, and at Tanglewood in 1948 with Copland. Quickly becoming an American citizen, his obvious gifts led to teaching positions at Juilliard, Brooklyn College, and the Graduate Center of City University of New York; grants and honors from such institutions as the Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and American Academy of Arts and

Letters; and commissioned pieces in a diversity of media, ranging from opera, oratorio, and symphony to chamber music and art-song, with a healthy dose of dance music thrown in. His deeply literate background and temperament also resulted in one of the finest composer memoirs of recent memory, *Continuo: A Life in Music*.

Starer's music reflects his pluralistic background in several ways. First of all, his Viennese roots are evident in the elegantly phrased melodies, the formal concision, the precise counterpoint. On the other hand, while he remains true to a particular sort of Central European chromatic harmony in his practice, it always suggests strong tonal underpinnings, and never avoids rich and sweet combinations of tones. Indeed, his lyric gift imbues even his more abstract instrumental works with a tunefulness directly related to song. And even more importantly, his rhythmic sense is deeply American. The crackle of swing and syncopation is never far from the music's surface; indeed, it is often in your face. Here is music which shows a deep and natural affection for and attraction to jazz, without any awkward pandering.

In short, Starer's music, while part of that "creative middle," is certainly not "middle of the road." It blends elements that many think contradictory into a seamless whole. While its individuality may exist in slightly subtler aspects than in others' showier experiments, its character and integrity are nonetheless evident. And by providing a living example of how supposedly exhausted musical means can remain fresh and communicative, the music is very much of this time, and forward-looking.

The three Starer string quartets form an unusual set of book-ends for the composer's career to date. The String Quartet No. 1, written in 1947, remained his sole essay in the medium until 1995, when, after having heard the young Miami Quartet perform it in Woodstock, the composer was moved to write a

new work for them. This was followed the next year by the String Quartet No. 3, also for the Miami. Suddenly Starer's quartet oeuvre had tripled, a testimony to the inspirational power great performers can have over composers.

Written in Jerusalem just before Starer came to New York, the first quartet makes a stylistic transition in its three-movement course which seems to mirror the composer's trans-cultural trajectory at the time. The first movement is the most overtly "European": it contrasts march-like materials redolent of Hindemith with far more lyrical episodes whose harmonic and melodic contours suggest the Schoenberg of *Verklärte Nacht*. It also introduces a sort of musical "fingerprint" which will not only pervade this work, but the other quartets—a short descending motive made up of descending intervals of the second and third (both major and minor). Starer describes the second movement as "near Middle-Eastern" in its tone, and while there is no overt suggestion of Arabic or Jewish cantillation, it does feature a sustained lyrical outpouring above the stately tread of triadic chords. The final movement is far and away the most "American," a premonition of the jazzy culture the composer was about to enter. The darting syncopations are of course derived from jazz practice, but the thumping bass and careening fiddle lines also have the twang of bluegrass. Though Starer's harmonic roots at the time were in chromatic harmony, the piece comes to a rousing and sunny conclusion in C Major.

The String Quartet No. 2 jump-cuts us to almost fifty years later. Surprisingly, it is by far the most "classical" of the set, adhering to a four-movement framework with close correspondence to traditional formal models. The first movement is sonata-esque, pitting a slightly off-kilter fanfare theme against one far more lyrical (whose sweetness would seem almost at home in the golden age of Broadway musicals). In the second movement, a scherzo, the conflict is rhythmic in nature. The main motive is itself at cross-purposes, a repeating sequence of alternating five and four eighth notes. To push the contrast to yet another level, there is a trio section which suddenly straightens out into duple time (though with an overlay of triplets). The third movement is an andante in the character of a lullaby, its delicate and simple theme elaborated by a swooping sextuplet figure a bit like Vaughan Williams's "Lark." In the fourth movement, after an outburst of *bariolage*, the music leaps into a dance that explores every possible way 6/8 time can be twisted and bunched into different rhythmic motives—the most pervasive being a two-note syncopated "stutter." This movement, with its dramatic unisons, its fugal episodes, and its taught, terse construction, is by far the most "Beethovenian" of the piece.

The String Quartet No. 3, dedicated to Vincent Wagner, whose "Maverick" chamber music series premiered the work, dates from only a year later, but inhabits an almost completely different universe. True, the surface language remains similar, but its expressive architecture is dramatically changed. The music unfolds in a single movement (subdivided into seven sections), all dominated by an eight-note theme (and one which once again features the "fingerprint," which could be described as a pair of major thirds, bounded by minor and major seconds, first on top and bottom, then on bottom and top, respectively). In this quartet the process of transformation of this source motive takes on an importance which such formal concerns did not project in the earlier two quartets. The piece is highly "organic": it is in a state of constant development and exploration of this core idea. Starer embeds it in the cascading thirty-second note flurries of the opening, in the pizzicato bass line of the first allegro, in the construction of tutti chords which occur near the middle and end, in the sustained tones and harmonics which stop the action about two-thirds of the way through, and at the ending,

where both the bass and the top melody are derived from the source, one in original form and the other in inversion. And these are only a few examples from a work dense with meaning, permeated with this *idée fixe*.

The third quartet moves from exhilaration to tenderness to mystery to poignant resignation, all with an economy of means that makes the work feel far fuller and longer than its actual timespan. It also points to a level of mastery that can only make us hope that this is not the end of the Starer quartet cycle.

—Robert Carl

The **Miami String Quartet** has quickly established its place among the most respected young quartets in America. The Quartet has been praised in the *New York Times* as having "everything one wants in a quartet: a rich, precisely balanced sound, a broad coloristic palette, real unity of interpretive purpose, and seemingly unflagging energy." Quartet-in-residence at Florida International University, the Miami String Quartet is also currently the resident ensemble of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Chamber Music Society Two.

The Miami String Quartet has performed extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and South America. Highlights of recent seasons include performances in New York (Merkin Hall, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall), Los Angeles, Atlanta, Houston, Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle, St. Paul, Pittsburgh, San Diego, and their own series of concerts in Palm Beach and at Kent State University. In the 2000–2001 season the Quartet will participate in a national Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center tour. The Miami String Quartet is in demand at many of the country's greatest festivals. For the last several years, the Quartet has served as the resident ensemble at the Kent/Blossom Music Festival in Ohio, as well as appearing at Chamber Music Northwest, Mostly Mozart, Ravinia, La Jolla, Maverick Concerts, Music at Angel Fire, and the Pensacola and Palm Beach Festivals. The Quartet is also the resident ensemble of the Virginia Waterfront Festival.

The ensemble's interest in new music has led to many commissions and premieres. In March 2000, they gave the world premiere of Augusta Read Thomas's *Invocations*. Their 1997–98 season included the American premieres of Fred Kaufman's "Catalan" Quartet and Quartets Nos. 1, 2, and 3 by Pēteris Vasks. The Vasks performances met with enormous acclaim, and in summer 1999 the Quartet released a recording on BMG Conifer of these three quartets, also garnering huge praise. Other new music highlights include a commissioning grant from Chamber Music America for a piano quintet from Maurice Gardner, premiere performances of the quartet *Whispers of Mortality* by Bruce Adolphe, premiere of a quartet by Philip Maneval, premieres of Maurice Gardner's Quartet No. 2 and Concertino, premieres of Robert Starer's Quartets Nos. 2 and 3, and David Baker's *Summer Memories*. The Miami Quartet has also performed works with several symphony orchestras, including the American Sinfonietta, the New World Symphony, and the Miami Chamber Symphony.

In 1992 the Miami String Quartet became the first string quartet in a decade to win First Prize in the Concert Artists Guild New York Competition, and was also awarded the competition's special ITT Corporation Prize. The Miami String Quartet has won recognition in competitions throughout the world; as laureate of the 1993 Evian Competition, 1991 London String Quartet Competition, and as the 1989 Grand Prize Winner of the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition.

Production Notes

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