

ROSS LEE FINNEY:

String Quartet No. 6 in E

The Stanley Quartet of the University of Michigan

Gilbert Ross, Emil Raab, violins

Robert Courte, viola – Oliver Edel, cello

ROSS LEE FINNEY was born December 23, 1906, in Wells, Minnesota. His father, Dr. Ross L. Finney, was an author and sociologist. His brother, Theodore M. Finney, is an author and a musician. Another brother, Nat. S. Finney, is a Washington Correspondent, and Gretchen Ludke Finney, wife of the composer, is an author. Creativity runs like a thread through the entire family, and Ross Lee has added another dimension in his double capacity as Professor of Composition and Composer-In-Residence at the University of Michigan. He has been the recipient of many honors, among them the Connecticut Valley Prize for his MacLeish Songs; a Pulitzer Prize for his First String Quartet; Guggenheim Fellowships in 1938 and 1947; a Boston Symphony Award in 1955; an Academy of Arts & Letters Award in the same year; and a Rockefeller Grant in 1956. His musical education was gained at the University of Minnesota in 1924-25; at Carlton College from 1925 to 1927; with Nadia Boulanger in 1928; and with Alban Berg in 1932.

The String Quartet No. 6 in E is Finney's first voyage into 12-tone waters. It was composed in 1950 and elicited an enthusiastic response not only from the audience at large, but from Paul Henry Lang, Music Critic of the New York Herald Tribune, who heard the work at the University of Michigan. The following remarks appeared in the Tribune's Sunday music column of January 9, 1955:

“One of the most convincing examples of independent and non-conformist dodecaphonic music is a recent string quartet by Ross Lee Finney, resident composer at the University of Michigan. The other day I heard this work ably performed by the Stanley Quartet, in Ann Arbor. . . . This composer evidently believes — as so do some of our other distinguished composers who avail themselves of the tone-row technique — that it is not necessary altogether to sacrifice the past in order to advance into the future.

“Mr. Finney’s quartet is entirely based on row technique; yet it seems less constructed than felt and heard, heard melodically and harmonically. In spite of the complicated procedure, the texture of the music is light and transparent, and the work is easily grasped. The listener, not aware of the “system” feels that he is the recipient of an effective communication.

“The title says ‘Quartet No. 6 in E.’ This is a quiet and undemonstrative profession of faith, and it is good to see it come from an American composer. The work deserves to be widely known. It is true chamber music and thoroughly enjoyable, not as an experiment but as the expression of a mature, thoughtful, and independent musical mind.”

The Stanley Quartet was established in 1949 as the official Quartet-In-Residence at the University of Michigan. Since its inception, the Quartet has performed more than thirty contemporary chamber works, half of which have been premiere presentations, and a third of them by American composers. Finney’s Quartet No. 6 in E was introduced by the Stanley Quartet and has since been widely performed by the group, including a performance at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

ADOLPH WEISS:

Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Cello

Kalman Bloch, Clarinet • Abraham Weiss, Viola • Kurt Reher, Cello

ADOLPH WEISS was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and obtained most of his training in the United States. He did, however, spend an important period of study with Arnold Schoenberg at the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts and has been referred to as “Schoenberg’s first official American student in Germany.” This association has had a considerable influence on Weiss’ evolution as a composer. Indeed, over the years, he has achieved such an easy camaraderie with the 12-tone system and with serial techniques in general – in short, with the “numerology” of advanced music that his compositions, both 12-tone and non-12-tone, are created first in a purely numerical form. They are written in columns of figures on the pages of a simple, loose-leaf notebook. Then, when the works have been completed in every detail, they are transcribed upon score paper in conventional notation. It is a startling experience to

observe the composer at the piano, playing a new, untranscribed composition from an enigmatic page of small dots, lines, and numbers.

This does not mean, as one might erroneously assume, that Weiss is straitjacketed by any “logic of numbers.” On the contrary, he finds freedom and endless stimulation toward new musical ideas in a tone row, and, as his attitude toward composition is unusually fun-loving and spontaneous, his musical fantasy remains unfettered. Somehow, in his career as a composer, he has acquired an uncanny facility with numbers. He can work in them more conveniently than in conventional notation and, concomitantly, finds his thinking disencumbered from traditional habits of five-line staff writing. The music, however, is “heard” before it is written; numbers and notes are simply the graphics of sound, and Weiss employs them as such.

The Trio for Clarinet, Viola, and Cello is formed in two movements, marked, respectively, Andante and Allegro Molto. Both movements are characterized by a high degree of contrapuntal complexity, with intervallic leaps accounting for much of the melodic movement. In the Andante, after a short introductory section for the strings in 5/4 meter, the clarinet enters with a broad, lyrical theme. Subsequently, several melodies of more close-packed rhythmic nature are woven into the fabric. Note values gradually become shorter; the music more agitated and climactic. Then, shortly after a restatement of the clarinet theme (with accompaniment entirely changed) the movement draws to a quiet conclusion.

The Allegro Molto is, in character, a Scherzo. It remains in 2/4 meter throughout, with cross-accent and fast imitative interplay imparting an almost breathless quality to the music. Occasional disguised references are made to thematic material of the opening movement, while several of the rhythmic motifs have a distinctly retrospective flavor. Here, as in the Andante, the linear approach predominates.

-Notes by LESTER TRIMBLE

This recording was made possible by a grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and its parent organization, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, which awarded composition prizes to Adolph Weiss and Ross Lee Finney in 1957.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)