

**Elie Siegmeister**

STRING QUARTET NO. 2 (1960)

GALIMIR STRING QUARTET

Felix Galimir and Marvin Morgenstern, violins

Samuel Rhodes, viola

Charles McCracken, violoncello

**Ellis Kohs**

A SHORT CONCERT FOR STRING QUARTET (QUARTET NO. 2 1948)

Eudice Shapiro and Nathan Ross, violins

Sanford Schonbach, viola

Gabor Rejto, violoncello

The name of Elie Siegmeister (b. New York City, 1909) has been associated for more than twenty years with a series of works inspired by American musical folklore, including most notably the highly successful *Sing Out, Sweet Land*, the *Ozark Set* (1943) and the *Western Suite* (premiered by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony in 1945). The fact remains, however, that Siegmeister's catalog of some half-a-hundred works exhibits a variety of forms together with a depth and scope that might not be suspected by those acquainted with only these popular scores.

Siegmeister himself views his output as a whole as having three major facets, the least generally known and perhaps most important of which is that encompassing "absolute" musical works, ranging in time from the Violin Sonata No. 1 (1931), Theme and Variations for Piano (1932), *A Strange Funeral in Braddock* (1933), and the String Quartet No. 1 (1935) to the Second and Third symphonies (1950 and 1957) and the Flute Concerto and Second String Quartet, both dating from 1960.

The second major sector of Siegmeister's output includes the theater works in which both light and tragic elements are intermingled, from the 1942 "play with music" *Doodle Dandy of the U.S.A.* to the full-scale opera of 1963 on Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*.

The third and best known aspect of Siegmeister's music are the purely entertainment pieces already noted.

In discussing the relationship between his works in absolute forms and those for the theater or in folk idiom, Siegmeister makes the point that,

"They are all part of what interests me. When working with abstract forms, the problem is to explore the inner possibilities and outer limits of your ideas. When writing incidental music for a play or ballet, there is the problem of illuminating a visual or verbal idea.

“I like to feel that even in our complicated times we can look at music as direct, untrammelled communication. *Ozark Set*, *Sunday in Brooklyn*, and quite a few other pieces were written with that in mind. It is refreshing to write a symphony or a sonata and then, alternately, a theater work or choral composition.

“Then there is the question of style. I have always liked to use certain melodic inflections and rhythmic germs related to our native idiom. From listening to most of my works, it would be easy to sense what part of the world I come from. In certain other works my ideas have taken a different turn. Always there has been a dark, complex, and abstract side to my music. My *Theme and Variations* for piano, the *First String Quartet*, and *First Symphony* may not be as well known as some of my other pieces, but they are no less a part of me for all that.

“There have been times when the darker and the brighter aspects of my writing have found a common meeting ground, as in the opera on Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*. Here O’Casey’s characters led me from an earthy musical language to one of a tragic and complex quality. To work out a convincing interplay, between them within the framework of a single score was an absorbing problem.”

Of the *String Quartet No. 2* recorded here, Siegmeister tells us,

“It was written in the summer of 1960 and first performed by the artists of the present recording at a concert of my works at Hofstra University.

“In an expressive sense, the *Quartet* contains those elements of energy, lyricism, and wildness that have always been part of my music, welded into a tight organic structure. The overall formal plan involves transformation of the root ideas of the first movement during the course of the two that follow. Thus the opening unison theme is metamorphosed into the secondary viola theme of the slow movement and again into what becomes the beginning of the third movement. The interweaving of such metamorphosed material throughout the quartet can be sensed by the listener who has heard the work two or three times, but complexities of structure can be discussed in detail only with score in hand. Nevertheless these same complexities, I believe, define the impact of the work as a whole and whatever challenge it may have for the listener.”

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FROM THE EARLIEST YEARS of study with Seth Bingham at Columbia University and with Wallingford Riegger, as well as with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, Elie Siegmeister has also been active as conductor and author. He was one of the founding members of the American Composers Alliance, is presently an officer of the American Music Center, has been choral director for Broadway musicals, and in the 1940’s organized the American Ballad Singers to promote interest in American folk music that has become the rage of the high school and college generation of the 1960’s. Since 1949, Siegmeister has been a member of the music faculty at Hofstra University where he holds the post of Associate Professor and conducts the *Hofstra Symphony Orchestra*.

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Ellis B. Kohs (b. Chicago, 1916) has pursued the greater part of his musical career on the West coast, where he has been head of the Theory Department of the School of Music at the University of Southern California. His early musical training was received in San Francisco, but more advanced studies took him ever further eastward—to the University of Chicago (where he majored in composition under Carl Bricken), to the Juilliard Graduate School (where he worked under Bernard Wagenaar and Olga Samaroff Stokowski), and to Harvard (where he studied with Walter Piston, Willi Apel, and Hugo Leichtentritt). Military service intervened in 1941, but a Concerto for Orchestra was in process of composition and received its first hearing at the 1942 ISCM Festival at Berkeley.

Following the war years, Kohs embarked—during and in between academic assignments—on the task of developing his own musical language, producing a number works in variation form for keyboard instruments, among them a set of Piano Variations and a Passacaglia for Organ and Strings. “In some of these works,” observes the composer, “I attempted to come to terms with the twelve-tone system.” Out of this struggle came a pre-occupation with variation technique, “a fascinating process,” says Kohs, “both to see on paper *and* for the ear consciously to hear.” Of the series of concerto-like works that came next, such as the Chamber Concerto for Viola and Strings (1949), Kohs speaks of them as “middle of the road consolidations, in terms of harmonic and formal matters.” The First Symphony (recorded on CRI 104) was also a Product of this period as was the *Short Concert* for String Quartet recorded on the present disc. Later works from Kohs’ pen have turned to the solo vocal and choral medium. The Second Symphony (written in 1956 on a Fromm Foundation Commission) calls for chorus, whole *Lord of the Ascendent* is a two-hour soloist-chorus-orchestral epic based on the Sumerian Gilgamesh legend.

*A Short Concert for String Quartet* (String Quartet No. 2) was composed in Stockton, California in 1948 when the composer was on the faculty of the Conservatory of Music at College of the Pacific. The title, according to Mr. Kohs, is intended to suggest that the work is a concert in miniature, rather than a quartet in the usual sense.

“Of the seven movements,” notes the composer, “the opening *Sonata* is similar in form to the classical sonata and symphony first movement: a concise exposition is followed by a very extended development, truncated recapitulation, and coda. Movements II - VI are quite short, and as a central group suggest a dance suite: the *Forlane* is derived from incidental music (Act IV, sc. 2) composed for a Wesleyan University (Conn.) production of *Macbeth*; only three instruments play in the remaining movements of the dance sequence—the second violin sitting out the *Waltz*, the ’cello being omitted in the *Sarabande*, the first violin being silent throughout the *Farce*, and the viola missing out on the *Gigue*. The final movement is a sort of tone poem: the Dreams and Recollections comprise a free association of melodic fragments derived from a variety of sources, surrounded by a mirror-like frame whose four-note motive inevitably recalls B-A-C-H. If the listener fancies he perceives an additional, allegorical significance to the title, or is led to believe the whole work is written in the style of a musical autobiography, that is his affair.”

THE GALIMIR STRING QUARTET through its first-violinist-founder traces its origins to between-the-wars Vienna, when it was a family affair consisting of brother Felix and three sisters. During these years, the Quartet won a great reputation throughout in the field of modern music and made the first recording (on Polydor 78’s) of the Alban Berg *Lyrical Suite*. Felix Galimir has continued the group’s name and reputation since coming to the U.S.A. in 1938, though with varied personnel. The Quartet has recorded for a variety of labels, continuing its tradition with a roster of contemporary works, ranging on stylistic persuasion from Benjamin Britten and Elie Siegmeister to Artur Schnabel and Ben Weber.

EUDICE SHAPIRO — NATHAN ROSS — SANFORD SCHONBACH — GABOR REJTO  
though not a regular constituted string quartet, rank individually among the finest solo and chamber ensemble musicians on the West Coast. Miss Shapiro, in particular has been represented by a number of outstanding contemporary music recordings on other labels, notably of the Leon Kirchner Sonata Concertante for Epic with the composer at the piano.

*(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*