

CRI SD 289

ARNOLD ELSTON

STRING QUARTET (1961)

Pro Arte Quartet (Norman Paulu, Thomas Moore, Richard Blum, Lowell Creitz)

GORDON BINKERD

SONATA FOR CELLO AND PIANO (1952)

Roger Drinkall, cello; Richard Corbett, piano

ARNOLD ELSTON was born in 1907 in New York and died, while this recording was in preparation, on a trip to Vienna in the summer of 1971. His associates in and around the University of California in Berkeley, where he was Professor of Music from 1956, knew him as a man of generous spirit and passionate convictions. Robert Commanday, writing in the San Francisco Chronicle, said that these qualities "illuminated his personality, his music, his spoken and written thoughts ... It was the world of human spirit to which Elston gave expression, a man with unquenchable love for nature, life and mankind ..."

The bare facts of Elston's career reveal little of all this. He was born in New York, studied at Columbia and got his Ph.D. from Harvard. Between 1933 and 1935 he studied with the man who is known as father of a whole modern school of serial music, Anton Webern.

Before settling in California, he taught at the University of Oregon. Although he composed "a fair amount" of music in various media, his innate modesty prevented him from pushing for the performances it certainly deserved. This is his first commercial recording.

About his quartet, the composer wrote:

"I am clearly in the tradition of the Schoenberg school, probably closer to Schoenberg than to Webern or Berg. But I have never espoused the 12-tone technique. The early works of the Viennese school, such as Schoenberg's Five Orchestra Pieces, or Webern's Op. 6, or Op. 10, have always given me more pleasure than Webern's Symphony or Schoenberg's 3rd and 4th String Quartets.

"Still it is easy to see I am very indebted to some procedures of 12-tone music. Thus the first measure of the first movement has ten different notes, and the G# and B of the first violin in the second measure add the last two pitches of all 12. There is no row, but all pitches tend to turn over constantly. The major impulse of the music is melodic, and in order to maximize the melodic character of all voices I try to invent rhythms which avoid simultaneous beats for all voices.

"The harmony is in part an end result of the linear forces, but not entirely. I tend to avoid chords like triads, sevenths, etc. which we associate with tonality. Some chords have a thematic character, such as the harmony of the first and last measures of the adagio, which is the same.

"I wish somebody would tell *me* what my forms are, I confess I simply feel my way, from measure to measure, like a child who builds a structure with wooden blocks, which he piles up, simply trying to control their precarious balance. I feel a thread of continuity, based on similarity of gesture, or texture, or melodic-rhythmic shape, and I try to hold on to this thread as it pursues its labyrinthine way.

"The *grazioso* section, near the end of the third movement, seems to illustrate a characteristic procedure. It is coda-like, and I wanted it to resemble the adagio, (second movement) which is, of course, the heart of the quartet. The resemblance is not in thematic material, but in a similarity of line and texture. In short, I prefer analogy, likeness, rather than repetition and even contrast."

GORDON BINKERD writes:

"It is a rare pleasure to write for these two instruments. The cello is perhaps the most eloquent of all, and the piano is certainly the most commanding. They put the composer very much on his mettle.

"The sonata was written during the summer of, I believe, 1952. We were living then over on Pennsylvania Avenue in Urbana, in a house now occupied by Dee Brown. I must have been teaching summer school.

"I remember almost nothing about that summer, other than that it was extremely hot. I remember my mother, who was visiting us, lying on a bed in an upstairs room, crying out for me to 'knock out the walls.'

"I wrote the piece for Robert Swenson, cellist of the Walden String Quartet, and the score is dedicated to him. He gave it its first performance with Daniel Eller at the piano, and eloquent and commanding it was.

"I was born in the Nebraska Sand Hills in 1916. My youth was spent in that state and in South Dakota. When it was time to go to college I went to the closest one at hand, South Dakota Wesleyan. I came out of college into a world smothering in dust and seemingly dying of the Great Depression. I got a job of sorts teaching piano, organ, voice, theory, history (these I can remember) at a state junior college in Garden City, Kansas. The following year I found a similar position at Franklin College, in Franklin, Indiana. I was there for two years. During the second of those years I had the curious good fortune to win a Bank Night at the local picture show. This windfall of over \$600 was one of the two decisive events of my life (the other, of course, being the 2d World War). The money made it possible for me to go back to school and begin serious study in composition. I went to Eastman and had the great fortune to be in three classes of Bernard Rogers. And I studied piano with Max Landau, whose wisdom and perception meant more to me than I can say.

"1941 — finding a teaching job seemed out of the question, with the world now etc. etc. I went on the bum. In Chicago I found a job in one of the Hardings Restaurants and worked as an usher at Orchestra Hall. Can anything compare with Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra of those years? In 1942 I enlisted in the Navy. When I came home from the Pacific I went immediately to Harvard, and studied there until 1949 when I came to the University of Illinois. Harvard was as different from Eastman as it was from Dakota Wesleyan. Just to name names suffices: Walter Piston, Irving Fine, Otto Kinkeldey, Archibald Davison, to cite only a few.

"The bulk of my music, including the cello sonata, has been published by Boosey & Hawkes of New York City. I retired from teaching last September. I live on an acreage north-east of Urbana with my wife, and am full of beans."

Mr. Binkerd's SYMPHONY No. 2 may be heard on CRI 139, his PIANO SONATA on CRI 202, and his AD TE LEVAVI on CRI 191.

The PRO ARTE QUARTET is the lineal descendant of the famous ensemble that was one of the first to make phonograph records of the classics. By a gradual turnover of personnel, it is now made up of four outstanding American musicians. In 1940 it became the first internationally recognized quartet to take up residence at an American university (Wisconsin), where it gives regular and frequent performances. There and on its tours, the quartet makes a point of including one new work on every program.

ROGER DRINKALL has toured as soloist in 17 countries of Europe, Asia, and the U.S. A graduate of Curtis Institute, he studied new cello works with their composers, including this one. He is Artist in Residence at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga (1972).

RICHARD CORBETT specializes in chamber playing and accompanying, which he not only practices extensively but has taught at Tanglewood, the Boston University School of Fine and Applied Arts and elsewhere. As soloist he has won the Performer's Diploma at Trinity College, London.

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(Original Liner Notes from CRI LP Jacket)