

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36 (1945)

The year 1945 was pivotal in Benjamin Britten's musical career. Britten had completed his opera *Peter Grimes*, premiered in June 1945 to much critical success, and which was lauded as the most important English contribution to the operatic repertoire since Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. As a performer he went on a recital tour of the recently liberated German concentration camps with violinist Yehudi Menuhin, including two performances in July 1945 at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In addition, Britten was charged with writing two pieces for the concerts commemorating the 250th anniversary of the death of Purcell: a song cycle, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, Op. 35, and the String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36. Britten said that his experience at the concentration camps influenced the composition of the Op. 35 songs, and it is easy to conjecture that the composition of the String Quartet No. 2 was affected by those experiences as well.

Britten regarded the music of Purcell very highly: it embodied many of the aesthetic characteristics that he strived for in his own works, including, as he himself put it, qualities of "clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness." As with many composers of the mid-20th century, a form of nationalism still colored Britten's search for his own unique compositional voice. As he wanted to distance himself from the "pastoral" school of composers such as Vaughan Williams, who based their musical language on the harmonies of traditional English folk songs and works of composers from the Elizabethan era, Britten found his solution to expressing nationalism by delving into the works of Purcell for inspiration. Some of Britten's thoughts on Purcell:

Henry Purcell was the last important international figure of English music. Ironically the continent of Europe has been more aware of his greatness than this island, which produced him. But that he should be to the English public little more than a name in history books is not altogether strange, for he is the antithesis of the music which has been popular for so long in this country.

"To my mind it is the greatest advance I have yet made" is what Britten said in a letter to Mary Behrend, referring to the String Quartet No. 2. It is possible that in saying this, Britten was providing a testament to the fact that composition of the quartet provided him with a watershed moment in his incorporating aspects of Purcell's music into his own.

One already hears the influence of Purcell at the very opening of the first movement of the quartet. As the two violins and cello play the introductory theme, the viola plays a drone on an open C along with an E a tenth above that. Britten's biographer Humphrey Carpenter stated that this viola drone was "probably modeled on Purcell's "Fantasia upon One Note," throughout which a viola sustains a middle C." James M. Keller further supports Carpenter's theory, stating that Purcell's "Fantasia" was programmed on the opening concert and that Britten also chose to include the Purcell as a selection to round out the first recording of the String Quartet No. 2, with the composer himself playing the viola drone.

The first movement is in a modified sonata form and is standard in many respects although it definitely traverses the moods of "clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness" that Britten spoke of. The opening gesture of a rising tenth (and analogously its inversion as a third) is an important structural component of the movement. Along with being in sonata form, the first movement also uses theme-and-variation technique, a particular compositional device that Britten was very fond of. One of his first major compositions to gain the composer recognition was the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, and his most well-known work is the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, Op. 34, which is subtitled *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell*. The use of variation technique in a sonata form movement foreshadows what is to come in the third movement of the quartet. Different expressions of the tenth/third gesture

(including a section utilizing harmonics that eerily sounds like distant air-raid sirens) demarcate the different variations where Britten also plays with the expression of different aspects of thematic material from the opening. The movement comes to a grand climax when the different themes of the opening are played simultaneously by the upper three voices over an arpeggiated figure in the cello, and the movement ends in a peaceful wash of C-major harmony to match the mood of where it began.

The second movement is a brilliant scherzo that makes reference to the musical language of Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer whom Britten greatly admired and who would later become his close friend. The movement is thematically linked to the first through the use of the arpeggiated figure in the strings. The use of canonic entrances adds the Purcellian flavor to this movement, and Britten's experimentation with different expressions of tertian harmony add a harmonic flavor to the movement that is a distinct hallmark of Britten's musical language; as with the other movements of this quartet, many sonorities that Britten explored in *Peter Grimes* make their way into this quartet as well.

Britten's usage of the "olde English" spelling word "Chacony" (referring to the French chaconne), and then using it as the title of the third movement of the quartet, is the most overt reference to Purcell. Purcell wrote a well-known Chacony in G minor that Britten must have been familiar with when he composed this quartet: he arranged the piece for modern string orchestra in 1955. The chaconne was a commonly used instrumental form in the Baroque, is usually in a triple-meter, and involves a set of variations on the opening statement, usually featuring a similar harmonic profile throughout the variations. The Ciaconna movement from Bach's Partita in D minor for solo violin BWV 1004 is one of the most famous examples of this movement type.

Britten wrote in the program notes he provided for the premiere that "[t]he sections [of the Chacony] may be said to review the theme from (a) harmonic, (b) rhythmic, (c) melodic, and (d) formal aspects." The first three sections each end with a solo cadenza; knowing this provides the listener with points of orientation in this massive movement. The coda following fourth section is, according to James. M. Keller, "punctuated by twenty-one explosions of a C-major chord, surely corresponding to the 21 variations of the chaconne theme." Listening to this movement is akin to the experience of walking through a massive cathedral. Sections of many old cathedrals express subtly different variations on architectural styles due to the fact that it took such a long time to build them. As the listener proceeds through the different variations of the Chacony one is struck by the myriad ways Britten transforms the theme, and then at the end one turns around in the cathedral at the point where he started and looks back to take in the magnificence of the entire structure and how all the individual variations combine to create an aesthetic and spiritual experience like no other.

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