

George Tsontakis: String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4
New World 80414-2

In the program note to his Third String Quartet, George Tsontakis acknowledges the great contrasts between his Second Quartet (1983) and the Third, which followed two years later. While the Second is a “severely introverted and intense semitonal (atonal) work, submerged in the seemingly inescapable malaise of our time,” the Third—which he calls “Coraggio” (courage)—“offers a certain exuberance and brightness, an optimism that might be based on our blindness—a momentary lapse into forgetfulness—to what surrounds us, or else perhaps on the tenacious human spirit we have inherited, where even in the worst of times there is a taking of heart and welling up of courage.”

I don't think it is too farfetched to suggest that in composing his Third Quartet Tsontakis was stating, in purely musical terms, a credo which arose from a hard-won conviction that modernism and modernity had to be broken with, set aside by an act of will. What does it matter where the strength to do this comes from? Sometimes it arrives through an overwhelming sense of desperation—and suddenly, one day, the crisis is over; the resolution presents itself.

When Tsontakis produced his Fourth Quartet in 1988, the courage to be himself stood undiminished. What he says about his Third—that in accepting “inheritance” (that is, tradition) as an important “factor in the tonal and gestural makeup of the work,” he acknowledges freely his “reliance on the stability of diatonically triadic harmonies” and his debt “gesturally...to the work of the late classical masters”—applies with equal force to his Fourth Quartet.

The reflective soul-searching that dominates the Third is constantly interrupted by a release of great physical energy, with an infectious metric bounce and rhythmic élan, which then dissolves and melts back into brooding introspection. This occurs also in the Fourth, although here Tsontakis is not ashamed to be heard praying aloud: The Fourth begins with the simple purity of a traditional Russian hymn. The text of the hymn (Tsontakis uses the first line, “Beneath Thy Tenderness of Heart,” as the title of the work) asks the Virgin Mother of God to “deliver us from perils.” One does not need to know the text, however, to understand the attitude expressed in the music; its genuineness of heart speaks for itself. What was Mozart praying “for” or “to” in the penetratingly beautiful slow movements of his string quintets in C major, D major, and G minor? Or Beethoven, in the *Adagio* of his violin concerto, the *Cavatina* of his Opus 130? The prayer of art, certainly of music, is totally unlike that of religion: it need not be “to” or “for” anything; it need only be an act of purity of spirit.

When Tsontakis releases himself from atonality and turns to tonal thinking in the Third Quartet, nowhere in the score does he write specific key signatures, although there are areas where he is working, for example, in B flat major or D flat major, and so on. In the period of time between the writing of these two quartets, he seems to have given considerable thought to the matter of key signatures. He identifies the Fourth's Part I with a B flat key signature, only to cancel the E flat for Part II, which places him in F; then he cancels the B flat for Part III, which becomes, as far as tonal thinking goes, somewhat ambiguous: veils of chromatic mists cloak the music until the work ends—very affectingly—in a kind of tonal no-man's- land.

This play between tonal and atonal becomes the means by which Tsontakis displays one of his most potent and dramatically effective ideas, in part three of the Fourth Quartet. The recurring refrain, a grand *ritornello*, seems to be carved out of sounding granite. It is fiercely rugged, with almost all the strings (the viola excepted most of the time) playing double stops in jagged rhythms, starting with a *con tutta forza* major chord; it then grows more and more dissonant and desperate with each harmonic change as the passage approaches its close. The despairing continuation following on the joyful opening major chord takes one close to heartbreak. It reminds us that Tsontakis is unable to forget what it is he took up the courage to fight against and why he finds it necessary to pray.

The great physical energy of these quartets is an important part of, and is intensely related to, Tsontakis's gifts as a composer; he has the "luck" of having concrete musical ideas that the ear can perceive and the mind hold in memory. These ideas tend to be expressed in concentrated, densely packed, nodule-like motives that the composer treats obsessively, and which, as they spread out in time and spin in tight figurational, centripetal orbits, create structure and gesture. Tsontakis has a unique way of suspending high register, slowly evolving chromatic melodic lines over rapidly whirling diatonic figures. This personal use of the age-old combination of slow-against-fast is one of the special delights of these quartets.

In a metaphoric sense, it can be said of Tsontakis's ideas that they are like a form of musical DNA, genetic material that we know in the biological sense as the species—specific generators of all forms of living organic stuff—ourselves included. This describes the vital way in which Tsontakis has reconnected with the past. When this intuitive way of hearing music was abandoned for more "sophisticated" possibilities (as it has been since the middle of this century), "DNA deficiency" set in, and a general amorphousness took over. In restoring clarity, Tsontakis's music is both refreshing and exhilarating. —*George Rochberg*

Composer George Rochberg's writings on music can be found in *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth-century Music*, University of Michigan Press.

GEORGE TSONTAKIS, born October 24, 1951 in Astoria, New York, has composed four quartets to date. Quartet No. 3 (*Coraggio*) was completed in 1986, and was commissioned by an NEA consortium made up of the Alard, Blair, and Colorado String Quartets. Quartet No. 4 (*Beneath Thy Tenderness of Heart*) was completed in 1988. The American String Quartet commissioned and premiered the work after receiving a *Chamber Music America* Commissioning Grant.

THE AMERICAN STRING QUARTET, one of today's foremost chamber ensembles, has received critical acclaim for its performances throughout the world. The Quartet has appeared in virtually all major American and European cities, performing a wide repertoire, which includes the complete quartets of Beethoven, Bartok, Schoenberg, and Schubert. The ASQ made its New York City debut in 1974 and won the Naumburg Award and the Coleman competition that same season. The first ensemble to receive a National Arts Endowment grant, the ASQ serves as quartet-in-residence at the Manhattan School of Music, the Taos School and Chamber Music Festival, and the Aspen Festival.

They appear frequently at the Blossom Festival and Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival. The group has been the subject of several television specials and has recorded for Nonesuch, Musical Heritage, RCA and CRI.

Selected Bibliography

Libbey, Theodor W., Jr. "Chorus to Sing Crete's Love Epic." *The New York Times*, May 14, 1982.

Lipman, Samuel. "American Quartet Music, Old and New." *The New Criterion*, March 1989.

Also Available by George Tsontakis

Galway Kinnell Songs. Kimball Wheeler, mezzo-soprano; Samuel Sanders, piano; Frank Almond, Benny Kim, violins; Lawrence Dutton, viola, André Emelianoff, cello. Opus One 137.

Produced, engineered, and edited by Judith Sherman.

Recorded at SUNY Purchase on May 6, 7, and 9, 1991

Both works published by Theodore Presser Co.

Cover art: Tamara Carlisle. *Necessary Protection* (1990). Ink and egg tempera on lead, 12" x 8". Collection of Danae Wilson.

Cover design: Bob Defrin

This recording was made possible with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Chamber Music America, and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust.

George Tsontakis

Quartet No. 4:

Beneath Thy Tenderness of Heart

1. Part One: Introduction (14:36)

Chorale and Meditations

2. Part Two: Scherzo (4:16)

3. Part Three: Postlude (10:54)

The Madonna Weeps

(There is no pause between Part One and Part Two)

Quartet No. 3: *Coraggio*

4. I Largo (8:28)

5. II Misterioso (6:46)

6. III Vivace (8:06)

The American String Quartet

Peter Winograd and Laurie Carney, violins
Daniel Avshalomov, viola
David Geber, cello

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