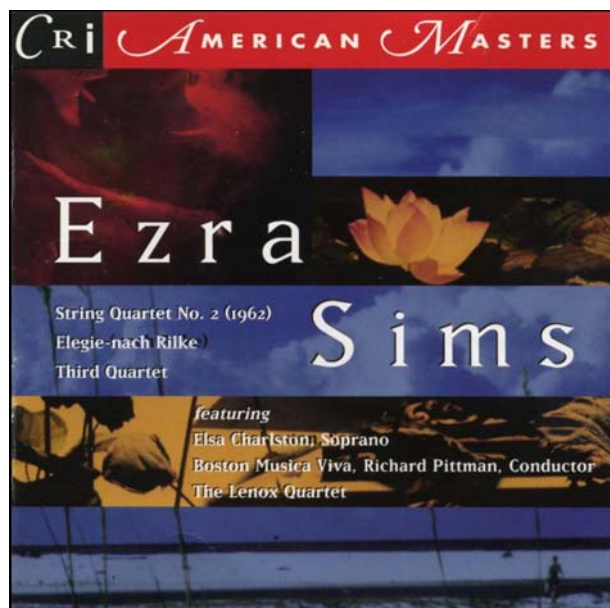


NWCR784

Ezra Sims



String Quartet No. 2 (1962) for flute, clarinet,
violin, viola and violoncello (1974) (30:13)

1. I Fluent and always placid (8:19)
2. II Calmly moving (11:30)
3. III Cheerfully fast (3:54)

4. IV The same (2:35)
5. V Quick and lightfooted (3:55)

Boston Musica Viva: Fenwick Smith, flute;
William Wrzesien, clarinet; Nancy Cirillo,
violin; Aaron Picht, viola; Bruce Coppock,
cello; Richard Pittman, conductor

6. *Elegie—nach Rilke* (1976) (13:45)

Elsa Charlston, soprano; Boston Musica Viva:
Fenwick Smith, flute; William Wrzesien, clarinet;
Mary Hess, violin; Aaron Picht, viola; Bruce
Coppock, cello; Richard Pittman, conductor

Third Quartet (1962) (25:06)

7. I Rushing (4:22)
8. II Quite slow—still and intense (6:49)
9. II Fast and furious (2:52)
10. IV Slow but moving (8:28)
11. V Calm, fluent and graceful (2:34)

The Lenox Quartet: Peter Marsh, violin;
Theodora Mantz, violin; Paul Hersh, viola;
Donald McCall, cello

Total playing time: 69:21

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Notes

How can I talk about twenty to thirty-five year-old pieces? My very molecules have replaced themselves three or four times since they were written. Someone else wrote them—I certainly couldn't now.

Third Quartet was the culmination of a crucial but transitional stage; String Quartet No. 2 (1962) was the real inauguration of a lasting one that I'm still exploring and expanding.

When I wrote Third Quartet, I was still modest enough to think you should do what your elders had always told you to do. So when I came to have to use intervals smaller than the half-step, they—with the exception of Partch, whose sliding triads and pentatonicism were of no use to me—seemed to prescribe quarter-tones.

Quarter-tones were from the beginning a help, but not the whole help. Of the six pieces I wrote using them, the first I lost (probably a good thing); the second I suppressed; the next three (two quartets that can be made into an octet) turned out to be O.K., but were more training than accomplishment. By the time I'd finished my last quarter-tone piece, Third Quartet, I'd come to realize there was a much richer and more natural world out there that my ear was begging to be allowed to explore.

The trouble was that there was no one I could get to play the results. So after writing a string octet that still awaits its premiere, and a light-hearted collage setting of Edward Gorey texts which did at last get several performances, I lay fallow and made tape pieces for dancers.

Finally, in 1970, Bert Lucarelli got interested and agreed to play a piece for oboe and string trio on one of his free-form recitals at Alice Tully Hall. That same year, Steve Smoliar made the computer at MIT's AI Lab play a seventy-two note tempered octave and put it at my disposal, and I was off again. Actually Bert could never get any of the New York string players to risk their necks playing the piece, so that didn't come off. But Richard Pittman agreed to accept a piece which turned out to be String Quartet No. 2 (1962) for Boston Musica Viva, whose members played it as if it were mere music. Then a bunch of excellent and adventurous younger performers turned up in Boston (mostly around New England Conservatory) to work with—and my doom was sealed.

That's the view from here. Since it would seem sensible to let the people who wrote the pieces talk about them, what follows are the original notes of the old LPs.

—E.S., *Cambridge, September 1997*

From 1978:

In 1960, I gave in and wrote my first microtonal piece—with considerable reluctance, but finally convinced that if I didn't, my ear would allow me to write nothing else. Now, after slogging (without, I trust, altogether despicable results along the way) through various misconceptions engendered by Received Ideas—quarter-tones, overuse of the total microtonal chromatic, and the like—I seem finally to have identified and made transcribable what my ear was after all along: a set of pitches ordered in an asymmetrical scale of eighteen (or nineteen) notes, some of them acoustically more important than others, transposable through a chromatic of

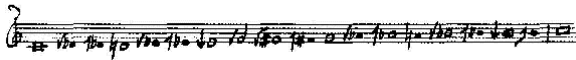
seventy-two pitches in the octave. It's—for me, at least—a nice thing, affording me, finally, a tonal technique directly connected with the structure of tonal music (one of its happiest aspects, I find—aside from the comfort of conceptual congruence—is its restoration of dissonance as a structural and affective resource), and facilitating, as a good grammar must, the formulation of new arguments.

Which pleases me a lot. No reformer, nor a revolutionary, I can't help remembering that every new thing permanently to enter Western music from at least 1000 to 1900 A.D. had retained, embedded somehow, the older things preceding it.

The notation is shown ascending through twelfth-tone inflections, the enharmonic quarter-tone bracketed in the middle.



The scale is:



Those familiar with the overtone series will notice how closely the notes with open heads approximate the eighth through sixteenth harmonics, with the twenty-first inserted; any musician will, I suspect, recognize in the black note-heads the exaggerated tendency-tones we're all likely to perform anyway; the observant will hear in its two minor thirds, the semi-major sixth, the sixth-tone, low minor seventh, the habits of much naive performance—blues singers come immediately to mind—of western music, and of the most sophisticated of non-Western. None of this, I'm sure, is accidental, and it seems to suggest there might be indeed some acoustical validity to my intuition. I like to think so, anyway.

This is very precise notation and would seem more precise than one might be thought licensed to demand of performers, approaching, as the smallest inflections do (and in the extreme registers exceeding, as do the semitones of twelve-note temperament), the limen of discrimination. And they're not played, of course, with utter accuracy. Neither are Mozart's. But players do better than they're always ready to admit. The ear judges much more nicely than we have words convenient to describe, and can place (when permitted by the manufacture of the instruments) these pitches with a very pretty accuracy—particularly when habituated to them as parts of a structure, a scale, instead of as isolated inflections. The notes sound very natural, and are indeed what many people usually perform, under the impression that they're playing semi-tones, tempered thirds, and the like. In fact, I often have trouble getting the smallest intervals played large enough.

Certain players in Boston Musica asked me, anyhow, to grant them public quittance for any deficiencies of pitch in their performances. I'm only too glad to do so. With the instruments we have today, I should be the more surprised if they were to play all the notes exactly as written—in my music or anyone else's. But the performances here represent very real avatars of the pieces, perfectly valid phenomena of the ideal *Elegie* and String Quartet No. 2 (1962) laid up in heaven. I cannot thank the players enough for their work and its results.

Some points, partly technical, about the two pieces:

String Quartet No.2 (1962): In the entry under my name in the last supplement to *Baker's Biographical Dictionary*, Nicolas Slonimsky created for me a non-existent work: "String Quartet No. 2 (1962)." My second string quartet was called 5

Sonate and was written in 1960. So, when it came time to write a piece for Boston Musica Viva, it seemed a pleasant idea to write one that would remove the error. After all, a name isn't necessarily a description, and just as the White Knight's song was "A-sitting On A Gate," but was called "Ways and Means," while its name was "The Aged Aged Man," but was called "Haddock's Eyes," just so could my piece be a quintet for winds and strings written in 1974, but be called "String Quartet No. 2 (1962)." The dedication is to Mr. Slonimsky, "that he (or rather *Baker's*) may be now less in error." I'm glad to say the idea amused him.

As I started working on it—that period of scribbling meditation that brings the process of the piece up into useable consciousness—it became apparent that the title wasn't only a joke. The major generative idea was obviously going to be the ratio 5:4—time-spans related as the series...7.8:6.25:5:4:3.2:..., metrical modulation by 5:4 and 4:5 (at some points there are three or four different tempi, all so related, going at once), tonal relations emphasizing the major third, all sorts of applications of the relation. And the statement, the affective structure, is indeed supported by a framework so characterized.

String Quartet No. 2 (1962) is in five movements with pauses after the first and third. The movements are marked Fluid; Calmly moving; Cheerful, fast; Still—enduring; and Quick and lightfooted. This recording of String Quartet No. 2 (1962) was made in a studio, not in live performance.

Elegie—nach Rilke is a setting of parts of the tenth elegy from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. It was commissioned by the Goethe Institute for Boston Musica Viva, and is dedicated to the memory of my friend, colleague, and collaborator, Lois Ginandes, who died of cancer in 1975.

What one means to do in such a piece, of course, is to discover a music that, while having its own expressive form, will still stand transparent before the words, allowing them their statement, yet melding with them to make, simultaneously and somehow separately, yet a third, complex unity, more richly expressive than either alone: something that will not too inadequately eulogize, not too feebly testify to, my love of Lois in her life, my loss in her death, my awe at the beauty of her passing.

As for technical matters: its melodic material is informed, and its tonal structure governed, by the implications of the fact that my scale affords two augmented fourths, of different sizes, for each of its pitches. It avoids sounding the perfect fifth (except when buried, twice, in a chord built up of those augmented fourths) until the entrance into the last section. Its word setting ranges over a continuum of abstraction, from barely abstracted speech, spoken on precisely notated pitches, through the full abstraction of song, to pure cantillation.

At the time of the recording, Elsa Charlston was still suffering the results of an injury and was unable to sing the high last section. It is sung here by Mary Hess.

From 1967:

Third Quartet (1962) was begun in Roxbury, Massachusetts, continued in New York and San Francisco and finished in Tokyo. It is dedicated to the Lenox Quartet, which gave it its first performance in Carnegie Recital Hall in 1965.

Third Quartet is my sixth work using micro-intervals and my last to use quarter-tones. The more I worked with quarter-tones the more I realized that they provided rather too-inflexible divisions of the octave. Now I'm calling for quarter- and sixth-tones mixed.

It was a curiously satisfying piece to write. It's a commonplace to describe sections of a piece as having written themselves when work was going at its best. But the whole of the quartet seemed something granted me rather than something I'd invented or uncovered. My role seemed essentially that of amanuensis: to keep my mind open, follow it where it wanted to go, and record its trip.

When it was finished, I saw that what had gone onto the page was a pretty conclusive survey, summing up, and dismissal, of what I'd been doing up till then.

Ezra Sims was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1928. He has received various awards—Guggenheim Fellowship, Koussevitzky commission, American Academy of Arts & Letters Award, etc.—and is known for his microtonal music, which he has written almost exclusively since 1960. He is co-founder of Dinosaur-Annex New Music Ensemble. He has lectured on his music in the U.S. and abroad, most notably at

the Hamburger Musikgespräch, 1994; the second Naturton Symposium in Heidelberg, in 1992; and the third and fourth Symposia on Microtones and Ekmelic Music at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst “Mozarteum,” Salzburg, in 1989 & 1991, in the second of which a program devoted mainly to his compositions was performed by Dinosaur Annex. He was in 1992–93 guest lecturer in the Richter Herf Institut für Musikalische Grundlagenforschung in the Mozarteum. In 1994, he was invited by the Stichting Huyghens-Fokker to present a concert of his music at the Icebreaker, Amsterdam. His *If I Told Him* was performed in the 1997 Tage für Neue Musik of the Akademie für Musik, Darmstadt. He has published articles on his technique in *Computer Music Journal* (v. 12, #4, 1988), *Mikrotöne III & IV* (Helbling, Innsbruck, 1990; FKM, Munich, 1993), *Perspectives of New Music* (v. 29, #1, 1991), and *Ex Tempore* (1992).

Production Notes

Digitally remastered by Joseph R. Dalton and Robert Wolff, engineer at Sony Music Studios, NYC.

CRI *American Masters*

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton

From CRI SD 377

String Quartet No. 2 (1962): Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded by Peter K. Storkerson, October 14 and 21, 1977. *Elegie*:

Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded by Roger Rhodes, May 27, 1977. Original recording was partially funded by grants from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc., Toby Armour and Margaret Lee Crofts.

From CRI SD 223

Third Quartet: Original recording made possible by a grant from The Samuel C. Endicott Fund.

This compact disc reissue was made possible through the generous support of the Aaron Copland Fund for Music.