

The Composer

Robert Erickson was born March 7, 1917, in an America which hardly still exists. “[A] little, no-place town in Northern Michigan,” as he recalled later, “where what we played was band music and Handel’s *Messiah*. I was an outsider right from the beginning.”

His family was Swedish-American. After his mother died in the 1918 influenza epidemic he was cared for by aunts and uncles until his father’s remarriage in 1921. Most of the extended family were amateur musicians, playing violin and piano and singing as one did in those days, for social entertainment. His childhood was filled with amateur music, and with the sounds of nature: birdcalls and beavertail slaps; the wind on Lake Superior; the tumbling streams leading to the lake—and, when suddenly Nature fell silent, the sound of the stillness, inviting the mind’s ear to recall and discriminate and discover resonance and reverberation.

Marquette, on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, was a town of 15,000 inhabitants in those days, and its musical activity was not sophisticated. It was active enough, though. There were touring soloists, vaudeville performers, and a town orchestra of fifteen or twenty supplying music for the silent movies. The Lutheran church choir sang chorales from Bach cantatas, and *Messiah* every year; and in the summers the town band gave weekly concerts of marches, novelties, and now and then something “symphonic” by Cesar Franck, or Verdi, or Tchaikovsky, arranged of course for the instruments that were available.

After high school Erickson settled in Chicago, the nearest city that could offer the harmony instruction he craved by then; and there he continued the voracious library reading he’d already been doing in Marquette; and he began participating in intellectual and artistic meetings at a neighborhood settlement house, where small groups devoted to music, dance, drama, books, and art—and politics, no doubt—met for conversation and, on Fridays, for dinner and a lecture by an invited speaker. In these discussions he heard firsthand reports of modern European concert music until then known only from occasional reports in books. He met with friends a year or two older, George Perle and Ben Weber—later significant composers themselves—to study the music and ideas of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg.

1938 was a pivotal year: Erickson celebrated his twenty-first birthday, met the Austrian composer Ernst Krenek who gave a lecture in Chicago’s School of Design, and met the ceramist Lenore Alt, whose stoneware mugs he had used as percussion instruments in music for a dance concert at Park House. In 1940 they settled down on the edge of a small lakeshore town in Michigan, hoping to support themselves making pottery. Erickson took summer classes in composition; joined his wife at the potter’s wheel; ultimately took a job in an electroplating shop. Throughout, he continued educating himself and, always, composing.

The Ericksons gave up this attempted idyll in the fall of 1942, moving to St. Paul, Minnesota, where Krenek, a refugee from Vienna, had joined the faculty at Hamline University. But as it interrupted the century, World War II interrupted the young composer’s education. In September 1943, he was drafted into the army, 26 years old. Poor eyesight kept him from action on the front, and for nearly a year he remained close to home, working in the band and at desk jobs in personnel offices. He learned about organizations, how they succeeded or failed, and how to work within them while still making time for composing. The army taught him, in short, how to take advantage of American bureaucratic jobs, supporting himself and his wife while still leaving time for study, research, and composition.

Discharged from the army in March 1946, just 29 years old, he immediately returned to student life at Hamline University, quickly completing his Master's degree and landing a job the following year teaching at St. Catherine's College, still in St. Paul. He stayed there until 1951, composing his first mature pieces, partly inspired by private seminars he attended in composition during his summer vacations.

In 1951 he won a fellowship from the Ford Foundation, allowing a stay in New York City while he wrote his first book *The Structure of Music: A Listener's Guide*. The book successfully finished the following summer, the couple returned to St. Paul for a final year. But summertime visits had attracted them to the San Francisco Bay Area, and by October 1953 they were staying there with friends and looking for work. After a year in temporary teaching positions at San Francisco State College, Erickson moved to Berkeley, where he became music director at the noncommercial radio station KPFA. Here his experience, as he recalled later, "was intensely sociological and political—the politics of small groups," and it left him no time to compose. After only a year he resigned, meanwhile joining the board of directors where he'd stay another eight years.

In 1954 he returned to teaching, at San Francisco State, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and for a while at the University of California in Berkeley. Finally, in 1957, he joined the full-time faculty at the Conservatory, where he headed the composition department until 1966. Only the prospect of partnering in the building of a brand-new music department, on whatever lines he and his Hamline friend Wilbur Ogdon might persuade an indulgent chancellor to allow, finally seduced him south to the University of California at San Diego; and there he continued teaching, counseling, and shaping the department until his retirement, at seventy, in 1987.

By then Erickson was already confined to a wheelchair, sadly crippled by polymyositis. He lived in increasing discomfort another ten years, much of the time unable to leave his bed, unable even to compose in his last seven years. He died in April 1997, eighty years old. Lenore followed, three years later. They left no descendants.

The Quartets

An aspiring composer faces a number of challenges, none perhaps more daunting than the string quartet. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms: the history of instrumental music follows this great cordillera of quartets, even cycles of quartets. And through the first half of the last century Erickson, like any composer, watched the formation of new ranges discovered by Ives, Schoenberg, Bartók, with individual peaks no less significant for their isolation: Debussy, Ravel, Alban Berg.

Berg's *Lyric Suite*, an idiosyncratic twelve-tone work in six movements with a "secret program" discovered years later by Erickson's Chicago colleague George Perle, made a particular impression on the young composer. It was the only "modern" European chamber music available on recordings to the youths at Park House, who listened to it carefully, marking up their scores, tracing out its counterpoint.

Counterpoint: because the string quartet had evolved, through Beethoven's late quartets and the works they inspired, into a conversational medium *par excellence*, a musical genre in which all sounds are exposed, the four voices are potentially equal, snippets of musical material can be stated, tossed from one voice to another, modified, turned upside-down or inside-out or

backward, stretched or compressed, modulated according to the “personalities” of the various instruments, or perhaps resolved, stated in unison.

It’s difficult to resist hearing these quartets as metaphors of social, even political, discussion. Not that their composers mean them as political statements, of course; not even that the musical material in these scores has any referential “meaning.” But at mid-century, when social and political issues were in the air and old forms were being discussed in terms of their relevance to modern times, the technical motivic and contrapuntal content of music—and particularly of the string quartet—was a constant preoccupation, both in discussions among young composers and in their solitary work at their desks.

It is in this context that Robert Erickson, then 32 years old, approached his **String Quartet No. 1**. He apparently began sketches with the second movement, while camping in Yosemite in the summer of 1948: it was completed the following February in St. Paul. He completed the first movement there in August 1949; the finale by the end of January 1950.

As a whole, the First Quartet is rather a conventional structure, however quirky (and difficult to play!) its rhythmic expressions. The first movement presents a familiar development form with two contrasting themes, the second slower (and both occasionally hinting at late Beethoven quartet subjects). The second movement is in three-part form, opening with a fugue-like section bringing the instruments in one at a time, working the slow subject into complex overlapping lines. Rather ingeniously and playfully, the finale combines the methods of the previous two movements, using quick motives similar to those in the opening movement but arranged in counterpoint similar to the second movement.

The First Quartet was performed in St. Paul in 1951, to a good review by John Harvey in the *Pioneer Press*. There was apparently a performance in New York, probably while the Ericksons were living there; it too was well reviewed, by the composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks, in the New York *Herald Tribune*. Erickson seems to have lost interest in the quartet, though, perhaps feeling its contrapuntal technique falsely constrained him. There were few further public performances, and this is its first commercial recording.

In the next six years Erickson seemed still to be looking for his mature “style,” completing only four works, all in 1953. Then, nearly forty years old, he composed the **String Quartet No. 2**. The inactivity was in part due to the distractions of his book, the year in New York, resettling to San Francisco, long working hours teaching in temporary assignments and, finally, the year at KPFA. But if no music was written between 1953 and 1956, something had been taking place in the composer’s mind. The Second Quartet is miles away from the First. From the very opening, even a casual listener will be struck by its greater openness, the ease and extent of its spatial dimension, the huge range of loudness, tone color, pace, texture. Where the conversations of the First Quartet had been contrapuntal, directed, like rational and logical disputations proceeding toward a logical outcome, those of the Second Quartet are fanciful, exploratory, playful, and not so rule-bound.

And it is *bigger*, nearly half again longer; and it is written in a single movement—and rarely is the word “movement” so apt. The music unfolds like an amble in a pleasure garden whose structure seems clear enough at the entrance but changes during the walk, opening into new areas, offering changing perspectives. At its central point, a lyrical section slows almost to immobility: Erickson writes three long measures of silence here, then changes to a fast tempo and adds another

measure, and we are in what some analysts have considered a final movement more or less restating the first, as if we were taking another route through the landscape, with familiar companions, in unchanged conditions, encountering not new impressions but new ways of contemplating already observed events.

Commissioned by the California Quartet, the Second Quartet was written for one of the special programs opening the new concert hall at the University of California in Berkeley. It was premiered along with new works by a number of prominent composers of the day. Erickson composed it carefully, according to procedures the academics would recognize and appreciate but to an effect which—with the advantage of hindsight—looks nearly 30 years into the future, all the way to his remarkable final compositions for string quartet.

Solstice, the first of these, was commissioned by Betty Freeman for the Sequoia String Quartet, who gave its premiere in March of 1985. Erickson worked quickly, “between October, 1984, and January, 1985, mostly during the last part of December and the first weeks of January when the days are trying to decide whether to get shorter or longer,” as he states in a note at the head of the score. “The winter solstice has always been important to me, but *Solstice* is not program music. There is no scenario, no plot, no image, only ears and sensibility.”

Like the Second Quartet, and like *Corfu* which followed it very quickly, *Solstice* is performed without a break, in a single movement. Erickson notes that it is “a continuous single entity, with three main divisions, blurred here and there by steep accelerandi and ritardandi. Whatever its form may be felt to be, it is not something from history, but something formed.”

Like Erickson’s orchestral music of the preceding few years, including *East of the Beach* and *Auroras*, *Solstice* is characterized by slow-moving blocks of massed sound; by drones; by hypnotic rhythms. Long-held or rhythmically energized single pitches recede from or prevail over filigrees of sound winding around them. Remarkably, the music merges into consonant, open, *acoustical* chords built on the simplest material. Perhaps the best illustration is the remarkable passage about ten minutes in, when the violins play extremely quietly, in octaves, on their fingerboards, over a very middle C held very long—forty seconds!—by viola and cello. Then follow three minutes given to, first, a long, slow viola solo over held Cs, and then virtual stasis on that same pitch. And then—as in the Second Quartet—there are a couple of measures of no notated sounds at all, inviting in whatever sound may be in your environment. (John Cage’s 4’ 33” is not far away.)

Corfu is another single-movement work “with three divisions,” as the composer noted, again commissioned by Betty Freeman, this time for the Kronos Quartet. The request came immediately after the premiere of *Solstice*, but Erickson was unable to begin the score until the following February. As had long been his method, Erickson composed the piece straight through from beginning to end, without worksheets or sketches, dating the pages now and then: 2/9/86, 2/10, 3/6, 4/14, 4/25. The score was completed in June.

A short program note appears in the score: “The style is bare and ‘stripped down,’ though it is strongly melodic. I have tried to compose a piece that is directly expressive and that goes its own expressive ways. During the composition of the piece I found myself thinking almost every day of the Greek islands and their ancient civilizations. Hence the title, though I have never been to Corfu.”

The three “divisions,” nearly equal in length, seem at first glance to consist of a quicker movement between two slower ones—it’s always been the convention to describe long structural divisions in terms of their tempo. But the sounds in *Corfu* are often so slowly paced as to remove tempo, movement itself, from the sonic picture. The piece begins quite loud on unison Cs, quickly growing quiet, and then a slow, long, contemplative melody is heard in the viola, then the cello, over a drone in the upper strings which provides a sort of reference point, a sonic horizon.

While writing *Sound Structure in Music* Erickson had taught a course on Mahler at the University, and the opening viola melody suggests that the finale of the Austrian composer’s *Das Lied von der Erde* had made a lasting impression. To Mahler, the program had been clear: a narrator, the composer, was contemplating death, singing his farewell. Erickson was by now composing in his wheelchair, drawn up to the kitchen table, slowly drawing the map his four instruments negotiate across their eighteen pages.

After the first five pages, after more than eight minutes of this spacious, open acoustic, the quality changes. The suddenly loud gesture of the first moment returns, and quickly repeated sixteenth-notes insist on the pitches that until now had been quiet drones. A greater variety of tone-production emerges: plucked strings; high whistling harmonics.

This contrasting section leads to a long, slow, unaccompanied solo for the cello, exploring its full range, especially the highest octave. It closes, though, on its lowest note, the open low C; and then, after another two measures of rest, the first violin picks up the pitch, gradually leaving it, always tracing pitches emerging naturally from its overtones, and it becomes clear we have entered a third major part of the piece. The song is slow and quiet, as in the opening minutes of the score, but both more supple and more acoustically grounded on its eternal C.

Suddenly, a minute or two before the end, a discord momentarily darkens the sky, but the shadow passes almost immediately as the five-note melody returns, passing calmly among the four instruments, and the music ends, quietly, in a final minute which has moved, as if looking across a divide toward a new vision, from C to F.

Corfu is similar to *Solstice*—in fact the two works could be considered two movements of a single String Quartet. It is both less urgent, though, and less inner-directed, *innig* as the Germans say: where *Solstice* is apparently a wintry piece, *Corfu* reaches into summer. It provides a fitting close to this survey, leaving any thought of a composer’s ego aside in their contemplation of pure sound.

These four string quartets frame Erickson’s entire oeuvre with remarkable eloquence, from the intellectual, process-oriented First Quartet and the suddenly fully mature Second—still explainable in the context of the mainstream of twentieth-century music—to the indisputably idiosyncratic valedictory qualities of *Solstice* and *Corfu*, which leave conventional analysis irrelevant. This is a historic, definitive presentation of an integrated, fully realized achievement by a necessary master of American music.

— Charles Shere

Charles Shere is a California writer and composer. He studied composition with Robert Erickson, and wrote the biography Thinking Sound Music: The Life and Work of Robert Erickson.

The San Francisco-based **Del Sol String Quartet**, two-time winner of the top Chamber Music America/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, commissions and performs outstanding new works from around the world, provides innovative educational programs, and has released five prior, critically acclaimed CDs since 2002. The group also collaborates with other artists in multi-media, dance, video and opera productions. Del Sol began in 1992 at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. Its current members are violinists Kate Stenberg and Rick Shinozaki, violist Charlton Lee and cellist Kathryn Bates.

With the support of prestigious commissioning institutions (Koussevitzky, Fromm, Barlow, Chamber Music America and Canada Council for the Arts), Del Sol has commissioned and premiered pieces by such composers as Mason Bates, Kui Dong, Gabriela Lena Frank, Tania León, Keeril Makan, Hyo-shin Na, Ronald Bruce Smith, Chinari Ung and Reza Vali, among many others.

In addition to its Bay Area concerts, the Quartet has performed on prominent concert series nationwide, including the Kennedy Center, Library of Congress (premiering Ung's *Spiral X* on Stradivarius instruments from the Library's collection), National Gallery of Art, and the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery in Washington, DC; Symphony Space, New York City; Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, Santa Cruz; Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, NY; Clefworks, Montgomery, AL; Colorado Music Festival, Boulder; Other Minds Festival, San Francisco; Santa Fe Opera; and internationally in Canada, Mexico, South Korea, Switzerland and China. Del Sol has also held residencies, led workshops, and performed at various educational institutions across the United States.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Auroras*. Boston Modern Orchestra, Gil Rose, conductor. New World Records 80682-2.
- East of the Beach*. Boston Modern Orchestra, Gil Rose, conductor. New World Records 80682-2.
- Fantasy for Cello and Orchestra*. Raphael Popper-Keizer, cello, Boston Modern Orchestra, Gil Rose, conductor. New World Records 80682-2.
- Garden*. Laura Martin, violin; Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Edwin London, conductor. New World Records 80603-2.
- General Speech*. Stuart Dempster, trombone. New World Records 80541-2.
- Kryl*. Edwin Harkins, trumpet. New World/CRI NWCR 616.
- Night Music*. Boston Modern Orchestra, Gil Rose, conductor. New World Records 80682-2.
- Pacific Sirens*. Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Edwin London, conductor. New World Records 80603-2.
- Postcards*. Carol Plantamura, soprano; Jürgen Hübscher, lute. New World/CRI NWCR 616.
- Quoq*. John Fonville, flute. New World/CRI NWCR 616.
- Ricercar à 3 for Double Bass*. Bertram Turetzky, double bass. New World/CRI NWCR 616.
- Ricercar à 5 for Trombones*. S. Dempster, L. Dwyer, F. Harmantas, L. Newton, P. Vander Gheynst, trombones. New World Records 80563-2.
- Sierra*. Philip Larson, baritone; SONOR Ensemble of UC-San Diego, Thomas Nee, conductor. New World/CRI NWCR 616.
- White Lady*. Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Edwin London, conductor. New World Records 80603-2.

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ROBERT ERICKSON (1917–1997)
COMPLETE STRING QUARTETS

Del Sol Quartet

80753-2 [2 CDS]

Disc 1 [39:18]

String Quartet No. 1 (1950) 16:10

1. I. 5:48

2. II. 4:41

3. III. 5:36

4. String Quartet No. 2 (1956) 23:04

Disc 2 [44:21]

1. *Solstice* (1984–85) 21:48

2. *Corfu* (1986) 22:28