

UNFOLD

BANKS BUTTERLEY MEALE WERDER

Kreutzer Quartet

Like so many string quartets, the pieces recorded here engage with the relationship of the ensemble's four players. Some of the works continue the tradition of cohesive playing, and others question that aspect of the genre's history.

In live performances of **Meale's String Quartet No. 1** his direct challenge to the performers is plain to see, for the piece is in two sections: in the first the performers sit in the usual configuration, and for the second section the performers are instructed to 'leave their chairs and take new positions toward the rear of the stage.' Meale writes that: 'This new seating position should be as dispersed as possible so that there appears to be no visual contact between the players. It is also necessary for the players to perform with their backs to the audience.'

The typical arrangement of a quartet leaves an open space for viewing the interaction of players, and is an invitation for the audience to enter their circle. But here the aim is to 'create a visually remote and contemplative atmosphere.' There are various challenges that come with this: to the string quartet as a forum for discursive music; to the theatre of performance, the physicality of four people with four instruments cueing each other visually; to close, responsive playing.

When the players are in the first configuration Meale writes a set of variations. The piece begins 'quasi

maestoso', but the music is hard and concrete. These blocks of sound vary in length – the rhythmic notation is flexible – and the performers decide the length of each block in the moment of performance. The effect is that both the start and end of notes are highly charged. In some cases Meale further heightens this idea, and the fourth chord, marked dolce, ends with a left-hand pizzicato as the bow leaves the string. The abruptness of the gesture is not at all what one might think of as dolce, but this is a piece that questions, stretches and extends ideas.

In this first section the music is most varied in terms of texture. The opening is solid. The second variation divides the blocks into two (violins/viola and cello). The third variation divides the players into four, and in the score four-note chords are connected with wavy stems, indicating that strict coordination is not necessary. At the same time, the glissandi and wide vibrato liquify the pitch, which previously had been as solid as the chords were coordinated. The fourth variation brings the first contrapuntal texture, which without metric notation further presses the players to react to each other to form the music; the lack of obvious coordination in the score heightens the coordination between the players.

Further variations explore these opening textures in greater diversity, and after some time the variations themselves begin to lose coherence, one overlapping with another. The remainder of the section

changes texture in a more flexible manner. The moments when the quartet comes together in rhythmically regular music are striking and climactic.

The second seating configuration, 'far away', begins with, is sustained by, and ends with clouds of harmonics. If the first section retains some hint of progression in its procession of variations, this section is totally still. Through the harmonics Meale traces lines of pitches that lead us across the stage, but nowhere else. These three sequences are labelled 'Tropes'. The term is a reference to the cycles through pitches and the revolutions through harmonics. It is also a technical term for a set of pitches in which the content, but not the order, is specified. It recalls 'Trope' in Boulez's Third Piano Sonata – Meale gave its Australian première in 1964 – in which the performer chooses the order of four sections.

Meale's first quartet ends his modernist period, and it is the last completed work before *Viridian* (1979).

The coordination of players also comes to the fore in **Nigel Butterley's String Quartet** (1965). The second of two movements begins without barlines, and according to Butterley's direction to the players, the 'upper parts are independent of each other, but each player should relate his part fairly closely to the cello part'. It is an approach to coordination that Butterley, if here only briefly, shares with Meale; in 1963 Butterley performed

in the première of Meale's *Las Alboradas*, which ends (save the two-bar coda) with each performer working through their material independently.

More generally, Butterley's quartet hovers between homophonic and contrapuntal writing. Since both homophony and counterpoint involve close working, the opening of the second movement breaks away from the composition's formal preoccupations in a moment of exuberance for the performers, forming a representation of the poem on which the work draws.

The poem is Henry Vaughan's *The Revival* (1650) and, like the composition, is in two sections. With the second part of the poem comes spring: 'Hark! how his winds have chang'd their note | And with warm whispers call thee out.' This is a realisation of the opening directive: "“Unfold, unfold!” take in his light | Who makes thy cares more short than night.' Unlike Meale's quartet, which thrives in the crises of its day, Butterley's quartet takes a longer view, with Vaughan's poem as the model. In the poem light and dark are opposed, but they are also forces that are tied together through its pastoral imagery, in which spring is a revivification of winter. For Butterley this is both a theological unfolding, and a concept that is musically pregnant.

Since the early nineteenth century, a single musical theme developed throughout a work was one meaning

of the term 'unfolding', and Butterley's composition 'develops' through constant transformations of a single idea. The composition is initially serial, with a row clearly stated at the start of both movements. This, together with the quasi-contrapuntal moments, are musical renderings of 'unfolding'. So too are the homorhythmic chords, which are symmetrical in their harmonic sequence, and which also unfold, and then fold again, in register.

The contrapuntal music is based on the semi-tone, a characteristic interval that Butterley's music shares with his one-time teacher Priaulx Rainier (this interval is particularly clear in her work *Quanta* (1962), composed when Butterley was studying with her). His homorhythmic chords are reliant on thirds, an interval emphasised in the second bar with a glissando in the cello.

There is little conflict between homophony and counterpoint, or between thirds and semitones, and the row is easily abandoned; indeed, that abandoning is part of the music's flow. The opening, linear, serial exposition, for example, is diffused into the first 'chorale' of homorhythmic chords and the music that emerges is not strict in any sense, even if it is restricted in its colour (for we are still in frosty winter). Butterley describes the two movements as follows:

As the music unfolds it 'takes in' more light and warmth, joy

and quietness. So while the first of the two movements is rather restrained, in the second the music has unfolded enough to contain both the energy of the outburst with which the movement opens, and the serenity of the closing bars.

Part of the work's impact is that it is difficult to tell where serenity, or joy, or quietness begins and contemplation ends. There is little requirement for the listener to respond to the composition as one might the poem, for the music retains little of the poetry's zeal.

Werder's *String Quartett No. 8* (1964) is confronting. It rails against tradition, and makes Butterley's composition sound like idyllic pastoralism in comparison. The work's subtitle is 'Consort Music', which begs the question: is this a 'whole' or 'broken' consort? The instrumentation suggests the former, and the work's extreme timbral variations, the latter. The mixed language of the title/subtitle points to Werder's childhood in Berlin and his time studying in London, but, in any case, his lack of regard for English music (he chose to study architecture before being interned and sent to Australia) suggests that the subtitle is ironic.

Although Werder ended up in Australia, and by 1964 had lived in Australia for 24 years, he remained steadfastly independent of his neighbouring composers. His heritage came with

the idea of progress, and in 2012 Werder-the-critic died waiting for Melbourne's musical life to enter the twentieth century. The composers who he critiqued had largely side-stepped the philosophical and aesthetic problems with which Schoenberg (for example) had grappled. The musical result of Werder's situation is a commitment to thematicism – the eighth string quartet is densely motivic – and also to fragmentation. The combination makes the motifs difficult to trace for any length of time, and it means that ideas are abandoned as abruptly as they erupt.

Much of the music inhabits the edges of possibility: the bow is used with 'excessive pressure', and on its side; in one passage the left hand plays percussive 'thumps'; and some of the harmonics that are indicated produce more noise than pitch. All of this is remarkable for a composition written in 1964.

In interviews, Werder frequently refers to painters, and his scores are visually striking. They also appear as fragmented as the music sounds, a collage of cuts and pastes. The notes of this quartet are written in Werder's hand (sometimes clear, often not), but many of the dynamics are cut from a variety of engraved scores.

The tempo directions in the piece are all from William Walton's Cello Concerto. Given Werder's disparaging remarks about composers who write 'post-Walton

music', cutting-up Walton's concerto and saving only the tempo directions is a consistent statement, if a curious one. The choice of Walton does go to the subtitle, but to nothing else in the score. The collage speaks to Werder's physical and musical dislocation, and as chief music critic for 'The Age', he was politically out of step with Melbourne's musical circles. The transition he experienced moving from childhood in pre-war Berlin (with Schoenberg as a family friend) to rural Victoria clearly had a major impact on his music. His works from the 1960s are often volatile, and this string quartet plays out his circumstance in obfuscated, fractured, unpredictable ways.

In 1972 Banks relocated from London (where he had lived for two decades) to Canberra, to chair the Music Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, and to establish the electronic music studio at the Canberra School of Music. In the early years in Canberra, Banks was busy with the administration of these (and other) organisations, which took the previously prolific composer away from writing music. **Don Banks' String Quartet** was the only work that he composed in 1975. When it came to writing the string quartet he took a new approach, and in a letter to James Murdoch (head of the Australian Music Centre), written when the composition was just finished, he described the work's serial basis:

The series has been a tough one, and I think I chose it

because after my 'lay-off' I needed a strict discipline to get the [...] compositional muscles working.

That discipline returned him to earlier years, when he was studying with Luigi Dallapiccola and Milton Babbitt, and when he was close to Roberto Gerhard. The work is broadly serial, and begins with something of a statement of the row, though the construction makes this exposition more ambiguous than for Butterley's quartet. Banks uses a combinatorial row, which shuffles its dyads with each whole-tone transposition. Banks' time with Babbitt formed Banks' use of combinatorial methods, and his early notebooks show him methodically working through the potential of this way of working. The notebooks also show him analysing Schoenberg's fourth quartet, which uses a very similar row to the one Banks chose for his quartet.

Gerhard's second quartet also uses a combinatorial row, and a form of rhythmic serialism. Banks explicitly refers to Gerhard's quartet and its use of rhythm as one part of his 'strict discipline'. In several sections pitch and duration are locked together, though unlike Gerhard's quartet, Banks does not use these durations for large-scale proportions, and once his 'compositional muscles' are toned, he moves away from the strictness of the rhythm/pitch scheme.

The toned/strict opposition is itself

part of the connection to Gerhard. In a letter to Michael Vyner in 1973, Banks explains the significance of Gerhard, and recalls a conversation that he had shortly before Gerhard's death, about 'the balance between intuition and reason. The opposite sides of a coin as it were. [Gerhard] said that often a musical impulse could only take you so far, then you would have to call "Dr. Reason" in to examine what you had been doing.' But a composer also needed to know when to 'kick him out'. Banks' 'strict discipline' and careful, methodical construction are employed to get the piece going, and once the work's momentum has been achieved Banks works more freely.

The debt to both Dallapiccola and Gerhard is audible in the work's canons, the technique that Dallapiccola made his own (and that were particularly important to the composer in the early 1950s, during which time Banks was his student).

Banks' work is formed in a single movement, 'dying out to nothing'. This is unusual for Banks, though not for Gerhard, whose late works are all in a single movement. If Gerhard's music seems an unlikely model today, given how little of his music is performed, in the early 1970s he was a major figure, and Banks' letter to Vyner (from which the earlier quote comes) coincides with the London Sinfonietta's performance of the complete Gerhard chamber works.

Gerhard is on Banks' mind in 1975

in part because of Dallapiccola's death in February of that year, and, in correspondence with Salvatore Martirano, Banks calls them both 'models', compositionally and personally. Through consideration of the technical debts Banks pays in his quartet, it is possible to hear the composition as a kind of tombeau to Gerhard and Dallapiccola.

The composition is in two sections, and by the second Banks is audibly more at ease with his material. The work is detailed, demanding, difficult and dramatic, and in a letter to Donald Hazelwood, who lead the first performance, Banks directs the players to 'Take your vitamins A, B, C, and D, for the 1st section as I'd love to hear a strong, rhythmic, vital sound'.

This recording was made at Aldbury Parish Church, Hertfordshire, in September 2013 by Jonathan Haskell (Astounding Sounds), who also edited the recording.

A 192kHz/24 bit version is also available, which includes the bonus track Don Banks' Sequence for solo cello. For more information, visit move.com.au

The producers of the project were Neil Heyde, Michael Hooper and Peter Sheppard Skærved.

Liner notes by Michael Hooper. Use of the quotes kindly permitted by the estate of Don Banks.

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Australian Government



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The **Kreutzer Quartet** has forged an enviable reputation as one of Europe's most dynamic and innovative string quartets. They are the dedicatees of numerous works, and over many years have forged creative partnerships with composers including Sir Michael Tippett, David Matthews, Michael

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prolific symphonist Gloria Coates. They are Artists in Residence at Goldsmiths College and at Wilton's Music Hall in London. Their work in collaboration with art galleries has garnered much attention and large audiences, working particularly closely with the National Portrait Gallery and Tate Gallery, St Ives.

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KREUTZER QUARTET

1. DON BANKS: STRING QUARTET 19'27"
- 2-3. NIGEL BUTTERLEY: STRING QUARTET 10'07" / 6'01"
- 4-5. RICHARD MEALE: STRING QUARTET NO. 1 14'29" / 13'10"
6. FELIX WERDER: STRING QUARTETT NO. 8 – CONSORT MUSIC 9'20"
7. DON BANKS: SEQUENCE FOR SOLO CELLO 13'32" (BONUS TRACK)

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