



A MIKROKOSMOS FOR STRINGS

Composer Geoff Hudson is in the midst of producing several volumes of “miniature” string quartets, progressively graded in difficulty, that please aesthetically while painlessly addressing all the musical challenges that a beginning or intermediate ensemble player faces. Not only that, they get kids playing contemporary repertoire right from the start.

BY KATHERINE MILLETT

Easy contemporary music for string quartet—a gap in the repertoire. Geoffrey Hudson, an American composer, has begun to fill it by writing pieces that progress in difficulty. He hopes to offer “a new entry point into chamber music,” he says, “that grapples with the music of our time.”

Most of his quartets are short, witty, instructive pieces, contemporary in their rhythms and harmonies. Hudson hopes to publish six volumes, titled the “Quartet Project,” in the fall of 2011. He envisions each volume containing 20 miniatures and one full-length work.

Already, some miniatures are available online. They may be so short that the score prints on two or three pages, with individual parts less than a page long. The format alone makes them attractive. A professional quartet teaching a week-long workshop can assign new music on the spot; the child at camp who lost her viola part can print a new one at the office; the amateur group looking for something new to sight-read can browse the website. Short pieces at various levels of difficulty may be downloaded, currently free of charge, from www.hybridvigormusic.org. For groups that can't muster a violist—a

OPPOSITE: Hudson coaches a student quartet at Indian Hill Music, in Massachusetts.
BELOW: A visit with young participants in Grand Forks, ND's Divertimento Program.



perennial problem for young quartets—Hudson furnishes a third violin part.

Hudson, 43, considers himself more composer than educator, but his many years as a camper, then as a teacher at Greenwood Music Camp in Cummington, Massachusetts, have shaped his intentions. He likens his quartets to treasure hunts—for musical ideas that can be passed from person to person.

"I'm focusing on ensemble and music-making," he says, "and I like the constraints of writing music for different technical levels. I hope players will pick pieces easier



than their technical level and read through them. Spend ten minutes on one, then turn the page. Teachers tend to choose pieces at the technical limit of a student quartet, but I say, "Please, choose something that looks too easy. Having fun with it is the most important thing."

Taking his cue from Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, the Hungarian master's graduated pieces for solo piano, Hudson gives quartet players small doses of the dissonances, irregular rhythms, and special effects of contemporary music. He may work with a folk tune or a jazz harmony, set the time signature at 5/8, move the parts in parallel fifths. His har-

monic language is generally tonal, but not based on triads, and the special effects include harmonics, glisses, and left-hand pizz.

He hopes his pieces will supplement the movements of Haydn and Mozart that beginning quartets typically play.

"The learning curve to play quartets is so long, it's a crying shame," Hudson says. "It takes a certain technical level to play a first movement by Haydn or Mozart, and by then, young players are ready to do more complex and modern things with rhythm and ensemble. They may never reach the technical level needed to play Bartók or Hindemith, so I am writing contemporary pieces that are technically much easier."

Hudson is surprised that this hasn't been done before.

"There is such an obvious need for this kind of music," he says, "that I keep expecting someone to tell me about a collection from Romania written in the 1960s. So far, I haven't heard of one."

As a junior-high student, growing up in Amherst, Massachusetts, Hudson began to write music for his family's recorder ensemble. He took up the cello at age 11, and as one of several young composers at his local public high school, he wrote for string quartet, chorus, and chamber orchestra. At Oberlin Conservatory, he studied composition with Richard Hoffmann. Hudson and his wife, opera singer Alina Pearson, have lived in Vienna since 2007, but they return frequently to the States. Together they wrote a children's opera, "Bug Opera," which toured New England in 2006.

In the verbal marking of his quartets, Hudson uses as few words as possible and mixes English with Italian. He uses *legato*, *forte* and *piano* but considers *andante* too

imprecise, and he always includes a metronome marking. As mood markings, Hudson uses words like "thoughtfully," "brash," and "wistfully."

"No one knows what sounds to expect from Hudson," he says. "I want to excite their imaginations, so they will want to work together. Sometimes they ask me to write in a fingering or bowing, and I want to say no. Figuring it out is part of the process."

In "Chatterbox," for example, Hudson says "the four players no longer share a melody, but the music holds together because of almost complete rhythmic unison." In "Clang Factor," the music comes alive when the quartet not only bangs the big bells but also discovers how to play the rising sixteenth notes with a smooth flourish, like chimes.

Hudson has spent two years trying out his Quartet Project pieces with six music programs in various parts of the United States: Divertimento in Grand Forks, North Dakota; Drake University School of Music in Des Moines, Iowa; the Summer String Academy of the MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Third Street Music School Settlement in New York City, Indian Hill Music in Littleton, Massachusetts, and Community MusicWorks in Providence, Rhode Island.

Students who work with the composer present learn that notation is fallible but that much can be discovered from it. Hudson sometimes makes changes because an idea doesn't work musically or causes unnecessary trouble for the players.

"I've worked with about 40 quartets," he says. "I try to be clear and direct and avoid unnecessary gestures. Kids have a sophisticated rhythmic vocabulary from listening to contemporary pop music, but a complex rhythm may look terrifying on the page."

Hannah Noyes, 15, has twice worked with Hudson in the Divertimento program in North Dakota. She remembers playing “Dizzy Mystic” last fall.

“It’s wild and wacky,” says Noyes. “I would definitely recommend it.”

But initially, she was not enthusiastic.

“It’s modern music,” she says matter-of-factly. “You have to practice a bunch of different rhythms and accents, and sometimes play your bow very lightly over the bridge to get a squeaky sound. It’s easier for me now to play classical quartets. I think it makes me a better player to play a crazy piece like that.”

Lalangi Marasinghe, who played cello in the same quartet, says she likes Hudson “because I get a lot more action. In Mozart and Beethoven, the cello is usually playing quarter notes, but in Hudson, the cello part is fast and wild. You have to pay attention to the other parts, or you’ll get lost. At first I didn’t want to do it, but it got to be fun.”

Noyes and Marasinghe fall into the “hard-sell” category of older students who have already played some classical literature. Like their parents, such students may initially recoil at the dissonance and unpredictability of Hudson’s quartets.

“The older the kids, the harder to get this music taken seriously,” says Naomi Welsh, principal cellist of the Greater Grand Forks Symphony and director of Divertimento (a youth chamber music program started by the Chiara Quartet during a rural residency sponsored by Chamber Music America). “They have certain expectations about what a quartet should sound like. But when they get into Hudson’s ensemble writing, with lots of seamless passing of lines and time signatures they aren’t used to, they like it. He uses accents in ways that make them want to match bow strokes and sounds.”

Noyes adds, “Usually you hear this kind of music played by a professional quartet, but we get to play it ourselves.”

A virtue of Hudson’s miniature format

is that the full score may fit on each player’s stand. From the start, novice quartet players see the interaction of their parts while they learn to hear it. A group could even memorize a short quartet and work on ensemble without the distraction of the printed page.

And then there is the social side of things to consider.

“I’m enough of an old fuddy-duddy,” says Hudson, “to think that kids today need to broaden their communication skills. I would have quit the cello long ago if I hadn’t started playing with other people. If you learn three chords on a guitar, you can play in a band with your friends. Rock music is so satisfying that way, with no authority figure telling you what’s right or wrong.”

And as amateurs well know, some of the most interesting people in the world play string quartets for fun. Often, like Hudson’s mother, they take up the viola in middle age. They are musically, but not technically, sophisticated. Hudson writes for them as well, to give them the joy of playing chamber-music tennis (a game Hudson plays frequently with other composers), free of the technical worries that keep them from listening and responding to each other.

So is the music any good? Find out for yourself by listening to excerpt on the Hybrid Vigor Music website. Hudson has stocked the site with audio links to performances. He invites readers to download any of the music they care to play at www.hybridvigormusic.org/Downloadsamplepieces.html, and he welcomes your comments. Contact him through the comment button at the bottom of the webpage or by email at hudsongs@earthlink.net.

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MORE MIKROKOSMIC OFFERINGS FOR THE YOUNG ENSEMBLE

Others besides Geoff Hudson may well have composed or collected a series of ensemble works of graduated difficulty. Here are two examples we are aware of.—Ed.

TrIo-Cosmos, for Three Violins

This set of 16 pedagogic suites, written in the early 1980s by the late Netherlands composer Henk Badings, is graduated in technique and style. Violinist Vartan Manoogian had intended to record a 16-CD set of the concert version of the works, as well as a “Music Minus One” version for students, but the University of Wisconsin’s Madison School of Music was able to issue only one recording before Manoogian’s death in 2007. The score is available from Schott Music (ISMN: 979-0-001-10293-3, Order number: VLB 55)

A Texas Nature Suite, for Violin, Violoncello, and Piano

by Felicity Coltman. © Mopani Press 2010.

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This collection, composed by Coltman for younger students of the Austin Chamber Music Center, is suitable for children who have had one or two years of lessons. Seven short pieces, with photographs, form a story of nature in a local park. The pieces progress in order of difficulty and can be obtained in other instrumental arrangements.

Piano Needn’t Be Lonely... It’s Fun Playing with Friends

2nd Revised Edition, by Nadia Lasserson, 34 Carver Rd. London, SE24 9LT. 35pp. £6.50. Lasserson has assembled a range of compositions for diverse instrumental combinations and for multiple pianos—suitable for a wide range of abilities. Annotations are frequently based on what this author has discovered working with this repertoire in her own chamber music classes.