

String Quartet no1

Nicola LeFanu

My string quartet was written in 1988 for Diana Cummings and the English String Quartet, who commissioned it with funds from Eastern Arts.

The quartet is in one movement, lasting about quarter of an hour. It begins as it means to go on: fast, assertive music interspersed with moments of quiet and stillness. Overall, the first three-fifths or so of the work are predominantly vigorous but in the latter part of the piece the quiet music comes into its own; first in a chorale texture and finally in the flowering of a tune that has been glimpsed throughout the work.

The form of my quartet is woven from many strands. Rather than a traditional leading-through from one main idea to another, the music grows through the juxtaposition of diverse images. These disparate colours and textures, contrasting rhythms and melodic fragments, have a common ground in the harmony of the work, which is rooted in the natural resonance of the instruments. It moves purposefully between diatonic, chromatic and microtonal harmony. Listeners may be able to enjoy a certain *frisson* as the chords are inflected with quarter-tones, as well as orienting themselves through the simple pitch references of open-strings and natural harmonics.

For many years I was reluctant to embark on composing a string quartet, much as I love the medium; the hesitation is not surprising given that at the heart of the canon of twentieth century British quartets are the thirteen quartets by my mother Elizabeth Maconchy. However, when I finally took the plunge I enjoyed writing my quartet enormously. The physicality of the medium was forceful: wood, hair, gut, I felt as if I myself was resonating and although I am not a very accomplished string player I felt the work in my finger tips while I imagined it with my 'inner ear'. I hope this delight in the sound-world of the string quartet is something the audience will share.

NL