

Benjamin Boretz

*Qixingshan*

(String Quartet No. 3)

TL: 19:01

a note by Robert Morris

Ben Boretz's third string quartet, *Qixingshan*, takes its name from a volcanic mountain in Taiwan. He writes:

*Qixingshan* converged two experiences: walking up and over the classically beautiful mountain near Taipei where, and just after, my granddaughter Lyla Luyi was born, on three consecutive days; listening on three later consecutive days in Warsaw to the recording sessions by the DARQ Quartet of Krakow playing my conjoined first and second string quartets (OPEN SPACE CD 23) not so much for the ensemble sound alone but to the intense particularity of each player's personal voice on her instrument. The ambience of that mountain was the image-environment into which I composed my impressions of those qualities of sonic being.

Bringing out "personal voices" of each player is always a factor in Ben's music, and in this quartet, the instruments share materials (melodies, gestures, drones, textures) over the twenty-minute duration of the piece. For instance, a brief but restless alternation of two adjacent notes starts the work in the cello; a continually relaxing transformation of the cello gesture ends the work in the viola; the violins take up this alternative rustling here and there, often used cadentially. There are many episodes—some dramatic, others fragile

or reserved—that seem to arise out of nowhere, as if they were going on subliminally and suddenly either erupt or fade into the surface of the work. But silences also separate phrases.

For me, I noticed many motivic pitch and pitch-class interconnections and transformations—more than in Ben's works of the last fifteen years. Here seconds (major and minor) and fourths/fifths weave the musical fabric spinning out passages ranging from the somewhat diatonic to the highly chromatic, but there is nothing generic about these easily heard affinities; each has particularity and character.

Throughout the work there is a subtle sensation of climbing, most especially in a middle section where a slow, steady series of adjacent pitches rise over drones (what Elaine Barkin calls "The world's slowest fugue"). This section slowly gathers itself into an almost pulsing intensity; then rises further in homophonic dyads in the second violin and viola, ending curiously with something that might have been culled from a quartet by Ravel.

Perhaps one can hear *Qixingshan* as if the four players are individually lit on the stage; as the piece goes on, the lighting goes on and off to highlight or subdue one or more of the player's musical contributions—in the manner of Beckett's play *Casando* with its "Opener," who opens and closes streams of words and music.

That's one way to enter Ben's mountain, but there are many other gates into this striking, deeply felt, remarkably nuanced, atmospheric composition.

June 2014

Robert Morris

*Quattro per Quattro*

TL1:8:52

a note by Benjamin Boretz

You don't have to "understand" Bob Morris's music to be aware of how good it sounds. In fact you might be drawn into its sound world first before you articulate the surges and ebbs of its other energies. There's nothing neutrally "structural" about its passages: its gestures are organic energies; its patterns speak as telling utterances, speaking explicit sense. Speaking sense, however, purely as musicmusic (as Jim Randall and I used to call certain phenomena within our Inter/Play improvisation sessions): so don't reach outside of music to grasp the expressive coloration of these configurations. And perhaps - to optimize your experience of Bob's soundsongs - don't even grope for fancy descriptive language to apply to them, in the hope of a fast track to full immersion. Not just in the case of Bob's music, but especially in the case of his music, that may lead you counterproductively away from the unmediated sonic clarity of the indigenous but airtight sonic vessels it creates. If you can imagine pursuing your successive listenings to progressively release your extramusical or metamusical baggage, you might possibly reach a place of unobstructed sonic awareness; this is the place where Bob's music has its maximum intricate micromeaningful

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being. So the pervasive canons in *Quattro per Quattro* aren't most vividly experienced as cognitions that they are canons; that raw fact underlies but doesn't constitute or illuminate their musical effects. Listen hard and unencumbered and you can hear something tightly and densely involving, a gravitational field about to go by in a blur but instead playfully, tenderly unraveling to materialize as a skein of singly singing, singly gyrating parts, embodied voices even, enacting gracefully the strands of separate sense and gesture that turn out to have been embedded as voices of the molten monolith from which they emerge. And it's always the sound, always the residue of how it "sounds" - not really "good" as I started out saying, but so very precisely particular, so - massively or exquisitely - superspecific, more poignantly specific than your intuition of specificity is quite ready for.

[Of course, given that the intricately explicit, complexly evolving denotative pitch geographies informing every molecule of *Quattro per Quattro*, can easily preoccupy your knowing ear, you might be drawn to hearing, indexing, appreciating those concrete quantified properties and perhaps never know the musicmagical qualities that are the experiential payoff of their presence. But music, as Bob knows well, is poetry. Its meanings are the resonances that are the residue of composing, ordering, conjoining, transforming, ramifying quantities and qualia, the unique specificities that ontologize time uniquely as experience. They (the meanings) are experiential effects, not equivalent to the facts that may be claimed to cause them; their cognition

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is individual, subjective, and indeterminate and can be attributed incorrigibly to unlimited underlying structures. Bob's own personal practice (as I understand it) is multitracked: he takes in all palpable dimensions as a simultaneity, rather than absorb them all into a single focus of unmediated attention to which all material details are organic background, integrated into the listening organism as part of its holistic identity rather than as components of its immanent attention. So in that sense my recommended mode of "reading" is skew to his: but his capacity for multiplicity is so uniquely vast that I'm sure he will insist that he can incorporate even this into his grand mental-experiential-musical-panoramic soundscape. So creative listeners can improvise for themselves: there are at least as many possible modes of musical experiencing as there are musical experiencers.]

Harmony. (Same as Counterpoint.) : In globs of sound crunching or souging, in the intertouching of unreeling sound-beings, intimately touching in free mutual orbit, in the color of a cascading blurry slide between distinct consecutive soundpoints, recreating my sense of "direction" into a multiplicity of space-translational energies. As: in a flash a simple single sound metastasizes into a tangle of asynchronous trajectories, each distinct in time- and sound-point crisscrossing modulating simultaneous shapes with mutually mirroring strand-shapes, a flash and its afterblur spelling meaningful configurations any way they are read but converging as instantaneous explosive action so your reading is a sonic aftermath of something very particular whose very

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expressive message is to be superliminal internally - but then instantly stretching out to re-sound itself as shaped action and utterance retroactively resonating its own component images in a coherently transformed form, a patient re-unfolding over 20 times the timespace of the opening flashblur. A beginning sequence that sets the timespace, soundscale, and image-diction as both event and mindsetting field of perceptual awareness for what follows. And much of the music that follows is a "discussion" of the evolving ways that parts of a sounding whole can be "like" each other but never identically, either within or between their perceived moments of occurrence. As *Quattro per Quattro* goes, its constantly modified retrieval of past moments dramatizes the emergence of new images - evolution taking place on two levels, within qualities and in the trajectory of image succession. And of course it ends with a surprising image/nomimage of its beginning. Of all Bob's pieces, *Quattro per Quattro* induces in me the sense that I'm channeling Bob's way of hearing, of experiencing not just music, not just sound, not just time, not just an intricate play of geometries, not just élan vital, not just expression...

A word on the recording: both Bob and I have been elated, moved, impressed with how the Momenta Quartet played not only their hearts out, but also their thoughts, hands, their remarkable feel for and grasp of two musics so disparate in character and content.

July 2014

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