

Geoff Palmer: String Quartet No.6: *for Max*

Co-commissioned by the St Magnus International Festival and **soundfestival** 2017  
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1. Sonata
2. Fugue
3. Chorale
4. In Nomine

Each of the first three movements presented here is pervaded by a repeating harmonic sequence which becomes fully manifest only at the beginning of the Chorale. The notes of each movement “clothe” this sequence with musical processes and detail – in much the same way that our human activity clothes the surface of the earth on which we carry on our business. I am fascinated by the notion of the very temporary nature of our existence – both individually and collectively – in relation to the inconceivably deep age of the planet on which we live – “as old as the hills”, indeed!

In the first movement the underlying harmonies come and go – hidden frequently by the conflicts and duality of a sonata approach. The following Fugue movement is a portrait of Max in my own musical language; I could not rid myself of an image of the man, with his huge energy and keen awareness and that so-gentle core, striding across the surface of the earth. The concluding Chorale sets individual contributions from each of the four players in the context of the harmonic sequence; as we travel the harmonic landscape, sonic snippets appear out of the musical mists – a nod once again towards Max and towards the northern landscapes that have been the backdrop to my own life for many years now.

Unusually for a Palmer string quartet, no microtonal retuning of instruments takes place in the first three movements! Some use is made of quartertones (the notes between the notes of the piano) and rather more use is made of what is described in the score as “glacial glissandi” – gradual changes of pitch which alter the harmonic landscape with a suggestion of almost geological slowness.

In the fourth movement, however, I found that I could most easily produce the colours and resonances I wanted by asking the second violinist to play a violin a quartertone flatter than normal. The movement is an In Nomine – a *cantus firmus* moves slowly and unobtrusively through the whole movement. It also represents a fairly traditional if unconventional summing up of the various themes heard throughout the work. Above all, however, the movement is a sound picture, conceived of one midsummer night on the cliffs of the Brough of Birsay in the company of gulls, puffins and kittiwakes; midnight twilight approaches, as the rotating shaft of light from the lighthouse beside me seems to grow stronger.

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