

Peter Fribbins – String Quartet *I Have the Serpent Brought*

The title comes from the first stanza of the remarkable poem by metaphysical poet John Donne entitled *Twicknam Garden*, which was probably written between 1610 and 1620:

Blasted by sighs, and surrounded with tears,
Hither I come to seek the spring,
And at mine eyes, and at mine ears,
Receive such balms, as else cure everything;
But O, self traitor, I do bring
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
And can convert manna to gall,
And that this place may thoroughly be thought
True paradise, I have the serpent brought.

The poem provided the initial inspiration and stimulus for my string quartet, but the music is not intended to be programmatic in the nineteenth century sense. I suppose the dark opening chords may well sound like *manna turning to gall*, and the elegiac passion of the violin melody that weaves above is certainly connected to the first lines, but there are no further literal (or *literary*) parallels intended beyond perhaps subliminal associations.

I have found that a poem often gives me an initial expressive and poetic focus for a piece, but after some measures the music seems to take off in its own terms. For me the piece must work coherently, structurally and abstractly as music: if it can only be understood in terms of the images, metaphors and structure of the poem linked to the music, I would feel something of a failure, and perhaps even a charlatan. Although I enjoy nineteenth century music very much, some of the music I find unsatisfying because it does precisely that (perhaps that makes me more of a 'Classical' composer).

The dark, claustrophobic mood of the *adagio* opening continues into the following main *Allegro*, but now with energy and perhaps even menace. The *adagio* and *allegro* are motivically linked.

A short *Adagio* follows, much more diatonically tonal than the first movement, simpler, almost naïve, and conceived with luminous chords and transparent textures to form a striking contrast to the dark complexity of the first movement.

A brief *Recitative* movement draws upon the melodies of the very opening of the work and leads directly to an *Allegro* which gives a different and somewhat truncated perspective on the energetic, motivic material of the first movement. It comes to a climax on held tremolo chords over which the violins recall the passionate melody of the opening. A brief moment of repose follows before the *allegro* bursts through and ends the music with violent finality.

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