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## String Quartet Composition

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### Abstract

*This paper will discuss the creative process of writing a string quartet. First, it will describe the composers whose works influenced this string quartet, as well as how I first became interested in composition. It then discusses specific terms relevant to the analysis of the piece and how to analyze music. This paper will dissect the Sonata Allegro form used and highlight important musical focal points in each moment of the work. It will describe how each section of the piece properly flows into one another melodically and rhythmically. It will then discuss the composers and artists that influenced many decisions made in the piece, and my experience with writing it.*

Keywords: Quartets, Strings, Composition

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The string quartet I have written is the culmination of my years of studying different styles of music and playing the piano and viola. I have been increasingly interested in classical music since entering college and playing in the Millersville Orchestra. I have been writing electronic music since I was 13 and have wanted to compose any form of media since then. Some of the composers who have influenced my composition are Franz Schubert and Ludwig Van Beethoven, two composers known for their large string quartet repertoire. I was also influenced by contemporary composers such as Steve Reich, Ernest Bloch, and Shiro Sagisu, all

modern and contemporary composers, to write my quartet.

### Terminology and Context

String quartets have been used as foreground and background music since the mid-1800s, popularized by Joseph Haydn. String quartets usually consist of two violins, a viola, and a cello. Before discussing details of the work, it is important to discuss certain terminology. Firstly, a major tonality or chord means the piece is playing an upbeat melody, whereas a minor one means the section is much sadder. Diminished or augmented chords create tension and dissonance for the next section to relieve. Keys are the notes the song is centered on. Flats and sharps also make

notes higher (sharper), or lower (flatter). So, if the key is in E flat major, we know the piece will start happily and center around E flat. It is also important to understand beats and measures. Each piece is made up of a certain number of measures, with a number of beats that divide up each. My piece's measures are normally divided up into four beats per measure.

### **A Chronologic Analysis of My Piece**

This quartet is in Sonata Allegro-Form and E flat major. Sonata Allegro-Form means that the piece is divided into 3 sections: the exposition, the development, and the recapitulation, or recap. The exposition begins with an upbeat melody in the violins, with constant rhythmic accompaniment in the cello and viola. The melody is pretty but ends in a different key. I end the section in another new key, then use a diminished chord to return to E flat. However, I linger on a different version of that diminished chord to introduce a new section to create tension, with the new melody still in the first violin. The sound opens back up with long connected notes in a major chord, then the melody moves to the second violin and repeats the diminished and major chords before making the key minor. The melody now is a somber version of the opening. I repeat variations of this melody and then enter a small moment that builds more tension and volume before entering the next section. This section has an intense accompaniment but repeats the chords from before. After entering the minor tonality for the second time, I linger again on a strange chord that is technically major. After some tension, the piece returns to E flat major, and the exposition is repeated before the development.

The development is normally the section where composers experiment with their melodies. They may move them into different keys or rhythms or introduce new ideas entirely. The development is not

complex melodically, but it is complex rhythmically. From the beginning of the development, there are two different divisions of the beat, one divided into two and one into three. These clashing divisions play for all of the development, jumping from instrument to instrument. One division of the beat will be more important, like the new melodic idea that appears at the beginning of the development. The beat is divided into three with the two-division clashing over it. However, after this section the tonality becomes minor and the melody divides the beat into two, making the three-division clash. The development has many adjustments to the original melody and introduces two new melodic ideas in the second half, first through the cello. It is then passed to the viola, which then continues the new melodic line until the end of the development is reached, where the beat is divided into two, three, and four all at once. Once enough tension is built, it is finally released with a repetition of the triumphant melody from the beginning, telling the listener that the piece is now in the recapitulation.

The recapitulation is used to make the listener feel like they are returning home after the adventure they have had in the exposition and development. After the opening section, instead of moving into the secondary melody, there is a small section in between. Instead of a long chord in the second section, we are met with constant accented beats. This section has the same melody and chord progression, just with a different rhythmic styling. Instead of building tension and entering the intense section like exposition, the group dies down, as if the instruments are sighing. For a while, the tonality and key are ambiguous, but the listener will catch on to the E flat major tonality to indicate the end. After some new melodic ideas, the viola and violins rise upwards in anticipation, before finally

resolving and coming back down. We are met with a variation of the melody one more time before resting in one long consonant E flat major chord.

**Conclusion**

Through this process, I have learned how to arrange different melodic ideas for a string quartet, and this is also the longest piece I have ever written. After studying Steve Reich, I used his technique of polyrhythms and melodies in certain sections, but also used Beethoven's style of connecting multiple melodic ideas at once. We performed this composition at the Made in Millersville conference on April 9, 2024.