

Defining a Personal American Quartet Tradition: The Four String Quartets of Gwyneth Walker

by Carson P. Cooman

American composer Gwyneth Walker was born in 1947 in New Canaan, Connecticut, and studied at Brown University and the Hartt School of Music. Her career has taken her from Connecticut to Ohio (where she served briefly as a faculty member at Oberlin Conservatory) and finally to Vermont, where she works as a full-time composer, traveling frequently around the country for residencies and performances of her music. She has composed in all genres, although she is most widely known for her choral music. Many of her choral compositions have entered the American standard repertory for choruses. A full biography and list of works is available from her website at: <http://www.gwynethwalker.com>.

Walker's acknowledged musical catalogue contains the following works for string quartet:

Works for string quartet alone

Three American Portraits (1988)
Short Set for String Quartet (1993)
Traveling Songs (1996)
Quartet for Leap Year (2000)
Sweet Land (of Liberty) (2001)

Works for string quartet in other contexts

Concerto for Bassoon and Strings (2000)
The Golden Harp (1999) for SATB chorus and string quartet

Although the quartets do not have numbers, Walker acknowledges her string quartet cycle as consisting of #1 – *Three American Portraits* (1988); #2 – *Short Set for String Quartet* (1993); #3 – *Traveling Songs* (1996); #4 – *Quartet for Leap Year* (2000). Throughout this essay, these works will often be referred to by their numeric designations, simply for convenience, even though these designations are not part of the official titles of this work.

The other works involving quartet will not be considered in this study. *Sweet Land (of Liberty)* is a short work based on the eponymous American patriotic tune. *Concerto for Bassoon and Strings* is a work which can be played by any size string ensemble, from quartet through large orchestra – although it was premiered in its quartet version. *The Golden Harp* is one of Walker's most eloquent musical works, involving the

string quartet in an imaginative and creative discourse with mixed choir. (It would be fertile ground for a further study.)

The “numbered” string quartet cycle spans the period of 1988 through 2000 – ranging from the first quartet, written near the end of her “first mature style period” to the fourth quartet, written full in the midst of her “second mature style period.”¹ These quartets, taken together, provide a microcosm of Walker’s stylistic development, and many of the musical preoccupations that run throughout her entire output.

This essay consists of two parts – firstly an exploration and commentary on the four quartets in general terms, and secondly a detailed musical analysis of the first movement of the second string quartet (*Short Set for String Quartet*). Despite the varying “purposes” served by each of these quartet movements, Walker’s basic style (especially in terms of harmony) remains consistent in many regards throughout the works. Thus, analyzing a single movement will provide most of the musical tools that can be used to describe the basic harmonic and rhythmic materials in the other movements as well.

I. The Four String Quartets

In 1976, having earned a B.A. from Brown University in 1968 and an M.M. from the Hartt School of Music (University of Hartford), Gwyneth Walker submitted her dissertation for the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree at the Hartt School. This dissertation was entitled *Tradition and the Breaking of Tradition in the String Quartets of Charles Ives and Arnold Schoenberg*.

In 1976 very little scholarship had been devoted to the quartets of these composers. The work of Charles Ives, in particular, still had almost no scholarly attention. As such, Walker’s study was one of the first serious investigations of his string quartets and certainly the first comparative study between these two composers. Her dissertation looks at the first and second quartets of both composers, and examines parallels between them. In particular, she shows that although their second quartets were written in isolation from each other, both composers were working towards the formation of their own personal approach to an atonal musical language.

The most significant conclusion drawn from Walker’s dissertation, directly impacting her own musical style and approach, is the idea that a composer interacts with tradition (to whatever extent he employs or rejects it) in a way that directly connects to the musical, cultural, and practical context in which he finds himself. She states at the

¹ For these purposes, Walker’s output is broken into three style periods – “early” works (before 1985), “first mature period” (1985 – 1990), “second mature period” (1990 – present). Since Walker is still a very active composer, future periods and designations cannot yet be truly assigned as there is not enough distance from the time of creation, and because her writing career is still ongoing.

start of the dissertation's conclusion:

The early string quartets of Ives and Schoenberg demonstrate both the acceptance and the rejection of traditional procedures. While the involvement of the two composers with similar stylistic choices is reflected in their common desire to transform the existing musical language, their cultural and temperamental differences result in the creation of distinct idioms."²

Although this is a straightforward point, it is a very important one. Walker's career as a composer has been built around a consistent attention to the context in which the music and its performances occur. The development of her own musical style relates to the filtering of her own "ear" and musical personality through the communicative performance means for which each work is conceived.

In the context of examining Walker's string quartets, one can see a significant interaction with the ideas of "tradition" in different ways. The string quartet is the only traditional European musical genre in which Walker has written a number of works. She has written only one symphony (1999) and very few instrumental sonatas. (Although she has written five piano trios³ (as of 2005), this is not a genre which has the same "traditional" connotations as does the string quartet.)

Walker's four string quartets each demonstrate a different significant facet of her instrumental music output:

First quartet	integration of "experimental" elements into personal style
Second quartet	updating/infusion/"Americanization" of traditional forms
Third quartet	"contemporary adaptations" and "quasi-staged" drama
Fourth quartet	music for amateurs and/or students

Furthermore, each of the categories shows each quartet interacting "against/with" a different musical tradition – most particularly the notion of the typical European string quartet genre. These designations and ideas for each quartet will be explained further while examining each composition in turn.

Despite her choice of DMA dissertation topic, it would be eleven years after earning her degree before Walker composed her first composition for string quartet. Walker has stated that she focused during her student years primarily on works for chorus, voice, and orchestra. Thus, as she began to set about building her professional career as a

² Walker, Gwyneth, *Tradition and the Breaking of Tradition in the String Quartets of Ives and Schoenberg*, DMA Thesis, University of Hartford, 1976.

³ There is, however, an uncanny parallel in the piano trio cycle to the quartet cycle as they display many of the same elements over the course of the cycle: e.g., first piano trio (early period), second piano trio (Americanization of traditional dance forms), third piano trio (contemporary adaptation), fourth piano trio (dramatic work with narrator).

composer during the 1980's, it was clear to hear that some additional chamber music would become necessary to amplify her catalogue.⁴

The first string quartet, *Three American Portraits* (1988), was thus written without a commission, in order to add a string quartet to her works list. The published score contains the following program notes from the composer.

Three American Portraits are interrelated movements each displaying uniquely American characteristics.

“Greeting” is a rough-hewn work with jagged contrasts between pizzicato and arco sections. The language is simple and diatonic, interspersed with vocal and tapping effects for color (and humor). Occasional references to popular idioms of jazz and rock can also be heard. The quiet beginning section is intended to draw in the audience, while the boisterous conclusion seeks to provide an awakening “splash of cold water.”

“As One” is modal (natural minor) and folk-like in character – perhaps Celtic and/or Appalachian. The opening melody in the viola, derived from the ending of “Greeting”, is echoed by the other strings. As the imitative entrances draw together more tightly, the intent is to create a tension which heightens the mournful quality of the melody.

“Rumble” is urban – often angry and violent, nocturnal and greasy. The opening section, again derived from the ending of “Greeting”, is marked “with energy and foreboding,” presented in a 7/8 meter for purposes of aggression. This movement may be interpreted as a street fight.⁵

With the title and inspiration of the work, a conscious decision to write an “American” work can be noted. The form of the entire composition, and each movement individually, is straightforward and clear – a hallmark of Walker’s style.

The most notable style element of Walker’s “first mature period” (which is not present in later works) displays itself frequently in this work: the integration of 20th century experimental musical elements within her own personal musical and tonal language. While these elements remain a limited part of Walker’s personal style throughout her later works, they are far more pronounced or obvious in the pieces of the first period.

Some simple elements such as spoken vocal sounds by the instrumentalists or tapping on the body of the instrument were common features of experimental chamber

⁴ Personal e-mail from Gwyneth Walker, October 17, 2005.

⁵ *Three American Portraits*, musical score, MMB Music, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri, 1988.

music of the mid 20th century. Walker integrates these ideas within the overall energetic and rhythmic character of the opening movement.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The upper staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, interspersed with rests. Above the staff, the instruction "(vocal sound)" is written, followed by "Sss" with a horizontal line underneath, indicating a sibilant vocal effect. The lower staff is a string ensemble part, divided into four systems for violin, viola, and cello. Each system includes a tremolo section on the left, marked "tremolo l.h. on violin", "tremolo l.h. on viola", and "tremolo l.h. on cello" respectively. The right side of the string part features a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, marked with "arco" and "fsub." (fortissimo subitissimo).

In many mid-20th century compositions (the works of George Crumb are a good example), these techniques are used to create textural “disjunctions” or a sense of mystical space. Walker, by contrast, tends to use these as an expression of energy. It is as if the music has burst beyond what the instrumental pitches can express – into these non-pitched sonic expressions.

The final pre-coda section of the first movement (beginning at letter J) demonstrates another important integration of experimental compositional techniques – the use of extended aleatory.

accel. **J** Faster ♩ = 144

The image shows a musical score for a quartet. It consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system includes a tempo change to 'Faster' with a metronome marking of ♩ = 144. The score features complex rhythmic patterns with many beamed notes and rests. Dynamic markings include *f* (forte) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). Performance instructions such as 'enter ad lib.' are present. The second system continues the piece with similar rhythmic complexity and dynamic markings.

Walker's works of this period tend to use aleatoric techniques for one of two purposes: 1) to create a pulse-less, murmuring tapestry over which a melodic idea is presented; or 2) as an expression of "out of sync" energetic playing. In this latter case, it is again as if the instruments have "burst" whatever metrical confines had been previously imposed.

It is this second kind of aleatory that Walker employs in the first movement of this quartet. It represents the developmental culmination of the building energy of the previous sections.

The second movement of this quartet is one of only two examples in Walker's current catalogue of entirely meter-less music.⁶ The title "As One" is meant quite literally as the members of the quartet all play from cued parts, notated entirely without barlines. The score displays the general overlap and interaction of these parts.

⁶ The other example is *Touch the Sky* (1986) for cello and piano.

Whereas in many 20th century compositions, meter-less passages are employed to create a disjunction or rhythmic freedom, Walker uses this technique for her own musical purposes. In the case of this movement, it serves to create the sense of gathering unity described in the program note.

The last movement brings together many of the musical elements of the previous two movements, while also adding a jagged rhythmic energy and a jazzy harmonic inflection to the palate.

The middle section demonstrates the first kind of aleatory mentioned previously – the use of aleatoric techniques to create a “murmuring tapestry.” In this case, the lower three strings provide the tapestry over which the first violin’s melody is sung.

in a nocturnal mood

B

In the final section of the movement, meterless music co-exists with the energetic “rumble” theme of the opening. In terms of the “street fight” imagery which Walker mentions in her program note, the ending presents the vision of a city street after the fight, as the rumble music dies away amidst the meterless passages in the violin, marked “spooky.”

The image displays a musical score for a quartet, consisting of two systems of staves. Each system includes staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score features various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key markings include 'con sord.' (con sordina), 'p' (piano), 'mf' (mezzo-forte), 'freely, spooky', and 'sul tasto'. The notation is in a key with one flat and a common time signature.

In this quartet, Walker is interacting with tradition as it connects to the musical climate of the 1960’s and 1970’s – particularly the musical climate within academic and experimental musical circles. It is an interaction with the “American academic musical tradition.” The fact that Walker’s early and first mature period works make far greater use of experimental musical techniques is certainly a direct connection to their temporal closeness to her academic studies and her time spent in academic music circles – at Brown, at the Hartt School, and as a faculty member at Oberlin College.

By the time the second quartet was written in 1993, Walker was at a different career stage. Her works had been taken on by a major publisher, E.C. Schirmer Music Company of Boston, in those intervening years and was starting to get wider distribution. Although she had left academia in the early 1980’s, by the early 1990’s her career was in a full swing with increasing commissions, interest, and performances. She was far “further” than before from the academic musical climate and was forging her own grassroots career as a professional composer.

Short Set for String Quartet (1993) was commissioned by the Yellow Barn Music Festival in Vermont, and was premiered at the festival by the Ritterhouse Quartet. The title of the work is a reference to one of Walker's primary non-musical interests: tennis. A nationally ranked tournament tennis player in her youth, Walker continued to pursue tennis very seriously during her own schooling, and even served as the tennis coach for the Oberlin women's tennis team during her years as a Conservatory faculty member.⁷ The phrase "short set" thus serves as a tennis reference, giving a personal touch to this six movement suite.

The composer's program notes for this work are very revealing as to how it interacts with tradition.

In six movements: "A Splash of Cold Water", "River Song", "Scarcely a Scherzo", "Rhythm and Blues", "Shadow of Evening", and "Don't Step on My Toes!"

Although the string quartet repertoire is often associated with formal concert presentations, there is also the element of informality when chamber musicians gather to play music for their own enjoyment or to share with listeners. And it is from this tradition that the *Short Set* was inspired. For just as Haydn based his "Menuet" on a popular dance form of his day, so "Rhythm and Blues" might appear today. And rather than an "Allegro" to infuse energy, perhaps "A Splash of Cold Water" will do!

These are short pieces written in the American vernacular musical language. The intent is to provide music that is fun to play and to hear.⁸

As these comments suggest, the second quartet is a very conscious interaction with the notion of the "string quartet tradition." Walker connects the string quartet both to its roots as "serious European concert music" but also to the informal chamber music making that she loves and strongly supports. The breakdown of the work appears as follows:

"A Splash of Cold Water"	traditional "Allegro" opening movement, updated with rock rhythms and harmonies (see detailed analysis in part II of this essay)
"River Song"	a "slow movement", updated with folk inflections
"Scarcely a Scherzo"	a scherzo movement with humor
"Rhythm and Blues"	a contemporary "dance movement"

⁷ One of Walker's most career-defining works and popular works is her *Match Point* (1985) for band or orchestra. It is a dramatization of a short tennis match, involving a conductor with tennis racquet, timpani players with tennis balls, and many other theatrical elements.

⁸ *Short Set for String Quartet*, musical score, MMB Music, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri, 1993.

“Shadow of Evening” a second “slow movement”, combining the folk allusions of “River Song” with hints at the music of the more energetic movements

“Don’t Step on My Toes!” a jazzy finale

The overall form of the work (a “short set”) is also a personalization of the tradition as well. Each movement is a brief miniature, like a tennis point – rather than the large-scale extended discourse of the typical European string quartet literature.

Style-wise, this work incorporates far fewer experimental musical elements than does the first quartet. The most notable one that remains is the use of the “murmuring tapestry” aleatory, appearing in “River Song.”

The image displays two pages of a musical score, labeled 'D' and 'E'. Both pages are in the key of D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. Movement D (top page) features a piano introduction with dynamics (p), (p), p, and mp. It includes performance instructions such as 'unmeasured rapidly, blurred' for the upper strings. Movement E (bottom page) starts with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic and includes 'senza sord.' (without mutes) and a forte (f) dynamic. It features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs, and concludes with a forte (f) dynamic.

The final movement incorporates some of the non-pitched techniques as well, to add to the jazzy character and energy of the texture.

♩ = 120

Violin 1
Violin 2
Viola
Violoncello

tap violin with fingers
finger tremolo
tap violin with fingers
finger tremolo
tap viola with fingers
finger tremolo
(in the manner of a "soft-shoe")
pizz.
p relaxed
pizz.

The second quartet is one of Walker’s most appealing chamber music creations. Each movement creates a world of its own, yet lives within the broader consistent framework of an American suite. When listening, it is clear that one is experiencing a true updating and Americanization of the “string quartet tradition.”

In 1996, Walker received a joint commission from two string quartets to compose her third quartet, *Traveling Songs* (1996). There are a number of Walker hallmarks displayed in this work: 1) the structure of the work as a series of “contemporary adaptations”; 2) the personalization of the musical material to the premiere context (and commissioners); 3) the incorporation of “quasi-staged” dramatic elements within the context of chamber music. The program notes in the score appear as follows:

Jointly Commissioned by the Quapaw Quartet of the Arkansas Symphony and the Chamber Musicians of Northern California.

Traveling Songs are contemporary adaptations of familiar American songs about travel – travel of the body, of the spirit and of the imagination. These adaptations use the traditional songs as “springboards” for musical explorations – delighting in the sonorities, the colors and the humor latent in the tunes.

Because this work is a joint commission from string quartets in California and Arkansas, it seems appropriate to feature one song especially recognizing each state. Thus the first song is “Sweet Betsy From Pike” – a California Gold Rush Song from the 1850s. The melody is presented in a suitably rough-hewn manner – blatant quarter-notes in the key of C Major. Dynamic contrasts and tonal shifts are purposely blunt. And our “Sweet Betsy” is taken into different keys, including a switch to the minor mode. Finally, perhaps drawing upon the “sweetness” of the blues, the harmonies become more complex, with a merging of major and minor at the end.

“Follow the Drinkin’ Gourd” is based on a traditional African-American ballad. Dating back to the time of the Underground Railroad, the lyrics for this song provided a map to the runaway slaves. By heading toward the Big Dipper (the

“Drinkin’ Gourd”), the fugitives would head north, toward Canada and freedom. This instrumental version features a swing rhythm, marked “in walking style.” Occasional foot stomps are inserted as part of the journey. “Shimmering” tremoli may suggest the stars seen overhead.⁹

“Coming Home” is structured as a Minuet and Trio. There are many types of journeys home, and this is an especially American one!

Terror fills the soul of the composer (not from Arkansas) attempting to elaborate “Arkansas Traveler” for an audience in Little Rock! One dares not explore the humor of the state song. And yet how can one resist! And thus our “Traveler” is presented energetically, then daintily, then in a modern (cubistic!) fashion, and finally, joyfully! The listener might also hear the title proudly announced in the opening/recurrent rhythms.¹⁰

Structurally, as a four movement quartet, this work follows the typical pattern of fast – slow/medium – minuet-trio – finale/variations. However, other than this overall structural resemblance, the musical content of the work bears little relationship to the typical European quartet structure – the least so of any of Walker’s four quartets. It is the most different because of the use of “contemporary adaptations. Because the musical ideas and their development live in such a different world from European quartet tradition, Walker’s use of moderately traditional “structural shell” for the work serves to give it some kind of connection to the tradition.

“Contemporary adaptation” is a term used by Walker to describe the many of her compositions that use familiar tunes (folk songs, hymns, or spirituals) as the basis of each movement. These pieces go beyond “arrangements” in that they use the source material as simply a starting point for a complete musical discourse. They do not necessarily present the songs in a direct context (as in an arrangement), but rather the material becomes integrated harmonically, motivically, and texturally into Walker’s language. Walker’s frequent use of these “contemporary adaptations” in his concert music is a distinct characteristic of her work that sets her apart from many other concert music composers.¹¹

Walker’s career has developed through relationships and connections with performing ensembles who have come to know her music. New works come about as

⁹ The original version (as premiered) of the third string quartet had a different third movement entitled “I Wonder as I Wander”, based on the faux-Appalachian folk-song written by John Jacob Niles. Because of copyright restrictions on the tune, Walker’s quartet could not be published with that movement. Thus, in 2003, Walker replaced the original third movement with a new one, “Follow the Drinkin’ Gourd.” This movement is connected to another Walker composition of almost exactly the same time, *The Road to Freedom* (2003) for SATB chorus and piano – a choral work based upon that same African-American song. Some musical material is shared between these two pieces.

¹⁰ *Traveling Songs*, musical score, MMB Music, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri, 1996, 2003.

¹¹ A few recommended other works that contains “contemporary adaptations” are *A Concerto of Hymns and Spirituals* (1997) for trumpet and orchestra, *A Vision of Hills* (2002) for piano trio, and *Hymns and Spirituals* (2000) for brass trio.

commissions from groups who have enjoyed and performed the music before. The music is never created in a vacuum, but always is writing with a full awareness of the performers and their performing contexts. Thus, the customization of the subject matter to the two commissioning quartets (i.e., the choice of a song each from California and Arkansas) is wholly characteristic of her patterns.

The program notes are enigmatic about the third movement. This is for a very good reason – saying too much would give away the sheer fun and surprise of its impact. The “particularly American journey” to which the notes allude is that of a baseball game, and the tune used is “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” (“The Star Spangled Banner” is also quoted.) The movement is one of Walker’s “quasi-staged” dramatic compositions in which, within the context of an instrumental piece, the players are asked to act out or depict a dramatic scenario.¹²

The opening section of this movement depicts a warm-up game of catch before the baseball game begins, and the score explicitly choreographs the gestures and actions.

¹² Other compositions include the previously mentioned *Match Point* (1985) for band or orchestra (a depiction of a short tennis game) and *The Magic Oboe* (2003) for oboe and orchestra (where the oboist, conductor, and orchestra engage in a series of magic tricks during the piece.)

The trio section depicts the actual batting – pitching, swinging, missing, and finally a home run.

89 **G** "Trio—at—Bat"
at a suitably dramatic tempo

[Violin II provides the sound effects for Violin I swing]
swings and misses

swings and misses

short high gliss.

short high gliss.

(wind—up)

(The first "pitch") 1

(The second "pitch") 1

(wind—up)

(The first "pitch")

(The second "pitch")

[Viola and Cello = The Pitcher] [lean toward Violin II]

93

an especially grand series of wind—ups

Batter connects!
HOME RUN! *

rap knuckles on chair

(The third "pitch")
short high gliss.

(The third "pitch")
short high gliss.

f

97

everyone watch "home run" sail up, over Viola and off—

Triumphantly **H** *rit.* *a tempo*

Violin I picks up violin and raises arms in celebration

f

f

f

f

At letter H, the violin's "triumphant" quote is from the "Star Spangled Banner", another tune always sung at American baseball games.

After another jaunty run through the minuet music, the coda ends the movement in a spirit of good humor and satisfaction.

134

Everyone bounces head (slightly) in rhythm to Cello as they follow the bouncing ball from Cello to front of stage and off in to audience. *Players exchange the "high-five" slap.*

only a slight rit. - - - - -

[a single up the line wins the game] [Everyone wins!]

This movement provides one of the most concise examples of Walker's "quasi-staged" drama within chamber music. Her strong sense of humor pervades many of her compositions. In this sense, she is extending the tradition of "chamber music" in another direction. She is aware that the contemporary musician is indeed a "performer", who must entertain as well as be a musician. After seeing first-hand a performance of any of the Walker compositions employing these dramatic elements, one notes instantly how quickly the audience is drawn into the musical discourse. She is careful to never let these ideas become "gimmicky" for their own sake – rather they become a truly integral part of the musical concept of each piece.

Walker's fourth string quartet, *Quartet for Leap Year* (2000), is the most straightforward of her four quartets, but it represents a very important facet of her output – the creation of music for amateur and student performers.

No program notes are provided in the score for this quartet, primarily because its language and concepts are easy to grasp. It was commissioned by Ronald and Marilyn Krentzman¹³ on the occasion of their daughter Laura's 16th birthday. Laura Krentzman is a violist, and the work was written for the high school string quartet in which she was then playing. The quartet is cast in four movements: "A Jolly Rag", "Light Waltz", "Fast Fiddling", "Walking Bass." The notation and musical ideas are presented in a manner suitable for the technical content of that performer level.

¹³ Ronald Krentzman was Gwyneth Walker's copyist for many years.

From the first movement, "A Jolly Rag":

Musical score for "A Jolly Rag" from the first movement, measures 64-73. The score is in 2/4 time and G major. It features a piano (p) and mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic range. The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 64-68) includes a first ending bracket labeled 'G'. The second system (measures 69-73) includes a second ending bracket labeled 'H'. The score is written for piano and includes dynamics such as *ord.*, *p*, *mf*, and *acc.*

From the second movement, "A Light Waltz":

Musical score for "A Light Waltz" from the second movement, measures 84-90. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It features a piano (p) and forte (f) dynamic range. The score is written for piano and includes dynamics such as *f* and *ord.*

As with all of Walker's compositions for amateur or student performers, the music is perfectly gauged to be appropriate in content and difficulty level. She has received the most recognition in this area for her many works for community choruses and community orchestras. The fourth quartet marked one of her first chamber pieces conceived specifically for high school age (student) musicians. In recent times, she has begun to amplify this aspect of her catalogue by creating a series of instrumental compositions for winds and brass, specifically intended for student performers.¹⁴

Throughout the four string quartets, Gwyneth Walker displays her own personal musical style. Most major trends and facets of her entire instrumental output are represented in these pieces. Because of the history and connotations of the string quartet medium, her quartets display, in a marked way, how her work interacts with tradition. As Walker concluded in her doctoral thesis, the composer's context is the determining factor for what she rejects, accepts, changes, or amplifies from varying musical traditions. Her own string quartets show her forging of a personal American quartet tradition – appealing, characterful, and individualistic. These are works that appeal to performer and listeners alike and are music “of their time and place” every bit as much as the quartets of Ives and Schoenberg.

II. An Analysis of “A Splash of Cold Water”

As mentioned in the introduction, this section of the essay will provide a detailed analysis of a single movement from Walker's second string quartet.

American composer Gwyneth Walker's *Short Set for String Quartet* (1993) is a work in six brief movements. “A Splash of Cold Water” (hereafter called “A Splash”) is the opening movement. As previously reference, Walker's program notes for the quartet describe the purpose of the movement as an American updating of traditional forms and ideas from the classical string quartet repertoire (as typified by Mozart and Haydn). Regarding this movement, she comments,

*And rather than an "Allegro" to infuse energy, perhaps "A Splash of Cold Water" will do!*¹⁵

¹⁴ Works in this series besides the fourth quartet include *Suite for Oboe and Piano* (2005), *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano: “Genesis”* (2005), *Suite for Trumpet and Piano* (2005), and *Threesome* (2005) for flute, oboe, and clarinet.

¹⁵ <http://www.gwynethwalker.com/shortset.html>

In this way, the purpose of this movement in the context of quartet is indeed one of introduction and “energy infusion.” It is thus a brief movement, with a concise set of musical materials and a condensed form. In this sense (of condensed form), Walker’s comparison of the movement to the opening “Sonata-Allegro” of a classical quartet is not particularly fruitful as the extent of material presentation and development of a classical “Sonata-Allegro” is not part of the purpose of “A Splash.”

This brief analysis will explore the piece in terms of three primary aspects: 1) overall form; 2) harmony; 3) rhythm and other musical features. At all times, the aural impact of the work and the effect of form and harmony on this will be considered – as this is one of the most important factors in Walker’s music.

Overall Form

The large chunks of musical material in “A Splash” can be split easily into two types – referred to for ease of use as “dance material” and “chorale material.” The “dance material” is energetic and rhythmic – usually articulated in a staccato fashion. Although it is not contrapuntal, there is interplay between the parts which makes the texture not strictly homophonic either. By contrast, the “chorale material” is chordal/homophonic and of less overt energy. The energy contained in the “chorale material” sections is potential energy – ready to burst forth into the “dance material.” The sections of “chorale material” are shorter in length than their connected sections of “dance material.”

“A Splash” can be generally broken into these large formal sections.

Section A (“dance material”)	mm. 1-27	27 measures
Section B (“chorale material”)	mm. 28-45	18
Section A ¹ (“dance material”)	mm. 46-73	28
Section B ¹ (“chorale material”)	mm. 74-79	6
Section A ² (“dance material”)	mm. 80-88	8
Coda (“two allusions”)	mm. 89-93	5

What these formal section breakdowns reveal is a structure that can be viewed in two ways. One is an alternation structure/”simple rondo” (with only one contrasting episode) of A-B-A¹-B¹-A²-Coda.

The other is a bi-partite structure: A-B-A¹ followed by B¹-A²-Coda. The justification for this bi-partite structure comes from the section proportions. Looking at it in this manner, two sections of the same length frame one of a different length in each case. However, at the same time, the pattern of the “chorale material” sections being shorter than the “dance material” is maintained.

Thus, in the first group, the sandwiched section (because it is “chorale material”) is shorter than its surrounding ones of nearly equal length. In the second group, the middle section (because it is “dance material”) is of a longer length.

What purpose does viewing the structure of the work in this way have? It provides a way to explain the aural impact of the piece’s building and increasing energy. One of the strongest ways to create energy is to set a structure in place, and then reduce its size. In this manner, Walker combines an “easy to hear” simple rondo structure with a structure of increasing “concentration” – thus subconsciously providing the listener with the visceral effect of energy increase.

Walker has commented that she intended to create two contrasting themes with the material. The opening material (“dance”) is energetic with the octave leap whereas the second material (“chorale”) is stepwise – thus creating an easily audible contrast.

Harmony

The harmony of the work is based around a D dorian scale, with “additions.” These additions are, however, diatonic additions, and not chromatic ones. This will be shown in more detail.

The way in which the harmony moves within the D dorian mode established is one that owes itself to the harmonic modality of American folk music and hymnody – rather than the modality of Medieval and Renaissance music. However, despite the motion of chords coming from this modality, Walker uses added tone harmony (of 6ths, 2nds/9ths, and 7ths to triadic sonorities) to create a contemporary color.

Within this modal framework, the intervals of 4ths and 5ths play a crucial role and serve as harmonic building blocks of the piece that allow for the diatonic additions to occur as a natural extension of the harmony.

Section A (“dance material”)

The opening measures (1-3) of the work establish a chord of stacked 4ths: D-G-C-F. When the C drops out in bar 4, it is still implied in the ear. The first violin’s entrance in m. 5 with “bouncing D’s” turns the chord into a D6 harmony. This basic sonority is articulated and revoiced in mm. 5-12.

Of important note is the bass line in the cello in mm. 6 and 8 which moves from the D to the G – thus referring back to the stacked 4th harmony of the opening measures. It also alludes to role that the 4th (G in this case) has as an “aural dominant” (in actuality, a sub-dominant) will have in the work. This becomes articulated very clearly in m. 13 where the viola and cello pulse together on a G-B dyad (alluding to G major) before returning to the D modality.

Thus, this opening section provides an articulation of a basic harmonic sonority. In m. 19-20, the first diatonic addition appears. The cello and viola articulate a chord progression of G-Bb-C(9)-D.

The cadential progression between a C (major) and D (minor/modal) harmony is an important one in this modal language, and it returns throughout the rest of this piece as well as in many other works of Walker's. The C-natural becomes a "modal leading tone" – very common in American folk music. (For good examples, see the original harmonization of the American folk hymn *Wondrous Love* in William Walker's The Southern Harmony of 1854.)

The difference between a "tonal leading tone" and a "modal leading tone" comes in the interval between the leading tone and the tonic. In a typical tonal progression, the leading tone is sharpened (C#), even in the minor, and thus a half-step is the interval between the C# and the D. A modal leading tone, by contrast is not sharpened, and thus a whole step is the interval. (This characteristic "modal cadential" sound can be found in a wide range of music – from the Medieval and Renaissance Machaut and Josquin to early American folk music.)

In this case, the added 9th is a contemporary inflection, added by Walker to the modal chord. Also, the Bb harmonic addition becomes a simple diatonic extension, for sonic purposes.

The rest of this section of the work reiterates that same chord progression in a more extended fashion (with some extensions within) – G-Bb-C-D (mm. 24-27).

Section B ("chorale material")

This next section, of "chorale material" presents in a homophonic form all of the basic harmonic material and progressions of the work.

The reduction below shows all of the chords and their progressions in this section. Each barline indicates a "phrase" end and the half note chords are ones which are longer than the others. (The original section is in 6/8 time.)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. Each system consists of two staves, a treble clef on top and a bass clef on the bottom. The first system shows a series of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system continues this pattern, with the bass line showing more stepwise motion and some eighth-note patterns.

The bass line of this section proceeds in a mostly stepwise manner. The first phrase of this section presents an alternation between the C and D chords which was alluded to earlier (and continues to be an important cadential sequence.)

By the second phrase, the upper two voices (first and second violins) move in the ubiquitous parallel 4ths. They continue in this manner for the entire rest of the section (until the last chord). In this second phrase, the step-wise bass motion provides the B-flat diatonic extension in the base.

In the third phrase, the lower two voices (viola and cello) move in parallel 3rds in mostly stepwise motion. This re-iterates the Bb diatonic extension and also adds an E-flat in the final chord – which is simply a transposition of the earlier basic sonority.

In the fourth and fifth phrases, both voice pairs are moving in contrary motion parallel 4ths. The final harmonies are repeated more than once (not shown in the above model) before the final dominant minor 9th chord.

Section A¹ (“dance material”)

The next section returns to the rhythmic patterns and tonality of the opening of the work. D dorian is re-articulated and punctuated by the stacked 4ths chords again (m. 47). In m. 51, a tremolando 4th of Ab-Eb provides a coloristic addition to the basic D modality.

In mm. 54-61, the same basic progressions and material from the opening section are repeated, including the beginnings of the G-Bb-C-D cadential formula.

However, in the last two beats of m. 61 the cello moves from C to D, rather than staying on C for the remainder of that measure. This provides a motion towards E. Suddenly in m. 62, the pattern continues to be rearticulated, but this time in E.

This “surprise” modulation comes from American rock music, in which the motion upwards tonally by a whole-step is very common. (It is not at all common in typical common period practice harmony – in fact, the tonal area one whole-step higher is almost never explored.)

The passage of music from mm. 62-73 can be reduced as below.



The musical purpose of this section is to provide a modulation to section B¹ which is centered in Eb/Ab. From the harmonic base, there is a motion from E-A, then from G-C. The 4ths thus return again in this manner. (The upper voices in this section also are centered around the motion of parallel 4ths.)

In the 2nd and 4th measures of the above reduction, those pivot chords allude back to the chords of 3rds and 4ths in the first “chorale material” section. However, this time, they are no longer diatonic. The chromatic interval of the augmented and diminished octaves (C-C# and E-Eb) provides the co-existence of harmonic material from each progression. Thus, the C# comes from the E dorian modality of measure 1. The C-natural alludes to the 3rd measure’s C-extension modality. The 3rd 4th measure’s E-natural comes from the C of the previous measure and the E-flat alludes to the upcoming Eb tonality towards which the next three harmonic chords move.

The final landing on Ab in the bass provides the 4th above Eb – the tonal center of the following section. Thus, a cadential sense is created moving into this section.

Section B¹ (“chorale material”)

This section opens identically to Section B, except it is transposed to Eb instead of the original D. The last chord of m. 75 is again a chord of stacked 4ths. In mm. 76-79, a series of pentatonic flourishes lead to the final chord consisting of a 4th and 3rd again.

The final measure of this section (m. 79) provides a focus down towards an Ab, which is the “Second Harmonic Pole” (to use a term Walker often does) of the original key of D

dorian. In this sense, there has been a progression away from the original D dorian before it returns with vigor in the next section.

Section A² (“dance material”)

This section returns to the opening material again in D dorian. The same harmonic progressions and single diatonic extension occur.

Coda (“two allusions”)

The phrase “two allusions” to describe this section refers to the two pieces of material within this very short (5 measure) section. The opening measures (mm. 89-92) present an allusion to the opening four chords of Section B (“chorale material”). The last chord dissolves upwards in a dramatic glissando.

After a grand pause, the final measure alludes to the “dance material” with the “rock rhythm” (to be discussed below) of four 8th notes. The harmonic progression of this is the previously discussed C-D cadential pattern. The first inversion C7 chord is followed by an “open” D chord. (The “open” chord, without either a major or minor 3rd is a common feature of modal music.)

Rhythm and Other Musical Features

The rhythms of “A Splash” owe a great deal to American rock music. Two notable features of American rock rhythm are: 1) patterns in 4/4 with strong emphases on beats 1 and 3 and 2) patterns of four (or more) 8th notes where the accented beat is on the last 8th note and thus NOT on a typical “downbeat.”

Although “A Splash” is notated in 2/2 for ease of performer counter, it can be felt as a fast 4/4.

In particular, some rock music often particularly emphasizes the 3rd beat, so as to make it very clear that beat 3 is just as important as beat 1. By casting the work in 2/2, this makes it very clear that quarter note beat 3 would be just as important (since it is, in 2/2, the “other” beat.)

One of the best examples of both of these features comes in the opening first violin solo (mm. 5-8; see example below) which presents a rhythmic pattern that goes through all the rest of the work. On the 3rd quarter note beat, Walker accents the pattern by using the D an octave higher. Likewise, in the second measure, on the last 8th note, the high D is employed again and is given an accent.



The meter of the work is generally notated as 2/2 with the exception of the “chorale material” sections, which are in 6/8. Before the choral sections occur, there is a bar of 11/8 (mm. 26 and 88) which is simply a free addition of 3/8 bar to a normal 2/2 bar.

By placing the “chorale material” sections in 6/8, Walker creates a sense of hidden energy, even during these slower and more peaceful parts. Since we are expecting 8th note groupings in 4 (and the half-note or quarter-note pulse), the irregular feel of the rhythm in this section gives a disruptive energy while still having its own consistency.

One of the other salient musical features of this work include the frequent inclusions of glissandi. Glissandi throughout the work are used in two ways: 1) to move from one clear chord/pitch to another (e.g., m. 83) or 2) to move to indeterminate pitches as a gesture (mm. 69 or 91). In the simplest sense, glissandi provide a tremendous amount of energy within the work. In a purely pictorial sense, the glissandi are reminiscent of throwing a bucket of water in somebody’s face – the “splash” that inspired this piece.

Conclusions

The exploration of the harmony and form in “A Splash” can be seen in fairly simple terms. The work begins in D dorian (amplified by diatonic additions), moves to a brief excursion in Eb before returning suddenly to D dorian for its conclusion. The cadential formulas and harmonic progressions owe primarily to two sources: 1) harmony in American folk music; 2) contemporary added tone excursions.

The rhythmic structure of the work comes out of American rock, and these patterns are used consistently, with the addition of glissandi for energy.

We are given the overall feeling of a coloring and amplifying of a basic D dorian modality. Again, “energy infusion” becomes the dominant theme. All of the harmonic and rhythmic structures in this work serve to achieve that goal.

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