

## CURTAIN

*Curtain*, for 15 musicians, was commissioned by the Austrian Cultural Forum NY for a festival of my music to celebrate my 50th birthday and farewell from New York City before my move to Irvine. It continues a line of inquiry I began in *Castle of Turns*, composed in 2007, and *Surroundedness* (2012). As in those pieces, phrases that would normally be regarded as ornaments - trills, etc. - are significant carriers of the musical message. While in *Surroundedness* slow-moving melodies are always perceptible yet encircled by ornamentation, *Curtain* investigates kinetic possibilities inherent in these trills themselves by stretching them to ever wider intervals and combining them with other ornaments in parallel or contrary motion.

The main focus of *Curtain*, however, is another element already present (though to a lesser degree) in its predecessor pieces: the idea of "painting over" a melodic/harmonic foundation. In *Castle of Turns*, a harp was at odds with the rest of the ensemble yet always subliminally audible in the background, carrying its own message. In *Surroundedness*, this role was played primarily by the piano, albeit not with the same constancy. In *Curtain*, a string quartet becomes the victim of the ensemble's broad paintbrush. The quartet functions as a separate entity of sorts, yet this is not a concerto grosso for string quartet and ensemble. If anything, it is an anti-concerto, as the quartet, while crucial to the overall sound and often the first section to introduce a musical idea, rarely if ever gets a chance to shine in its own right as it is constantly threatened or drowned out by the other 11 musicians.

Thus, the string quartet acts as a sort of canvas onto which I paint the other instruments' parts. The analogy is apt, because while the idea of multiple, simultaneous strands of music is not without precedent (Charles Ives was a major innovator in this regard), my primary influences in this work are visual: the "Übermalungen" ("over-paintings") of Austrian painter Arnulf Rainer, or William Kentridge's animated drawings based on successive erasure of previous drawings, as well as his collages superimposed onto woven tapestries.

Yet string quartet and ensemble also attempt to reconcile, and sometimes they momentarily meld together, blurring the distinction between canvas and paint. During the course of the piece, the canvas provided by the quartet can change color; it can be smooth or rough, creased, spiky... and the other instruments not only play over it but also attempt to straighten it out or reconstitute it. They cover the foundation like a curtain, sometimes dense but sometimes transparent or riddled with holes.