

*String Quartet No. 2* by Richard Wilson

A work commissioned by Phi Beta Kappa might be expected to display the most intimidating compositional devices--marvels of canon, fugue, or serialization. I may as well admit at the outset that my *String Quartet No. 2* is not especially concerned with cerebral or academic accomplishment. If it bears any relation at all to Phi Beta Kappa it would be to that institution's origin as a debating society holding raucous meetings in a tavern in Virginia. The piece contains a good deal of argumentation, interruption, contradiction, and even muddlement. The voices are only occasionally united in harmony, and at such points the sonorities might not be deemed harmonious by every listener--certainly not by the 18th century founders of the society.

The "image" that lies behind the sonority of the work is, I recognized after finishing it, the familiar dominant seventh, appearing sometimes altered but more often sounding against another dominant seventh representing a tonality remote from the first. Thus bi-tonality is evident in the vertical, though less so in the horizontal, dimension. The characteristic sound of two superimposed dominants is what--more than anything else--ties the four movements together.

The four movements are conventional to the extent that the second has some very slow music, the third is a scherzo (even with trio and repetition da capo!) and the outer movements contain perhaps the most assertive expression. I once considered labeling the four movements respectively: Confidence, Doubt, Irony and Ambiguity, with the overall title, SIGNS OF LIFE. But these titles did not wear well and I soon discarded them. It seemed that each movement was really a contention among several, or all four, characteristics in which the outcome was not entirely clear.

To lovers of fiercely advanced music, who are apt to find this work old-fashioned, I would offer this defense: the truly old-fashioned composer would have progressed from ambiguity to blustering confidence. Speaking roughly, my piece moves in the opposite direction, toward increasing ambiguity. Does this not make it particularly a child of The Age of Uncertainty? More seriously, I do believe that, whatever the sequence of events, the pitting of complexity against order, ambiguity against affirmation, forms a basis for musical discourse irrespective of fashion and style.

--RW