

APRIL 11, 1988

CHARLES WUORINEN's Third String Quartet (1987) was played in January by Benjamin Hudson, Carol Zeavin, Lois Martin, and Fred Sherry at a Group for Contemporary Music concert in Merkin Hall. It is a long span of thoughtful, beautiful music, generated, the composer says in his program note, by a phrase of the "Asperges me" chant. It begins with a characteristic burst of Wuorinen energy but then settles on some long chords and moves into a stretch of quiet counterpoint, reaching a still point from which the "Asperges me" melody—hitherto adumbrated by motifs or melodies with small steps—starts out *en clair* from the bottom G of the first violin. But this is not archaizing music: chromatic displacements and developments soon take over. (In fact, the second violin, in longer notes, sings the whole phrase "Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean" without breaking mode, but this is more apparent in the score than to the ear.) Further grave contrapuntal discourse ensues. The piece moves deliberately, without haste. One can hear everything happen. An eighth-note pulse moves through flexible periods, barred (for convenience of playing, not for downbeats) in a variety of metres. Structure is defined by returns to G, which is then treated as the starting point for new explorations of motifs derived from the chant fragment. Canons, imitations, augmenta-

tions are audible. There is no outré writing for the instruments, but there is variety of texture—now close, now wide-spaced. The "infinitely slow" resolution to the final chord is moving. This is a poetic—I'd say an inspired—composition, representing Wuorinen in an unusually intimate vein, and it strikes me as a major contribution to the string-quartet repertory. The Group players gave a devoted, carefully balanced, gripping performance, which needed only to be a little tighter. The score (which is published by Peters) suggests a duration of twenty-five and a half minutes, and the Merkin Hall performance lasted just over half an hour.

—ANDREW PORTER