

# MARTIN BRESNICK – String Quartet No. 3

American Modern Contemporary composer Martin Bresnick [born 1946] has written at least three string quartets. As with most contemporary composers, and especially academics, of which Bresnick is one, he has written music in many styles.

The Third Quartet, written in 1992, begins with a brilliant slow movement, marked *Calmo Risoluto Teneramente* – make of that what you will. It translates from Italian as *Calm Resolute Tenderly*, which is surely a meaningful composer direction. A sparse section of sustained brass-like chords eases into the work, there is no melody here, just the most wonderful soundscape. Slowly, slight changes to the harmonies begin to unfold and eventually, there is a sense of melody over the chords. As stronger melodies take shape, the feeling is almost spiritual, with the violins probing, sometimes even in a modal fashion. The sustained chords have dissipated now and some sharp interjections against a walking, pizzicato cello line create a fine mood. Nearing the end, the feeling is so sweet and light as the violins investigate pleasing, sparse melodies which eventually fade to an end. I found this movement to be very special, with a rare quality of uniqueness – simply marvellous.

This is followed by a movement marked *Feroce Cascando* – Google had a little trouble working out which language this was, but I think that ‘fierce’ is the operative term – although it may be a little strong for the music as I hear it. Powerful, harmonised violin lines compete and glissandos and other string sound effects abound in this propulsive opening. A sudden pause leads to a violin expressing seemingly random phrases, over a very quiet, slightly rhythmic accompaniment. The intensity of the prominent violin increases, almost to a breaking point in a strong solo passage. A slight easing of the pressure leads to an unusually long violin tone, which fades out.

The final movement is marked *Pensieri Oscuri le Stelle*, which again, is slightly ambiguous – I’m going with ‘Dark Thought the Stars’. A lone lamenting violin leads into a tender, harmonised, very sparse section. Then follows an increased sense of activity as two violins engage in a moderately dissonant dialogue, which eventually moves into a rhythmic phase with ensemble accompaniment. A sudden increase in tempo causes the intensity to lighten, but not for long. There is a return to a violin duet, with powerful, harsh phrases a feature. Now a shrill solo violin crafts a beautiful melodic passage and the second violin contributes in a lower register. For

a time, the music is barely audible with minimal violin phrases, eventually becoming a succession of long tones, which brings the work to a faded conclusion.

The review CD, *Martin Bresnick – Music for Strings*, on New World Records/Composers Recordings also contains the five named-movement String Quartet No. 2, written in 1984 and titled *Bucephalus* – the name of Alexander the Great's legendary horse, together with another fascinating work, *Wir Weben, Wir Weben* (We weave) for String Sextet. These three pieces are all performed by different ensembles.

Unfortunately, this disc is not freely available, except as a download from Amazon US and UK. However I have come across a copy at [Arkiv Music](#). I recently picked up a *new and used* copy via Amazon US.

The CD is on Spotify, together with a version of the Second Quartet performed by the Flux Quartet. [YouTube](#) and [earsense](#) have versions of both Quartets Nos. 2 and 3 but I find the Third Quartet to be way too confronting – it is just so different from the review CD.

**Listenability:** Mildly confronting work with a stunning slow movement.