

Intelektualni čar: s strastjo prethotapljena tradicija v Godalnih kvartetih angleškega skladatelja Hugh Wooda

Intellectual Magic: Tradition Infiltrated by Passion in the String Quartets of the English Composer Hugh Wood

Ključne besede: Hugh Wood, godalni kvartet, modernizem, tradicionalizem, glasbeni motiv

Keywords: Hugh Wood, string quartet, modernism, traditionalism, musical motifs

IZVLEČEK

ABSTRACT

Skozi zgodovino glasbe je vselej obstajal konflikt med starim in novim. Enako velja za glasbo angleškega skladatelja Hugh Wooda (r. 1932). Najprej je študiral zgodovino, nato kompozicijo z Anthonyjem Milnerjem, Iainom Hamiltonom in Mátyásom Seiberjem, in od vsakega posebej znal najti lepoto glasbe, zlasti melodike, in mojstrstvo v kontrapunktu; dvanajstonski serialistični tehniki; in raznolik ter nedogmatski pristop h kompoziciji. To se zrcali v domala univerzalni hvale njegove glasbe pri kritikih. V njegovem opusu, ki šteje pet godalnih kvartetov, imajo prvi, četrti in peti godalni kvartet več stavkov, medtem ko sta drugogi in tretji oblikovana kot nepretrgana niza številnih odsekov. Kvarteta št. 1, 4 in 5 imajo kratke med seboj ločene stavke, ki navidezno temeljijo na tradicionalnih glasbenih oblikah, tridelni formi, rondoju, sonati, scherzu in triu, a praktično ponujajo kaj malo namigov nanje zaradi živahnih, a zgoščenih idejah in subtilnih motivičnih povezav, ki nastajajo z rabo obsežnih melodičnih fragmentov, predstavljenih na samem začetku vsakega dela. Kvarteta št. 2 in 3 sta po vnanjosti drugačna, a tu Wood grupira številne odseke (39 v Drugem in 24 v Tretjem godalnem kvartetu), da bi nakazal tradicionalne oblike. Toda to je varljivo, saj gre za dramaturški argument na ravni podrobnosti, ki zakrinka vsa-

Throughout the history of music there has often been a conflict between the old and the new. This applies very much to the music of the English composer, Hugh Wood (b.1932). Studying history, and later composition with Anthony Milner, Iain Hamilton and Mátyás Seiber, he respectively gained from them beauty of music, especially melody, and a mastery of counterpoint; the technique of twelve-note serialism; and a varied and undogmatic approach to composition. This has been reflected in almost universal praise for his music from the critics. Of his five numbered string quartets, the first, fourth and fifth are cast in separate movements, while the second and third play continuously in a large number of linked sections. Quartets Nos.1, 4 and 5 have short separate movements which ostensibly employ traditional forms, ternary, rondo, sonata, scherzo and trio, but in practice give little indication of this because of the vivid but terse ideas and the subtlety of motivic connections that arise from the use of extensive melodic fragments given at the very beginning of each work. The Quartets Nos. 2 and 3 are superficially different in technique, but here Wood groups his numerous sections (39 for No.2 and 24 for No.3) to suggest traditional forms. Again this is deceptive as there is dramatic

kršno očitno povezavo s tradicionalnimi formami. Skupni učinek je enak tistemu pri drami, okrepljeni z močnim občutkom za napredek glasbe. Skladatelj je ohranil nekatere sledi tradicionalne glasbene oblike in njihovih kompozicijskih tehnik, vendar je ob enem na vseh ravneh oživil tematsko gradivo z živahnostjo, domišljijo in močnim čutom za glasbeno dramo, združeno z močno mrežo motivov. To je intelektualni čar, ki kaže te kvartete kot nekaj resnično posebnega.

argument at a detailed level which disguises any obvious connection with these traditional forms. The overall effect is one of drama, enhanced by a strong feeling for the progress of the music. The composer has retained some vestiges of traditional form and other techniques in his music, but at the same time has at all stages enlivened his thematic material with vividness, imagination and a strong sense of musical drama coupled with a strong motivic network. This is the intellectual magic that marks out these quartets as very special.

Throughout the history of music there has often been a conflict between the old and the new. In many cases it has not shown itself very strongly, while at others it has become a major issue. Usually this appears in the work of two different composers, at a time of transition from one style or period to another. Conservative composers will adhere to an older or even archaic style, while more adventurous ones will abandon the old style for the latest features. Examples of this can be found in the case of Johann Sebastian Bach and his son Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach. Earlier this can be seen in the lingering Renaissance features of the music of Lassus and Palestrina which are strongly contrasted with the advanced style that was being used by Claudio Monteverdi soon after their deaths. More interesting, though, are the examples of the two trends being present in the same composer. Again this will tend to be most noticeable in the periods when one style is giving way to another. This can be discerned in the case of Beethoven whose adherence to Classical forms persists right to the late period in his life, but increasingly he superimposes a strong emotional Romanticism on these inherited features. This conflict in no way devalues his music: in fact, it is one of the glories of his compositions. They are enlivened by a magical process that transforms and enhances the traditional forms in which most of his works are cast.

Straddling the late 19th century and the early 20th century another composer falls into this category: Gustav Mahler. On the one hand he still observed the idea of traditional formal procedures, yet he modified them in such a way that they were almost unrecognisable. In doing so he transformed these almost outdated procedures into music that was so new that among many people it was often totally misunderstood. Yet fifty years after Mahler's death the situation changed and the inspiration that he added to the traditional techniques was beginning to be understood, and he was even thought of as a pioneer of European modernism in music. Nearly one hundred years after his death in 1911, there is almost universal agreement about his ability to infiltrate these old and, in some cases, obsolete methods with an inspiration that was barely recognised at the time. Many years after Mahler's death, there was some criticism among the avant-garde of the 1950s that Arnold Schoenberg, despite his invention of the twelve-note (or twelve-tone) system in the 1920s, remained faithful to the Classical forms of the late 18th century. The composer Pierre Boulez was particularly scornful of his reluctance to modernise other parameters than the notes chosen for a particular composition. Yet it was precisely these parameters that helped to make Schoenberg's music approachable, even if his music has

never gained a really popular following. It is here that we can begin to understand the dilemma that many composers have faced in the middle of the 20th century.

This dilemma can be stated briefly as follows: to what extent should one retain techniques of the 19th century and earlier, to what extent should one follow the lead that Schoenberg made in his devising of twelve-note technique, and to what extent should one adopt the total serial methods being advocated in the 1950s by Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono and, above all, Karlheinz Stockhausen. For composers who were achieving their maturity in the 1950s, this was a very difficult choice. If they did not employ a sufficiently advanced technique, their music would be branded irrelevant, or at the very least, their music would be seen to compromise the high artistic ideals promoted by Boulez and his group. This was no academic issue in the United Kingdom, especially after 1959, when the musical output of the British Broadcasting Corporation was dominated by its Controller, William Glock, and his assistant, Hans Keller. For the next ten years or so, a large number of traditionally oriented living composers were deliberately excluded from the BBC's Third Programme (later Radio 3) for the simple reason that they were not sufficiently modern. On the other hand this is the environment in which a group of adventurous young British composers also found themselves. These included Alexander Goehr (b.1932), Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle (both b.1934), all of whom had no trouble satisfying Glock's criteria for inclusion in the BBC's modern music programmes. Another composer, an almost exact contemporary of Goehr's, Hugh Wood (b.1932), was himself in precisely the same situation. With his modernist style he would not be excluded either.

Like Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, Hugh Wood was born in North West England, but, unlike them, he did not study music at the Royal Manchester College of Music or the University of Manchester. Instead, first of all he studied history at the University of Oxford. His change of direction was marked by his subsequent musical studies with three composers: Anthony Milner (1925-2002), Iain Hamilton (1922-2000) and Máttyás Seiber (1905-60). Judging by the music of these three men, Wood would have gained the experience of a wide range of ideas. Milner is normally looked upon as a conservative composer in the English tradition, while the Scottish composer, Iain Hamilton, was a dedicated follower of the twelve-note techniques of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. Seiber, who had emigrated from Hungary in the 1930s, was a composer who could put his hand to almost anything, whether it was folk music, jazz, renaissance pastiche, or twelve-note serialism. Over and above this, he was a superb teacher and communicator. The formative influence on Wood of these three composers must have been considerable.

At the time Wood was beginning to make his mark as a composer, he was closely involved with writing about music. One of the most significant of his articles was his contribution on British music to Howard Hartog's *European Music in the Twentieth Century* in the revised 1961 edition.¹ In the first edition of the book the chapter on British music had previously been written by the composer already mentioned, Anthony Milner, but the editor considered that this chapter should now be replaced by a new one because of the rapidly changing situation. Wood set about his task without apology, saying that British music usually took its influences from the Continent of Europe with some 25 years' delay and although there had

Howard Hartog (ed). *European Music in the Twentieth Century*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1957; Harmondsworth Penguin, 2/1961.

been a considerable increase in the quantity of British music, the quality was not always high.² His selection of the composers chosen to illustrate the best of British music at the time give a clear indication of his taste, preferences and the direction that his own music was likely to follow in the years to come. It is clear, for example, that while he was very well disposed to Milner, he only took from him the idea of the beauty of music, especially melody, a mastery of counterpoint and probably some unusual forms, notably the totally unusual but convincing plan found in the *Orchestral Variations on 'Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen'* op.14 of 1958. Wood showed his complete sympathy with the aims of twelve-note technique, which he adopted for his own music, but he was not necessarily happy to work with the musical style employed by his teacher Iain Hamilton whose chapter in Hartog's book noted above discussed the music of Webern and Berg.³ Wood took as an example of Hamilton's pointillist application of Webern's techniques, the *Sinfonia for two orchestras* of 1958 which illustrates the style well. Despite the fact that he cited this work as a good indication of Hamilton's art, Wood seems not to have been convinced that this virtually non-melodic method was suitable for him. Moreover, he was determined to ensure that a melodic or at the very least a thematic approach was to be an important feature of his music. It was at this stage that the superb teaching of Mätÿäs Seiber instilled into Wood's music the fastidiousness which has always been a feature and confirmed his own feelings about thematicism in the broadest sense. Moreover we have a wonderful tribute to his teacher in Wood's own article on Seiber in *The Musical Times*⁴ and entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.⁵ Seiber was an enthusiastic user of the twelve-note system, but was always circumspect on its use. In a broadcast talk on his own *Quartetto Lirico*, it was evident that he was always insistent that what was important was the *sound* of the music, not any slavish adherence to a system.⁶ One other significant composer is discussed by Wood in his article, Alan Bush, who encouraged Wood to pursue a career in music. One work, in particular, is singled out for praise, *Dialectic* for string quartet of 1929, music that seems to have a direct bearing on Wood's string quartets. Wood himself wrote of *Dialectic* words that might apply to his own string quartets:

... the material is argued out with a mastery of contrapuntal technique and concentration of musical thought unparalleled in English music of the period. Its extreme but never oppressive thematic economy was to form the basis of an undogmatic and craftsmanlike compositional theory, which requires that all the melodic material in a work should be 'thematic', i.e. deriving from a basic theme.⁷

Wood's earliest acknowledged compositions date from the late 1950s. A String Quartet in B flat (not part of the numbered five) of 1957 was first performed at the Cheltenham Festival in 1959, while the String Quartet No.1 was played there in 1962. The latter work was well received and over the next few years received two commercial recordings,

Hugh Wood. 'English Contemporary Music'. In Howard Hartog (ed). *European Music in the Twentieth Century*. Op. cit. (n.1) (1961), 144-70. The use of the word 'English' is confusing as Scottish composers are included, e.g. Iain Hamilton.

Iain Hamilton. 'Alban Berg and Anton Webern'. In Howard Hartog (ed). *European Music in the Twentieth Century*. Op. cit. (1961), 107-30. An article by Hamilton entitled 'Serial Composition Today', *Tempo* 55-56 (1960), 8-12, presented many of the same points.

Hugh Wood. 'The Music of Mätÿäs Seiber'. In: *The Musical Times* (September 1970) vol 111, no 1531, 888-91.

Hugh Wood. 'Mätÿäs Seiber'. In: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Macmillan 1980, vol 17, 110-11. And, revised by Mervyn Cooke, second edition: London: Macmillan 2001, vol 23, 46-47.

This talk was given on the BBC's Third Programme in the late 1950s. The exact date is not known.

Hugh Wood in Howard Hartog (ed). *European Music in the Twentieth Century*. Op. cit. (1961), 148.

exceptional for such a work.⁸ This promising start was soon followed by numerous works that established Wood as a composer of talent and achievement. These include another string quartet, other chamber music, various song settings and the outstanding vocal-orchestral *Scenes from Comus*, after John Milton, in 1965, and notably the two string concertos, the first for cello in 1969 and the second, for violin in 1972, imposing works by any criteria. The two concertos were soon recorded, too. The excellent works that followed a period of compositional silence included three more string quartets, a large-scale Symphony in 1982 and an equally imposing Piano Concerto, completed in 1991, to say nothing of a stream of vocal works that show an acute understanding of the power of music to enhance words. While what may have been a relatively modest output in the hands of some composers might be thought to be worthy rather than impressive, we must now address the reception of Hugh Wood's works, especially by the critics and audiences. This gives a good indication of its perceived quality.

It is unusual for critics to be virtually unanimous in the praise of works by any one contemporary composer, but Hugh Wood has managed this achievement in all the different stages in his work. He has always challenged his listeners with his music, not making it easy to appreciate it completely at one hearing, but rather than confuse his audiences, he merely encouraged them to listen to the music with even more attention than would be normal. Taking his early Three Pieces for piano op.5 of 1960-63, Frank Dawes effectively defined the characteristics of Wood's early music:

Hugh Wood favours a more traditional serialism with due regard for forward-looking rhythm, melodic shapeliness and close-knit harmonic and contrapuntal textures. Two slow pieces flank a hugely energetic middle one. The last piece is by far the simplest and provides a shining example of how music abounding in the traditionally harsher intervals (major sevenths and major ninths especially) can be organized by a composer with a fine ear and sense of spacing into something essentially gracious and charming.⁹

Of the *Scenes from Comus*, composed a couple of years later, Ronald Crichton described it as 'an attractive and highly promising work' with 'colourful and dramatically suggestive orchestral writing.'¹⁰ Another report gives another indication of the critics' positive response to Wood's work. After discussing a varied collection of pieces by various British composers at the Cheltenham Festival of 1967, Stephen Walsh reacted very sympathetically to Wood's Quintet for clarinet, horn, violin, cello and piano op.9 in a warm tribute:

But if only these composers had the ability to combine all the musical graces as expertly as Hugh Wood in his tiny quintet ... This six-minute, one-movement piece was neatly scored, melodically distinctive and rhythmically alive, and an obvious cue for Cheltenham to commission a big piece from this gifted composer as soon as possible.¹¹

Argo ZRG565 (1968), played by the Aeolian Quartet, and Argo ZRG750 (1974), played by the Dartington String Quartet. A later recording by the Chilingirian Quartet appeared in 1995 on compact disc only. See note 15.

Frank Dawes. 'More Piano'. In: *The Musical Times* (June 1966) no.1480, vol.107, 530.

Ronald Crichton. 'The Proms'. In: *The Musical Times* (September 1965) no.1471, vol.106, 685.

Stephen Walsh. 'Cheltenham'. In: *The Musical Times* (September 1967) no.1495, vol.108, 826.

The large-scale pieces that followed soon after were the Concertos for cello and violin. Jeremy Thurlow wrote about the former in glowing terms: '... the concerto was acclaimed at its proms première' and about both works: 'the two works brought to the attention of a sizeable audience not only Wood's ability to shape dynamic forms on the largest scale, but also his characteristically intense, yearning lyricism, in which cantabile lines are stretched over angular contours defined by wide, dissonant intervals.'¹² A similarly enthusiastic response by the same writer was elicited by the 40-minute Symphony of 1982 'which traces a Beethovenian, heroic path from tempestuous violence to hard-won affirmation. His largest work to date, it exemplifies the way that he can inform a highly cogent thematic and harmonic argument with a directly communicative, late-Romantic kind of rhetoric, to overwhelming effect.'¹³

In the same way as the String Quartets of Bela Bartok appear in the different stages in his career, so do the quartets of Hugh Wood (see Table 1).

String Quartet No.1 op.4	1962
String Quartet No.2 op.13	1969-70
String Quartet No.3 op.20	1978
String Quartet No.4 op.34	1992-93
String Quartet No.5 op.45	2001

Table 1. Wood's String Quartets with dates of composition¹⁴

The characteristics of the first four quartets are well defined by the perceptive and articulate David Cairns in reviewing the recording of these works:

All four of Hugh Wood's string quartets make a welcome appearance ... These tough, rewarding works span almost the whole of Wood's career: No.1 influenced by both Schoenberg and Bartok, but finding its own solution to the demands of structure and expression; the one-movement No.2, from the late 1960s, incorporating random textural elements such as Lutoslawski had lately been experimenting with; No.3, also in a single movement, charting an emotional and spiritual progress from dearth and desolation to abundance and joy that reflected a central experience in the composer's life; and the abstract but no less deeply and vividly felt No.4, one of Wood's richest works.¹⁵

At its first performance, the Fifth Quartet drew a very favourable response from Paul Conway:

Jeremy Thurlow. 'Wood, Hugh'. In: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, London: Macmillan 2001, vol 27, 549.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ This list omits the unnumbered String Quartet in B flat major of 1957 which the composer acknowledges, but describes in his introduction to the published score of the String Quartet no.5 merely as 'a quite serviceable student work.' It does not form part of the present study.

¹⁵ David Cairns. *The Sunday Times* 9 April, 1995, Features section. The number of the now deleted recording on compact disc is Conifer 75605 51239 2.

The basic material of the opening *allegro energico* was straightforward and easily grasped, the result of a composer whose expressiveness is kept in check by a formidable organisational control. Initiated by a questioning single cello pizzicato, the first nocturnal scherzo was an implacable nightmarish quest of serious intent, only the insouciant payoff releasing the tension. The central *romanza* was launched in the richly dark waters of Bergian late Romanticism, weathered a stormy central section and then faded away on the first violin's resigned harmonics. Energy was immediately restored with a second nocturnal scherzo, light as air and fleet of foot. If the first was predatory, this one found the players on the run with its hunted, anxiously darting gestures. A powerful, climactic finale contained the quartet's most memorable material, which became the subject of imaginative sequences and variations. The bravura, headlong conclusion set the seal on a direct and cogently argued discourse that unfolded with a freedom of expression and technical assurance harvested from long experience. ... the composer's personal idiom ... is expressed in an atonal, occasionally serial, lyricism and laced with febrile Expressionist chromaticism, [with] an abundance of superbly calculated effects and bold contrasts, which never drew attention to themselves but found their place within the superbly integrated whole.¹⁶

These are strong words which one may suspect are exaggerated in their praise if it were not for the fact that critics almost without exception are saying similar things about virtually all of Wood's music. To investigate the stature of his quartets, it will be useful to examine them in turn. A good point to start this analysis is to consider the composer's own words which help one to understand his thought processes and formal concerns. These remarks can then be applied to the works to see how the composer has worked his intuitional magic in a way barely hinted at in the introductory remarks. The first works to be considered are the first, fourth and fifth quartets, each organised in separate movements and then the second and third quartets which play continuously through a large number of different sections.

The First String Quartet is planned in the traditional four separate movements, with the slow movement third and the scherzo second. The opening movement and finale are moderate to fast in tempo. In the analysis in the first edition of the score, Wood gives the following plans: first movement - ternary form, second - scherzo and trio, third - 'simple alternations of primary and secondary material', the finale - 'ternary form with introduction'.¹⁷ Nothing could be more straightforward in theory, but more deceptive in practice. The composer used the opening section of the first movement as a means of presenting a collection of motifs which he would employ in the whole work: there is no extended 'theme'. What Wood wants his listeners to note is the disjointed viola solo at the beginning and the rising cello phrases a few bars later. To support this there are three four-note chords. A short musical example (Ex.1) can show these different materials, but does not reveal the extensive and unifying motivic interactions that come later. All these materials are constantly interwoven into the textures in a very

¹ Paul Conway. *The Independent* (London), October 10, 2001, 'Features', 10

¹⁷ Hugh Wood. *String Quartet op.4* (Vienna and London: Universal Edition 1968), iii-v.

brief but tense twenty bars. The tension is never allowed to slacken, with a prominent feature the use of violent crescendos on six occasions. In the central section, called by the composer 'development', the textures are thinner and the use of counterpoint increased with an emphasis on duets. The return of the opening in modified form is again exactly twenty bars long. The use of sustained chords built up note by note and the placing of double-stopped augmented octaves in the individual instruments ensures that the tension is never relaxed. Out of the long-held notes the next movement, the scherzo, emerges, built up from tantalisingly fragmentary figures related to some of the motifs that opened the first movement but magically transformed into sinister spidery themes. The internal structure of the scherzo is very flexible with barely a hint of traditional symmetries and reprises. Almost everything is unexpected. For the contrasting trio section Wood again uses themes from the first movement but put in a context of trills before returning to the dancing, staccato patterns of the main scherzo. The scale of the movements imitates Webern although the style is quite different. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the miniature slow movement which operates in short phrases, each barely two bars long. Using the chords from the first movement as harmonies for fragmentary melodic shapes in gentle alternation between two thematic sections. All this prepares us for the more extended finale, which carries the weight of the argument of the whole work. Nevertheless, the composer casts it simply as a three-part ternary structure plus a short introduction. References to the earlier movements provide a strong unifying factor: the introduction recalls the climax of the first movement, and the third part of the main ternary section makes quotations from the scherzo and from the Introduction. In a short description it is difficult to convey the intensity or economy of the musical thought, but what is so impressive is the way that the listener is able to follow the composer's thought processes so readily. Of the first recording of the work, Diana McVeagh wrote: 'Everything is clearly stated ... it is so keenly 'heard', its thought and expression so fastidiously matched.'¹⁸

The String Quartet No.4 dates from 1978, some sixteen years after No.1, but it returns to the idea of four separate movements. Clearly Wood found the procedures that he had so carefully worked out for his First Quartet were, in very general terms, again capable of producing a resulting work that is musically satisfying.¹⁹ The durations of the individual movements, apart from the extended slow movement, are similar to those of the earlier work. As before, the introductory material at the opening provides a thematic basis for the whole work. A short eight-note chord and a sustained four-note chord provide the foundation for a scattering of semiquaver figures that will return at crucial moments in the work. Some working on the two motifs, one rising, the other falling, is concluded by a violin cadenza that leads into the Scherzo in a fast 12/8 time that variously dances, mystifies and excites. Rather than adopting the scherzo and trio format of the first quartet, it introduces a new double-stopped motif which acts as a foil to the faster music which never disappears from the texture. Thus an old idea is modified in a masterly way. The long slow movement has hints of sonata form with a contrasting second theme, but it is better understood as an arch-shape ABCBA with the central C section a brief agitato

¹⁸ Diana McVeagh. 'Record Reviews'. In: *The Musical Times* (June 1968) no.1504, vol.109, 547.

¹⁹ The two intervening quartets (Nos. 2 and 3), each cast in one continuous movement, are discussed below.

contrast to the sustained and mostly quietly lyrical but often discordant outer sections. The length is perfectly judged and balanced in scale against the other movements. This is just as well for the finale has an intensity and compression of motifs which are breathtaking. Much of the material has been heard before, but now it is set in a different perspective and context. Most thrillingly the return of the very opening from the first movement launches a coda packed with motifs from throughout the work. Nothing could draw all the different threads together more convincingly.

The reception of the work is typified in Conrad Wilson's report of a performance in the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh, in November 1993:

The Chilingirian Quartet for whom he composed it, passionately conveyed its terse, strong argument. Ideas were punched out, cogently reprised, sent shooting in fresh, arresting directions. The opening gestures evoked the start of Debussy's quartet. Torrential pizzicato passages evoked Sibelius, as also did the fierce impetus achieved by linking the first movement with the scherzo.²⁰

Meirion Bowen was similarly enthusiastic about the work on its radio première in May 1993:

The compositional goals were manifest simply through arresting invention and well-formulated argument. Most of the thematic basis of the piece was outlined in the introductory first movement, and already at an initial encounter, the two-chord iambic motif and succeeding imitative passages for second violin and viola etched themselves on the memory, so that their various transformations made the music audibly coherent. A reflective cadenza for the first violin at the end of the introduction also returned as a sort of chorale on the lower instruments at the end of the work, again strengthening its sense of unity. But if, dramatically, the score gravitated towards its finale, perhaps the most personal music emerged in the preceding slow movement, a kind of elegy that rose to an impassioned climax, thereafter subsiding into a mood of great tenderness: all very late Beethovenian.²¹

At the same time Jan Smaczny seemed to sum up the great strength of Wood's quartet:

Perhaps Wood's greatest achievement in the new quartet is its fast music. The *Introduzione* does not grope its way into being, it slams straight into the argument. ... The best string quartets manage the seemingly impossible feat of marrying the abstract with the passionate. In recent years, the genre seems to have been on the retreat. This new quartet shows the medium has abundant life.²²

The most recent of Wood's String Quartets, the Fifth op.45, dates from 2001. Like the First and Fourth Quartets, it is written in separate movements, but unlike its predecessors, Wood used five movements arranged in a symmetrical plan that has some similarities with Bartok's Fourth Quartet. As Barry Millington observed at a London performance:

²⁰ *The Herald* (Glasgow), November 17, 1993, 10.

²¹ *The Guardian* (London) May 21, 1993, The Guardian Features Page, 7.

²² *The Independent* (London) May 21, 1993, 17.

'Hugh Wood ... [in his Quartet No5] ... makes no secret of his debt to classical tradition, not least Bartok. [Its] soundworld is evoked in the pair of Nocturne-Scherzos, fleeting, spectral and evanescent, just as the arch-form of the five movements recalls the Hungarian master's structural preoccupations.'²³ Note that the emphasis is on tradition, even a recent example, but in practice Wood does not imitate Bartok at all, but follows his own technique as practised in the earlier quartets.

As Jan Smaczny vividly describes, the Fifth Quartet plunges straight into the argument with a flurry of motifs that Wood treats dramatically and contrapuntally. The syncopated widely-spaced descending phrase, the three-note figure that rises or falls by a minor third and rising arpeggio figures are elaborated in a totally untraditional way. Some lyrical contrast is only a prelude for the headlong return of the transformed opening material. The two scherzo movements, the second and fourth, both entitled 'Nocturne', extend even Wood's vividly imaginative scherzo style with a wide range of surprises. In the first there are irregularly structured bars, for example 5/8 and 8/8 divided 3+3+2, in addition to the normal 6/8 and 9/8, and a much larger number of motifs; in the second there is extensive pizzicato, using repeated notes contrasted very eerily with held flautando and harmonics. These movements enclose a slow one entitled 'Romanza' which the composer modestly describes as 'a brief, light and lyrical movement'. In fact it underpins the emotional impact of the work with its sweeping melodic lines and an explosive middle section, not to say its duration. The finale, as in the First and Fourth Quartets sums up the work in a powerful way. Wood chooses the particularly traditional form of rondo for this and, further, he makes it very march-like. That is where the similarity ends for the three-note motif of the rising (and falling) minor third and the three-note widely spaced descending phrase dominate the frenetic motivic activity. Transformations occur every few bars in a whirl of compositional imagination with the opening combination returning in various ways before a brilliant contrapuntal texture draws all the threads together.

To turn from the three quartets that are planned with separate movements to the two quartets, Nos. 2 and 3, which are set out as one continuous movement in a large number of sections, seems at first to be a complete break with tradition. This change of direction on the composer's part would appear to be a negation of the classical tradition which Wood has very steadfastly adhered to until this time. Although in the event this was to be followed by other similar works, notably the String Quartet No.3, in 1974 Leo Black suggested that this might be something of a diversion, when he wrote:

It stands a little aside from the rest of Hugh Wood's work, since he deliberately made it more fragmentary than any composition before and since. ... The 39-section Second String Quartet he described as 'my first attempt at rough circles'. It is in no important sense in any 'free form', nor does it greatly differ in its continuity and shapeliness from the composer's other works, but it relies less on thematic development and more on abrupt juxtaposition than is usual with him. Only time will show whether this, the only work in which he has come within sighting distance of an alternative attitude to music and time and form, was an isolated foray into strange country or the harbinger of a future line of development.²⁴

²³ *The Evening Standard* (London) July 15, 2002, 48.

²⁴ Leo Black. 'Hugh Wood'. In Lewis Foreman (ed): *British Music Now*. London: Elek, 1975, 58-59.

A detailed examination of the quartet will reveal some interesting features. Wood's original idea was simple. 'I started with the idea of a 'collection': a sequence of short pieces of material simply laid end to end, objets trouvés shown off in different lights by their constantly changing juxtapositions with each other, the individual quality of each item, rather than its underlying relationship with the rest, determining its inclusion in the whole.'²⁵ Because this idea seemed unsatisfactory to Wood, a new idea arose which resulted in grouping of sections in a way that made larger spans. For example, the opening which consists of a fast 'scattering' of motifs that are freely coordinated is contrasted with a slow section using long-held notes in which the semitone or minor second is prominent. In the first fifteen sections the composer makes this apparently mechanical alternation of materials into a conflict that results in unexpectedly varying lengths of each section. The musical development is clearly audible and is particularly impressive when the climax at the end of the fifteenth section 'explodes' into the scherzo sections, a favourite device of Wood's. What is fascinating is how the music incorporates an *Adagio* section as the scherzo's trio but returns to this slow section in what he calls 'Still Centre', the heart of the quartet. To extract the argument from this Wood introduces zig-zag melodic shapes to launch into a return to an abbreviated form of the opening alternation of fast and slow sections. In his description of the work, the composer simply refers to a ternary form, but closer inspection as we have seen reveals a wonderfully sophisticated hidden network of relationships that leave one almost breathless with admiration. In less than fifteen minutes the music has a compression that many works twice the length cannot match.

While at the time of its first appearance the quartet was unusual for Wood, it was followed after a period of creative silence (1974-78) by the String Quartet No.3, a similarly constructed work that plays continuously for about 20 minutes, and planned in 24 sections. Again the short sections were not arbitrarily organised, but grouped according to an inner logic that the composer built into the material. The ten opening sections are written as 'chorale variations' but, from the fifth section onwards, including interjections of birdsong fragments (see Ex.2). Obviously we cannot expect music like that of J.S. Bach, but the intensity distilled to its harmonic essence increases the attention that one gives to it immeasurably. It is music that constantly grasps the attention with its vividly worked out phrases and its almost Webernian economy. A scherzo group of sections with an *impetuoso* section that serves for a trio and suggestions of an *Adagio* follow before plunging headlong into a final group that starts *Maestoso* but expands the motifs from the *Adagio* section in a wonderfully lyrical culmination of the work. Meirion Bowen summed this up perfectly: 'the initial microscopic chorale variations were gradually invaded and made more expansive by birdsong elements, generating ultimately an effulgent lyricism.'²⁶ The normally very circumspect Richard Morrison made a very important point: 'its discriminating use of serialism eventually led to an unexpectedly lyrical, almost ecstatic conclusion.'²⁷ Even more fascinating is the report by Susan Loppert about an enthusiastic and frequent concertgoer called Peter Gregory

²⁵ Hugh Wood in notes on the Chester Novello website: <http://www.chesternovello.com>.

Meirion Bowen. *The Guardian* (London), 2 February, 1990.

²⁷ Richard Morrison. *The Times* (London), 10 January, 1989.

who was heard to say at a performance: 'I don't pretend to be an expert on anything. Hugh Wood's Third String Quartet is the best quartet of the last 15 years.'²⁸

We can now make two important conclusions about Hugh Wood's String Quartets. The first is that the composer has retained some vestiges of traditional form and other techniques in his music. He even goes some way to emphasise this point in remarks that he has made in commentaries about these works. Often, however, his statements are simplified and in some ways misleading in that they do not give any real indication of the subtlety employed in these works. We may rightly observe, however, that it is not the business of a composer to explain how good his works are; rather it is the concern of the listener to understand these features from the sound of the music. This, fortunately, is exactly what has been done by many music critics over the whole of Wood's career. They point to numerous features that enhance the basic structures that we are led to understand are the foundation of the works' forms. It is precisely these imaginative and dramatic events which give the works their great propulsion and immediacy.

The other point is that Wood's modernism is in no way compromised by these broadly traditional features nor by superficial influences from such composers as Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Bartok, Messiaen and Elliott Carter. In practice, he manipulates his material in a supremely craftsmanlike way, but one in which the attentive and sympathetic listener can follow, admittedly after a number of hearings, the processes of exposition, development, transformation, contrast and juxtaposition, both simultaneously and successively. We can ask no more of a composer than this.

²⁸ Susan Loppert. *The Independent* (London), 31 October, 1992, 33.

Musical examples

*Ex.1: String Quartet No.1 Op. 4, Music by Hugh Wood
© Copyright 1995 Chester Music Limited.
All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured.
Reprinted by Permission.*

The image displays a page of a musical score for String Quartet No. 3, Op. 20 by Hugh Wood. The score is arranged in four systems, each with four staves representing the string instruments: Violin I (top), Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass (bottom). The first system is marked with a box containing the number 9 and the instruction 'ancora più animato' with a tempo marking of quarter note = 72-76. It includes dynamic markings like 'pizz.' and 'cresc. poco a poco'. The second system continues with similar markings. The third system is marked with a box containing the number 10 and 'Con brio' with a tempo marking of quarter note = 80-84. The fourth system features a large, complex rhythmic pattern in the lower staves, likely for the Cello/Double Bass part, with 'pizz.' markings. The score is written in blue ink on a white background.

Ex.2: *String Quartet No. 3 Op. 20, Music by Hugh Wood*

© Copyright 1980, Chester Music Limited.

All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured.

Reprinted by Permission.