

## Copland

## Piano Quartet

Adagio serio  
Allegro giusto  
Non troppo lento

### Piano Quartet (1950)

#### Aaron Copland

Born November 14, 1900 in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Died December 2, 1990 in Peekskill, N.Y.

Aaron Copland's *Piano Quartet* was commissioned in 1950 by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Coolidge Foundation. Copland completed the score on October 20, 1950, and it was premiered nine days later by the New York Quartet during the Eleventh Festival of Chamber Music at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. It was written at a time when Copland was experimenting with serial technique—composing using "tone-rows" containing all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Copland writes of the Quartet: "I was, of course, well aware that serial composition was the dominant method of writing during the years following the war...I cannot say that I admired much of what I heard—so often it seemed that individuality was sacrificed to the method. It was twenty years since I had composed the *Piano Variations*, in which I had explored certain possibilities of serial composition and adapted the method to my own use. I was interested in trying it again...the *Quartet for Piano and Strings* seemed like an ideal opportunity. In the first movement, which has been described as 'fugal,' the tone-row is announced in an outright manner at the start of the piece by the violin. The second theme, announced by the cello, is a retrograde [reversed] form of the row. The second movement, *Allegro giusto*, is the longest of the three: a fast-moving scherzo with jazz-derived rhythms. In some passages all of the instruments play high in the treble register (the violin has harmonics and pizzicati); in other sections there are big leaps between the voices. The third movement is in a simpler mood. It is the only movement with a key signature (five flats). The form is episodic, with sections loosely based on the original theme. Its beginning resembles the first movement in that it opens with strings alone. In place of the traditional contrasting second theme, I used two motives derived from the series. Toward the end of the *Quartet*, ten notes of the series are presented in a figure of descending whole-tone scales...the piano writing is at times far above the treble staff and characterized by wide leaps. In two places I ask the pianist to use 'a glassy tone' and the strings to play 'impassively and somewhat draggingly.' The *Piano Quartet* ends quietly, *pp*, *morendo* [very softly, dying away]. The *Quartet* was intended for the cultivated listener. Most audiences find the work puzzling, some find it moving, others find it puzzling *and* moving. The audience for the premiere was of the puzzled variety. However, they at least seemed to enjoy the ending of the *Allegro*. Critic Lawrence Morton caught the idea of what I was after: 'The final movement dwells in regions of immobility, impassivity and quietude, except for a few impassioned outbursts.' Olin Downes was less than delighted: 'It is Copland on one of his most intellectual jags, and we submit that it is neither beauty nor convincing art.'"

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