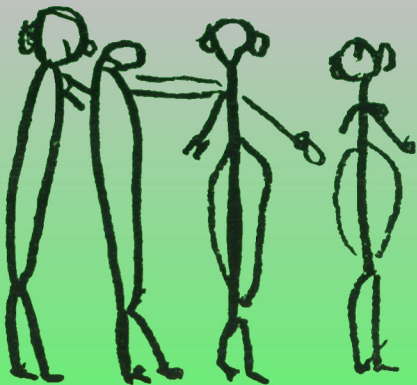


Michael Finnissy

works for string quartet

Kreutzer Quartet



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1	Plain Harmony I (1993)	5:52
2	Plain Harmony II (1995)	1:22
3	Plain Harmony III (1993)	2:20
4	Nobody's Jig (1981)	19:27
5	Sehnsucht (1997)	2:54
6	Multiple Forms of Constraint (1997)	10:48
7	String Quartet (1984)	21:54

Publishers: Oxford University Press (1,2,3,5 & 6); Michael Finnissy (4); and United Music Publishers (7)



This recording was made in St John's church, Loughton in Essex on

7 - 9 December 1997 and 14 April 1998 using a pair of Neumann KM140 microphones.

Sound Engineer / Producer / Digital Editor / Cover design and booklet layout: David Lefeber

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This disc includes works for 2 violins, viola and 'cello, written between 1981 and 1997. One would hesitate before glibly referring to them under the name of string quartets. All of the works question the archetypes and prejudices that come with such a title. Many of these expectations are most deeply rooted in the performers themselves, ranging from the most basic, such as the seating configurations, and the distances from each other that the performers sit, to the hierarchical, one might almost say sociological signifiers embedded within the conceit.

Take the question of stage layout. *Nobody's Jig* (1981) has a specific seating instruction, that the second violin should be placed opposite to the first, effectively swapping with the 'cello seat. There is also an implication that the players should not be placed too close to each other on the stage. These might seem like small matters. In fact, the second instruction has almost seismic implications for the strata of a string quartet.

Traditionally, quartets can be recognised by their extremely personalised proximities to each other in the magic circle of the stage. Each player is used to a very particular degree of intimacy that results from a strictly organised aural relativity in space to each other. When a composer steps into this intimacy and requests a change, it is akin to surgery. The group is not what it was before; the semi-feudal relationship between instruments totters.

This is made more complex by placing violins opposite each other, because therein lies an indicator pointing clearly to the classical tradition. Immediately, the players will start looking for the antiphonal relationship present in the eighteenth century works using this configuration. Whether it is there or not, acknowledged or denied, a curve has been thrown into the interdependence of the musicians. It is a degree of interference, bordering on a violation, but implicit in it is "listen up, this is not a *quartet*".

This dialogue is taken a stage further in the most recent work on this disc, *Multiple forms of Constraint* (1997). Here, the four instruments are split into an unequal two. On one side of the stage, a tightly scored string trio dutifully ignore their pendant, a solo violin. Initially the two camps seem to be exploring different material; the soloist playing rhapsodic Bulgarian folk melodies, the trio weaving a shimmering web of quarter tones. But gradually an apparent unity emerges, as the two colours begin to float into each other's territories, and the 'cello is silenced, removing the last remarkable difference of tessitura. What started out as a trio with a solo oozes, by way of "almost a quartet", into a duo with accompanying solo. This effect is compounded by the simple device of handing the use of 'sul ponticello' from the group to the individual, so that the broken sound switches sides, surely moves from left to right.

In only one of the works included here does the classical balance of vertical harmonic relationship and horizontal line exist. That work, *Plain Harmony* (1995), has no score, rather four part books, as if, not only for the players but the creator too, radiant harmony,

contemplative gathering notes and rhythmic wit are the result of some delightful chance rather than design.

Plain Harmony was written in 1995 for the Kreutzers. Whilst referring overtly to the British hymn singing tradition, there is something about the lusty joy in the physicality of chordal colour and part writing that smacks of Ives. This is powerfully felt in the precisely notated rubato of the middle movement, a quodlibet distinctly reminiscent of Ives' "Holding your own" Scherzo of 1912. There are flashes of other traditions - miniature skirls of pipes, gathering notes, versicles and responses.

By way of contrast, it would be impossible to conceive of performing the 1984 *String Quartet* without a multitude of graphic and rhythmic signposts. And there's the rub. The result of the extraordinary mathematical rigour and metric transformations is the creation of the floating quartet, four lines that apparently dance and sing in blissful freedom, whilst in truth, terribly bound. What sounds like complete rhythmic freedom is notated with a mind-numbing exactitude. For one large section of the piece, the metric relationships between the players are in the ratio of 9-7-5-3, which means that every note in an adjacent part is not what it seems, the whole set in greater limbo because, apart from two 'expositions' that mark turning points in the work, Finnissy has completely eschewed any sense of "downbeat". This is circular rhythm, notated architecturally.

One of the results of this exploration is that there can be no ideal performance of any of these works. *Nobody's Jig* can never be performed the same way twice; the ramifications of one player adjusting their line by a micro second in the opening minute are inflated to such an amplitude by the nature of the writing that every reading is an awe-filled surprise.

Likewise, the continental drift of the two protagonists (solo and trio) of *Multiple forms of Constraint* will always shudder and lurch in different directions and meters; the players treading a fascinating tightrope between recognition and control or blinkered optimism. It seems that Finnissy would have much in common with Enesco's dictum that one must "dance in chains".

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Ambivalence towards the recording industry, the process of recording, and the resultant 'product' has always accompanied the technology. A more intimate relationship with a piece can be purchased, but at the price of alienation - from both the performance act (which ceases to exist as such) and the performance environment. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and while one could cite the vogue for 'live recordings' as indicating a dissatisfaction with the status quo, Glenn Gould famously saw the removal of the performance environment and the possibilities for relocating/extending the performance act in the editing process as liberations. A more fundamental source of the ambivalence towards recording is a direct function of the recording process itself, in which active *readings* (performances) are fixed so that they become *texts* - something altogether different. The problem is especially interesting in the context of this disc, because the music here is preoccupied with those aspects of the 'work character' of music that transcend the fixing process.

Recording has brought the most significant changes to our comprehension of music since the invention of notations which first gave music a concrete existence. Finnissy's quartet music explores the possibilities of notation in ways that radically and directly change the nature of the performance act (and consequently of the whole musical process). Of the five pieces here, only two have complete scores (*String Quartet* and *Sehnsucht*) testifying to Finnissy's ambivalence towards the text character of his music. *Nobody's Jig* depends on non-synchronisation between the parts and a score would be useless, but the absence of a score for *Plain Harmony* tells us rather more, even though at one level it constitutes part of a stylistic reference to consort music. It is the only piece here in which there is extensive unison rhythmic articulation, and a score would be particularly easy to produce, but it would present a much more concrete image of the piece than, for example, the score of *String Quartet*. In the *Quartet* there are vast sections which have almost no material articulated together, no unison barlines, and where each part may be in a different tempo: the score is necessary as a kind of map.

The issue of the score is, however, only symptomatic of Finnissy's radical approach to notation in general, and to material itself. As in much post 1950s avant garde music the notation is often extremely complex, and makes extensive use of irrational rhythms which hardly ever articulate vertically coordinated events. At a preliminary stage the performer is forced into a confrontation with a notation which is anything but a transparent representation of the piece or a clear set of instructions: he must *earn* the right to enter inside the work. Finnissy's music is particularly interesting in the way in which it holds this adversarial relationship open. In the music of some of his contemporaries the impossibility of accurately realising the score necessitates an interpretative *tour de force* in which the moment of performance must transcend the notation. In Finnissy's music, accurate

realisation is held open as a possibility, and the nature of the material transforms this into something radical.

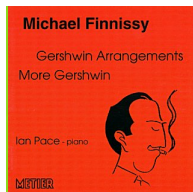
This is because the closer one approaches an accurate realisation of almost any of the music here the more clear it becomes that this is a process without a goal - will one know when one is right? - and the childish fetishist in every performer that strives for accuracy and perfection is confronted with himself. The question of whether the notes and rhythms are 'right' ceases to have importance not because of their insignificance, but because of their very special significance. At all stages of performing or recording the activity of production is never allowed to become invisible and so becomes the subject of the music. Because the process of production resists reification and retains the right to a full and meaningful existence, it becomes immaterial. To play this music is to be aware of a pressing need for an absolutely accurate realisation of the notation while at the same time being aware of its fundamental insignificance.

None of this can change the nature of the recording process, but because Finnissy's music is so intimately concerned with the concept of definitiveness recording occurs in a special context. The denial of the possibility of a definitive reading inherent in the material holds the recording's status as text open in much the same way as the notation avoids a concrete image of the music. Because Finnissy is concerned to afford all aspects of the musical process a substantial importance the recording is offered the possibility of a special relationship with the work - close to the performance act and the concept of a text.

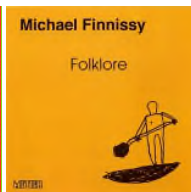
Almost all of the pieces here were recorded in very large takes (for practical as well as aesthetic reasons), but perhaps the most telling session was for the completely unsynchronised *Nobody's Jig*. We had decided to record four or five versions (necessarily complete 'performances') and to choose one for the disc. It was the end of a trying day during which extraneous noise had ruined a lot of work, and we agreed that it was worth recording one more take. Less than a quarter of the way through it was obvious that this final version was going to be the one, even though we had no idea of how the material would synchronise. The integrity of the piece as a work and its fluidity as a performance act are held in a balance that seems to remain transparent in this recording. If a similar sense of fluidity and openness can be heard in the other pieces then we have done our job properly.

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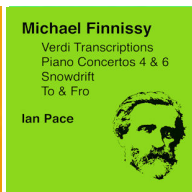
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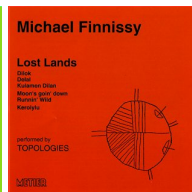
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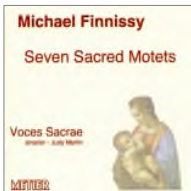


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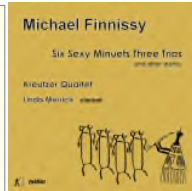


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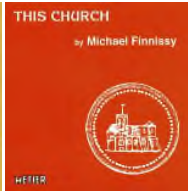
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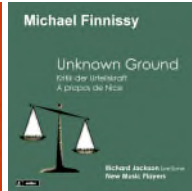
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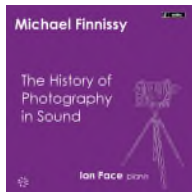


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