

# "SPEAK LIKE THE PEOPLE, WRITE LIKE THE KING"

Steven Mackey

(b. 1956)

## **Ars Moriendi (2000) (26:34)**

*nine tableaux on the art of dying well*

1. "Don't trouble trouble" (5:44)
2. First Lament Fragment (1:02)
3. "Speak like the people,  
write like the king" (3:54)
4. Second Lament Fragment (1:00)
5. a peculiar spice (1:40)
6. "Everything in moderation,  
including moderation" (3:06)
7. Third Lament (5:53)
8. Fibrillation (2:38)
9. Londonderry Air (1:20)

### **Borromeo String Quartet**

Nicholas Kitchen, violin 1; Kristopher Tong, violin 2;  
Mai Motobuchi, viola; Yeesun Kim, cello

## 10. 'Lude (2002) (10:33)

### **Brentano String Quartet**

Mark Steinberg, violin 1; Serena Canin, violin 2  
Misha Amory, viola; Nina Lee, cello

## **Gaggle and Flock (2001) (24:29)**

11. Gaggle (12:59)
12. Flock (11:22)

### **Borromeo and Brentano String Quartets**

with Hsin-Yun Huang, viola

## “Speak Like the People, Write Like the King”

The three pieces on this disc have a lot in common: They are all for string quartet, or two string quartets in the case of *Gaggle and Flock*, they were all written within the first couple years of the new century, and they all engage themes of tradition and family. The string quartet itself is something of a family, with complex internal relationships that balance the independence of four accomplished musicians with the mutual dependency inherent in chamber music. There are more specific instantiations of tradition and family as well.

*Ars Moriendi*, Latin for ‘the art of dying well’, was a term used to describe a visual art practice from the 14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The work also draws from a musical tradition common in the 16th and 17th centuries, known as the *Lament* or *Tombeau*. *Ars Moriendi* also draws on my experience with my father’s death.

*Lude* was commissioned as a companion piece to J.S. Bach’s *Contrapunctus XI* from *The Art of the Fugue*, a tour de force of 18<sup>th</sup> century fugal composition.

*Gaggle and Flock* was commissioned to celebrate collegial bonds between the two excellent quartets on this disc. In addition to finding themselves at the same festivals, mixing and matching to form quintets and sextets, at the time of the commission, the two quartets were “in-laws” of sorts as their respective violists were married.

**ARS MORIENDI**, string quartet, (2000) commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress for the Borromeo Quartet.

### **Ars Moriendi**

*nine tableaux on the art of dying well*

1. “Don’t trouble trouble”
2. First Lament Fragment
3. “Speak like the people, write like the king”
4. Second Lament Fragment
5. A Peculiar Spice
6. “Everything in moderation, including moderation”
7. Third Lament
8. Fibrillation
9. Londonderry Air

As mentioned above, the title *Ars Moriendi*, comes from an ancient art genre. The pictures that I have seen depict a dying man in bed, surrounded by the benevolent figures of family and clergy while some evil, gargoyle-like creatures skulk and fornicate in the corners – allegories for the struggle between good and evil competing for a new soul. These works were often presented as a series in books that priests used to inspire members of their flock to a *good* death: death with dignity.

My composition does not represent an inspirational, hypothetical death, but rather a personal diary of my experience with my father’s death, which I regard as among the richest, most profound experiences of my life.

My father had a massive stroke in 1990 and fought hard to recover much of his speech and movement until the fall of 1993, when he suffered another stroke or, perhaps, a series of small strokes. Returning from a trip to Europe, I was greeted at the airport by my mother who immediately told me that he had taken a turn for the worse and seemed near death. We went to see him in the hospital where we found him to be completely uncommunicative and taking desperate, gasping, wheezing breaths. We spent the next couple of days at his bedside believing that he somehow felt and appreciated our presence but we could not imagine that he could *hear* us.

On the third day the nurse said to my mother and me that she thought my father was a real fighter (she got that right, metaphorically and literally: as a Midwestern child of the Depression he earned his college tuition as a professional boxer). The nurse felt that he might be able to understand us in some deep sense and in fact, might need our permission to let go. The nurse left the room, and my mother and I went to his bed and told him that he had been a good father and a good husband. We assured him that my brothers and I were making our way in the world and that my mother was taken care of, so it was okay to let go; he didn't need to fight anymore.

Seconds after my soliloquy ended I heard, with my head on his chest, what seemed like a last heart beat, and as I looked up, startled, I literally

saw the life leaving his body. An ashen gray color moved quickly and evenly from his toes up his legs, through his hospital gown, to his chest, over his face and to the top of his head.

*Ars Moriendi* is 24 minutes long and is in nine tableaux played without pause, except for a short break between the sixth and seventh movements. The first six movements have distinct beginnings and endings but are performed *attacca*, while the last three movements are seamlessly connected.

The titles of the first, third and sixth tableaux are pieces of advice that my father shared relentlessly with my two older brothers and me. The music doesn't really attempt to capture the sense of these nuggets of wisdom, but these movements are, in general, reminiscences of my father's character in his prime: his athleticism, quick wit, the funny dances he did, and the way he yodeled rather than yawned when he got sleepy while driving. The first movement begins with my rendering of the sounds of the hospital, of my father's labored breaths and his struggling heart. While my mother and I were visiting him, these sounds served both as a backdrop and as interpolations to our nostalgic musings on his life. When thinking about his last days, I am reminded of a quote from a letter Rilke wrote to a friend: "Everywhere, death permeated life like a peculiar spice in life's powerful flavor." This is the source of the title of the fifth tableau.

The second, fourth and seventh movements refer to the musical genre, especially common in the 16th and 17th centuries, known as the lament. These works were usually based on a recurring descending bass pattern or *ground bass*. The first two "lament fragments" tease out a pattern from elusive and disoriented textures. The ground bass becomes explicit and recurring in the *Third Lament* and by the end of this movement the pattern is shortened to the same four-note bass line that Monteverdi uses in his madrigal *Lamento della Ninfa*.

The last two movements, flowing continuously from the *Third Lament*, deal with the nitty-gritty of my father's death: the gravity of the occasion, his struggle to cling to life, for our sake, his family's urging to let go, and the tide of ashen lifelessness flowing up from his toes and leaving through the top of his head. My father, of Scotch-Irish descent, loved Londonderry Air (AKA "Danny Boy") and enjoyed torturing me by plunking it out awkwardly on any piano he came across. It seemed fitting that this piece, written in his memory, frequently drifts through the pentatonic world of that song and culminates in a setting of the melody, harmonized by the lament ground bass. Coincidentally, the words of the song -- at least in my father's rendition -- are also about saying goodbye: "Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling."

'LUDE, string quartet, (2002) commissioned by the Brentano Quartet.

Pre-*Lude*, inter-*Lude*, post-*Lude*, and perhaps a little bit Lewd; I've always been interested in exploring the edges that delineate contrast. Normally these edges occur along the boundaries between two passages that I invented. *Lude* gave me a chance to explore the edges between musics separated by vast spans of time, language and culture. By interspersing *Lude* around and inside Bach's *Contrapunctus XI* I had 4 edges to work with: as a pre-*Lude*, my music recedes gently and allows *Contrapunctus XI* to emerge. As an inter-*Lude* I latched on to a particularly obsessive patch of *Contrapunctus XI* and extended the obsession until it reached escape velocity and found its way back to *Lude*. The most challenging transition for me was returning from *Lude* back to Bach. It is quite a drawn out process culminating in what I hope is a gentle little bump as the tempo of *Lude* downshifts to the tempo of *Contrapunctus XI*; (The two tempi stand in a 9:8 ratio). After Bach's piece ends the post-*Lude* dances off into the present.

My aim was to use melodic and rhythmic materials from Bach's *Contrapunctus XI* in new contrapuntal contexts that would stake out a musical territory that I could claim as my own, in sharp contrast to Bach. I was not interested in the rhetorical opposition to Bach but rather an earnest characterization, using Bach's themes, of where I stand as an American composer working in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**GAGGLE AND FLOCK**, string quartet, (2001) commissioned by the Joseph Haydn Society.

As mentioned above, at the time of the commission, the two violists, Hsin-Yun Huang and Misha Amory from the Borromeo and Brentano Quartets, respectively, were married. Due to a personnel change, not divorce, I'm happy to report, the two quartets are no longer matrimonially joined at the viola, but the idea of featuring the two violas and creating a strong musical bond between them continued to intrigue me. Violas have such a distinctive, soulful sound and represent the inner voice of the quartet literally, psychologically and metaphorically. It was my intention to explore the dialectic of inside versus outside, within the community of the octet, the two quartets, the violins, violas and cellos.

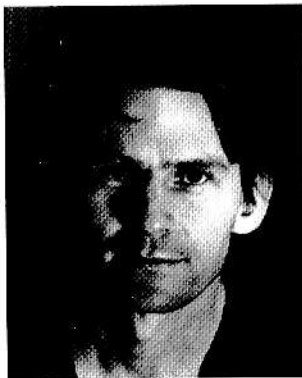
The first compositional act was to design the seating plan which places the violas together at the center as the symbolic point of connection between the two quartets, and places the violins and cellos as antiphonal opposites. This arrangement puts the viola pair on an equal footing with the violin pairs and makes palpable the movement between inside and out as well as left and right. The shape of the seating plan, reminded me of the "flying-V formation" of migrating geese and, since the music plays so much with the social dynamic within this community, I began thinking of the community as a Gaggle and Flock and drew inspiration from the graceful, organized flight of migrating geese and the ridiculous cackling of landed ones. I live on Carnegie Lake in Princeton New Jersey which hosts geese coming and going.

The first movement, *Gaggle* is about motion. The community is one of diversity where factions (usually duos) are encouraged to pipe up with serious considerations as well as boisterous dissent. It is a something of a migratory fantasy, always on the go, with each move achieving a volatile consensus, never unanimity. Although in the world of geese, "gaggle" refers to a stationary flock, the word *gaggle* seemed to capture the spirit of this movement in the form of onomatopoeia.

In the second movement, *Flock* the community is much more unified toward a single common musical result. The individual instruments are often asked to subordinate individual tendencies to create the sense of a single communal instrument/organism. Unlike *Gaggle* which was mercurial, *Flock* is simply slow-fast-slow and all three sections are based on the same melody.

I want to thank the Borromeo and Brentano Quartets not only for their fine performances on this disc but also for enriching my life in the last decade with stimulating collaboration and warm fellowship. I want to give a special thanks to Mai Motobuchi, the Borromeo violist. In addition to her soulful performance in *Ars Moriendi*, in a magnanimous gesture, she invited Hsin-Yun Huang to take her place in the Borromeo Quartet for the recording of *Gaggle and Flock*, so that Hsin-Yun could join her husband Misha in documenting the work that was commissioned as a wedding gift for them.

As always the producer Judy Sherman and her assistant Jeanie Velonis were fantastic to work with.



## Steven Mackey

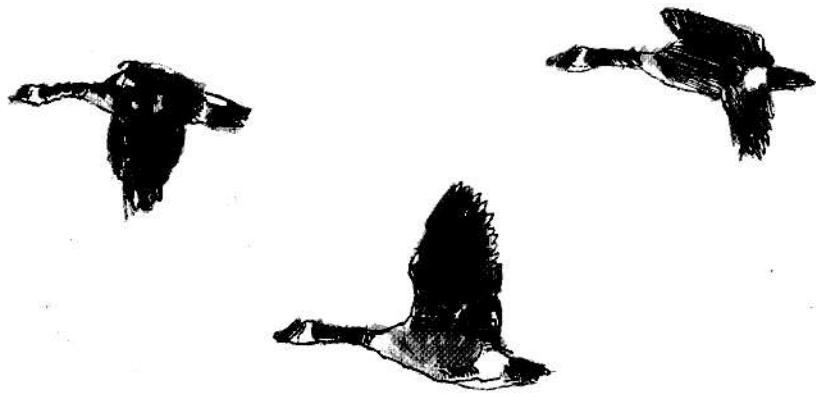
Steven Mackey was born in 1956 to American parents stationed in Frankfurt Germany. His first musical passion was playing the electric guitar in rock bands based in northern California. He later discovered concert music and has composed for orchestras, chamber ensembles, dance and opera. He regularly performs his own work, including two electric guitar concertos as well as numerous solo and

chamber works and is also active as an improvising musician.

As a composer, Mackey has been honored by numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, two awards from the Kennedy Center for the performing arts, the Stoeger Prize for Chamber Music by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and in 2000 the Miami performing arts center acknowledged his contributions to orchestral music with a special career achievement award. His *Indigenous Instruments* was selected to represent the U.S. at the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris in 1990.

Mackey has, in the past, been composer-in-residence at Tanglewood, Aspen, Yellow Barn, and Bennington among others. He was featured at the 2000 American Mavericks Festival presented by the San Francisco Symphony and the 2003 Holland festival in Amsterdam.

Available discs of Mackey's work include "Lost and Found": Mackey performing his own solo electric guitar music, released by Bridge Records in 1996; "Tuck and Roll": Michael Tilson Thomas conducts orchestral music of Steven Mackey, released in 2001 by BMG/RCA Red Seal; and "String Theory": String quartets and string quartets plus with the Brentano String Quartet on Albany.



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Engineer: Judith Sherman  
Assistant Engineer: Jeanne Velonis  
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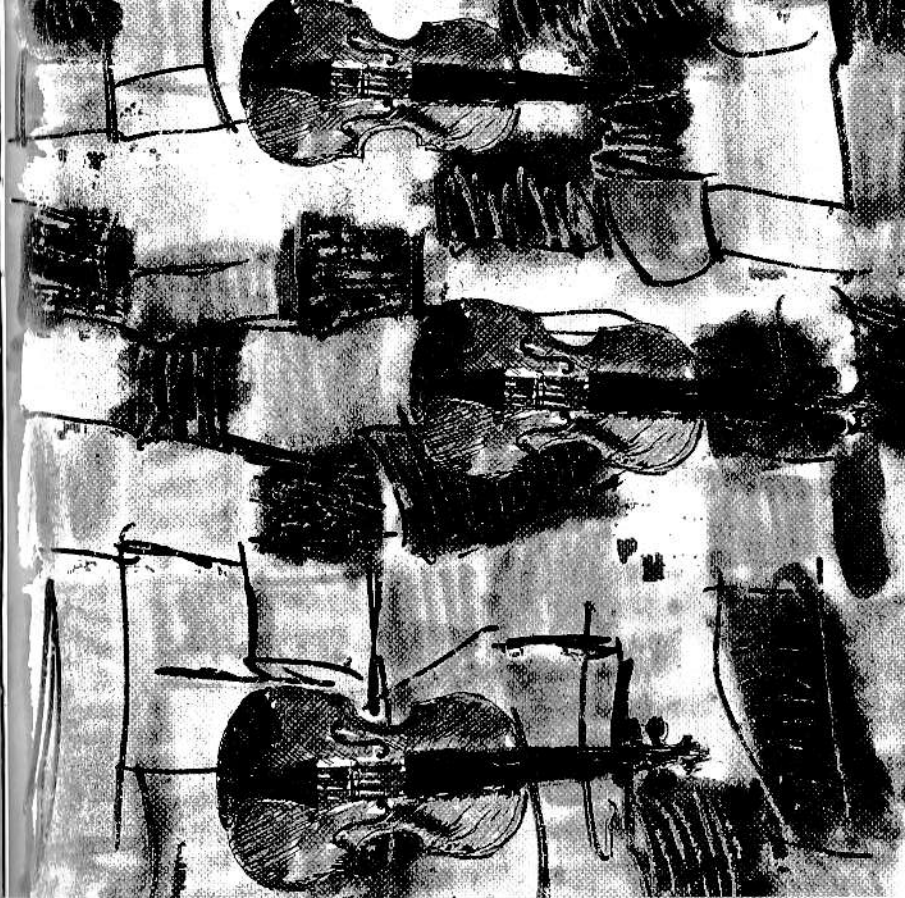
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Bridge Records, Inc.  
200 Clinton Avenue  
New Rochelle, NY 10801  
E-mail: [bridgerec@bridgerecords.com](mailto:bridgerec@bridgerecords.com)  
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# STEVEN MACKEY ON



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## Steve Mackey: *Lost & Found* *Electric Guitar Music*

Lost and Found  
Grungy

Dancetracks  
(composed with Paul Lansky)

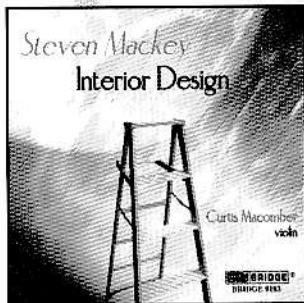
Myrtle and Mint  
Wish It Were

Cairn

Steve Mackey, composer/guitarist



BRIDGE 9065



## Steve Mackey: *Interior Design*

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1996)  
Curtis Macomber, violin;  
Aleck Karis, piano

Interior Design (2003)  
Curtis Macomber, violin

Humble River (1997)  
Susan Nidel, flute;  
Curtis Macomber, violin;  
Maureen Gallagher, viola;  
Gregory Hesselink, violoncello

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