

# GEORGE PERLE

(1915-2009)

## String Quartet No. 2 in D minor, op. 14 (1942) (22:14)

- 1) I. Moderato (7:53)
- 2) II. (3:54)
- 3) III. (10:16)

## String Quartet No. 5 (1960, rev. 1967) (14:24)

- 4) I. ♩ = 92-96 (6:39)
- 5) II. ♩ = 132 (2:08)
- 6) III. ♩ = 80 (5:37)

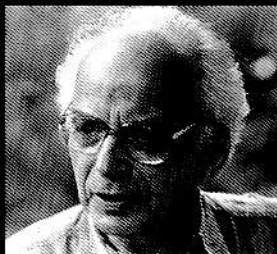
## 7) Windows of Order (String Quartet No. 8) (1987/88) (18:39)

## 8) Molto Adagio (1938) (12:31)

### Daedalus Quartet

Min-Young Kim, violin 1  
Matilda Kaul, violin 2  
Jessica Thompson, viola  
Thomas Kraines, cello

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### Reflections on George Perle & His Music

by Paul Lansky

It's surely a sign that a composer has added something to our lives when merely the mention of his name will conjure up musical images in our mind's ear. It is only necessary to say Chopin, for example, in order to recall the rich legacy of his music in our aural memories. We even go so far as to form adjectives, such as Mozartian, or Schoenbergian, to describe musical features in meaningful ways.

For many people today the name George Perle has this magic. Just its mention rings with the sound of his music: it recalls artful phases, overlapping, colliding, dovetailing, dancing with wonderful elegance one moment, coming to a sudden halt the next, rich harmonies which seem to have an internal logic and consistency all their own, unlike that of any other music; clear, brilliant, and inventive orchestration which masterfully captures the colors and subtleties of instruments and allows them to sound free and natural; a high minded and deeply serious concern with making music all that it can be; a rich and humorous texture full of musical equivalents of puns, jokes, and riddles; and most of all a music which is clear, understandable, and inviting.

For those fortunate enough to know the composer personally, his name also conjures an image of tirelessness and passion for music; he sleeps little and is totally absorbed by his work— how else could he have written seven important books and numerous articles.

dozens of extraordinary pieces, been a devoted and effective teacher for more than forty years, and become known as an important theorist of contemporary music as well as the world's leading Berg scholar.

Conversation with George invariably revolves about music—he always has an infectious enthusiasm about something musical. Whether he is enthralled by the mysteries of Berg, his own compositional theories, or any of the musical discoveries he makes daily, you always feel enlightened and uplifted. For him music is simply the most wonderful thing there is, and after having talked with George you feel this way too.

Despite the depth and breadth of his activities, he is basically and deeply a composer, and his music is his finest and most eloquent accomplishment. The sound and surface of his music is marked by a relative simplicity which is actually the underpinning of a rich and complex language based on principles he has developed and which owe much to the thinking of Bartók, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Berg. He has eschewed serialism, however, and his compositional approach is one which differs fundamentally from most post-Schoenbergian practice.

Moreover, Perle's music does not present itself in radical disjunction with tonal music and music of the past. In fact, his way of composing owes as much to tonality

as it does to post-chromatic dodecahonic thinking. Concepts of harmony, counterpoint, formal consequence, and coherence are as vivid and lively in Perle's music as they are in tonal music. His music is a special language, and while each piece sings uniquely and individually, his language is consistent, convincing, and all his own. The quality and character of his body of pieces is remarkable and unforgettable; there is nothing else remotely like it. It reveals no sense of arbitrary abstraction, formalism, or the whims of fashion. The notes are alive with a life, breath, and purpose which only a superbly gifted musician can create. George Perle often talks enthusiastically about dance: Balanchine and Stravinsky hold a special place in his heart. It is therefore not surprising that one of the most palpable features of his music is its compelling and persuasive rhythmic profile. His music moves with the subtlety and sureness of good ballet—it has a real physical, rhythmic presence. Some might say it "swings," but I prefer to say that George's music really dances!

-1999, Princeton University

### Notes by Malcolm MacDonald

In what was actually a very varied musical life, George Perle's international reputation was principally as a theorist, for his works *Serial Composition and Atonality* (1962) dealing with the Second Viennese School, and *Twelve-Tone Tonality* (1978), explaining his own developed compositional practice – related to but distinct from that of the Schoenberg school. He was also very widely known for his heroic work in making the music of Alban Berg better known. It would be fatally easy to assume, then, that Perle's own music was in some way a demonstration or exemplification of his theories of composition. Just as with Schoenberg, the music preceded any application of theory, and insofar as theoretical work was involved it was in the same way as the instinctive, everyday involvement of traditional harmony and counterpoint, as seamlessly part of the process as a pen or music-paper. But – just as with Schoenberg – it seems to have been vitally necessary to Perle to find a *post hoc* theoretical justification for the music he was writing; and where Schoenberg was led to develop the 'method of composition with 12 tones related only to one another', Perle discovered the concept of '12-tone tonality'.

To make yet another comparison with Schoenberg, the string quartet, as a genre, seems to be central to Perle's output. He regarded his first encounter, in 1937, with the score of Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* for string quartet, as decisive: within five minutes of playing the score at the piano, 'my whole future direction as a composer was established'. As he explained in an interview with Josephine Carson published in the September/October 1989 number of the periodical *Strings*, 'the basis of what I had been searching for lay before me in this one composition – that the twelve notes of the semitonal scale could be understood as an integral and autonomous structure'.<sup>1</sup> If we except the unfinished Quartet No. 1 and the unnumbered *Molto Adagio*, Perle wrote eight quartets in all (Nos. 2-9), though he tended to say there were really only four: Nos. 5, 7, 8, and 9. We should also remember the String Quintet of 1957-58 (a quintet with 2<sup>nd</sup> viola like those of Mozart, Bruckner and Brahms, rather than a Schubertian 2-cello quintet).<sup>2</sup> In the interview cited above Perle briefly characterized his numbered quartets Nos. 1-6 and gave devastatingly objective verdicts on each of them: 'In the case of the First String Quartet, I wrote

1 This realization is surely related to Busoni's prophecy, in *Sketch for a New Aesthetic of Music* (1907) that the 12-note chromatic scale would supplant the diatonic scale as the basis of tonality. The idea goes even further back – it is found in the unpublished theoretical notes of Charles Ives's father, George Ives.

2 The String Quintet and String Quartet No. 9, *Brief Encounters* (1998) may be found on Bridge Records' 2-CD set, 'George Perle: A Retrospective' (BRIDGE 9214 A/B).

only 17 bars – what I think of even today as marvellous bars, by the way – but then I got stuck. I thought I was working in the 12-tone system, and in a sense I was, but it wasn't Schoenberg's 12-tone system. The point is that the problem I faced here led me into the whole future of my career. I've always wanted to go back and finish that quartet so I left it as the legitimate No. 1 of the string quartets, even though it's been 52 years now since I stopped working on it. No. 2 in D minor is a tonal piece. I wrote it to prove I could do it. It's been played, and I like it, but I don't consider it a real part of my oeuvre. And No. 3 is in the conventional 12-tone serial system and not so relevant to my work as a whole. No. 4 was performed but I consider it an unsuccessful work. With No. 5 I reached a certain stage of maturity in the development of my musical language. It is one of the most successful compositions of my earlier 12-tone tonal works. No. 6 was the first piece after a big breakthrough in the evolution of 12-tone tonality in 1969. [Paul Lansky and I worked together for four years, 1969-73, resulting in] a radical expansion of the original theory [of 12-tone tonality] and an immense enlargement of its compositional possibilities which quickly took me so far beyond what I had been able to do in the sixth quartet that I was no longer satisfied with it by the time I had finished with it.

The earliest work on this disc is Perle's *Molto Adagio*, composed in August 1938 in La Porte,

Indiana and first performed by The New Music Group of Chicago in May 1941. In an interview given in 1985 Perle said: 'it had a big success and quite a few performances at that time ... I quote it in my viola quintet which I think is one of my best pieces ... It was a real attempt to find some kind of a way to write atonal music ... [it] embarrasses me in some way because it's a little too derivative, but maybe I'll revive it.' As far as the music's being 'derivative' goes, Perle also noted that he knew the Second Quartet of Bartók before he wrote the *Molto Adagio*, and that it has 'bars and bars that are derived from' Bartók's work.

Dedicated to Frank Kerney, this is a warmly and intensely expressive piece in a broad ternary form. If its 'atonality' hints here and there at a key-centre of C sharp, and allows both note-repetition and the softer tonal intervals, it certainly saturates the chromatic spectrum, and the Berg *Lyric Suite* seems just as much an influence as the last movement of the Bartók quartet. (Perle even makes sparing use of the Second Viennese School's *Hauptstimme* sign to indicate the principal voice, though usually this would be obvious anyway given the clarity of the part-writing.) Behind those contemporary models, the ancestry of the *Molto Adagio* perhaps reaches back to great classical precedents such as the slow movement of Beethoven's op. 132. The piece opens *molto tranquillo*, and stays for quite a while in the lower registers; a repeated-note idea, initially shared

by Violin II and Viola, conveys an impression of soft, slightly irregular breathing. A five-note motif in Violin I (at first A-D-C#-Eb-A) and a four-note one occurring a little later in the cello (at first C-F#-B-F) are the thematic kernels out of which the music is spun, ceaselessly but thoughtfully re-making itself from phrase to phrase. There is a slightly quicker central section, *Andante*, making use of the full gamut available to the four instruments and keeping the textures airy; the *Adagio* tempo returns and, after further development, the music ebbs away, the 'breathing' figure in Violin II and Viola being the last sound, as it was the first.

It seems as if Bartók's Second String Quartet was still exercising some fascination for Perle when he came to compose his own **String Quartet No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14**, which like the Bartók is laid out in three movements with an opening *Moderato*, a quicker second movement and a slow finale. As noted above, Perle said he composed the work, which he completed in Chicago on 24 November 1942, 'to prove I could do it'. In the 1985 interview he also stated: 'I would say to myself, "I don't trust a composer who can't sit down and write a quartet in D minor." I wonder if I can write a quartet in D minor?' And it turns out that I could, and I think it's got a very good first movement ...'

3 Why particularly in D minor? The obvious example is Schoenberg's official String Quartet No. 1, op. 7 (which not many composers could just 'sit down and write'), and Perle may have been thinking of the fact that Schoenberg was a 'D-minorish' composer throughout his career and in whatever idiom he used.

This first movement is a fascinating piece. Perle's D minor is chromatically saturated from the start, and at first the sense of tonality is as elusive as in the *Molto Adagio*. The opening gambit – a rising chromatic scalar figure in Violin I, filling in the space between D and A – is imitated and inverted by the other instruments, with a contrasting texture in triplet rhythms whose repeated notes recall, if anything, Schoenberg's 12-tonal Third Quartet of 1928. When a more 'tonal' feel takes hold, it is partly thanks to an extensive use of cello pedal points, first D and then E. The scalar figures and the triplet rhythms are only some of the motivic entities in a very varied first subject group, with a longer-breathed second group, *poco meno mosso* appearing later, within which the rising chromatic scales, now extending over two and a half octaves, appear more as decoration. The sense of flow is immediately attractive, while imitative writing, in the form of localized canons and inversions, keep the texture continually on the move. A short solo for Violin I, *a piacere*, marks the movement's mid-point. The second half continues to develop what has previously been experienced, though with a feeling of recapitulation and coda.

The second movement is a Waltz, complete with section-repeats in the manner of some of Schoenberg's works from the 1920s; the key signature suggests B flat, but the feeling remains D, bolstered by E. This is very

much the idea of the waltz filtered through Mahler and Berg, though a brief hymnic 'trio' in an unexpectedly pellucid C major shows we should not take Perle's affinities for granted – as does a second, more playful 'trio' nominally in C sharp major but soon modulating out of it through a thicker of accidentals.

The final movement is unmistakably music of lament. It grows, *Adagio*, out of a falling melodic figure in the violins and an accompanying two-note tritone hardy-gurdy figure in viola and cello, the melodic line soon being expanded and decorated, the two-note figure recurring obstinately in many contexts. The feeling here is prophetic perhaps of some of Shostakovich's late quartets. There is a quicker, more dance-like contrasting *Andante* episode, much fuller in texture than the bare lines of the *Adagio*, but it is the grimmer music that has the last word – or nearly so, before a brief soaring melodic flight for the two violins in unison, and a decisive zeroing-in on a repeated unison D to conclude. Considering the fateful year in which this quartet was composed, it seems likely that Perle's Jewish and East-European family origins are relevant to the strong emotional content of this finale.

The emotional world of **String Quartet No. 5** is much less clouded; rather it speaks of mastery achieved, in a time of peace. It was composed in 1960 and is dedicated to The Composer's Quartet. As we have seen, Perle voted it 'one of the most successful

of my early 12-tone tonal works', and in fact from a purely harmonic aspect it is probably more beguiling than either the *Molto Adagio* or Quartet No. 2. Each movement ends with the same chord, but a third lower at each appearance, and this seems emblematic of the tonal universe that Perle is creating in Quartet No. 5 – one that sounds in some ways like traditional tonal music but is in fact arrived at through his own personal adaptation of the 12-note method. At the opening of the first movement his paramount concern seems to be with continuity: the sinuous melody moves in conjunct intervals in association with steadily-marching even minims [♩] in the other voices, and pulsing repeated quavers [♪], the even rhythms enlivened by sly syncopations and occasional changes of metre. Later material is more disruptive: angular, fragmented, using extremes of register. But the overall impression is one of calm, expressive lyricism, and when the recapitulation sets in – for this is a kind of sonata movement – it is as if order has been restored.

There follows a short and very lively scherzo, essentially good-natured but rhythmically tense and even febrile in its continually changing time-signatures. It alternates two main ideas: the first is driven by scurrying, chattering quavers while the second is a more songful, wide-ranging theme in rhythmic unison; both ideas comes round twice, and the busy quavers seem to be coming round a third time, only swiftly to dissolve in thin air.

While the first two movements therefore are easy to characterize – a sonata, a scherzo – the finale is a much more capricious invention, cramming and juxtaposing several different kinds of music together in a small space. It also uses the widest range of textures and effects. Warm-hearted and often lyrical, it can also be pugnacious, and humorous: its progress is interrupted a couple of times by a little mechanistic-sounding march, like the movements of a clockwork toy. Mysterious tremolandi, first heard in the opening bars, introduce a coda of gentle relaxation.

It was some years after the composition of Quartet No. 5 that Perle finally developed his conception of 12-tone tonality, whose central principle is that a harmonic vocabulary of chords that are related to each other in a special way can interact just as chords do in traditional, diatonically-based tonality. Perle ultimately creates the relations between these chords on principles of symmetry, and different 'keys' can arise through the different pitches acting as centres of symmetry. Within such a 'key' the music proceeds through a harmonic landscape not in a closely determined serial manner, but according to the composer's fantasy and invention: just as in traditional tonality. He does tend to use a basic grouping of the 12 chromatic pitches, but the result is often closer to Bartók or even Scriabin than to Schoenberg.

Perle's most ripely developed language may be heard in a work such as **Windows of Order (String Quartet No. 8)**, which was commissioned for the Juilliard Quartet by American Public Radio and the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in the Library of Congress and composed between 15 December 1987 and 25 April 1988. The title *Windows of Order* is a phrase that occurs in James Gleick's book *Chaos*, which examines chaos in its relation to order: the book chimed with Perle, as he said in 1989, because he had long 'been referring, in discussing early atonal music in my classes, to something I simply called "order amid chaos". Atonal music, in its harmonic character, seems chaotic when compared to traditional tonal music. The expression "order amid chaos" was my way of denoting certain elements in atonal music which could be called referents in that they establish connections between different post-diatonic compositions ... I chose that as the title of my [Eighth] quartet as a way of alluding to such referents'.

Quartet No. 8 is cast in a single large movement, but interweaves passages in four different tempi, each of which has its own material. Tempi II, III and IV all have a mathematical relationship to each other and to Tempo I, whose basic unit is crotchet [♩]=68: thus Tempo II is three-quarters the speed of Tempo I at crotchet=51, Tempo III is three times the speed of Tempo II at crotchet=153, and

Tempo IV is two-thirds the speed of Tempo III (or, twice the speed of Tempo II) at crotchet=102. (The basic unit in Tempi III and IV, which open in 7/16 and 9/16 respectively on their first appearance, is in fact the dotted quaver.) All four Tempi are briefly presented in the first 30 bars of the work, which serve as a prelude or introduction. But in fact there is an underlying four-movement shape, which these tempi define. Throughout the first principal span of the movement the contest or polarity is exclusively between Tempo I and Tempo IV, the former warm and lyrically meditative with a recurrent signature viola tremolo, the latter volatile and almost hyperactive, characterized first by a rapidly-moving cello part against repeated staccato pitches in the other instruments, and then by swift contrapuntal activity for the entire quartet, tending to motivic imitation and brief bursts of fugato. Although the music is constantly in flux, the space devoted to each Tempo progressively expands. Thematic entities – generally what was presented in those first 30 bars – recur several times, and do so quite recognizably, providing the listener with signposts: if they are not, indeed, the 'windows of order' themselves.

While this first span has something of the sense of a sonata allegro (because of the onward momentum of Tempo IV, in relation to which Tempo I appears something like the relaxation of a second subject),

the next span interweaves Tempo I and Tempo II (characterized by an initial rising figure in rhythmic unison) in what is in effect a 'slow movement'. Here Perle's lyricism flowers most expansively, in quartet-writing of great richness and refinement. With the long-delayed return of Tempo III, a kind of scherzo begins, powered at first by scurrying triplet quavers in viola and violin 2 over a pedal ninth or tenth in the cello whose lowest note is always bottom C. It has a more complex, developmental 'trio' and then returns to the scurrying music. Throughout this section Tempo III prevails, and then hands over to the somewhat slower but still energetic Tempo IV for a pugnacious finale that has touches of repeated-note fanfare and brief, telling solos for the individual players. As in the work's first span, Tempo IV alternates with Tempo I in what seems a kind of developmental summing-up of the argument to date. Tempo I has the last word, as it had the first, and Quartet No. 8 ends with a relaxed liquidation of its opening gesture.

Such a description of this music may seem dry (and a tonal or serial analysis would be drier). What is hard to convey in words, but is plain to the ear, is the sheer wealth of Perle's inventiveness in musical shapes and sounds: his obvious delight in the quartet medium itself, the wit and wisdom of his discourse throughout what must be ranked one of the string quartet masterpieces of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Praised by *The New Yorker* as "a fresh and vital young participant in what is a golden age of American string quartets," the **Daedalus Quartet** has established itself as a leader among the new generation of string ensembles. In the eleven years of its existence the Daedalus Quartet has received plaudits from critics and listeners alike for the security, technical finish, interpretive unity, and the sheer gusto of its performances. Since its founding the Daedalus Quartet has performed in many of the world's leading musical venues; in the United States and Canada these include Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center (Great Performers series), the Library of Congress, the Corecoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and Boston's Gardner Museum, as well as on major series in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. Abroad the ensemble has been heard in such famed locations as the Musikverein in Vienna, the Mozarteum in Salzburg, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Cité de la Musique in Paris, and in leading venues in Japan.

The Daedalus Quartet has won plaudits for its adventurous exploration of contemporary music, most notably the compositions of Elliott Carter, George Perle, György Kurtág and György Ligeti. The Daedalus has forged associations with some of America's leading classical music and educational institutions: Carnegie Hall, through its European Concert Hall Organization (ECHO) Rising Stars program; and Lincoln Center, which appointed the Daedalus Quartet as the Chamber Music Society Two quartet for 2005-07. The Daedalus Quartet has been Columbia University's Quartet-in-Residence since 2005, and has served as Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Pennsylvania since 2006.

The Daedalus Quartet's debut recording, music of Stravinsky, Sibelius, and Ravel, was issued by Bridge Records, followed by Haydn's six "Sun" Quartets, Op. 20, an album of chamber music by Lawrence Dillon, and the complete string quartets of Fred Lerdahl, all on Bridge.

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