

The Quartet

for solo cello

J. Simon van der Walt

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Composer's note

'The Quartet' is the so far most fully worked out manifestation of my interest in the performance rituals of Western classical music. It is a challenge; to player, audience, and composer. The player must discover a new virtuosity, that of the performer or actor, as well being asked to produce a flamboyant display of musical pyrotechnics from nothing. The audience are asked to seriously question their motives and expectations in attending a concert of 'new music'. The composers challenge is the same as that of any other serious artist; to transgress.

Notes to the score

The score consists of a performance scenario, some costume suggestions, a stage layout, and a reminder of a passage in the instrument's repertoire which must surely be so well-known as to make it's notation otiose. My only other suggestion might be to enlist the help of a suitable director in developing the piece.

(That the cellist is referred to throughout as 'he' is an unfortunate linguistic convenience; it is not, of course, intended to preclude performance by a female cellist.)

A CD with a selection of three-second bursts of annoying pop radio (see score) is available on request from the composer.

Duration

~ 4-5 minutes

Scenario

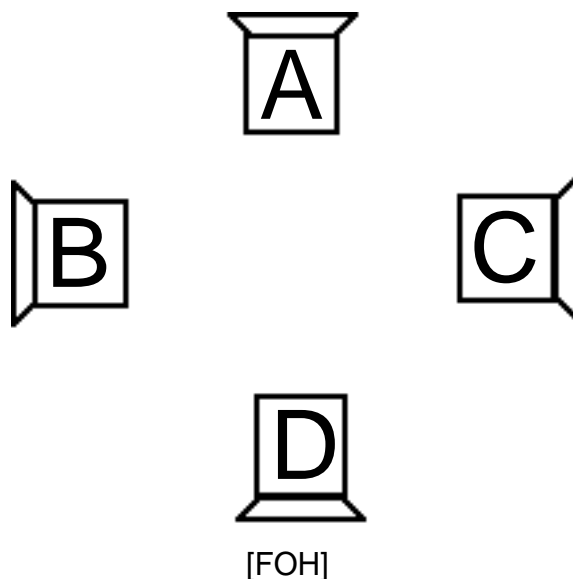
Old Janos has turned up at half-past seven in the morning at the village hall in Warga, woken the caretaker and demanded entry. He is twelve and a half hours early for the recital which he is to give that evening with the other three cellists in 'Ensemble Boreas'. He doesn't sleep too well these days, and he likes to get to the hall early to set up and practice.

He looks a bit old and past it; a bit rough. He is wearing smart trousers and shoes, ready for the concert, but also has on a disgusting old worn-out jumper, his second-best pair of glasses and a strange woollen hat.

Having woken at five that morning, he's cold and crabby. Occasionally he mutters to himself unintelligibly in a variety of languages; mainly he is complaining that there is nowhere open for him to get some breakfast. He is angry at the caretaker, who has gone back to sleep in the office; consequently, he bangs about and makes as much noise as possible.

Stage plan

Four wooden chairs, mismatched, arranged in a square, facing inwards, with enough space for four imaginary cellists and music stands;



Action

An empty stage. Janos enters carrying chairs A and B and bangs them down noisily in place.

Exits

Returns carrying two remaining chairs, sets them in place. Spends a few moments fussing over the exact positioning, maybe swaps two of the chairs round, but doesn't sit yet.

Exits

Returns a moment or two later, carrying a smart jacket and singing something to himself. Suddenly gets carried away and sings a couple of phrases loudly, then stops. Goes to chair D and puts the jacket over the back of it, then goes to chair B.

He sits, adjusts his posture for a moment, and looks around as if imagining the other players there. With a sudden grand gesture of his arm he loudly declaims a single word in German; 'vielliecht!' Satisfied with this he hops over to chair A and says 'etwas'; he tries it again, in a more sinister voice, lingering over the 's'. (This is part of a piece which is to be performed later that night.)

[The following action only to be performed if technically possible]

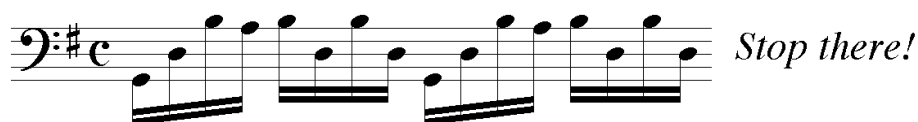
As he gets up to walk around behind chair C, he is interrupted by three seconds of blaringly loud pop radio which suddenly erupts from the loudspeakers in the hall, then just as suddenly stops again. Although the audience probably react to this, Janos doesn't. He continues to consider chair C. Perhaps he is deaf? A beat or two *after* the noise stops, however, he pauses as if he had heard something, then shakes his head and exits.

[Else exit after briefly considering chair C]

Returns with cello and bow. Looks a little more self confident and poised now. He sits with his back to the audience (chair D), quietly and briefly checks his tuning, and then plays this;



Adjusts his tuning (or bow) microscopically, then plays it again;



He moves over to chair B and plays again, a little more this time;



He moves to chair A, and appears about to play the same thing again. Instead he launches into a frenzied avant-garde improvisation; rapid phrases over the whole range of the instrument, interspersed with violent triple stops, bowing behind the bridge, left-hand plucking, glissandi, shouting and screaming, whatever. As a climax to this shocking performance, he reaches out with his left foot, and, while still playing, kicks chair C up into the air and over onto it's back a couple of meters away.

As the chair comes to rest, he stops and holds the pose, as if waiting for applause. [The audience may or may not decide to applaud at this moment; doesn't matter.] After a moment or two [cutting short any audience response] he gathers himself and puts down the cello and bow on the floor to his right. Somewhat sadly, he goes over the the fallen chair C, rights it and puts it back in it's place.

Leaving cello & bow in place, exits.

Returns after a short delay carrying large absurd object (wedding cake, inflatable sheep, etc). He has removed the smelly jumper and hat and put on his proper glasses. With ceremonial care, he places the absurd object in the centre of the square, where the music stands would go. He then comes downstage, retrieves his jacket from the back of chair D, carefully puts it on, faces the audience and bows.

Finis - exit.