

"A Splash of Cold Water" from Short Set for String Quartet

A Musical Analysis by Gwyneth Walker

This opening movement of the string quartet was selected for analysis because of its concise form and readily comprehensible harmonic language. This work appears to epitomize various aspects of the composer's techniques. And thus, it is a likely choice for study.

The harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary of Gwyneth Walker has been described as open, sparse and very American. The formal construction has been observed to be tightly-knit. Perhaps an analysis of "Splash" will yield some explanations of these characteristics.

Musical Form and Language

This movement is brief, of less than two minutes in duration. And, as the first movement of a multi-movement work, its function might well be to grab the attention of the listener. With this in mind, efficiency of notes might be appropriate. Clear-cut forms, leading the music to its logical conclusion, would give the quartet an energetic start.

We find here a simple rondo: A (m. 5) B (m. 28) A' (m. 46) B' (m. 74) A'' (m. 80)

After a four-measure introduction, the theme (octave leaps) appears in Vln. 1. Four measures later, the theme is stated in Vln. 2. At m. 13, the theme switches to the Vla. & Vcl, in the Subdominant area for four measures. The Violins now answer, in inversion, for four measures. At m. 21, the theme settles back into the Tonic, exchanged between the instruments.

Of particular interest is m. 27. Here, the 11/8 measure is subdivided into two half-note units followed by three eighth-notes. These three eighths now become the beating unit for the 6/8 meter at m. 28. And, this is the B section of the music.

The B section was constructed intentionally to contrast with the A section. The 2/2 meter has switched to 6/8. The melodic contour is stepwise, rather than octave leaps. The articulation is sustained, not staccato. And, the dynamic has quieted to "p." Chromaticism and dissonance are introduced into the diatonic framework. By the time m. 45 is reached, the four strings have gathered into a harmonically-remote cluster.

At m. 46 (A'), the theme returns in its original tonality of D Dorian. And, the phrases are similar to the opening, with the exception of the modulation up a step into m. 62. The material at m. 70 offers the opportunity for harmonic exploration, still using thematic material.

M. 75 is the start of the B' section. [Accents now replace tenuti.] Once again, entering the realms of flats provides a journey away from the tonal center. The return of the

theme at m. 81 marks an abbreviated A" section. M. 86 is a Coda which weaves together material associated with both A and B sections.

Essentially, there are two musical ideas, A and B. They are presented in alternation, and, finally, in juxtaposition. The "rivalry" between the two themes is quite apparent. And this is the essence of the formal clarity.

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The harmonic language is both simple and complex, typical of the composer's style. The opening measures build up structures in fourths. The theme itself spans open octaves. The tonality is rooted on D, but due to the absence of the 2nd and 6th degrees of the scale (and minimal presence of the 7th degree), the mode is unclear.

By m. 3, with the arrival of the raised 6th scale step (B natural), it is evident that D Dorian is the mode in use. However, mm. 20-1 employ a harmonic progression of VI, VII, i in D Minor. This lowered 6th step alters the mode for variety.

The open and sparse qualities attributed to this style may well be founded in the quartal structures and use of less than the complete scale steps in the vocabulary. Such techniques would result in the uncluttered sonorities often associated with 20th-Century American music (perhaps in contrast to 19th-Century European repertoire).

However, the very simple harmonies thus far begin to become clouded during the B sections. As noted previously, chromaticism appears with increasing frequency. First comes a B flat (m. 32). Then an E flat (m. 35). Dissonances are found with each structure. Mm. 44-5 contain a chord of fourths (A, D, G, C) which then moves to the "preparation" chord under the fermata. This is close to a Minor Dominant (rooted on A). Yet, the B flat heightens the dissonance, turning this into perhaps a Dominant Minor 9th in inversion. Or, simply, a pseudo-Dominant with dissonance. This is hardly as simple a harmonic language as was found in the first section of this music. One would therefore conclude that this composer has placed both simplicity and complexity on her harmonic palette.

At m. 46, with the return of the theme, the harmonic realm is once again D Dorian. Quartal structures provide harmonic response within the mode. However, at mm. 51-2, these responses now shift into the flats area, with abrasive commentary to the melody. This is part of the process of introducing increasing dissonance into this movement. Perhaps some of these "abrasions" are meant to depict the "Splash of Cold Water" in the title – a "wake-up call" with brief dissonance, almost in fun.

Whereas most of the sonorities associated with the A section are basic to the mode, the movement between phrases can be unexpected. For example, the connection between mm. 65-6 displays a mediant relationship. A similar pattern is found at m. 70. This movement between chords a third apart is a technique found in the music of Richard Strauss (the "Four Last Songs" for example) as well as Bela Bartok. It is a valued means of drawing harmonic richness into the language. The progressions have logic, yet they

offer chromatic alterations that are both unexpected and fascinating. Considering that the composer studied with Arnold Franchetti (a student of Strauss), and also is familiar with the Bartok string quartets, it would not be hard to imagine that mediant progressions might appear in this music.

To summarize the harmonic discussion: this is a language which can be both simple and open, complex and dense. The simplicity may come from using very obvious chord constructions and progressions (i-IV-i in D Dorian, mm. 12-14, for example). The openness may come in using less than all scale steps (pentatonic modalism at times). The vocabulary is less chromatic than it is modal. But, complexity can arise as dissonance is interjected for contrast and tension. Slight chromaticism may build to tone clusters in harmonically-remote areas. And, mediant progressions can shift the tonalities rapidly and unexpectedly. The simplicity is balanced by the complexity. And the complexity creates the urgency for resolution in simplicity.

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The rhythmic language of Gwyneth Walker has been described as “American” – influenced by jazz and rock styles. Perhaps some examples of these influences might be helpful.

One aspect of the American vernacular style of rock music is **driven rhythms**, epitomized by repeated, regular note values, with accents. Such rhythms are found in the opening four measures of “A Splash of Cold Water.” These patterns appear throughout the music. In addition, motives such as are found in mm. 62-9 are examples of driven rhythms.

A specifically jazz-derived rhythm is **syncopation**. This characterizes the theme. Note the accented 4th eighth-note in Vln. 1 in mm. 6 & 8. The off-beat dyad in m. 9 (also Vln. 1) is another example. The section from mm. 70-73 is especially syncopated. And the 11/8 measures (27, 88) are designed to throw the listener off balance (as well as to transition into the 6/8 meter to follow).

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Of special note in this movement are the glissandi in mm. 14, 16, 19 and throughout the piece, ending with a large glissando in the penultimate measure. Remembering that the title of this movement is “A Splash of Cold Water,” and reading in the program notes that the composer envisioned this music to “infuse energy,” one might interpret these glissandi as gestures of “waking up,” or dousing oneself with cold water in the morning. Upbows would be the appropriate way to play these energetic glissandi!

I. A Splash of Cold Water

Gwyneth Walker

Lively (♩ = ca. 96) *with growing energy*

Musical score for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Violoncello. The score is in 2/2 time and begins with a *p* dynamic. The Violoncello part starts with a *p* dynamic and a *sim.* marking. The Viola part starts with a *p* dynamic and a *sim.* marking. The Violin 2 part starts with a *p* dynamic and a *sim.* marking. The Violin 1 part is silent.

Musical score for Piano, measures 5-9. The score is in 2/2 time and begins with a *mf* dynamic. The piano part features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The *mf* dynamic is marked in the first and third measures.

Musical score for Piano, measures 10-14. The score is in 2/2 time and begins with a *mf* dynamic. The piano part features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The *mf* dynamic is marked in the first and third measures. The *p* dynamic is marked in the fourth and fifth measures.

15

mf *p* *mf*

20

f *f* *f* *f*

25

suddenly peaceful

p *p* *p* *p*

with increasing urgency

31

mf

mf

mf

mf

39

accel. ----- *faster* *molto rit.* -----

f

f

f

f

f

46

a tempo

p

pizz.

mf

arco

mf

pizz.

mf

pizz.

mf

pizz.

mf

51

arco

p

mf

mf

56

mf

p

mf

mf

p

mf

p — *mf*

61

with bite

f

p

f

p

f

p

f

p

66

Musical score for measures 66-69. The score is written for four staves: Treble 1, Treble 2, Bass 1, and Bass 2. Measure 66 starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 67 continues with *f*. Measure 68 begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 69 continues with *p*. A *sfp* (sforzando piano) dynamic marking is present in measure 68. The music features various articulations such as accents and slurs.

70

Musical score for measures 70-75. The score is written for four staves: Treble 1, Treble 2, Bass 1, and Bass 2. Measure 70 starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 71 continues with *f*. Measure 72 begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 73 continues with *f*. Measure 74 continues with *f*. Measure 75 continues with *f*. The music features various articulations such as accents and slurs.

76 (non rit.)

rit.

a tempo

Musical score for measures 76-81. The score is written for four staves: Treble 1, Treble 2, Bass 1, and Bass 2. Measure 76 starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and is marked "(non rit.)". Measure 77 continues with *f*. Measure 78 begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 79 continues with *f*. Measure 80 continues with *f*. Measure 81 continues with *f*. The music features various articulations such as accents and slurs. A *rit.* (ritardando) marking is present above measure 78, and an *a tempo* marking is present above measure 80. A piano (*p*) dynamic marking is present in measure 81.

82

mf

mf

mf

mf

Detailed description: This system contains measures 82 through 85. It features four staves: two for the right hand (treble clef) and two for the left hand (bass clef). The music is in 6/8 time. Measures 82 and 83 show a piano introduction with a *mf* dynamic. Measures 84 and 85 continue the piece with similar dynamics and phrasing.

86

f

f

f

f

Detailed description: This system contains measures 86 through 88. It features four staves. Measures 86 and 87 are marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic and feature more active melodic lines. Measure 88 shows a change in the bass line, with a new rhythmic pattern.

89

G.P.

(f)

(f)

(f)

(f)

Detailed description: This system contains measures 89 through 92. It features four staves. Measures 89 and 90 are marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 91 is marked with a repeat sign and 'G.P.' (Grave Play). Measure 92 is also marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic and features a more rhythmic, accented pattern.

Duration: 1'45"