

WHILE SUMMER LASTS FOR STRING QUARTET

The title of this String Quartet, "While Summer Lasts," is inspired by the 13th century Middle English song fragment "Mirie it is while sumer ilast." Much of English music prior to the English Reformation was lost to history during the dissolution of the monasteries when countless medieval illuminated manuscripts, documents, liturgical and secular music were burned, destroyed, or looted. The destruction was so thorough, that our modern knowledge of English music prior to the Reformation is mostly only thanks to a handful of liturgical pieces that were kept in libraries in continental Europe outside of England. Rarer still is "Mirie it is," as it represents one of the very few surviving secular songs from medieval England, and was only discovered by chance hidden between the pages of a book of Psalms at Oxford in the late 19th century. It therefore offers us a rare insight into the music of a time and place that is for all intents and purposes musically enigmatic to us.

It is the short text of this medieval song that was the impetus of this String Quartet; the end of summer, which although merry while it lasts, soon gives way to autumn and winter. Beyond this, a variation of the medieval music itself is quoted in the build up to—and final movement of the Quartet.

Middle English:

Mirie it is while sumer ilast
with fugheles song.
oc nu necheth windes blast
and weder strong.
Ey ey what this nicht is long.
And ich with wel michel wrong
soregh and murne and fast.

Modern English:

Merry it is while summer lasts
With fowl's song.
But now nears the wind's blast
And weather strong.
Oh, oh! How this night is long!
And I with very much wrong
Sorrow and mourn and fast.

On a macro level this Quartet is not just about the end of a season but also the larger seasons of our lives. For most, summer is the best time of the year, as the weather is warm and the days are long. In a sense the joy one feels during summer can be transmuted to periods of our life. Sometimes the realization that we were living through a "summer" isn't fully recognized or appreciated until we have departed it and can only look back in nostalgic retrospect. For some it's looking back at one's youth or an era of one's life that was particularly pleasant, or maybe just one particular summer when troubles were scarce.

As with most things, these moments are ephemeral and must come to an end. As autumn follows summer, so too do times of difficulty follow those of bliss. Because we are all governed by these laws of nature, there is a melancholy or dread that befalls us when we realize a summer is coming to a close. We all feel it each year, when the days become shorter and the trees begin to shed their leaves, and in a larger sense when events in our lives begin to put us on a more difficult and unexpected path.

This piece is meant to straddle this turning point. It's a blend of optimism, vigor, anxious joy, and finally melancholy. For as long as summer continues things are carefree, but nagging in the background is the truth we must all face, that this time will come to an end.

It is however the belief of the composer that the musicians who perform this piece interpret it as freely as this description inspires them to.



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