

CROQUIS (1976-80)

Three 'Cahiers' of 27 short pieces for String Trio.

When I began work on this String Trio in the autumn of 1976, it was partly by way of giving myself a tonic. I was 'on the rebound' from a very different kind of operation – a large-scale, deeply subjective piece – and I wanted to refresh myself by working on the minutest scale, both with regard to medium and musical thinking. I started 'doodling': composing what I thought would be a modest collection of bagatelles. Four years later, with twenty-seven such bits and pieces on my hands, I still felt the medium of the string trio to be inexhaustible.

As usual with me, one of the strongest stimuli had been the musical character and sound of the players for whom was writing: the members of the Arditti Quartet. Another was my re-awakened delight in all forms of miniature artistry: not only the supreme musical models of Couperin, Beethoven, Scriabin, Webern and many others; but also, for instance, the poetry and artefacts of the Far East; Blake's wood-cuts; the daily jottings of Beaudelaire – what he called his 'squibbs'; the drawings of Watteau – where the subject is sometimes reduced to a mere fragment of costume or a girl's nostrils.

'Croquis' means 'sketch'; and in this collection – as in any album – there is to be found not only finished work, precisely organized, but also the odd scribble, dashed off: as it were, provisional. The pieces are gathered together in three 'Cahiers', or portfolios, and can be performed in a number of different ways: as a framework to a programme in which items for other media could be interleaved; or extracts could be used judiciously as 'fillers' between more substantial fare – in other words as a kind of spice, *entremet*; or simply as an anthology. Although I took care to impose some sort of organization within each of the three parts as well as over all, in a way I'd prefer listeners to 'nibble' at these pieces, rather than expect a solid meal: what the French might call a *dégustation*. Or perhaps, a *meze* or a string of *tapas*...

CAHIER I

In most cases only the titles are necessary to elucidate each piece. The first three are –

Precipitoso; Cadence; Chants.

Now the first of three Croquis – sketches, in different degrees of definition, of the same material. Then Sextet; and Fusée – the name Beaudelaire gave to his aphorisms.

The last three pieces in this first set are entitled Plaint; Solo 1 – 'pathétique' – for the violin, which employs a fairly wild gypsy style; and finally 'Sommeil' – pour les violes, the first of several duets: a gentle echo of the court music of Francois Couperin.

2.

CAHIER II

The second Cahier opens with an extremely condensed Fugue, in which the ideas of chase and flight are enacted: a fairly hectic movement which is only blocked by the ensuing viola Solo, marked *deciso*.

Now Croquis 2, another version of the fragment we heard in Cahier 1; followed by two 'process' pieces: Eye, which is a study in expanding and contracting durations; and Centering, which involves a gradual gathering of texture.

The four remaining pieces in this set allude to dance idioms. Pas de deux for viola and cello is a grotesque limping affair, framed between two rather strained *révérences*. This miniature divertissement continues with a Tambourin; and Adage; and finally Reels.

CAHIER III

Where as the first two Cahiers are largely composed of character-pieces and movements in which action and gesture are prominent, the last is generally reflective and draws upon poetic models.

Sapphic Fragment is followed by Minstrel; then a rather gloomy Solo for the cellist, marked *mesto*; and a short passage 'From the Chinese...'

The Quodlibet which comes next is entirely composed of second-hand materials – mostly twentieth-century chamber music, although Vivaldi, Mozart and Beethoven get a look in. what the various component fragments have in common, is either re-iteration – patter or pulsing – or melodic shapes derived from thirds and seconds. It's followed by the third and last version of the Croquis heard before in Cahiers I and II.

The last three pieces in the set are in a way complementary. Etude à 3 is in fact three solo studies superimposed upon one another; the apogee of the virtuosity exploited throughout the work. Trio brings together – but in an alienated fashion – the material and character of the three solo movements heard earlier: the strident, decisive viola, the lugubrious cello, and the fiery, nimble violin. Finally, as a reply to this excessively dispersed view of the ensemble, and as an 'envoi' to the entire composition, a brief musical Sonnet.

JEREMY DALE ROBERTS