

BRASS QUINTET - Elliott Carter

Programme Note

The Brass Quintet was written during the summer of 1974 for the American Brass Quintet which commissioned the work. This group gave its premiere on October 20, 1974 at a Charles Ives Festival broadcast by the BBC from London, and its American premiere at the Library of Congress on November 15, 1974, and has recorded the work for Columbia Records.

The music being almost constantly multilayered, as is my Second String Quartet, separates the players by individualizing their parts, but not completely, because each instrument shares parts of its repertory with one of the others. The first trumpet, for instance, near the beginning plays in a trio with the second trumpet and tenor trombone featuring the minor sixth light, irregular chords of which the character and interval become part of the repertory of the three participating instruments. A bit later, the first trumpet plays another trio with the horn and bass trombone that features fanfares and quiet, majestic music based on the perfect fifth, which then become part of the repertory of these three instruments. The horn, which has the largest repertory of all, however also frequently uses the augmented fourth which it does not share with any of the other.

All of the contrasting characters and their related musical materials form a multilayered piece planned along the following pattern: Every third (that is, the first, fourth, seventh, etc.) of its overlapping 19 short sections is a brief five-part quodlibet in which the instruments oppose each other with contrasting parts of their individual repertories. Between these is a dup preceded or followed by a trip in which two or three instruments join in music of similar character. Each dup and trip has a different instrumentation.

The general plan is interrupted midway through the work by a relatively extended unaccompanied horn solo which is cut off by angry octaves from the others. The slow music which began the piece and forms the background of the first three quodlibets is abandoned after the last of these, only to return in extended form near the end. The entire work, in fact, can be heard as one long, slow movement with interruptions.

This quintet, rather than employing all the resources of color possible with modern mutes for the brass, relies primarily on linear material, textures, and the instrumental virtuosity for which the American Brass Quintet is notable.

--Elliott Carter