

# AMERICAN COMPOSER

GEORGE TSONTAKIS

BY KYLE GANN

What is it about the George Tsontakis string quartets that reminds me of Beethoven? Isn't that a terrible thing to say about someone? I mean, either you'll rush out now and buy the Tsontakis string quartets—there are two lovely ones on a New World disc played by the American String Quartet [New World 80414-2]—and, since what you really wanted was more Beethoven, you'll be disappointed. Or else, you'll agree that Tsontakis really succeeds as a Beethoven imitator, and the fact is, an epigone—even of Beethoven—is just an epigone.

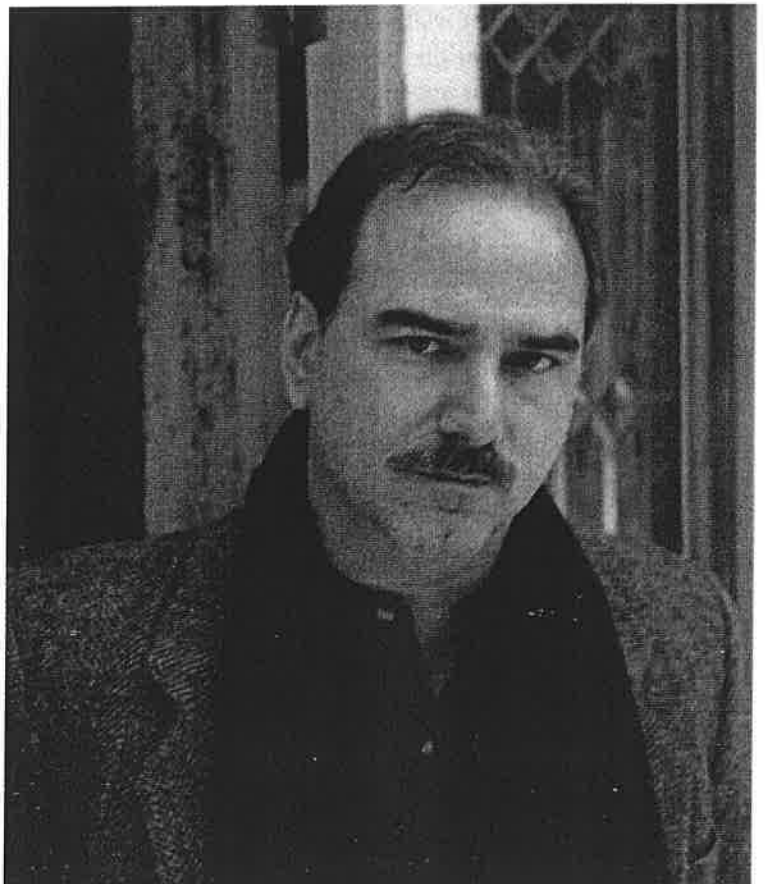
Obviously, no one would ever mistake Tsontakis's gnarly style for Beethoven, and yet as Groucho Marx said in *Animal Crackers*, I still insist there's a resemblance. And I've got it partly pinned down. It's that Tsontakis often uses familiar chords such as triads and seventh chords, but he deploys them in counterintuitive rhythmic settings that keep you continually surprised. That's a factor of only

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Beethoven's late music—in the late quartets and piano sonatas, the harmonic rhythm is often a beat or two off of the metric rhythm one way or the other. It makes late Beethoven sound deep and thoughtful, like someone talking with familiar words but spacing and in-

flecting them in weird ways that make them sound portentously meaningful. And it makes Tsontakis's music sound deep and thoughtful as well.

But that's still not quite the whole story. It implies that Tsontakis writes tonal music, which isn't quite accurate. Rather, he writes music in which tonality gradually seeps into atonality without your noticing, and vice versa, and in which the two sometimes even seem to trade places. His Third Quartet, "Coraggio," opens with angular, Webern-like gestures, then sinks after five measures into



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warm F major—except for the first violin, which resists. In Tsontakis's Fourth String Quartet, "Beneath Thy Tenderness of Heart" (1988), there are some big, climactic chords that sound weird, but turn out, on inspection, to be simply B-flat-major triads. A few beats later there will be a perfectly simple-sounding chord that, when you look at it in the score, contains D, G, G-flat, D-flat, and A-flat. The musical technique is so smooth in its voice-leading and repetitions that you hear complexity and simplicity when he wants you to, not when they're necessarily present.

Like George Rochberg, but later and not so publicly, Tsontakis abandoned an idiom of harsh atonality and serialist rigor—between his Second and Third String Quartets, to be specific, the latter of which is more listener-friendly than the former. However, Tsontakis was originally a student of Roger Sessions, who, despite his use of twelve-tone method, believed that there was a large gray area between tonality and atonality. Tsontakis spends so much time in that area that the listener actually grows comfortable in it. In place of the old classical dichotomy of tonic and dominant, which gave the music of the common-practice era a rhetoric of tension alternating with relaxation, Tsontakis employs a flexible and clearly defined idiom of contrapuntal motion versus stable ostinatos.

In the Piano Quartet No. 2, for example, there are two defining points of repose. One is the sweetly falling pentatonic scale in repeated notes, like a children's nursery tune, that interrupts each of the two movements, linking them. The other is the series of mystic piano chords, sounding like Messiaen, which acts as a foundation for the first movement's string lines; the chords are mostly bitonal and ac-

tually quite dissonant, but by playing them pianissimo and spelling out simple melodies in the top notes, Tsontakis makes them seem tonal. Between these two anchors of calm, the strings modulate in poignant counterpoint with suspensions resolving like the sighing wind.

So if it can't be said that there is any minimalist impulse in Tsontakis's music, there are certainly moments in which the music settles into a comforting (if never tonally unambiguous) rocking motion; two examples occur in *Meditations at Perigee* for piano and six instruments, first a delicate treble ostinato in the piano, then a kind of chorale of repeated notes in the four strings. In *Dust* for horn, violin, and piano, the horn's angular line enters over a simple alternation of two pitches in the piano, a whole-step apart. Interesting how often horn appears in his chamber music; not only in *Meditations* and *Dust*, but also *Gemini* for horn, violin, piano, and cello.

Another Beethovenian twist to Tsontakis is his willingness to use simple motives as generating ideas—easily trackable in his complexly nuanced forms—and big, memorable gestures. Unlike Beethoven, however, he has virtually no heroic mode. His music is warm and listenable, but it is pervaded by a Nordic

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pensive (remarkable considering the composer's Greek roots). It is occasionally cheerful, much more often calm, invariably thoughtful in every measure. Ghosts inhabit it; there is a ghost chorale in the Third Quartet; a ghostly tremolo passage in *Eclipse* for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano; and he's even got a piano opus called *Ghost Variations*. His are among the few works by any living composer that I find myself hearing in my head, and that I impulsively put on the stereo the way I do Schubert.

One last example, again from the Fourth String Quartet—my favorite Tsontakis work but only marginally, since several others are nearly as compelling. The work opens by quoting a beautiful Russian Orthodox hymn whose melody spans a diminished fifth from B up to F in the key of C minor. Later, the first violin runs up and down that diminished fifth in high register as a tiny ostinato, creating a point of stability. Still later, the music works up to a climax ending on that diminished fifth, and even after that the same motive is repeated in differing rhythmic configurations to create turmoil. Now, not many composers working today write such clear music that points of repose, passages of turmoil, and climaxes can all be distinctly delineated. But that Tsontakis can make that one motive heard convincingly as embodying all those different functions means that he has recaptured the subtlety of classical-era music in an idiom all his own.

Heck, maybe Beethoven himself would hear the resemblance. ■