

Quartet No.2 in C
Benjamin Britten
Analysis by David Mitchell

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was an English composer. He was born on November 22, the feast day of Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music. He studied at the Royal Academy of music under John Ireland. He also studied with Alban Berg. He also collaborated with W.H. Auden on several pieces. Britten also wrote a series of English operas including *Peter Grimes*. He was known for treating traditional musical forms with a fresh approach. This is evident in the third movement of *Quartet No. 2 in C*.

Quartet No.2 is quite tonal, but Benjamin Britten uses modulation in this piece to give the piece harmonic variety and to obscure the tonal center. In the first movement, the first eight measures are in C, but he begins to move away from C to G by measure 8, to E, then A by measure 23. He is in F by measure 36. He is in G by measure 45 (the beginning of section B). From G, Britten modulates to A, D, E, Ab, and Eb. There is a brief section of Db at section H. There are six measures of Eb just before section G. There is evidence for almost every key signature except F#/Gb. It is possible that F#/Gb is there and I'm just not seeing it. He returns to C major at the end of the first movement. Britten is definitely using tonal harmonies and quick modulations to obscure the tonal center.

The second movement begins in C minor with the violin II playing an Eb major arpeggio and the viola mirroring the violin with an Ab major 7th arpeggio. This is a very interesting effect. The two arpeggios are major, but the effect is C minor because the viola has note c as the root of its arpeggio. At measure 13, Violin I and the Cello take over this mirrored arpeggio pattern in D minor. At measure 22, we're back to the original

instrumentation in C minor again. Then there is a return to the D minor arpeggio with Violin I and the Cello. Section A is a series of declamatory figures in C minor. Section B is essentially in A melodic minor with an F# diminished 7th with a minor 9th. Section C is in D minor. I could do a measure-by-measure analysis of the second movement, but the general effect is essentially minor with modulations to a variety of minor keys with a return to C minor at the end of the second movement.

Britten gave the third movement the title Chacony. It is in triple meter just like the Baroque chaconne. He also uses doubled dotted quarter notes and triple dotted half notes. These are characteristic of the Baroque period. He ends the third movement in C major. The major key is also typical of the Baroque period chaconne. It is also slow and stately like the chaconne of the Baroque period. But all the other aspects of this movement are definitely not Baroque period. Britten has divided the third movement into a series of numbered sections. Section 1 seems to be in Bb and it modulates to C. Section 2 starts with a mixture of C and Bb tonalities. It is almost polytonal. Section 3 is C major in the Cello and Bb in the Violin modulating to C major. Section 4 is also polytonal with Bb in violin II and C in the Cello. Then Britten modulates to other remote keys before finishing the movement in C major.

The harmonic qualities of this string quartet are very interesting and complex. It has qualities that are twentieth century and late romantic period. All three movements are based on C. C is the tonal center, but the harmonic structure is so dense that it is totally obscured.

Melodically, there are sections that use sequencing and imitation, and inversion. There are also homophonic sections and doubling between the instruments. He also uses thematic repetition to give the movements continuity.

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