



ARDITTI QUARTET

Sunday, March 8, 2009 3:00 pm

PROGRAM

Alvin Curran, *VSTO*

(1988; revised 1993–94 and 2008)

Chris Brown, *Arcade* (2008) world premiere

Fred Frith, *Allegory* (2002)*

INTERMISSION

Hilda Paredes, *Cuerdas del destino* (2008)

Iannis Xenakis, *Tetras* (1983)

MUSICIANS

Irvine Arditti, violin

Ashot Sarkissjan, violin

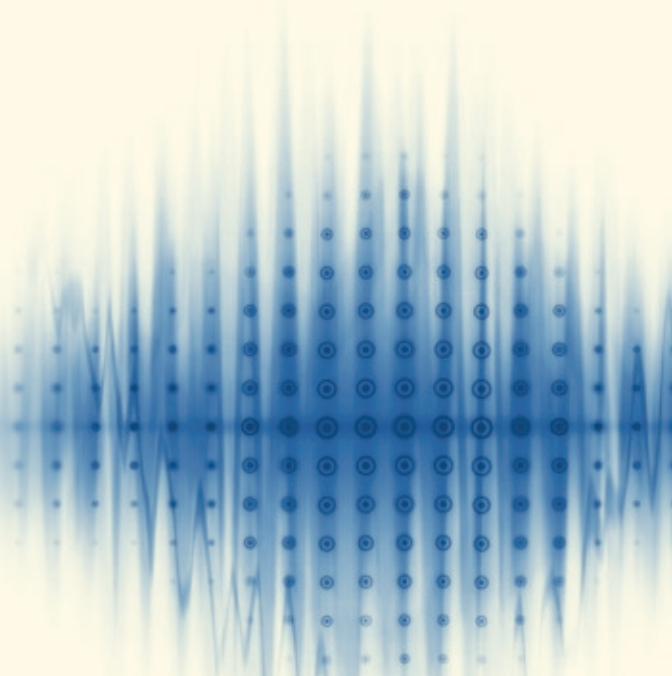
Ralf Ehlers, viola

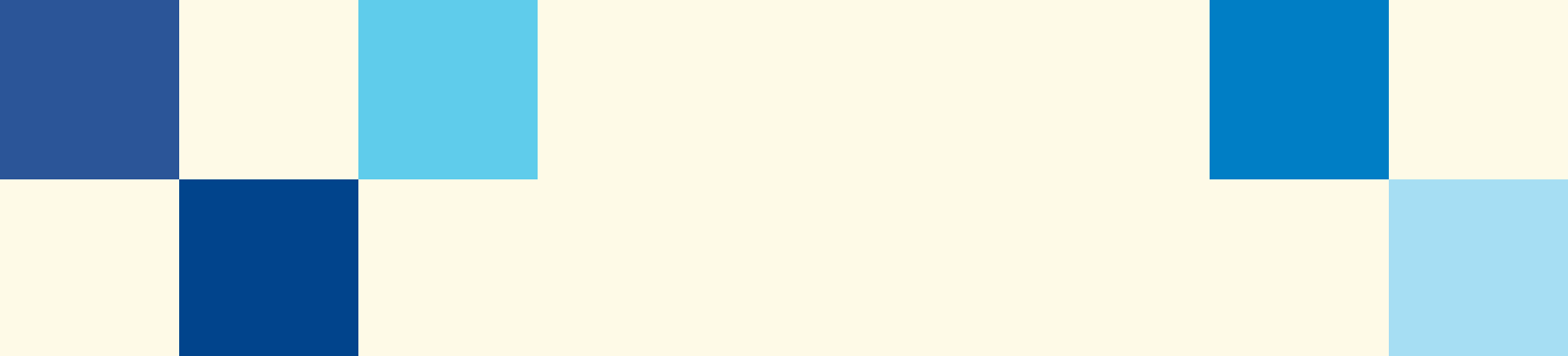
Lucas Fels, cello

*Fred Frith, electric guitar



Now in its 35th year, the Arditti Quartet is quite simply without parallel in the world of contemporary music. It is not merely a matter of their longevity, nor the sheer volume of string quartets written especially for them, impressive though these may be. Rather, it is the fact that their world premieres of quartets—by composers such as Birtwistle, Cage, Carter, Dillon, Ferneyhough, Gubaidulina, Harvey, Hosokawa, Kagel, Kurtág, Lachenmann, Ligeti, Nancarrow, Neuwirth, Reynolds, Rihm, Scelsi, Stockhausen, and Xenakis—have had a major impact upon 20th-century music, giving the Arditti Quartet their own distinguished place in music history. This afternoon's concert celebrates five unique composers who share a past or present association with Mills College. It also continues the extraordinary legacy of string quartet performances and residencies at Mills, which has included the Pro Arte, Budapest, and Kronos Quartets.






VSTO (1988; revised 1993–94 and 2008)

The notes below appear on the CRI edition of VSTO and are followed by a brief update for the 2009 version performed here today. The reference to famed choreographer and Mills alumna Trisha Brown '58 is a work she created to this music in the early '90s.

“When it comes to music, Trisha Brown knows what she wants and, if necessary, she’ll dance it for you. I opened my archives—bowling balls and foghorns fell out, but no ‘little man.’ After an exasperating search, a Polish string quartet appeared, four nice guys from Silesia; they had premiered the work in Berlin in 1988. I never thought they could dance, but Trisha saw it immediately. String quartets are said to embody all the mysteries even as they bob and hum along. The choreography seemed to fit as if it were the music, moving through places of quiet fragility with the same oblique wisdom as through Berber encampments.


As students, Elliott Carter said we could do anything but write octaves; here the octave rules like Gurdjieff. It is an interval that goes absolutely nowhere even when it goes up and down, like Trisha’s 18-minute phrase. In contrast, a melody leaves the *Schtetl* and continues on to the dissonance school, leaving with a degree in contrary motion and triadic psalms. It was that simple, and who would ever know that when the green light went on in the pit the musicians would jump from whatever chord they were playing to the next to last one, ending with the dancers in perfect time. All of this called *VSTO* (an acronym for Giacinto Scelsi’s lifelong address in Rome, Via San Teodoro Otto) and forming the last 18 minutes of a 90-minute work written by me in Scelsi’s memory in 1988, indeed, a little man now becomes *ANOTHER STORY*.”



The present string quartet 2.5 is a recent modification of the original work, here preceded by some 10 minutes of music, all concerned with the idea of unison in one form or other and employing varying degrees of temporal coordination between the players. But as soon as the music reaches the octave melody, it takes on a most sober quality demanding absolute rhythmic precision and articulation. As mentioned earlier, this piece was composed in 1988 to commemorate the death of my friend and mentor Giacinto Scelsi, and revised in 1993–94 for the Trisha Brown Dance Company. Twenty-one years later, this occasion—the reopening of the Mills Concert Hall—is a special one, with the Arditti Quartet performing this work in yet another slightly revised version, with a new opening phrase and a new closing one now bookending the original score pretty much as written. My concern, now as then, is how to compose music which goes everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This musical hat trick has been an obsession for most of my professional life and, on the surface, might appear in this work as a dog-eared postmodern music primer. But the early joys of putting this with that and that with more of this has indeed become my critical union card—allowing me not only to understand that all the doors were

open, but also how to choose which ones to walk through, sometimes simultaneously. That this work, incidentally, had its American premiere in this very hall, and was recorded by a stunning group of Bay Area pros headed by David Abel, makes the presentation of the current edition a special one indeed—closing the circle as if this music never left the hall in which it was first heard.

—Alvin Curran, Rome; January 16, 2009



Arcade (2008)

A Rhythm-Harmony String Quartet for Henry Cowell

Arcade is a traversal through the rhythmic-harmonic field of ratios defined by the set of unique four-number combinations of the values 2 through 9, where none of these values occurs more than once. Each of the work's 69 bars uses one of these sets to determine the rhythmic and harmonic framework for the music written within it: each instrument plays rhythmically in a different subdivision of the bar (2 through 9), and the available pitches for each bar are determined by the intervals defined by the ratios of the same numbers. Because the ratios can include the number 7, the intervals are often quite far away from equal-tempered ones, and microtonal tuning adjustments are required to realize the harmonies that they imply. A total of 19 notes per octave are generated by the ratios, and, with F as the fundamental pitch, their notation, name, ratio, and cents deviation from equal temperament is shown in the "Microtonal Note Key" included with the score.

My purpose with this composition was to hear and make performable all of the rhythms and harmonies implied by these simple numerical relationships, and to experience through them the continuum of consonance and dissonance. After generating the four-number sets, I next calculated the pitch-sets that they defined, and grouped together the sets, which had similar scales and tunings so that they could be heard together for longer amounts of time. Then these groups were arranged in three sections that trace first a progression from dissonance to consonance, then two progressions from consonance to dissonance. The first section focuses on the beats produced by small differences in tuning; the second on melodic and harmonic progression; and the third, played entirely pizzicato, focuses mostly on rhythm.

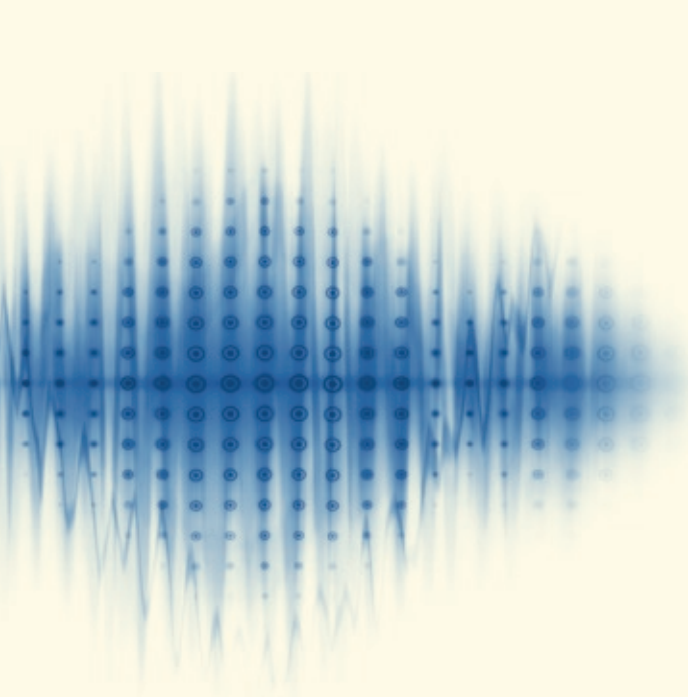
—Chris Brown

Allegory (2002)

Allegory was composed at the suggestion of Irvine Arditti, and is dedicated to him. It was first performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, in September 2002. Much of the writing owes a debt to José Maceda. When Maceda visited Mills in 2000, I performed in his *Suling Suling* (for 10 bamboo buzzers, 10 gongs, and 10 flutes) and became fascinated with his use of multiple overlapping tuplets. I have experimented since then with applying this kind of rhythmic density to extremely simple melodic material. The other principal axis of interest for me was to create a part for electric guitar that was always below the dynamic level of the strings, a kind of perversion of accepted reality! The guitar part is largely improvised, though always closely following the score. —Fred Frith

Cuerdas del destino (2008)

In *Cuerdas del destino*, my second work for the medium, I have treated the string quartet as a mega instrument, in contrast with my first string quartet written in 1998 in which I treated the instruments as characters who propose and characterize their own material. In *Cuerdas del destino*, the concept of consequence is the principle from which all materials develop by creating the direction, dramaturgy, and structure of the work. The choice of the title (*Strings of Destiny*) derives from this.



As in many of my recent works, the instrumental treatment in this piece is as important for defining the character of the material as are the harmonic, rhythmic, and dynamic parameters. From the introductory opening, two contrasting materials follow each other—glissando tremolo and pizzicato—while a third, a white-note harmony played *col legno tratto*, interrupts the discourse between the other two. Consequently, the first section of the piece grows out of this white-note harmony and develops slowly into harmony colored microtonally. The dramatic treatment of these three materials sets up the principles, which will develop throughout the piece. The four main sections are defined by their harmony, instrumental color, and gestures. In the second section, a combination of harmonics, *col legno battuto*, and left- and right-hand pizzicati interact. The rhythmic and percussive character of the third section grows out of the *col legno battuto* and left-hand pizzicati, which appeared in a different context in the second section. Each section is linked to the next one by a transition in which *tonloss* (toneless) sounds prevail. In the last transition into the fourth section, there is further development of the subtle bow pressure of the toneless sounds into various different colors produced by varying bow pressures. This leads to the climax in the quartet, which acts as a link into the last section, built out of elements previously heard but in a different, more rhythmic, and virtuoso character. *Cuerdas del destino* was written in 2007–08, commissioned by Festival Traiettorie (Parma) and Ultima (Oslo), and is dedicated to my loyal colleagues in the Arditti Quartet. —Hilda Paredes

Tetras (1983)

Commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, *Tetras* was composed in 1983 specifically for the Arditti Quartet. The premiere took place in Lisbon on June 8, 1983. At the time, *Tetras* was among the most difficult works in the string quartet repertoire; its performance helped establish the Arditti Quartet as a major force in the world of contemporary music. *Tetras* is divided into nine sections, each characterized by a predominant sound element drawn from a palette of sounds that ranges from discreet pitches to glissandi and noises created by various bowing techniques, knocking on the body of the instruments, and tapping on the strings with the wooden part of the bow. The word “*tetras*” stands for a group of four instrumentalists. Xenakis eschews traditional polyphonic part writing, treating the quartet as if it were a single entity rather than an ensemble with four players. As seemingly random movements of molecules determine the temperature of a volume of gas, Xenakis employs stochastic processes to create a random distribution of the individual musical details to achieve preconceived large-scale effects, which evoke a wide range of expression, including humor and personal lyricism.



This performance by the Arditti Quartet is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

