

PROGRAM NOTES: "Short Stories"

"Short Stories" is a collection of 6 movements for saxophone quartet which are flexible in both the order and number in which they can be performed. I wrote it with the idea that a group could tailor the piece according to their venue and the duration they might like to fill on a concert. While being composer-in-residence with the Prism Saxophone Quartet, I had the chance to see how the demands for repertoire change greatly from concert to concert: through school programs with young students, to college-age classical musicians, to formal recitals. So, when I sat down to write a work for the Anica, Black Swamp, Resounding Winds, and Sax 4th Avenue quartets, I wanted a work with as much diversity in the characters of the movements as possible and I wanted the groups to have freedom in their choices of movements. As a result, there are 6 movements, 3 of which are slow and 3 which are fast, and each one tells a different story:

"Summer's Eve" - I had in mind the idyllic summer evening where folks are out sitting on their porches in swings and rocking chairs, listening to the sounds of summer: crickets and children at play, and soft evening breezes. I wanted to capture the essence and the magic of an ideal summer's eve.

"Lullaby" - This movement was originally written as a work for mezzo, flute, and piano, but I kept hearing it as a saxophone quartet in my head. It is a lullaby whose lyrical qualities seem to lend itself to the saxophone very well.

"Coyote Nights" - Many years ago, I took a trip out West, camping out in 8 different National Parks; one of those parks was Arches, in Utah. It is an unusual place to be in our modern day of technology and electricity, since it becomes totally dark at night, out there in the sand, with large looming rocks and a million stars above, and with the sound of wild coyotes crying in the night. The crying of the wild animals was a peaceful reminder that we are visitors.

"Chase" - A fast movement with a lot of energy and tension, this is a running game that could be through any streets anywhere, where pursuers and prey sometimes come very close to catching up with each other, and when they do, they rough and tumble before sprinting off again.

"Stomp & Dance" - For this movement, I was inspired by the dance/rhythm company that performs in the Broadway show "Stomp". The idea in "Stomp" is that various performers make rhythmic cadences out of anything, from matchboxes to brooms to oil drums. I thought that their rhythms and execution of the pieces were so interesting and ingenious, that I wanted to take their "spirit" and infuse it into one of the movements of this quartet; it is always dancing and moving and changing. The pulse moves and the timbres change in order to create the stomping and dancing feel.

"Splashing the Canvas" - This movement was inspired by the idea of an artist who splashes paint upon a canvas in a wild and uncontrolled manner, building up layers and constantly changing the resulting structure. When I started this movement, I had been reading a biography of Jackson Pollack, who was a very angry person whose approach to painting included this technique of throwing paint at the canvas. In the piece itself, many ideas are presented and are thrown about and layered. At the beginning of the movement it takes longer for the ideas to be stated, but as the piece progresses, the themes come back quicker and quicker as if the canvas were building into thick layers of overlapping ideas and becoming more complex.

"Short Stories" was commissioned by the Anicia, Black Swamp, Resounding Winds, and Sax 4th Avenue Quartets, with a grant from the American Composers Forum, underwritten by the Jerome Foundation, and from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

--Jennifer Higdon