

## *Program Notes by the Composer*

When the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society commissioned me to write a string quartet in honor of the 250th Anniversary of Pittsburgh, I decided to take the City as the actual subject of my quartet. My idea was to tell its history in music—to capture the spirit of Pittsburgh from its early days as a frontier to the west, through the struggles of its immigrant population in building the steel industry, to the pride of the shining modern metropolis of today.

For inspiration, I began by visiting such sites as the Fort Pitt Museum (dedicated to the French and Indian War), and the Bost Museum in Homestead which houses information on Pittsburgh's steel heritage. I followed this with research on indigenous tunes and folk music associated with the City's past. In all, I ended up incorporating eleven tunes from various ethnic groups, nationalities, and specific historical events into my Allegheny Quartet. Taken as a whole, the work is designed to provide the listener with a journey through the evolution of the City.

### Movement I:

#### The Land at Diondega

The title refers to the early Native American term for the land where the Allegheny and Monongehela Rivers meet to form the Ohio River. The movement begins with a traditional Iroquois "Dream Song," intoned on the solo viola, evoking a Native American chanting alone to the trees in the virgin forest land that would be Pittsburgh. During the course of the movement, French troops begin to gather, represented by a traditional French song from 1755, "La Courte Paille." The movement continues with the introduction of English soldiers through the period song, "The Little Turtle Dove." The ensuing battle among these parties (and their associated melodies in the development section of this 'sonata form' movement), representing the French and Indian War, ends

with the British melody emerging from the contrapuntal "struggle" of the tunes. The raising of the British flag over Fort Duquesne (soon after to be named Fort Pitt), was in November 1758, the very anniversary this piece was commissioned to commemorate.

## Movement II:

### Magarac's Dream

The title refers to "Joe Magarac," the Eastern European immigrant's equivalent of the American folk hero, John Henry. Magarac was a mythical figure about whom many stories of heroism were spun. In particular, Magarac was said to have performed feats of extraordinary strength in the Pittsburgh steel mills, and he was a symbolic hero of many steelworkers. The reality of the immigrant's dream of prosperity, however, usually was one of poverty and despair with horrific working conditions and meager earnings. The title of the movement, then, has a double-edged meaning: it is the "dream" of the men who came to America to become new Magaracs, but at the same time, the shattering of that dream. The principal melody of the second movement, intoned first by the viola, is a beautiful song written by Andrew Kovaly, a Slovakian immigrant who worked in the Pittsburgh steel mills. "I Lie in the American Land" was penned in 1899 to comfort the wife of one of Kovaly's steel mill friends, who, newly arrived in America with her children at the behest of her husband, learned that he had just been killed in the mills. The second movement is a spiraling elegy of free variations on this tune:

Ah, my God, what's in America?  
Very many people are going over there.  
I will also go, for I am still young;  
God, the Lord, grant me good luck there.

I'll return if I don't get killed  
But you wait for news from me  
Put everything in order,  
Mount a raven-black horse,  
And come to me, dear soul of mine.

But when she came to McKeesport,  
She did not find her husband alive;  
Only his blood did she find  
And over it she bitterly cried.

"Ah my husband, what did you do,  
Orphaned these children of ours?"  
"To these orphans of mine, my wife, say  
That I lie in America,  
Tell them, wife of mine, not to wait for me,  
For I lie in the American land."

The Eastern European folk inflections in the music are an attempt to evoke the spirit of those whose lives were consumed by the steel mills. After the impassioned central section which builds to a climax in the high register, the music floats downward and falls into a traditional Greek tune, "The Immigrant's Heartbreak," a song akin to "I Lie in the American Land," set as a little Greek dance. This tune winds down and we hear a final reprise of "I Lie in the American Land." In the coda, the major key statement of a motive from the melody represents an element of hope, and the final consonant/dissonant chord that ends the movement is an affirmation of bitter pride.

### Movement III:

#### Men of Steel

For this scherzo movement I listened to recordings of actual Pittsburgh steel mill sounds and attempted to “translate” them into music. There are whistles, rumbling effects, sirens, and the sounds of crashing metal fragments. We find ourselves in the belly of a relentless industrial monster which, at times, opens up to reveal the various ethnic groups slaving inside it, only to swallow them up again. Out of the churning machine four tunes emerge, each representing the people of the steel or coal industries in Pittsburgh. The 19th century African American song, "Coal Diggin' Blues," heard in the unison cello and viola represents a sort of chanting "chain gang." This tune moves immediately into the Slovakian song, "Aja Lejber Man," (I'm a Labor Man), another melody associated with the mills. The setting suggests an Eastern European folk band with a violin, an accordion, and a pizzicato double bass. The two tunes then mingle in counterpoint, but are soon absorbed by the sounds of the mill machines. Two other tunes then emerge from the furnace. First, the machine noises morph into "Two Cent Coal," a song set to a traditional Irish melody written about a coal workers' incident in Pittsburgh in 1876, cast here in a jig-like setting. This is followed by "The Homestead Strike," a famous protest song about the 1892 incident in which Andrew Carnegie locked out striking steelworkers—a conflict which escalated into a deadly riot. The Homestead tune and "Two Cent Coal" then combine, but eventually disappear back into the steel mill with the machine triumphant all the way to the coda.

### Movement IV:

#### River City Mecca

The movement begins with a chorale-like setting of the 20th century folksong, "Where the Old Allegheny and Monongehela Flow," and continues with upbeat variations on the song, "Pittsburgh Town," a tune sometimes attributed to Woodie Guthrie. A short interlude is followed by a minimalist-like section which builds and builds as we approach the modern city of Pittsburgh (the "Emerald City" in the distance) on Interstate 279. At a climactic moment, we break through a sonic wall, and the original Native American tune of the first movement is heard. A sense of déjà vu comes with an extended canon in which 8 of the tunes we've heard previously in the quartet overlap in counterpoint (The Dream Song, Coal Diggin' Blues, Aja Lejber Man, and I Lie in the American Land play simultaneously, and then morph gradually into a counterpoint of The Homestead Strike, Two Cent Coal, Where the Old Allegheny and Monongehela Flow, and Pittsburgh Town). As the strains of each ethnic group bubble to the surface from their place in the foundations of the City, a triumphant coda emerges, and the movement ends in a musical evocation of a shining modern city.