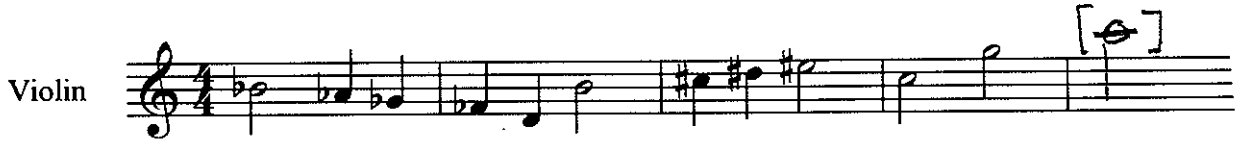
Aaron Copland
Quartet for Piano and Strings (1950)

Aaron Copland encountered the music of Schoenberg in the 1920s and experimented briefly with the 12-tone method in "Poet's Song," a setting of an e.e. cummings text, which he composed in 1927. He did not go any further in this direction, however, and during the 30s and 40s he seems to have regarded 12-tone music as a particularly "German" style and thus not very promising for an American composer. After Germany's defeat in World War II Copland took another, longer look at the possibilities of serialism. Jennifer DeLapp argues that, as Copland came under increasing politcal pressure, serialism, a style vigorously condemned by the Communist party and the Soviet regime, offered Copland a way to distance himself from his Communist associations and associates of the 1930s and 40s, without naming any names or abandoning his left-wing beliefs.

Copland said that the piano quartet, composed in 1950, was his first 12-tone piece. And indeed it opens with a 12-tone row on which all three movements are based. The row, however, is quite different from anything Schoenberg ever used.



It begins with a descending whole-tone scale, breaks off after 5 notes, embarks on another whole-tone scale, this time ascending, The last two intervals are fourths and fifths, and at the end, instead of the 12th chromatic pitch, Copland ends by repeating the opening note. The row doesn't reach the 12th pitch until the end of the movement. This is a row with familiar scales and many tonal possibilities.

For the most part Copland employs his row melodically. Inversions, retrogrades and transpositions are freely used; but because the whole tone scales occur in all forms and are strikingly audible, the row remains in the foreground as a melody. Row forms remain within single voices and are treated in strict and very audible counterpoint. As the movement becomes more agitated (m.60 ff) Copland begins to use only 6 notes of the row, producing a sort of stretto effect.

Copland is at no pains to avoid consonances or triads; indeed he often contrives to end phrases with what amount to cadences on triads: e.g. m. 13, c-minor; m.17, C-major; m.29, F-major. Not surprisingly, then, the Piano Quartet sounds a good deal like Copland's previous non-serial music.

Here is a magic square for the Piano quartet. Remember that the 12th note isn't heard until the end, so retrogrades begin on pitch #11.

	I_0	I_{10}	I_8	I_6	I_4	I_1	I_3	I_5	I_7	I_2	I_9	I_{11}	
P_0	Bb	Ab	Gb	E	D	B	C#	D#	F	C	G	A	R_0
P_2	C	Bb	Ab	Gb	E	C#	D#	F	G	D	A	B	R_2
P_4	D	C	Bb	Ab	Gb	D#	F	G	A	E	B	C#	R_4
P_6	E	D	C	Bb	Ab	F	G	A	B	Gb	C#	D#	R_6
P_8	Gb	E	D	C	Bb	G	A	B	C#	Ab	D#	F	R_8
P_{11}	A	G	F	D#	C#	Bb	C	D	E	B	Gb	Ab	R_{11}
P_9	G	F	D#	C#	B	Ab	Bb	C	D	A	E	Gb	R_9
P_7	F	D#	C#	B	A	Gb	Ab	Bb	C	G	D	E	R_7
P_5	D#	C#	B	A	G	E	Gb	Ab	Bb	F	C	D	R_5
P_{10}	Ab	Gb	E	D	C	A	B	C#	D#	Bb	F	G	R_{10}
P_3	C#	B	A	G	F	D	E	Gb	Ab	D#	Bb	C	R_3
P_1	B	A	G	F	D#	C	D	E	Gb	C#	Ab	Bb	R_1
	RI_0	RI_{10}	RI_8	RI_6	RI_4	RI_1	RI_3	RI_5	RI_7	RI_2	RI_9	RI_{11}	