

Everette Minchew – *Constructions for Julie Mehretu* for saxophone quartet  
Analysis by Brian Kauth

One of the most promising young chamber groups in this country is the Mana Saxophone Quartet. Since 2007, they have garnered a reputation as outstanding artists who are working with contemporary composers to expand the saxophone quartet literature. One of these composers is Mississippi-based Everette Minchew (<https://everetteminchew.wordpress.com>) who has contributed several works to the saxophone's ever-growing body of repertoire. His latest saxophone quartet, which he composed for the Mana Quartet, *Constructions for Julie Mehretu* (2013), is a wonderful work which serves as a great introduction to Minchew's compositional style.

Due to his own knowledge and experience as a saxophonist, Minchew expects performers of his music to be fluent in the various tonal and microtonal possibilities characteristic of the saxophone, including quartertones, multiphonics, slap-tonguing, and fluttertonguing. *Constructions* is no exception, as it contains multiphonics, quartertones, timbral variation, and altissimo capability to some degree.

Rather than exploring the harmonic content of Minchew's quartet in this article, I believe that it is prudent to understand the formal design of this piece. This particular work is constructed around the idea of an "open form", in which the order of the sections (and in some cases, which particular sections are played) is determined by the performers, resulting in a work that may sound very different from one performance to the next. There is one "main" movement, written without barlines and precise rhythms in spatial notation. This "main" movement is the primary torso of the quartet, while three shorter sections are to be interpolated at various times throughout. These shorter sections may be inserted into the "main" movement in any order, with each one written in a different manner to create different musical effects.

The "main" movement is a chorale-like section that utilizes differently notated fermatas to indicate how long to hold each tone – from relatively short to very long. This section is always played at very soft dynamic levels, ranging from *ppp* to *mp*. Minchew creates subtle pitch shadings through these sustained tones by supplying a second staff for each part, in which the players must improvise around their given pitches using quartertones. The horizontal line in the second staff indicates the given pitch, while notes above or below this line represent quartertone inflections of this pitch. Minchew also provides articulations and rhythmic groupings that may be used by each player for these improvisatory episodes.

Interspersed throughout this chorale section are brief passages of rapid *ff* rhythmic figures – each is to be played for a predetermined length of time. These very loud rhythmic interjections provide a marked contrast from the subtle gestures found throughout most of this section, and are reminiscent of figures found in Miklós Maros' *Saxophone Quartet*.

As stated earlier, three shorter sections are to be incorporated into the "main" movement at various times. Minchew provides a specific symbol (found in the legend at the beginning of the score, along with his other notational indications) to indicate when these sections should begin. Once one of these sections is played, the players must immediately proceed to the next "measure" in the "main" movement and continue until the next indication to play one of the shorter interpolated sections is given. Each of these shorter sections will be discussed separately.

Movement A is the first section that may be incorporated, and it features a baritone saxophone solo accompanied by the remaining three saxophones. What makes this particular movement interesting is the fact that the baritone solo is to be played out-of-time from the other three players. In fact, the saxophone trio that accompanies the soloist is to play freely amongst themselves as well, creating a very unstable texture. Both parts (trio and solo) do not necessarily have to conclude at the same time – another factor that contributes to the instability of this section.

Movement B is composed in strict traditional notation, and is reminiscent of a scherzo, with quartertones and slap-tonguing found throughout. Intermittently throughout this section, there are brief recurrences of the *ff* style passages found in the "main" movement, which links these two sections together. This section creates a much greater contrast with the "main" movement than the other shorter sections do.

Fragment No. 1 is also written in strict traditional notation, and consists of an eight-measure chorale. This particular section is similar to the "main" movement, albeit written in traditional notation. Due to the definite rhythmic pulse of this section, it may be used to deviate slightly from the "main" movement without creating as drastic a contrast as Movement B.

Finally, Fragment No. 2 is written in spatial notation, with no precise pitches; however, rhythms are indicated. This section is the most improvisatory of the entire work, providing the performers with a guide to which registers they may improvise in, as well as the proviso that quartertones are preferred. The free nature of this section provides an even greater contrast to the previous sections under consideration.

Everette Minchew's *Constructions for Julie Mehretu* is a wonderful new addition to the saxophone quartet repertoire. The unique musical style of this composer brings a fresh perspective to contemporary music that performers and audiences enjoy. It is hoped that other dedicated saxophone quartets will take a listen to Minchew's music and consider programming it in the future.