

Quartet # 3, The "Automotive"

Jon Jeffrey Grier

For String Quartet (1997-98)

Program & Performance Notes

This is my mostly humorous-- but not altogether fond-- look at the modern horseless carriage. Auto manufacturers through the years have named many of their products for beautiful or powerful phenomena of the natural world (Cougar, Mirage, Saturn, Storm, Galaxy), or rugged cultural icons (Apache, Rodeo, etc.), in hopes, I presume, that the mystique of these things would rub off onto their namesakes and fuel the consumer's passion to possess them. This seems rather ironic in light of the effect that the proliferation of the automobile has had on the public's actual relationship with the environment and on the environment itself. But marketing is concerned only with what works: making the product memorable and desirable by whatever means is effective. I remember, back in the 70's, seeing a TV commercial for a tire called the "American Eagle Radial". In my useless exasperation I wondered aloud What in Hades? they really thought this radial had to do with the critically endangered eagle. A friend, wiser than I, offered the perfect explanation: "They certainly can't call it the Bald Tire".

Each movement of the quartet evokes a vehicle that borrows its name from an animal. I have made some effort to exploit those characteristics of the vehicle that seem most at odds with its name. There is a sequence of notes (B-C-A-F-C#-E, with numerous modifications and extensions) that appears in every movement, symbolizing, I suppose, the shared ancestry and mechanics of these diverse machines. It is used as the principal theme in the 2nd movement, *Caterpillar*, which is concerned with the machines that build roads; in the others it is integral but less prominent.

I. Impala My target here, named for a swift and graceful antelope of central Africa, is the heavy, long, big horsepower, wide-wheelbase American family sedan... essentially interchangeable with any similar model by other manufacturers, including most station wagons. It was conceived in the era of chrome and tailfins, along with the "See the USA in a Chevrolet" theme which is paraphrased here. The movement proceeds from start to finish without repetition of any large section, suggesting a one-way trip from point A to destination B.

This movement includes the most explicit programmatic content. Constant, quiet but stuttering activity suggest the power of the mighty V8 and its ill-adjusted carburetor. The "See the USA" quote suggests that we should be having a priceless American experience, but soon there are stirrings from the back seat... "Are we there yet???". Tension grows as the "See the USA" theme continues, and soon a fight breaks out, complete with the standard na-na-na-na-boo-boo playground jeer. Gradually the mother's soothing words calm things, and the routine sounds of the engine and the tires thumping on the cracks in the road return. The Chevy theme sneaks back in one more time (with both phrases in counterpoint), but the hard-won peace is lost when mechanical difficulties arise. Eventually everyone arrives, exhausted, at Grandma's house.

II. Caterpillar This is actually a trademark for continuous metal tracks powered by toothed wheels, used for moving over rough or muddy ground, as in a bulldozer; it is also the name of a company that makes these and other large construction vehicles. When I was growing up in central Pennsylvania, a stretch of Interstate 80 was being built just down the hill from my house, and I never tired of seeing the big earth movers, graders, and power shovels that performed this incredible act of landscaping. In this movement, I have tried to capture the slow but relentless prosecution of their task in a sort of cartoonish manner that reflects not only the machines themselves, but also the way that I modeled their activities in my sandbox.

III. Beetle This stilted waltz is my homàge to the original Volkswagon, the car so homely it was cute, the car regarded so fondly by its legions of owners, proud of their thrift and eshewal of comfort, that they gave it a name: the Bug, or Beetle. I never owned one, but during the era of moon exploration a full-page ad for the Beetle from *Life* magazine hung in my room: a picture of the Lunar Excursion Module (LEM), with the caption "It's ugly, but it gets you there". Well, sometimes. My friends who owned VW's spent as much time under them as in them. Their efforts are venerated in the final gesture of the piece, and the criss-crossing arpeggios of the violins 10 bars before this trace the outline of the V-over-a-W company logo. The recent superficial return of this design... sleek, safe, reliable, its engine in the front... cannot possibly recapture the mystique of the original.

IV. Jaguar This movement is a lament, concerned more with the living jaguar of the western tropics (*Panthera onca*) than the handmade British personal luxury car. The jaguar is a solitary animal of the tropical forest, and, like all the big cats, has not benefitted from the encroachments of humans. The 4-wheeled