

My Second String Quartet was written mainly while I was the composer in residence at the Copland House, in Peekskill, New York. Alone in Copland's studio, far from home, my mind wandered back to an African Music teacher who made a brief but intense impression on me when I had been a composition student at UCLA many decades earlier.

The students stood in a circle holding surrounding this intense, squarely-built man. We timidly held our newly-acquired Ghanaian squeeze drums, and he sat with a big drum in between his legs, driving us into ever more complex rhythms. One by one we were made to come into the circle alone with him, band try to hold our oddly syncopated rhythm while staring at his drumsticks as they wove ever more complex solos. It was impossible. He spoke no English except "You come!" to get us to enter his circle. The only thing worse was the other words of English that he spoke: "You ..go!", to indicate we were done.

He was a man of great honor in his tribe, where he was the one man who communicated between the king and the gods, using his 'talking drum'. I met Kwasi Badu once on Wilshire Boulevard, while I was waiting for a bus home from UCLA. There weren't many words we could share, so our conversation was brief. But I will always remember the deep sense of confusion as he struggled to maintain his dignity in the face of the immense presence of the canyon of skyscrapers that surrounded us. I fear the school system did not quite reimburse him sufficiently. I went on to become a teacher myself, at the university level for 17 years. I deepened my feeling that teachers are underpaid.

So I subtitled my Quartet, "Kwasi's Revenge". My interest in having different speeds of music sounding simultaneously is friendly towards the idea of using African rhythms, and some are used in my piece. But many of the rhythms are my made-up extensions of the African rhythms I learned.

Only recently did I learn that Kwasi Badu died in 1995, at 63. I wish he could have known that I thought of him while writing this piece.