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The Poetic Mingus and the Politics of Genre in String Quartet No. 1

VILDE AASLID

Abstract

In 1972, the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned new musical settings of poems by Frank O'Hara for a concert honoring the late poet. Among pieces by Virgil Thomson and Ned Rorem, the program featured a new work by Charles Mingus: his String Quartet No. 1. Mingus's piece was performed only once, at that concert, and was never recorded. It survives only in manuscript form.

String Quartet No. 1 thwarts nearly all expectations of a piece by Mingus. Scored for strings and voice, the work's modernist approach to rhythm and pitch is unprecedented for the composer. Mingus chafed at being categorized as a "jazz" composer, and String Quartet No. 1's style is both a bid for and an undermining of the prestige of the high art world. Faced with primitivist discourses that characterized jazz musicians as unschooled and nonverbal, Mingus deployed poetry as a mode of resistance. He worked with poetic texts throughout his life, often writing the poetry himself. Mingus's sensitive setting of O'Hara's text in String Quartet No. 1 points to the centrality of poetry to Mingus's artistic and political project, and suggests that the piece's anomalous style can be partially understood as his response to O'Hara's text.

Charles Mingus had a way with words. From his blustering monologues to his legendary memoir, he crafted his public persona through experimental use of language. Even his music overflowed with words. Mingus composed texted works throughout his career, combining music and word in a wide range of styles and compositional methods. He had a fluctuating relationship with the role of improvisation in his compositional process; at the height of his career, calling himself a "spontaneous composer," he refused to notate any of his music. In his later years, he returned to the page, penning dense scores for large ensemble. Throughout this remarkable career, he continued to write music with text.

In this article, I introduce an unknown example of his texted work: Mingus's String Quartet No. 1. Commissioned by the Whitney Museum and setting a poem by Frank O'Hara, this work was performed only once, on the evening of 26 April 1972, and never recorded. Here, I bring String Quartet No. 1 out of the archive to consider what happens when Mingus combines text and music in what most closely resembles an art song.

This curious work hints at the composer's late-career ambitions, and its surprising modernist style opens new discussion on two facets of Mingus's work: his musical interaction with poetry, and his activist work in the intersection of race and genre. Much of Mingus's music challenges genre conventions, pushing against the

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Table 1. Selection of Mingus's texted works.

Title	Year	Text Author	Spoken/Sung
Baby Take a Chance with Me	1945	Mingus	Sung
Weird Nightmare	1946	Mingus	Sung
The Chill of Death	1947, unreleased	Mingus	Spoken
Portrait	1952	Mingus	Sung
Eclipse	1953	Mingus	Sung
The Clown	1957	Jean Shepherd and Mingus	Spoken
Scenes in the City	1957	Lonnie Elder	Spoken
Weary Blues	1958	Langston Hughes	Spoken
Fables of Faubus	1959	Mingus	Spoken
Eat that Chicken	1961	Mingus	Sung
Devil Woman	1962	Mingus	Sung
Freedom	1963	Mingus	Spoken and Sung
Don't Let it Happen Here	1965	Based on Niemoller poem	Spoken
String Quartet No. 1	1972	Frank O'Hara	Sung
Duke Ellington's Sound of Love	1974	Mingus	Sung
Cumbia and Jazz Fusion	1977	Mingus	Spoken
Joni Mitchell Songs	1979	Joni Mitchell	Sung
Pansies	Unrecorded	D. H. Lawrence and Mingus	Sung
Jackie's Blues	Unrecorded	?	Sung

boundaries of jazz, but String Quartet No. 1's high modernism is unprecedented for him. The style, the instrumentation, the venue, and the nature of the commission form a rich bundle of new information about how Mingus related to the high art world and the ways in which this relationship can be heard as both aspiration and resistance. String Quartet No. 1 also sheds light on an overlooked feature of Mingus's creative life: his sensitivity in text setting. Mingus's deft handling of O'Hara's poetry suggests that amidst the bluster resided a keen poetic sensibility that has repercussions throughout his oeuvre.

"He turned a mean phrase"[1]—Mingus and Text

The above quotation, from Mingus's arranger Sy Johnson, refers to Mingus's famously inventive use of language, from his everyday speaking to his art. He showcased his linguistic virtuosity often, including in the numerous instances of text in his music. But more broadly speaking, Mingus had an acute awareness of how language shapes self-presentation and the power of that process over a performer's career.

Mingus's works with text span his lifetime of composition, and a selection of them are listed in Table 1. Starting with the early "Chill of Death," first written when he was seventeen years old, he worked with texted components in his music until his death. His texts, which he often authored himself, ranged from the gothic poetry of

[1] Sy Johnson, interview by author, 11 November 2011. Johnson worked closely and extensively with Mingus, especially in the 1970s as arranger on *Let My Children Hear Music* and many of his other works from the period.

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"The Chill" to the shout-inspired exclamations of his mid-1950s recordings.[2] Like many jazz composers, Mingus also wrote in the popular song tradition; his most notable examples including "Weird Nightmare," "Eclipse," and "Duke Ellington's Song of Love." Near the end of his life, he was working on a final texted work, a collaborative album of songs with Joni Mitchell.

These compositions include a number of works that take an experimental approach to the combination of text and music. Text functions as an integral part of their larger forms. Some of the extended texted works incorporate spoken word and improvised musical content similar to the Beat poets' poetry-with-jazz performances; others are fully determined works of sung text. In all cases, though, Mingus engages with text deeply, and the diversity of approaches reflects his broader development as a composer.

Mingus knew the weight that words would carry in shaping his persona and legacy. He spoke at length in his interviews, lectured audiences, and published short essays in the form of "open letters." Recordings of him speaking capture his propensity for monologue in fast-paced streams of stylized linguistic play. And most famously there is *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus's semi-fictionalized memoir filled with psychological self-exploration and, notoriously, tall tales of his sexual exploits.[3]

A manuscript in the Charles Mingus Collection reinforces Mingus's interest in the expressive potential of poetry, perhaps especially in the period of the Whitney commission. The two-page sketch, in the composer's hand, is titled "Pansies: A Sane Revolution" and lays out twenty-seven measures of a song, scored for bass voices and piano.[4] In the fragment, Mingus set the first six lines of D. H. Lawrence's poem "A Sane Revolution" from his 1929 collection *Pansies*. But Mingus added a preface: "The solution / halt the persecution / have a revolution / let us blow this institution / just for fun." He seems to have written these words himself—the margins of the second page of the sketch are filled with the trace of his poetic creative process. There, he listed words rhyming with revolution, from the straightforward (diminution, constitution, evolution) to the delightfully unpredictable ("subterfusion," "Rosicrucion," Lilliputian). The inclusion of "your intrusion" and "new conclusion" suggests that he may have been looking for four syllable examples. He

[2] My characterization of "The Chill" as "gothic" comes from David Yaffe, in his lively description of Mingus's authorial modes: "Mingus wrote 'The Chill of Death' in a gothic mode, *Beneath the Underdog* with a Jungian tinge, 'The Clown' as absurdist allegorist, and 'Eat That Chicken' as a man loudly proclaiming his appetites." David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 116.

[3] Excellent scholarship has been done on *Beneath the Underdog*. Examples include: Nichole T. Rustin, "Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999; Thomas Carmichael, "Beneath the Underdog: Charles Mingus, Representation, and Jazz Autobiography," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 25/3 (Fall 1995): 29–40; Holly E. Farrington, "Narrating the Jazz Life: Three Approaches to Jazz Autobiography," *Popular Music and Society* 29/3 (July 2006): 375–86.

[4] The scoring for the piece is unstable. The lowest stave of the piece is labeled "bass voices" at the work's opening. Later, the bass voices are replaced with a treble-clef vocal line, and a piano part appears on the lowest two staves.

also wrote out brief definitions for some of the words, including the distinction between elusion, illusion, and allusion.

This sketch is of particular interest here in part because of its possible concurrence with the period of String Quartet No. 1's composition. Mingus wrote an annotation, "the trials of OZ," at the top of the first page, alluding to the highly publicized 1971 obscenity trial of the British underground magazine *Oz*.[5] And in 1960 Penguin Books was prosecuted in London under new obscenity laws for publishing the uncensored text of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The release of *Beneath the Underdog* coincides with the *Oz* trial, and given the risqué content of the book, Mingus may have been paying close attention to it. Extrapolating from these connections, it seems probable that "Pansies" was penned during this period, placing it around the same time as String Quartet No. 1.

"Pansies" may not have made it into Mingus's performing repertory, but the sketch's content draws another connection between Mingus and text, and the marginalia makes visible his textual signifying, demonstrating his playful and experimental use of language. In the early 1970s Mingus was in the midst of revitalizing his career. Taken together, "Pansies," the release of *Beneath the Underdog*, the recording of "The Chill of Death," and String Quartet No. 1, suggest that text may have been of even greater than usual interest to Mingus in these years.

More generally speaking, what emerges from looking at texted Mingus is that poetic language in particular was an important medium of artistic expression for the composer. Although some other jazz composers have extended their work with text beyond the boundaries of popular song, notably Duke Ellington, Mingus's linguistic play sets him apart as particularly poetically oriented.[6]

Scholars and friends of Mingus have speculated on his preoccupation with text. Sy Johnson, who worked intensely with him in the 1970s, suspected that in some instances Mingus was willing to participate in projects for financial reasons if they struck him as interesting. "He needed to live like everybody else, and so he was open to almost anything at some point in his life if it was a challenge and if enough good people seemed to be involved in it."[7] We might also consider what poetry, specifically, offered Mingus. As Langston Hughes said in 1959, "Jazz gives poetry a much wider following and poetry brings jazz the greater respectability that people seem to think it needs. I don't think jazz needs it, but most people seem to."[8] In his study on jazz and literature, David Yaffe writes of Mingus as striving for this respect in his collaborative work with Hughes and argues that literary legitimacy is at stake in some of his texted works.[9]

[5] "3 London Editors Free in Smut Case," *New York Times*, 10 August 1971; Anthony Lewis, "Britain Tightens Obscenity Curb: Court Rules Single Item Can Send Editor to Prison," *New York Times*, 6 November 1971.

[6] For an insightful study of Ellington's relationship with literature, see Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Literary Ellington," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 326–56.

[7] Johnson, interview by author.

[8] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. II: 1941–1967, I Dream a World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 280.

[9] See chapter 3 of Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 99–149.

A literary Mingus conflicts with the deeply problematic representations of race that have riddled jazz discourse. As John Gennari has written, "U.S. jazz magazines … historically have been dominated by white ownership and editorial control. White voices likewise have dominated jazz's representation in the mainstream print and broadcast media. Record companies and booking agencies have always been white-controlled."[10] Throughout much of the twentieth century, these "white voices" shaped an essentialist discourse that demeaned black musicians, downplaying their intellectualism and attributing artistic achievements to "natural" abilities.[11] Portrayals of jazz musicians in film and the press sensationalized drug use, sexuality, and other appetites.[12] These primitivist constructions elided the reality of musicians as highly trained working professionals. Further, the focus on innate musicality framed the musicians' abilities as one sided, rather than as the achievements of multifaceted individuals. As Ingrid Monson has written, "Musicians stressed their fundamental disdain at being cast in the image of the jazz musician as untutored, instinctual, nonverbal, and immoral rather than knowledgeable—an image that has been transmitted in a wide range of (primarily non-African-American) historical writings."[13]

Mingus's texts resist these constructions, both in form and content. A far cry from "nonverbal," he spoke publically against this discourse throughout his career,[14] and his poetic orientation can be seen as a figurative resistance. If jazz musicians were portrayed as "nonverbal" and "untutored," poetry offered the ideal medium in which to defy the primitivist characterization. One way to understand Mingus's texted output is as an assertion of a poetic voice in the face of an essentialist discourse that suppressed his linguistic agency.

Mingus's texted works prefigure the jazz avant-garde's proliferation of intermedia projects. Salim Washington has called Mingus "the avant-garde's reluctant father" and cites his work with text as a "direct precursor to the more integrated efforts made during the Black Arts movement" of the 1960s and 1970s.[15] The difficulty in finding appropriate performance spaces for the experimentalists' intermedia works points to the interwoven constructions of genre and race. George Lewis has written about the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, "Early on, however, black experimentalists realized that serious engagement with theater and performance, painting, poetry, electronics, and other interdisciplinary expressions

[10] John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9.

[11] For a discussion of the early history of this discourse, see Ted Gioia, "Jazz and the Primitivist Myth," *The Musical Quarterly* 73/1 (1 January 1989): 130–43.

[12] For an analysis of a group of these portrayals, see the chapter on Charlie Parker in Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 299–338.

[13] Although in this quotation Monson is referring to the musicians from her ethnographic work circa 1990, this position holds true for musicians in Mingus's period. Ingrid Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology," *Critical Inquiry* 20/2 (Winter 1994): 286.

[14] See Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) for details of Mingus's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

[15] M. Salim Washington, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now': Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz," in *Uptown Conversation*, 37.

that require extensive infrastructure would be generally rendered ineffective or even impossible by the jazz club model. In this light the supposed obligation to perform in clubs began to appear as a kind of unwanted surveillance of the black creative body."[16] As I move to discussing the details of Mingus's String Quartet No. 1, it is worth remembering that his composition of a piece for string quartet to be performed in a prestigious art museum was far from a racially neutral act.

Commission and Performance

In early 1972, Mingus had just finished work on his monumental album *Let My Children Hear Music*. Sy Johnson described the album as a companion to the recently published memoir *Beneath the Underdog*, and it was filled with ambitious, fully composed works for large ensemble.[17] On the tails of this enormous project Mingus began work on what would become one of his most anomalous and least known works: his String Quartet No. 1.[18]

The Whitney Museum of American Art had been hosting a new music performance series, the Composers' Showcase, since 1968. As part of a spring festival, curator Charles Schwartz organized a concert honoring the recently deceased poet Frank O'Hara, commissioning and premiering new musical settings of the poet's work. Mingus composed String Quartet No. 1 for the event, but abandoned the piece after its sole performance. It survives only in manuscript form in the Charles Mingus Collection at the Library of Congress.

What little is known about String Quartet No. 1 is overwhelmed by the obscurity and misinformation about the piece. Mingus researchers have known of its existence but next to nothing else about it. We don't know how Mingus was selected to be included in the concert, how he chose the poem he set, or how he arrived at the instrumentation of the work.[19] Personal relationship with the deceased poet does not seem to have been the connection—although Mingus's social circle included a variety of artists and poets, according to his widow he had no personal connection with Frank O'Hara.[20] In a recently published interview with John F. Goodman, Mingus even struggles to recall O'Hara's name, calling him "that guy that got killed

[16] George E. Lewis, "Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970–1985," in *Uptown Conversation*, 69.

[17] Johnson, interview by author.

[18] The performers' parts identify the piece as "The Clown," which is the title of the O'Hara poem that Mingus set, but this title is scratched out and "String Quartet No. 1" is handwritten in instead. The change was likely because there already was a Mingus piece named "The Clown," and indeed another work combining music and text. Because "String Quartet No. 1" is how the work is catalogued in the Mingus collection, I will refer to it by that title. The inclusion of "No. 1" marks Mingus's intention to compose more string quartets. In 1973, Mingus was planning to include a new piece for two cellos, viola, and violin in a concert at the Mercer Arts Theater that was cancelled due to a building collapse nearby. John F. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 13. In an interview, after describing composing String Quartet No. 1 at the piano, he said, "I did one with the pencil and never finished it. I have sketches for about four more." Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 55.

[19] Mingus biographer Gene Santoro suggests that there was a competition to win the commission, but I have not found any corroboration of this claim. See, Gene Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 308–9.

[20] Sue Mingus, e-mail message to author, November 2007.

on the beach at Fire Island, a poet."[21] Mingus had previously appeared on the Composers' Showcase Series in 1970, performing three of his tour warhorses with a quintet and sharing the bill with the iconoclastic composer/poet Moondog.[22] Perhaps Schwartz's familiarity with Mingus after this event led him to contact the composer about the commission.

Why Mingus turned to the instrumentation of String Quartet No. 1 remains a puzzle. His early training in classical music and fluency with the medium likely contributed to the choice, but an earlier concert from the Composers Showcase Series hints at another possible catalyst. Curator Charles Schwartz described his plan for that concert in a letter to Sonny Rollins: "Key jazz composers will perform the solo part in their respective works which will also utilize string quartet ... we hope to have a total of five key jazz figures participating in this exciting and historical event."[23] A press release stated that it would "present three leading American jazz composer-performers, with the Carnegie String Quartet, playing works commissioned for the event."[24] Held on 18 February 1969, the concert included works by Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Jimmy Giuffre, and Cecil Taylor.[25]

With only a few years separating the two concerts, the same curator organizing the events, and the relatively small size of the city's top-tier jazz community, the earlier concert may have influenced Mingus's instrumentation. Perhaps Mingus had been among the "key jazz composers" contacted for the New Dimensions concert and, although he did not participate, the idea of writing a quartet for the Whitney series stuck with him. Or perhaps he was *not* among the composers contacted but heard about the project and characteristically wanted to make the point that he ought to have been included. In any case, there was precedent for bringing jazz composers and string quartets together within the Whitney's walls.

Mingus's liner notes for *Let My Children Hear Music*, written shortly before he composed String Quartet No.1, suggest that the instrumentation may have had political meaning for him. Therein he writes:

> As I say, let my children have music. Jazz—the way it has been handled in the past—stifles them so that they believe only in the trumpet, trombone, saxophone, maybe a flute now and then or a clarinet. ... I think it is time our children were raised to think they could play bassoon, oboe, English horn, French horn, lull percussion, violin, cello. ... If we so-called jazz musicians who are the composers, the spontaneous composers, started including these

[21] Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 56.

[22] Program from the concert, 7 April 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, series 3, "A Moondog–Charles Mingus Concert."

[23] Charles Schwartz, "Letter from Charles Schwartz to Sonny Rollins," 25 September 1968, box 8, folder 10, Charles Schwartz Papers, New York Public Library.

[24] Press release, 10 February 1969, Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, series 3, "New Dimensions in Jazz."

[25] Only Coleman and Giuffre actually included the string quartet in their pieces and Coleman's work had, in fact, been composed prior to the commission by the concert series. Rollins played a solo improvisation, and Taylor performed "Tongues" with his Cecil Taylor Unit. Coleman performed "Saints and Soldiers" and "Space Flight," which are listed in the program as receiving their concert debuts (they had been previously recorded), and Giuffre premiered a work for clarinet and string quartet titled "Orb." Program from the concert, 18 February 1969, Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, series 3, "New Dimensions in Jazz."

> instruments in our music, it would open everything up, it would get rid of prejudice because the musicianship would be so high in caliber that the symphony couldn't refuse us.[26]

The broader essay displays multivalent reflections on race, genre, and composition. But this unambiguous passage shows Mingus's interest in broadening his instrumentation not just for artistic purposes, but also as political strategy.

Two newspaper articles published in February 1972 suggest that Mingus was at work on the piece by that point. The articles describe it as part of a comeback for Mingus and highlight the prestige of the commission: "Now into his fourth decade as an instrumentalist and composer, he is the only jazz artist among 10 composers (including Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland) invited by the Whitney Museum to prepare music for a spring tribute to the late poet, Frank O'Hara."[27] Although Bernstein and Copland may have been invited to participate, neither of them contributed works to the concert.

Mingus likely originally intended to compose two pieces for the O'Hara concert. The program lists two works: "The Clown" (our String Quartet No. 1) and "Ode on Saint Cecilia's Day," but according to reviews only the first was performed, and I have found no evidence of the second piece beyond its title in the program. This mysterious second listing hints at Mingus's source for his chosen O'Hara poem: a new collection of the poet's work published by Knopf in 1971.[28] In this collection, on the page facing the poem used in the quartet, is a poem with the same title as the non-existent second work from the program.[29]

The months leading up to the Whitney concert were particularly busy for Mingus, and he composed the piece quite quickly. Work on *Let My Children Hear Music* had recently wrapped up, and preparations for his Philharmonic Hall concert and the European tour were in full swing. Saxophonist Paul Jeffrey, who worked with Mingus throughout the 1970s, served as arranger for the quartet, although the extent of his involvement is unknown.

The concert took place on a Wednesday evening, 26 April 1972. As was typical of the Composers' Showcase Series concerts, it was well attended, mostly by younger concertgoers. Seating was on the floor for most of the audience, with a few chairs and bleachers available. The museum environment attracted a different crowd than concert hall events, as noted by reviewer Byron Belt: "Why crowds would rather be uncomfortable in the Whitney than in a concert hall, we can't pretend to know. But other than the professional modern music crowd (which will go anywhere, and usually does!) it is great to find so many young people enjoying adventurous music in the handsome museum setting."[30] The first half of the program included works by Lucia Dlugoszewski, Lester Trimble, Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem, and Lukas Foss, with instrumentation ranging from the traditional art song piano and voice

[26] Charles Mingus, "What Is a Jazz Composer?," liner Notes for *Let My Children Hear Music*, Columbia, 1972, LP.

[27] "Mingus Is Back after 10 Years," *Amsterdam News*, 5 February 1972.

[28] Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 26–27.

[29] How Mingus went about selecting his text is unknown, but perhaps O'Hara's "Ode on Saint Cecilia's Day" caused him to linger on those pages. Sharing a title with Purcell's famous work, and full of sensuality and musicality, the poem would likely have caught Mingus's eye.

[30] Byron Belt, "2 Fine Ladies of Song," *Long Island Press*, 28 April 1972.

to an ensemble of clarinet, French horn, percussion, violin, bass, piano, and tenor voice. Mingus's piece appeared first on the second half the program, followed by Jimmy Giuffre's suite for jazz trio and voice, *The Many Sides of Frank O'Hara*.[31]

Reviews of the concert largely ignored String Quartet No. 1, focusing instead on the offerings from Rorem and Dlugoszewski. The lukewarm and scant discussion of Mingus's piece mostly criticized the vocal writing. Belt called the piece "haunting" but complained of "too little variety in the vocal line."[32] Still, he called the string group "stellar" and wrote that it was "good to hear Mingus working in such a vein," without elaborating on exactly what vein that would be. Allen Hughes, writing for the *New York Times*, was less generous, writing simply that the piece "did not work out well chiefly because the voice part lies too low."[33] Mingus talked up the piece in the press later that year, calling it his "string quartet," but the music he wrote slipped into obscurity.[34]

Introducing String Quartet No.1

In what follows I provide a general overview of the work's characteristics and argue for the relevance of the piece for a fuller understanding of Mingus as an activist and an artist. Although its style is anomalous for Mingus, String Quartet No.1 is no novelty piece. The work's modernism shows him taking a different approach to his lifelong confrontation of racialized genre boundaries. Following a discussion of the piece in relation to race, genre, and cultural hierarchy, I return to the details of the piece to highlight the nuance of Mingus's text setting and conclude with an assertion that the style of String Quartet No. 1 is at least partially due to his reading of the poem. As such, the work sheds light on Mingus's under-acknowledged poetic orientation.

Two sources exist for the music of String Quartet No. 1 in the Charles Mingus Collection at the Library of Congress.[35] There are individual parts for all of the performers.[36] Judging from the pencil markings, these were the parts used by the performers for the concert. There is also a condensed score.[37] There is a high degree of agreement between the two sources with virtually no differences in pitch or rhythm. I suspect that the parts were copied from the condensed score. Tempo, dynamics, and bowing indications are minimal, and where they do appear they look to be the pencil markings of the performers. I used these sources to

[31] Program for the concert, 26 April 1972, Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, series 3, "New Songs to Poems by Frank O'Hara."

[32] Belt, "2 Fine Ladies of Song."

[33] Allen Hughes, "Composers Honor Frank O'Hara with Vocal Works," *New York Times*, 28 April 1972, 34. This review also tells us that the singer was actually Rose Taylor, not Betty Allen, as was listed in the program.

[34] Richard Williams, "Mingus: The Clown's Afraid Too," *Melody Maker*, 12 August 1972, 16.

[35] Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1, box 23, folders 2–5, Charles Mingus Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

[36] In addition to being in the Library of Congress collection, these manuscripts were helpfully filmed for the *Let My Children Hear Music* microfilm.

[37] Neither of these sources appears to be in Mingus's hand. The instrumental parts are in ink and were prepared by a copyist. The condensed score is in pencil, and the Collection's finding aid calls it a "copyist manuscript."

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prepare a performing edition of the piece, from which I excerpt throughout this article.

The work is scored for low female voice and four strings. In fitting with Mingus's characteristic bias toward the low range, there are two cellos, one viola, and one violin. A one-page manuscript in the Charles Mingus Collection suggests that he decided on this particular scoring before making his final poem selection.[38] Titled "The Critic—String Quartet," the manuscript comprises nine measures of a sketch in Mingus's hand, featuring the precise instrumentation of the final quartet, including the unusually low vocal range.[39]

The piece runs between six and seven minutes and is fully composed, with no suggestions or space for improvisation in performance.[40] By this point in his career, Mingus had become almost entirely a "pencil" composer, having moved away from his oral-transmission approach. According to Sy Johnson, Mingus was having memory trouble by the early 1970s, perhaps related to the onset of his ALS.[41] Certainly, this problem would contribute to his increasing focus on fully scored composition. But Mingus continued to compose works with improvisational sections, including the pieces he wrote under his 1971 Guggenheim Foundation grant. The entirely fixed nature of String Quartet No. 1, not to mention the piece's high modernist style, suggests he was making a deliberate generic shift in this composition.

O'Hara's "The Clown" follows below:

The Clown

As a child, fleeing, trying his body
Among the trees, feeling the wind, even
Then knowing treasures that surprised

him, he cried "I am glorious! It is a
secret that must not be kept from them!"
and saw his voice in the sky's clamor's

And they heard him full of castles
cannons and sharks as he made up the
illustrations for these people, they

sighed over the spectacle and sent him
compliments lest he make a noise or
scandal. He smiled at their solicitude.

[38] Charles Mingus, "The Critic—String Quartet," box 32, folder 12, Charles Mingus Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

[39] The fragment also suggests that Mingus found an affinity with O'Hara's hostility toward criticism. The text comes from O'Hara's poem "The Critic," and the portion Mingus set reads: "I cannot possibly think of you / other than you are: the assassin / of my orchards."

[40] In readings of the piece, I settled on a tempo that led to this duration estimate, based on breathing opportunities and playability of the string parts. Mingus corroborates this length in his interview with Goodman. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 55.

[41] Johnson, interview by author.

At their insistence he pranced higher,
not happy in their excessive interest,
uneasily older by their seriousness.

They were always crying! he noticed
and turned away to meditate. But now
the tears seemed closer and too loud!

He knelt, his ear next his heart, thus
striking an attitude of insight. Ah!
his heart ached like Niagara Falls!

"What have you done?" he screamed "I was
not like this when you came!" "Alas,"
they sighed, "you were not like us."

In the poem, the poet avoids metrical and formal conventions. The eight groups of three lines generally have between eight and ten syllables per line.[42] Their rhythm falls into no recognizable metrical pattern, thus enabling Mingus to sidestep one of the challenges of setting poetry as song: reconciling the poetic and musical meters and rhythms.[43]

The poem's narrative traces the rise and corruption of an artist. It opens with a naïf discovering his power in a natural world. An unspecified "they" interrupt his idyll, forming a human audience for the boy. This audience appears at first to be enthralled by the boy ("they / sighed over the spectacle and sent him / compliments lest he make a noise or / scandal"), but the fifth stanza brings a sinister turn. There, the audience takes dictatorial control over the boy, directing his performance and lavishing unwanted attention on him, thereby causing him to grow "uneasily older by their seriousness." Unable to block out the demands of the audience, the boy turns inward, listening to his heart in an attempt to regain his grounding. Instead, he hears only his own sadness taking the form of Niagara Falls, perhaps as wild and demanding as the external audience. The poem closes with the proclamation of corruption, which "they" summarize bluntly in response to the boy's demand for an explanation: "you were not like us."

Although O'Hara avoids rhymes both at line ends and internally, the prosody reflects and expands on the narrative of the text. Just before the fifth stanza turn, as the boy is unwittingly being corrupted, the text hisses with alliterative *s* sounds ("sighed over the spectacle and sent him / compliments lest he make a noise or /

[42] Three lines in the poem stray from the eight- to ten-syllable range. The closing line is seven syllables long, the first line of the second stanza is eleven syllables, and the third line of the fifth stanza is twelve syllables.

[43] I do not mean to say that free verse poetry does not have a rhythmic component, but rather that poetry with a metrical pattern poses a specific type of challenge.

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scandal. He smiled at their solicitude"). As the point of disillusionment arrives, the pace slows through broad vowels and the longest line of the poem: "uneasily older by their seriousness."

The figure of the clown holds a prominent place in Mingus's music, and he was likely drawn to this particular O'Hara poem first by the title. Mingus's earlier "The Clown" is his most famous example of texted music. Lesser known is his "Don't Be Afraid, the Clown's Afraid Too," a work for big band from *Let My Children Hear Music,* finished just before the Whitney commission. Once drawn in by the title, Mingus may have found that the narrative of the poem resonated with his own life's story. He appears in clown face makeup for the album cover of *The Clown*, associating the fate of the tragic character in the title track with himself. He notoriously battled with record companies for fair economic treatment, resisting their exploitative practices. To escape their control, he founded his own record labels, with mixed success. If Mingus read O'Hara's "The Clown" as I do, perhaps he would have related to the poem's portrayal of struggle for self-determination.

The quartet's compositional techniques support the idea that it was written fairly quickly, and Mingus acknowledges as much in a later interview.[44] Although there are ostensibly four string voices, frequent octave doublings reduce the texture to two parts for much of the composition. The upper string parts are fiercely difficult, with fast runs soaring to precarious heights. Mingus was no stranger to challenging his musicians, but this level of near-unplayability was unusual even for him.[45] The lack of bowing and dynamic markings and some strange enharmonic choices meant that the string players had a difficult task.[46] This challenging state of the parts could be a symptom of his relative inexperience as a string writer. Sy Johnson suggested Mingus might have done quite a bit of revision on the work had he returned to it, based on what Johnson saw of the score and his experience with Mingus's creative process.[47]

Formally, String Quartet No. 1 is completely through composed. A few segments of music are recalled after their initial appearance, but repetition is rare. Meter changes might be said to mark sections, but these sections seem to have more to do with the poetry than with some kind of musical structure, a point I will return to later. There is no sign of any kind of traditional jazz form or the "plastic form" with which Mingus has been associated.[48]

[44] "I didn't write [the quartet] out, I composed it on piano. But when people heard the composition, they thought I had spent months writing it." Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 55.

[45] The string players for the Whitney concert impressed Mingus. He commented later, "The guys read it at sight. I rehearsed for months with the big band and the music hasn't been played yet. And the string quartet was 9,000 times more difficult." Priestley, 189. The program lists Gerald Tarack on violin, Laurence Fader on viola, and the two cellists, Kermit Moore and Steve McGhee.

[46] When preparing an edition for a spring 2012 reading of the piece, I took an urtext approach. Understandably, the string players found the parts frustrating to work from, and my guess is that Mingus's string players would have, too.

[47] Johnson, interview by author.

[48] The term "plastic form" is attributed to Andrew Homzy and is described here by Scott Saul: "Sections of a composition would be elongated, compressed, or recombined, their underlying rhythms radically altered through stop-time, background riffs, new bass vamps—and much of this would be

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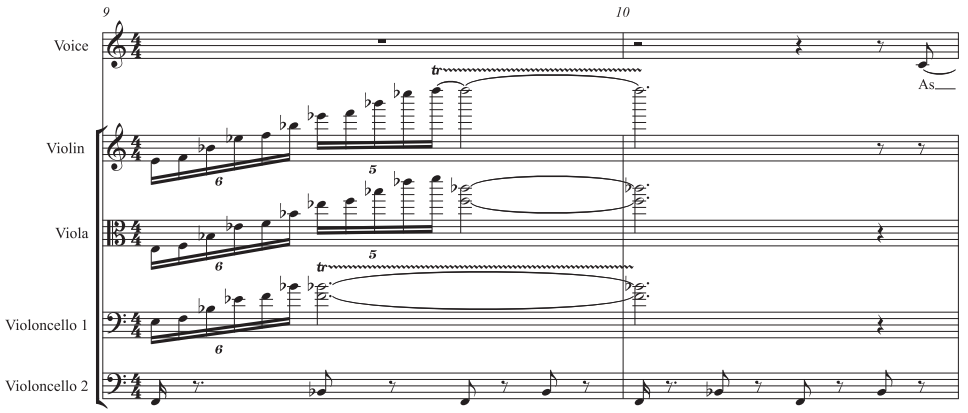
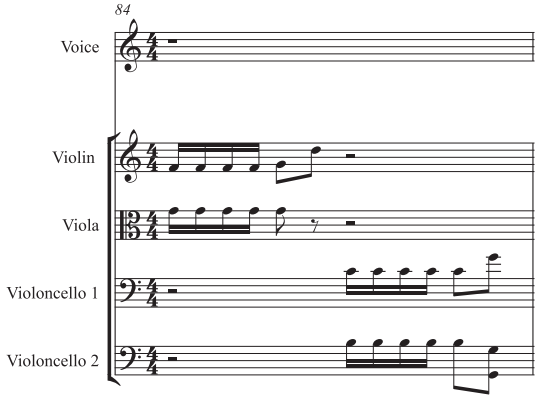


Example 1. Mm. 9–10. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.



Example 2. M. 84. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.

Mingus pushes into the realm of atonality in the quartet. The piece occasionally has a vague B-flat center, at its clearest in Example 1 (mm. 9–10). The second cello articulates a repeating V–I motion while the upper voices play a rising figure that fits largely within B-flat major. These moments of tonal clarity are, however, rare flirtations with a key center in a piece that largely eschews tonal structures.

Mingus further destabilizes the work's pitch world in moments of thwarted expectation. Although in the majority of the piece the upper and lower strings pair off in octaves or unison, there are occasional points of departure from this texture. Example 2 shows a typical passage. Here, the violin and viola first play a rhythmic motive, separated by a whole step. The cellos then offer a version, beginning a half step apart but coming to an octave on the second of the eighth notes. Although the relatively small divergence from the octave/unison texture might be explained by copyist's mistakes in the parts—time was certainly short leading up to the

signaled as the composition was being enacted." Scott Andrew Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 162.

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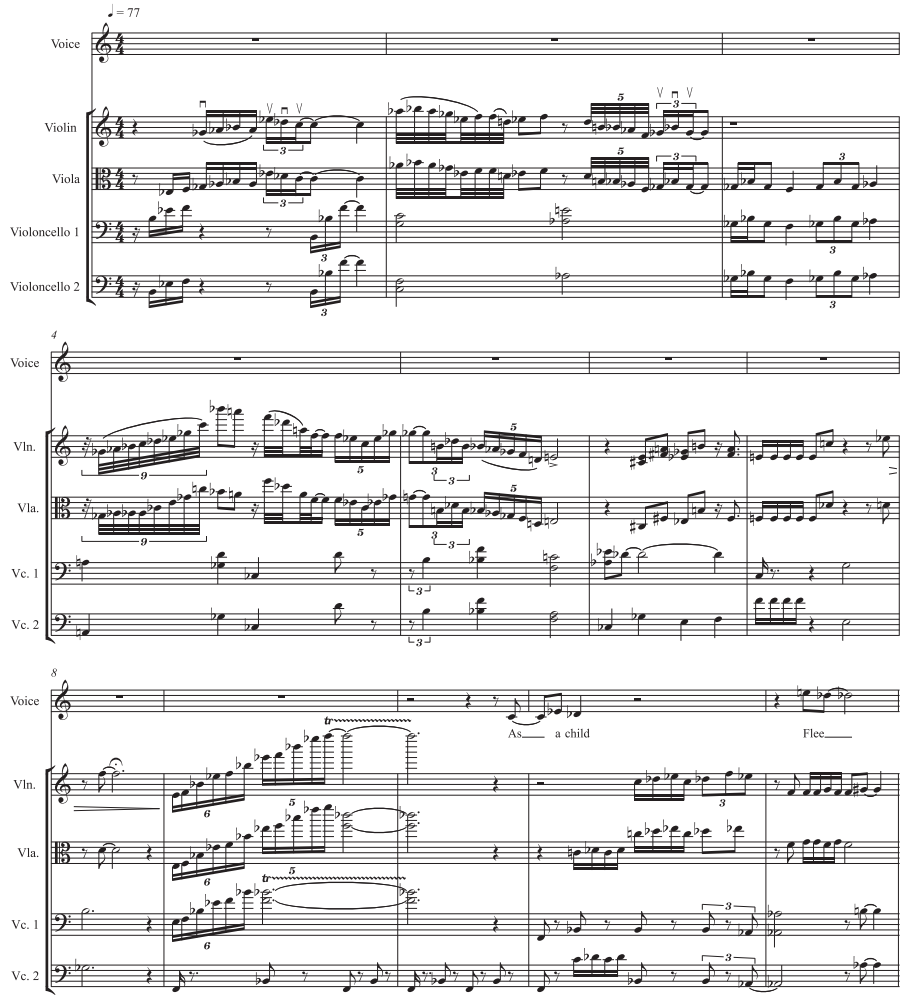

Example 3. Mm. 1–12. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.

performance—these "mistakes" are far too numerous and consistent among the sources to be unintentional. These "off" moments occur throughout the work, but especially at instances of the rhythmic motive shown in Example 2. Dissonance is integral to Mingus's style, but the particular approach here, with the setup of the unison/octave texture rupturing into harsh, hammered clashes, is uncharacteristic.

Rhythmically, the work continues to surprise. Though Mingus certainly pushed at stylistic boundaries throughout his career, nearly all of his other works are, at their core, groove-centered. Certainly, he used ametrical sections—especially in introductions—and played with obfuscating the groove, but the basic sense of metrical pulse and direction is rarely far from reach. In his setting of the O'Hara poem, Mingus offers little in the way of pulse to hold onto, much less any sense of meter. Shifting subdivisions and offset downbeats disorient the listener. In the string introduction, seen in Example 3, he sets up an instability of rhythm that continues throughout the piece, starting with the opening empty downbeat. In measures 2–4,

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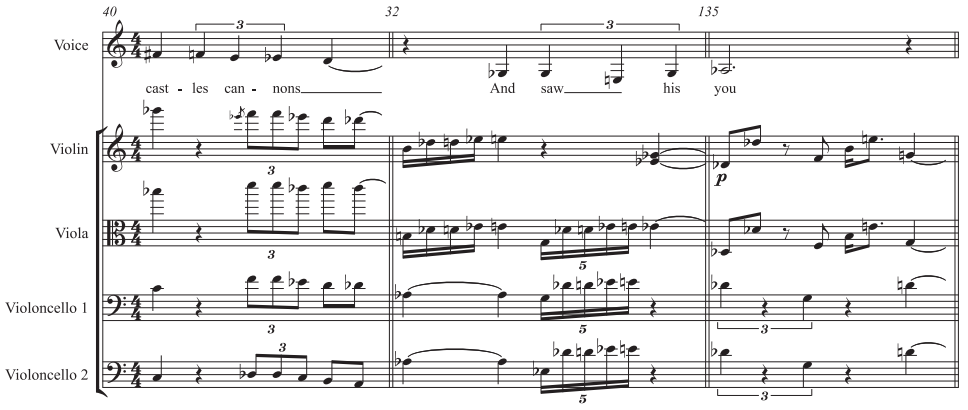

Example 4. Mm. 40, 32, and 135. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.

the cellos articulate a basic metrical framework while the upper voices shift through a series of tuplets. Measure five troubles this rhythm with a delayed downbeat, the cellos entering on the second eighth-note triplet of the measure. Mingus sprinkles these metrical hiccups throughout the work, using the cellos to establish and then undermine rhythmic stability. The vocal entrance breaks down the meter further. The melody begins on the final eighth note of a measure and ties through the downbeat. The clear rhythm in the cellos helps maintain the pulse, but it dissolves in the next measure with another offset downbeat, this time an anticipation.

Conflicting subdivisions further disorient a listener's sense of rhythm, as seen in Example 4. In measure 40, the singer's mid-measure quarter-note triplets push against the homorhythmic strings. In measure 32, a similar rhythmic challenge occurs as the singer's quarter-note triplets clash with the strings' sixteenth-note quintuplets. These collisions happen between the string parts as well, seen in measure 135, where the violin and viola play a simple eighth-note rhythm against the cellos' quarter-note triplets.

In short, it is not that Mingus avoids meter and pulse altogether, rather that he plays with bringing rhythm in and out of focus, keeping his listeners (and performers) unsettled. Layer this rhythmic approach with the intense dissonance and melodic avoidance of the composition, and you have a decidedly atypical Mingus composition.

In rhythm, pitch, and form Mingus's String Quartet No. 1 more closely resembles an example of high modernism than a characteristic Mingus piece. Faced with this outlier from his typical compositional approach, one is left with the question of why Mingus made the choices he did, and what the piece tells us about him as a composer, and particularly as a composer of texted music.

"I know I'm a composer"[49]—Genre, Race, and Hierarchy

Throughout his career, Mingus fought for the dignity and privilege granted those in the high art world. He was acutely aware of the politics of prestige and the impact

[49] Mingus, "What Is a Jazz Composer?"

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it had on his ability to make a living. Musical hierarchies seemed to be especially on his mind in his later years, as he shaped his legacy. In an essay from the liner notes to *Let My Children Hear Music*, Mingus declared himself a composer, but did the rest of the world see him that way? The commission from the Whitney offered Mingus a double opportunity: a chance to gain respect for his work as a composer in a prestigious context, and a platform from which to critique and resist the constructs of that same prestige.

David Yaffe has contrasted the aspirations of Mingus from those of Langston Hughes. "Mingus . . . was striving for a different kind of literary credibility, closer to the hierarchical modernism of Ellison."[50] Yaffe writes further, "If Hughes was a poet who worked as an entertainer, Mingus was an entertainer who aspired to poetry."[51] Always aware of his self-presentation, Mingus thoughtfully positioned himself in the public's eye with specific goals in mind. From the style of his music to his fashion choices, all aspects of his life came together to tell the story he sought to tell. As Nichole Rustin has explained, "Mingus imagined his 'personality' as a tool enabling him to mediate the relationship between his art, the expectations of fans and critics, and his daily life. . . . He realized that it was up to him to create his own mythology, to articulate his own framework for understanding his genius."[52]

Jazz musicians, Mingus included, occasionally turned to concerts halls as legitimating venues. But the Whitney goes one step further, extending prestige in a cross-arts gesture. Belt's review of the concert intimates that the audience was generally younger than at the more formal concert halls. The Whitney's concert series managed to convey institutional prestige while cultivating an enthusiastic and youthful audience, an appealing combination for musicians seeking to expand their own audiences.

Other compositions from this period show Mingus treating text experimentally, stretching beyond the popular song tradition. Perhaps the most notable example is "The Chill of Death," composed largely when he was seventeen years old and reworked for the 1972 album *Let My Children Hear Music*. Its fully composed and thickly textured score sets Mingus's own poem. In the later arrangement, the ensemble plays through the score twice, the first time with Mingus reading his poetry and the second time with a saxophone soloing over the ensemble. Biographer Brian Priestley comments that the piece is "more tied to the story of the poem than in most of Mingus's later experiments involving words," but his is the lone sympathetic voice in the work's reception.[53] Others have found it to have major problems, including Aldon Nielsen, who calls the piece "marred by sentiment."[54] Mingus commented on the tone of the album in the liner notes, writing, "I think the music on this

[50] Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 124.
[51] Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 120.
[52] Nichole T. Rustin, "Cante Hondo: Charles Mingus, Nat Hentoff, and Jazz Racism," *Critical Sociology* 32/2–3 (March 2006): 320.
[53] Brian Priestley, *Mingus, a Critical Biography* (London: Quartet Books, 1982), 13–14.
[54] Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188.

record is serious in every sense."[55] That Mingus included his own poetry in this self-described "serious" effort suggests his aspirations not only as a composer of texted works, but also as a composer of texts.

In the late 1970s, Mingus reached out to singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell to participate in a collaborative project with him. Mitchell describes his first proposition:

> At the time he had an idea to make a piece of music based on TS Eliot's Quartet and he wanted to do it with—this is how he described it—a full orchestra playing one kind of music, and overlaid on that would be bass and guitar playing another kind of music; over that was to be a reader reading excerpts from Quartet in a very formal literary voice; and interspersed with that he wanted me to distill TS Eliot into street language, and sing it mixed with the reader.[56]

One can't blame Mitchell for turning down the project.[57] But the idea nonetheless reflected Mingus's experimental stance in this period—crossing brows and races in densely layered performance, with a distinct aim for high-art status.

If Mingus aspired to a prestigious positioning of his texted works of the period, associating himself with Frank O'Hara would certainly help. In his private life, Mingus circulated in an interracial bohemia. From living with artist Farwell Taylor in the Bay Area early in his career, to his marriage to Sue Graham officiated by Allen Ginsberg, he was no stranger to the *avant garde* of poets, painters, dancers, and filmmakers. These artists generally came from subversive or subcultural groups, as did Mingus's previous poetic collaborators.[58] O'Hara's poetry offered Mingus something novel: a poetic text with all the prestige of institutionally and academically supported poetry.

Mingus, who was carefully sculpting his legacy in these years, would likely have seen the commission's prestige as a potential boon. Within this frame, one way to understand the surprising style of String Quartet No. 1 is as an attempt to show an elite artistic community that he could compete on their terms. But several factors complicate this reading. First, choosing to write a high-modernist-style art song for strings and voice would be a somewhat conservative gesture within the art music community of 1972. Second, Mingus himself fought unflaggingly for the respectability and insisted on the seriousness of *all* of his music, and privileging the style of the art music elite merely on the grounds of its prestige would have been something of a contradiction for him.

Mingus left an ample written record of his thoughts on the intersection of race, genre, and cultural hierarchy. Eric Porter has thoughtfully analyzed Mingus's words, tracing how his views changed over the course of his career. He points to Mingus's early universalism paired with a Romantic approach to the idea of composition. In a letter to Ralph Gleason published in *Down Beat*, Mingus asserted

[55] Charles Mingus, liner notes to *Let My Children Hear Music* (New York: Columbia Records, 1972).

[56] Leonard Feather, "Joni Mitchell Makes Mingus Sing," *Down Beat*, 6 September 1979.

[57] Eventually Mingus and Mitchell worked together on a less high-concept project—the songs that would eventually comprise her album *Mingus*.

[58] Langston Hughes, with whom he collaborated on *Weary Blues*, was marginalized by the artistic elite, and Jean Shepherd of "The Clown," although not precisely subversive or subcultural, worked exclusively in the entertainment sphere.

the basic similarity between jazz and classical music, "Those who have always separated the two into jazz and classical will finally see that it's all one music we're playing and what they've been buying is just the confusion out of the separation of the two."[59] In the mid-1950s Mingus shifted toward favoring more defined, if permeable, genre boundaries. As Porter notes, "By reconstructing these boundaries, Mingus simultaneously tapped into a celebratory, self-affirming discourse from the community of black musicians and a critical discourse that sought to legitimate jazz by affirming a tradition, employing them both to protest the treatment of black musicians by the jazz industry."[60]

In later writings, Mingus refocused on a genre-transcending conception of composition. The "one music" universalism returned, now grounded in a concern for the artistic mobility of musicians. In his liner notes to *Let My Children Hear Music*, he laments the impact that racialized genre restrictions had on him as a composer. "When you have to wait thirty years to get one piece played—what do you think happens to a composer who is sincere and loves to write and has to wait thirty years to have someone play a piece of his music? . . . Had I been born in a different country or had I been born white, I am sure I would have expressed my ideas long ago."[61] Through all these shifts in his views of the relationship between jazz and other music, there is one constant: Mingus was always attuned to how race and genre shaped, in part, his artistic life.

When performing in nightclubs, Mingus demanded that his audience attend with concert hall demeanor. Inevitably, cash registers or conversations interrupted his performances, and Mingus would caustically chastise his audience. As Jennifer Griffith writes, "An audience was under his care and in a position to get hip to *his art*. This stance reversed the roles of audience and performer. He demanded outright that his audience transcend the role of passive listener, that they distinguish between art and entertainment, and that they make concerted efforts to *please him* by listening quietly to his music as other audiences were accustomed to doing in concert halls."[62]

This social control is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century rhetoric that accompanied the transformation of concert halls from interactive spaces to silent and appreciative ones. For Mingus, this observant silence represented respect for him as a composer, whether "pencil" or "spontaneous." Recounting a fight between Mingus and an audience member, Scott Saul writes, "[It] was a battle over the power of self-revelation—who might circulate their story over the din of someone else's, who might incorporate someone else's story into their own. . . . Mingus refused to believe that the customer was always right—especially when she believed in the utility of the art world as it was, not the power of art to model a utopian world to come."[63] Mingus's nightclub skirmishes took place during the height of

[59] Ralph Gleason, "Charlie Mingus: A Thinking Musician," *Down Beat*, 1 June 1951, 7.

[60] Eric C. Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 121.

[61] Mingus, "What Is a Jazz Composer?"

[62] Jennifer Griffith, "Mingus in the Act: Confronting the Legacies of Vaudeville and Minstrelsy," *Jazz Perspectives* 4/3 (December 2010): 339.

[63] Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 402.

his spontaneous composition years, when his style was most solidly within jazz's genre boundaries, yet he expected the same attentiveness from the noisy nightclub patrons in that period that he received from the "young music lovers" at the Whitney concert. For Mingus, there was no question of one style deserving legitimacy and another serving as background. It was all "Mingus music" and all to be taken seriously.[64]

Recent jazz scholarship has inquired into how "jazz" as genre functions for the musicians who work within, around, and through its constructed borders. Christopher Washburne formulates it not as *Jazz/Not Jazz*, despite the title of book in which his essay appears, but rather as a fluid construct with a center and margins. He "conceiv[es] of the center as a location of empowerment, authority, and privileges (imagined and real), in terms of economics, nationalism, or cultural capital, while the periphery is a marginal location of a somewhat disempowered difference and alterity."[65] For Washburne, "genres are not only performed but carefully imagined, constructed, and maintained in ways that reveal 'the ideologies and power arrangements that underlie local impositions of generic order.'"[66] Musicians then "navigate their position along the continuum (and in stark contrast to the violence of generic labeling), fluidly moving from center to periphery or choosing to remain at the margins, using a discourse of alterity to claim power or create space for innovation."[67]

Mingus's confrontations with genre often functioned in this way, destabilizing the center of jazz with his raucous presence at the margins. But String Quartet No. 1 works differently on genre. Instead of shifting the center of jazz, Mingus moved to a new center altogether, and in doing so he asserted his artistic mobility despite racialized genre boundaries. Eric Porter describes the musicians of Mingus's Los Angeles youth as making similar generic leaps: "By drawing upon a variety of musical influences, including those considered elite or serious, young black musicians took pleasure in artistic accomplishment and symbolically challenging the social order. Experimenting with convention subtly resisted the oppressive aspects of playing or composing distinct, racialized musical genres, while still maintaining allegiance to an African American tradition."[68]

When offered the prestigious Whitney commission, Mingus turned to a style that carried its own pedigree. Perhaps he recognized the opportunity for framing himself as a composer who transcended genre and decided that a high-modernist style might best serve him to those ends. But this decision was unlikely to have

[64] In her memoir, Sue Mingus quotes Mingus responding to critics' requests to categorize his music with, "Can't you just call it Mingus music?" She often uses the phrase when discussing his work. Sue Graham Mingus, *Tonight at Noon: A Love Story* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 266.

[65] Christopher J. Washburne, "Latin Jazz, Afro-Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban Jazz, Cubop, Caribbean Jazz, Jazz Latin, or Just … Jazz: The Politics of Locating an Intercultural Music," in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett, David Ake, and Daniel Ira Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 103.

[66] Washburne, "Latin Jazz, Afro-Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban Jazz, Cubop, Caribbean Jazz, Jazz Latin, or Just … Jazz," 90.

[67] Washburne, "Latin Jazz, Afro-Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban Jazz, Cubop, Caribbean Jazz, Jazz Latin, or Just … Jazz," 104.

[68] Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 106.

been a straightforward one. As with the musicians Porter described, Mingus's compositional choice functioned doubly, both vying for and critiquing the privileges of the high art world.

The Poetic Mingus

Issues of genre and prestige almost certainly contributed to Mingus's stylistic decisions in the piece, but Mingus's poetic orientation and lifelong interest in the interplay of music and text may have held equal sway in shaping the piece. Returning to the details of the piece, I propose that the style of the quartet, when viewed through the lens of a poetic Mingus, can be understood as a musical response to O'Hara's text.

Mingus's music is filled with thoughtful moments of text setting. One moving example is his treatment of the stanza "He knelt, his ear next his heart, thus / striking an attitude of insight. Ah! / his heart ached like Niagara Falls!" (Example 5). Leading up to this climactic passage (mm. 94–100), the singer slowly voices, "his ear next his heart," and the strings come together in rare rhythmic clarity. The sustained dissonance and paused motion (m. 96) mark the import of the moment. From there, the strings move in rhythmic unison through a chromatic line (mm. 97–98), foreshadowing the underscoring for the pathos of the final line of the stanza (mm. 107–114). The strings return to their rhythmic complexity until the singer lands on "ached." Here, they ascend chromatically once again, the cellos dropping out as the viola and violin play a fragile melody, thinning further until just the violin remains under the singer. With this passage, Mingus offers a tender and poignant reading of "his heart ached like Niagara Falls."

The poem's narrative builds to a final stanza, and in that closing passage Mingus's music suggests a larger-scale reading of O'Hara's poem. Earlier in the poem the young naïf follows the audience's orders to "prance higher," and Mingus writes four measures of dissonant oom-pah-pah, illustrating the naïf's performance (Example 6).

Triple meter returns at the work's close, as the naïf realizes that the audience's demands have corrupted his freedom. The poem closes with the climactic "'What have you done?' he screamed, 'I was / not like this when you came!' 'Alas,' / they sighed, 'you were not like us.'" At the naïf's cry, out of rhythmic instability emerges a sinister waltz.

In the closing stanza (Example 7, from m. 116), the cellos stomp out the downbeats, while the violin and viola turn above them in a dissonant melody. The vocal part falls in step, reinforcing the meter. This clearest articulation of meter in the work gives the impression of a mechanical dance. Thirteen measures in, the cellos begin a metrical unraveling, anticipating the downbeat by an eighth note. Over the next seven measures the seams of the dance continue to split as rhythmic instability returns.

In interpreting this pivotal moment of the quartet, I draw on a parallel theme in O'Hara's poem and Mingus's earlier piece of the same name. In Mingus's "The Clown," from 1957, an audience's reaction drives a performer to increasingly self-destructive measures in order to earn accolades. The audience functions as a

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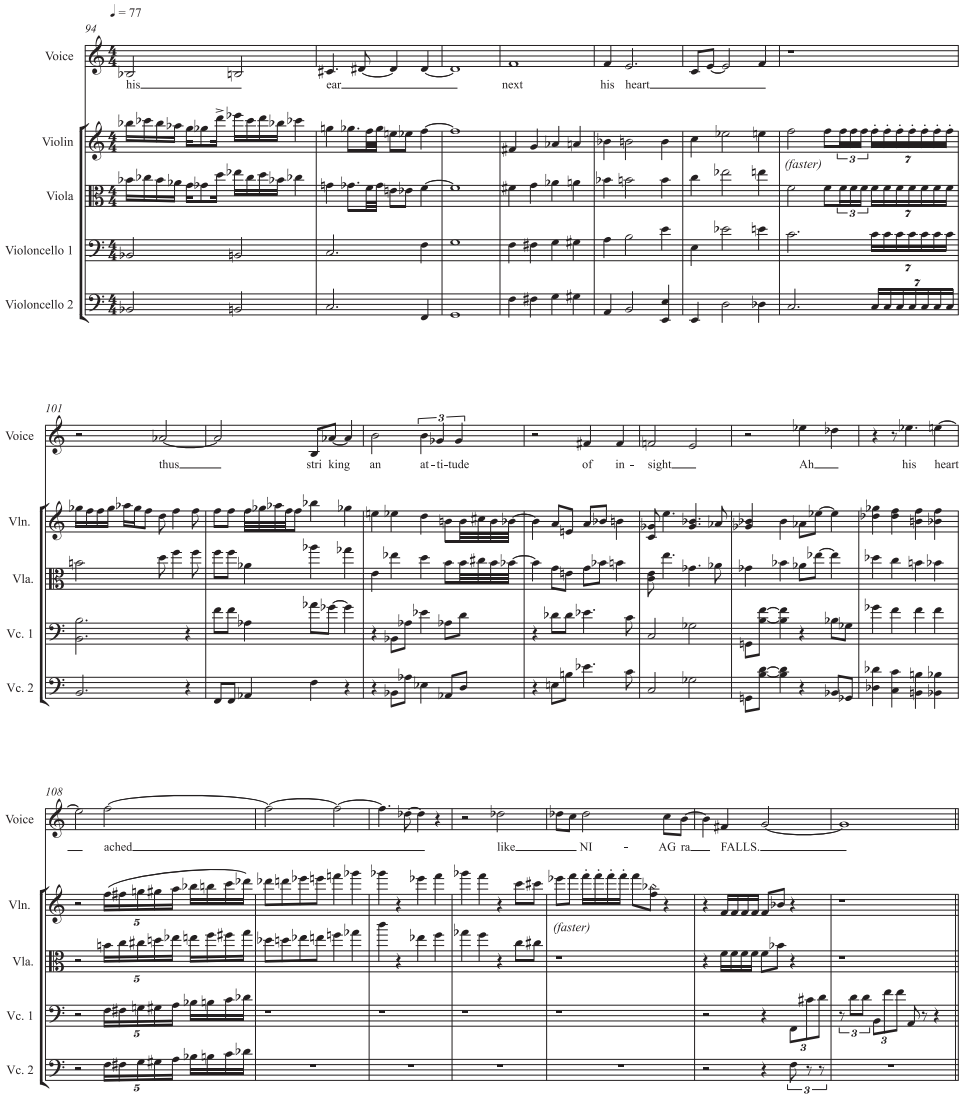

Example 5. Mm. 94–114. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.

threatening force. Returning to O'Hara's "The Clown," we can see a similar narrative. The poem's protagonist reacts to the praises of his ever-watching "them." By the end he recognizes that his movements are now controlled by their desires rather than by the idyllic explorations that opened the poem.[69]

Mingus's approach to rhythm in String Quartet No. 1 highlights the theme of threatening audience control. In the midst of a disorienting rhythmic landscape he suddenly turns to a rigid triple meter, with all members of the ensemble in lock step.

[69] In addition to this thematic similarity there is (at least) one musical one as well: all three of Mingus's clown-themed pieces feature triple meter prominently.

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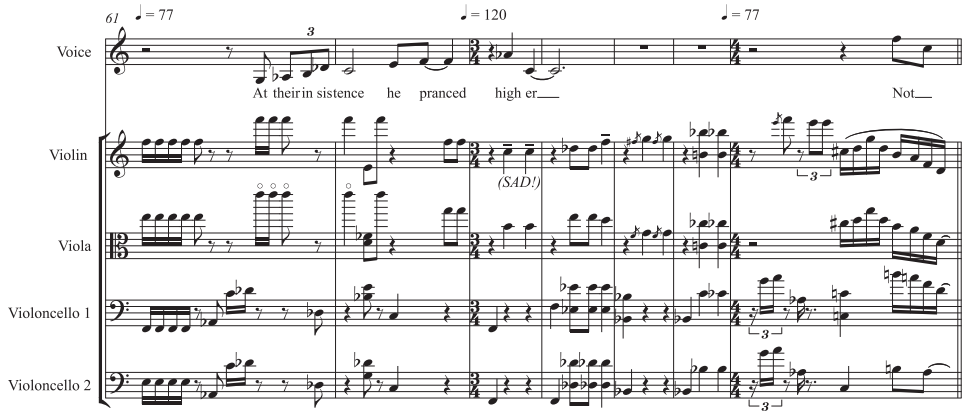

Example 6. Mm. 61–67. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.

As O'Hara's naïf recognizes how his viewers have corrupted him, Mingus gives us a mechanized dance, suggesting the performer's loss of agency when faced with the demands of the audience. O'Hara's disillusioned naïf turns into another iteration of Mingus's tragic clown character in a moment of brutal rhythmic control.

This striking instance of text setting suggests that Mingus reached outside of his usual stylistic domain at least in part as a response to O'Hara's poetry. Too quick a dismissal of String Quartet No. 1 as a stylistic experiment due to a prestigious commission would miss seeing the poetic interpretation at work in Mingus's setting. Certainly, the opportunity offered by the commission shaped the piece to no small extent; if nothing else, even just the instrumentation could be considered a direct reaction to the environment of the work's genesis. But with Mingus, nothing is so simple. Doubleness and contradiction are necessarily a part of any study of his life and music. From the multiple personalities in his memoir to his many styles and approaches to composition, Mingus evades simple categorization. As Nichole Rustin has written, what this multiplicity speaks to is not Mingus, necessarily, but those trying to categorize him. "He was not claiming to have 'changed' styles. Rather his artistic and intellectual interests were broader than the narrow definition of jazz with which the mainstream public could identify. Since the music had always been, as Ellington described, 'beyond category,' the simplification of his music into 'jazz' was evidence to Mingus (and many black musicians) of how black men were policed artistically, economically, and racially."[70]

The doubleness that emerges from my examination of the style of the quartet speaks to Mingus's racialized world. The piece's modernism is both a bid for and an undermining of the prestige of the high art world, a privileged zone so often denied to African American artists. But it also reflects his deep attention to O'Hara's poetry, and suggests the need to think of Mingus's lifelong engagement with poetry as central to his artistic project. If String Quartet No. 1 thwarts facile explanation, it is because Mingus himself lived and performed resistance to categorization. And

[70] Rustin, "Mingus Fingers," 118.

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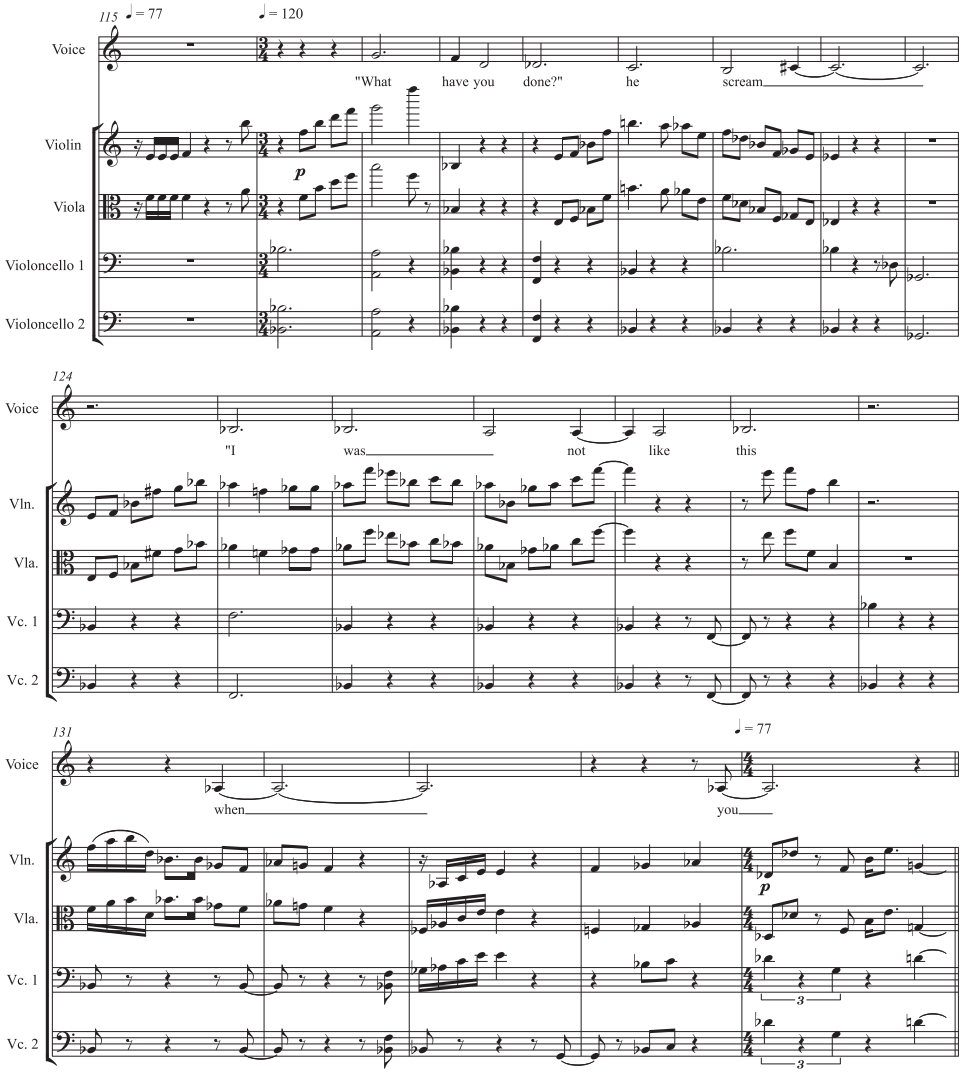

Example 7. Mm. 115–135. Charles Mingus, String Quartet No. 1. © Jazz Workshop, Inc. Used by Permission/All Rights Reserved.

perhaps, in hearing this long-forgotten work, we should heed Mingus's words and listen with open ears.

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