Michael Kropf, a composer whose new string quartet will be premiered at Apple Hill’s January concert, first connected with Apple Hill as a student at the Summer Chamber Music Workshop. He has since earned music degrees from New York University and San Francisco Conservatory and written a commissioned work for the Cabrillo Festival. Here, he talks about his new piece and his experiences at Apple Hill.

You were a participant in the Summer Chamber Music Workshop at Apple Hill from 2009-2014, when you were in high school and college. What was that experience like for you?

I first came to Apple Hill because my violin teacher, Netta Hadari, was like, you gotta go to this magical place in New Hampshire. I’d had some less than great experiences at other music camps; I couldn’t really deal with the toxic competitiveness that comes with being a teenager playing music in most institutions. So I told my teacher this, and he said, you need to go to Apple Hill to restore your faith in music.

My first year was so amazing; I remember the music very clearly. I played the Copland Sextet, which later became a very influential piece for me as a composer. And I also played Shostakovich String Quartet no. 3, which might have been my first time playing in a string quartet. Our coach on the piece was none other than Mike Kelley, and rehearsals with him were always so inspiring and mind-bending for me. I still remember him telling us to play the static rhythms of the second movement as if they were the lines of the the grid in the movie Tron. That image has always stuck with me.

The whole Apple Hill experience was so entirely different than any other camp experience I’d ever had. Usually you get to music camp and there’s
a very strict itinerary of mandatory activities and stressful auditions, etc. I got to Apple Hill and everything was so self-organized and organic; people would play ping-pong all day, or get an impromptu ensemble together to sight-read until late into the evening, or just hang out and read. As a teenager, suddenly having so much responsibility in creating my own camp experience was exhilarating, and I ended up spending more time with my violin that week than I had ever had before.

Tell us about your piece. What are some of the ideas and inspirations that went into it? What should we listen for?

The very first thing you hear in the piece was actually written during a short visit to Apple Hill. It’s a twelve-note melody in which each note is played and held by a different member of the quartet, so each note overlaps with the next, like holding down the sustain pedal on a piano. I think of this like a musical kaleidoscope; it’s a shape that is always in transformation. Throughout the piece, the idea of suspension continues so that there are very few moments in the quartet where someone isn’t holding onto a note. This makes the moments where everyone changes at the same time very important.

It’s a piece with a lot of tightly packed details in a pretty short 15 minute package. It’s divided into three parts that are distinct but dependent on one another. Part one has a searching quality to it, and finds a very energetic climax before fading away and revealing the musical kaleidoscope still churning underneath. Part two is more like a single moment crystallized in time; it takes a single idea from the end of part one and painstakingly stretches it apart into a single flowing gesture that lasts five minutes. Part three is about forward momentum towards an inevitable destination, although this momentum is sometimes halted or diverted.

The piece was written during a time of intense change and anxiety in the world, and although it does not have an explicit program, I think that the emotions of our time and my own personal experiences have filtered into it. I’m inspired by the ability of music, particularly classical music, to conjure emotions and empathy without any literal context or concrete
meaning—the fact that we can hear sounds that are completely abstract and yet make us feel like we’re in a deep personal conversation with someone is very special to me.

Read Michael’s program notes.

What has it been like to work with the Apple Hill String Quartet on this project?

They’re extremely skilled and extremely sensitive musicians. I felt like we could get to the meat of the piece very quickly. It’s a really unique experience to work with musicians who play so well together, so musical opportunities open up in terms of what I was able to write for them. The piece is reflective of having heard them many times as a group and having so much respect for how they approach music in all ways. It was a huge challenge, because I had to push myself to fully take advantage of what they are capable of as an ensemble.

While I always strive to make my music new and striking, I also remain very influenced by the experiences that I’ve had playing and listening to “traditional” chamber music (often at Apple Hill). Every AHSQ concert I’ve ever been to has been filled with incredible diversity, from the standard classics, to obscure historical works, to very difficult pieces of new music, and they perform all with so much commitment. Composing for them was a dream opportunity, because it allowed me to draw on what I love about classical chamber music while simultaneously pushing myself to create something new.

How did you become a composer, after starting out as a violinist?

I was always most interested in composing, but as a classical violinist I was very nervous to try to teach myself how to compose. I had this idea in my head that you absolutely needed to have a teacher to start (the way you do with violin). What I later realized was that composition is a much more open-ended skill and can be accomplished in many different ways. It wasn’t until college when I had my first composition teacher that I had the courage to start putting my ideas down. I quickly realized that everything I had been doing as a musician up until that point, from messing around with jazz piano to playing violin in orchestra and chamber groups, had been training my ear all along. The feeling that led
me to composition was a deep love for certain pieces that I heard combined with a sense of dissatisfaction about music that didn't exist, or that I wish existed. Composing is kind of like trying to scratch a very specific itch.

**What is next for you?**

This summer, I’m going to the Aspen Music Festival and School for the first time, as a composer. That is really exciting—I’m looking forward to hiking in Colorado, and I’m hoping to write a piano quartet that will be premiered there. I’m also currently writing oboe quartet for a great Bay Area oboist named Ryan Zwahlen. It’s fun to think about the future as a composer, because part of what makes composing so exciting is the mystery of what comes next.