

ARDITTI QUARTET

October 20, 2017

BARTÓK

String Quartet No. 3, Sz.85

Prima parte: Moderato

Seconda parte: Allegro

Ricapitolazione della prima parte: Moderato

Coda: Allegro molto

LIGETI

String Quartet No. 1 “Metamorphoses Nocturnes”

INTERMISSION

LIGETI

String Quartet No. 2

Allegro nervosa

Sostenuto, molto calmo

Come un meccanismo di precisione

Presto furioso, brutale, tumultuoso

Allegro con delicatezza

BARTÓK

String Quartet No. 4, Sz.91

Allegro

Prestissimo, con sordino

Non troppo lento

Allegretto pizzicato

Allegro molto

String Quartet No. 3, Sz.85

BELA BARTÓK

Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary

Died September 26, 1945, New York City

In the fall of 1927, just as he was leaving on his first concert tour of America, Bartók submitted the manuscript of his *Third String Quartet* to a chamber music competition sponsored by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia. Bartók returned to Europe in March 1928 without hearing anything about the competition, and, after waiting nearly a year, he gave up and began to make arrangements to have the quartet published in Europe. And of course at just that point the news arrived: Bartók had split first prize with the Italian composer Alfredo Casella. His share of the prize was \$3000, welcome news for a composer who was never wholly free from financial worries throughout his life. Bartók had powerful friends on the committee of six judges who awarded the prize, among them Willem Mengelberg (conductor of the New York Philharmonic), Fritz Reiner (conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony), and Frederick Stock (conductor of the Chicago Symphony). And in passing, it should be noted that the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, which had been founded in 1820, is still active today, and Bartók's manuscript for his *Third Quartet* remains one of its prized possessions.

The shortest of Bartók's six quartets, the *Third Quartet* has proven the thorniest of that cycle—critics invariably refer to it as “anti-romantic.” The *Third Quartet* is marked by a fierce concentration of materials and by Bartók's refusal to use traditional melodic themes. In their place he makes use of short motives that are almost consciously athematic in their brevity. The quartet takes as its basic thematic cell a three-note figure first announced by the first violin in the sixth measure: G rising to D and falling to A. That motif and a handful of others are then subjected to the most rigorous and concentrated polyphonic development: canon, fugato, inversion, simultaneous presentation of material. The structure is equally concentrated. Only fifteen minutes long and performed without pause, the *Third Quartet* nevertheless divides into four sections: *First Part*, *Second Part*, *Recapitulation of the First Part*, and *Coda*, which is essentially a recapitulation—or a revisiting—of the second part.

Bartók accentuates the fierce concentration of this music by enlivening it with one of the richest palettes of sound of any of his quartets. The *Third Quartet* opens with a sound he rarely used in his quartets—artificial harmonics—and then takes the music through a panoply of string sonorities: slithering ponticellos, martellato chords snapped off at the frog of the bow, passages

tapped out with the wood of the bow rather than bowed with the hair, quick glissandos that span more than an octave, passages played entirely over the fingerboard to produce the most whispery textures. One cannot separate music and sound, of course, and the sonic phantasmagoria of this quartet is part of its unbelievable concentration of material.

The first and second parts are basically sonata-form movements without their recapitulation sections. The *First Part* (marked *Moderato*) is built on the seminal three-note figure, which will then recur in untold shapes. Three strident chords mark the transition to the second subject, yet here the “accompaniment” of the lower strings incorporates the basic shape of this quartet, as does the violin duet above them. At the very end of the movement, the second violin and viola have a sustained duet in which this figure is finally made to sing diatonically (and very beautifully). The *Second Part* (marked *Allegro*) begins with a sustained trill: moving between different instruments, this trill goes on for 39 measures and then returns throughout. This “part” is built on two ideas: the cello’s strummed pizzicato chords near the opening and the first violin’s hurtling dance tune, draped along asymmetric meters. As part of the vigorous development, Bartók treats these themes fugally and at one point even combines them. The brief concluding sections bring the missing recapitulations, but now Bartók—who never liked to repeat anything literally—shortens and concentrates his material even more stringently. In the words of Halsey Stevens, the material from the first two parts here makes “a psychological return, not a physical one.” The dance rhythms of the *Second Part* race ahead, and the *Quartet No. 3* concludes on stinging dissonances hammered out by all four instruments.

The first performance of the *Third String Quartet* took place in Philadelphia on December 30, 1928. The quartet on that occasion was made up of the principal string players of Stokowski’s Philadelphia Orchestra: concertmaster Mischa Mischakoff, David Dubinsky, Samuel Lifschey, and Willem van den Burg. The Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet gave the European premiere of the *Third Quartet* seven weeks later, on February 19, 1929, in Wigmore Hall in London.

String Quartet No. 1 “Metamorphoses Nocturnes”

GYÖRGY LIGETI

Born May 28, 1923, Dicsöszentmárton, Hungary (now in Romania)

Died June 12, 2006, Vienna

The generation of young Hungarian composers coming of age in the decade after World

War II faced some very specific—and potentially deadly—problems. In those years artistic life in Hungary was rigidly controlled by the communist government, which insisted that its artists conform to the doctrine of Socialist Realism: art was to serve the people and to support the government, and it should be simple, easily understandable by the masses, and politically correct. Even the music of Hungary’s greatest twentieth-century composer, Béla Bartók, was out of favor because of its complexity. Composers were rigidly cut off from developments in the West like serial or electronic music, and as a young composer György Ligeti found that the only musical avenues open to him were patriotic choruses, music for children, and music for school orchestras. Composers could either accept this situation or—if they were lucky—get out, and Ligeti chose the latter path: he escaped from Hungary during the 1956 revolution and eventually became one of the leading voices of avant garde music in post-war Europe.

Even before he left Hungary, Ligeti was writing music that he knew would be unacceptable to Hungarian authorities, and one of these pieces was his *String Quartet No. 1*, composed in 1953-54 and subtitled “Metamorphoses Nocturnes.” Formally, this quartet may be thought of in several ways: as one continuous movement spanning about twenty minutes or as a sequence of miniature movements played without pause (the quartet is made up of a series of very short episodes at different tempos). The governing principle in this music is the continuous variation of material introduced at the very beginning (hence the quartet’s subtitle). The music begins very quietly (the marking is *Allegro grazioso*): over softly-rising lines from the lower voices, the first violin plays a series of shapes (marked *piano*, *dolce*, and *espressivo*) that will form the basic material for the evolving variations. The music then leaps between a number of very short variations. Sometimes these can be almost brutal in their speed and ferocity, and these episodes demand brilliant playing from all four players. These alternate with slow sequences, and some of these are expressive and quite beautiful: an *Adagio, mesto* (“sad”) introduced by the second violin; an *Andante tranquillo* that produces a deep, organ-like sonority; a saucy waltz marked *con eleganza, un poco capriccioso*; and others. Ligeti’s harmonic language can be gritty—at some moments the instruments can be clustered a half-step apart, other passages are set in quarter-tones, and the music is often spiked with strident, dissonant chords. At the end, all four instruments create a web of sound made up of barely-audible glissandos played entirely in harmonics, and finally the music fades into silence on reminiscences of the opening material.

One of the impressive things about the *Quartet No. 1* is how good it sounds. Everyone

hears the influence of Bartók's quartets on this music, and Ligeti incorporates some of that sound-world into his own music, including "Bartók pizzicatos" (plucked so sharply that they snap off the fingerboard), glissandos, and harmonics. Throughout, there is a freshness, a brilliance, and a clarity to the writing that makes this music exhilarating to hear.

Ligeti knew that this quartet would be unacceptable to the political and musical authorities in Budapest, and he did not try to have it performed there. The first performance of the *Quartet No. 1* was given in Vienna by the Ramor Quartet on May 8, 1958.

String Quartet No. 2 GYÖRGY LIGETI

György Ligeti composed his *String Quartet No. 2* between February and August of 1968. It was during this same year that Ligeti achieved worldwide fame in quite an unexpected way: without the composer's permission, Stanley Kubrick used excerpts from Ligeti's *Atmosphères* and *Lux Aeterna* as part of the soundtrack of the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and the 45-year-old avant garde composer suddenly found himself famous. Ligeti of course had no idea that any of this was about to happen when he composed this quartet, which was premiered by the LaSalle Quartet in Baden-Baden on December 14, 1969.

In contrast to Ligeti's *First String Quartet*, which is in one continuously-evolving movement, the *Second* is in five clearly-defined movements. Each of these movements is at a different tempo, and each inhabits a completely different sound-world, though all five movements make use of some of the same material. One of the most striking things about the *Second String Quartet* is how scrupulously annotated it is: the score opens with several pages of instructions about the degree of pitch variation within microtones and the correlation of tempos, and throughout the score itself Ligeti specifies with extraordinary precision how he wants the music to sound. These range from subjective instructions (*shadowy, furious, whispering*) to exact specifications about where on the bow and the string passages are to be played, how harmonics are to be produced, the precise sound he wants ("a scratching noise"), and so on. This is music of extraordinary difficulty for its performers, who must not only master its technical challenges but transcend them to create the range of musical expression Ligeti has built into this sharply-varied music.

As he often does, Ligeti begins with several seconds of "absolute silence" before a sharp

pizzicato attack springs the *Allegro nervoso* to life. At the core of this movement are sharp contrasts between different textures and dynamics: the music can be static, almost silent, for measures at a time, then erupt into the most furious activity. The second movement, marked *Sostenuto, molto calmo*, seems to take us into a different world entirely, but the composer has pointed out that this movement is in fact a series of variations on material introduced in the first movement. It begins with a series of subtly-gradated entrances (Ligeti instructs the performers to “attack imperceptibly”), and soon we hear a variety of sounds: *flautando* (floating the bow so that it produces a flute-like sound), *ponticello* (bowing on top of the bridge to produce a grainy sound), and the “Bartók pizzicato,” in which the string is pulled so strongly that it snaps off the fingerboard with a resounding crack.

Ligeti marks the third movement *Come un meccanismo di precisione* (“Like a precision machine”). Though this movement is in 4/4, Ligeti is adamant that he does not want the players to create a regular beat—his instruction is: “very even, without accentuating the bar subdivisions, nowhere should the impression of barring be created.” This movement is played mostly pizzicato, and Ligeti has spoken of it as “a kind of homage to Bartók” (listeners might compare it to the fourth movement of the Bartók *Fourth Quartet* heard next on this program). The most striking thing about this movement is the way the metric patterns, different in each instrument, go in and out of phase, somewhat in the manner of Ligeti’s famous *Poème symphonique for a hundred metronomes*. Ligeti specifies exactly how he wants the pizzicato notes played, ranging from simple plucked notes to delicate pizzicatos played only with the fingertip.

The brief fourth movement lives up to its marking: *Presto furioso, brutale, tumultuoso*. Ligeti specifies that it “is to be played with exaggerated haste, as though crazy,” and this movement careens between moments of stasis and furious activity, much as the opening movement did. The music proceeds with only the briefest pause into the finale, *Allegro con delicatezza*. The composer’s performance instructions here are particularly telling—he wants this movement to sound “as though from afar” and “always very mildly,” and he asks that it be “executed like a finely worked embroidery.” Motifs heard earlier in the quartet return, but now we sense them through a ghostly filtering—they are the same, but not the same. At the very end, the music suddenly whips upward and vanishes, and Ligeti’s closing instruction is precise: “All four instruments disappear suddenly, as though into nothingness.”

String Quartet No. 4, Sz.91
BÉLA BARTÓK

Bartók's *Fourth String Quartet* of 1928 is a work of extraordinary concentration. Over its brief span, materials that at first seem unpromising are transformed into music of breathtaking virtuosity and expressiveness. Bartók's biographer Halsey Stevens suggests that the *Fourth* "is a quartet almost without themes, with only motives and their development," and one of the most remarkable things about the *Fourth Quartet* is that virtually all of it is derived from a simple rising-and-falling figure announced by the cello moments into the first movement. Bartók takes this six-note thematic cell through a stunning sequence of changes that will have it appear in an almost infinite variety of rhythms, harmonies, and permutations. So technical a description makes this music sound cerebral and abstract. In fact, the *Fourth Quartet* offers some of the most exciting music Bartók ever wrote.

The *Fourth Quartet* is one of the earliest examples of Bartók's fascination with arch form, an obsession that would in some ways shape the works he composed over the rest of his life. There had been hints of symmetrical formal structures earlier, but the *Fourth Quartet* is the first explicit and unmistakable statement of that form—the form here is palindromic. At the center of this five-movement quartet is a long slow movement, which Bartók described as "the kernel" of the entire work. Surrounding that central movement are two scherzos ("the inner shell") built on related material, and the entire quartet is anchored on its powerful opening and closing movements ("the outer shell"), which also share thematic material. There is a breathtaking formal balance to the *Fourth Quartet*, and that balance is made all the more remarkable by its concentration: the entire five-movement work spans only 23 minutes.

Bartók's *Third Quartet* had seen a new attention to string sonority, but the *Fourth* takes us into a completely new sound-world. It marks the first appearance of the "Bartók pizzicato" (the string plucked so sharply that it snaps off the fingerboard), but there are many other new sounds here as well: strummed pizzicatos, fingered ninths, chords arpeggiated both up-bow and down-bow. If the *Third Quartet* had opened up a new world of sound for Bartók, in the *Fourth* he luxuriates in those sounds, expanding his palette, yet employing these techniques in the service of the music rather than as an end in themselves.

Many observers have been tempted to describe the outer movements of the *Fourth Quartet* as being in sonata form, and it is true that they are structured—generally—on the notion of

exposition, development, and recapitulation. But to try to push these movements into a traditional form is to violate them. The outer movements of the *Fourth Quartet* do not divide easily into component sections, and in fact the entire quartet is characterized by a continuous eruption and transformation of ideas. Themes develop even as they are being presented and continue to evolve even as they are being “recapitulated.” For Bartók, form is a dynamic process rather than a structural plan.

The *Allegro* opens with an aggressive tissue of terraced entrances, and beneath them, almost unobtrusively, the cello stamps out the quartet’s fundamental thematic cell in the seventh measure. This tight chromatic cell (all six notes remain within the compass of a minor third) will then be taken through an infinite sequence of expansions: from this pithy initial statement through inversions, expansions to more melodic shapes, and finally to a close on a massive restatement of that figure.

If the outer movements are marked by a seething dynamism, the three interior movements takes us into a different world altogether. Bartók marks the second movement *Prestissimo, con sordino* and mutes the instruments throughout. The outer sections are built on the opening theme, which is announced by viola and cello in octaves. The central section, which does not relax the tempo in any way, rushes through a cascade of changing sonorities—glissandos, pizzicatos, grainy *sul ponticello* bowing—before the return of the opening material. This movement comes to a stunning close: glissandos swoop upward and the music vanishes on delicate harmonics.

At the quartet’s center lies one of Bartók’s night-music movements. Textures here are remarkable. At the beginning Bartók asks the three upper voices—the accompaniment—to alternate playing without and with vibrato: the icy stillness of the former contrasts with the warmer texture of vibrato. Beneath these subtly-shifting sonorities, the cello has a long and passionate recitative that has its roots in Hungarian folk music, and the first violin continues with a series of soaring trills suggestive of bird calls.

The fourth movement is the companion to the second, this one played entirely pizzicato. The viola’s main theme is a variant of the principal theme of the second movement, here opened up into a more melodic shape. This use of pizzicato takes many forms in this movement: the snapped “Bartók pizzicato,” arpeggiated chords, strummed chords, glissandos.

Brutal chords launch the final movement. This is the counterpart to the opening

movement, but that opening *Allegro* is now counterbalanced by this even faster *Allegro molto*. Quickly the two violins outline the main theme, a further variation of the opening cell, which returns in its original form as this music dances along its sizzling way. As if to remind us how far we have come, the quartet concludes with a powerful restatement of that figure.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger