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BORRAMEO
STRING QUARTET

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Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson Building

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The Library of Congress
Coolidge Auditorium
Friday, December 18, 2015 — 7:30 pm

THE GERTRUDE CLARKE WHITTALL FOUNDATION
IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

BORRROMEO STRING QUARTET

NICHOLAS KITCHEN, VIOLIN

KRISTOPHER TONG, VIOLIN

MAI MOTOBUCHI, VIOLA

YEESUN KIM, CELLO



Program

The Six String Quartets of Béla Bartók

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

String Quartet no. 1, op.7, BB52, Sz. 40 (1908-9, rev. 1909)

I. *Lento*

II. *poco a poco accelerando al Allegretto—più quieto—Molto quieto—Tempo I—Sostenuto sempre—Molto sostenuto—Tempo I—Agitato sempre—molto più tranquillo—Agitato—Molto sostenuto—Tempo I—Poco sostenuto—a tempo—molto quieto—sempre quieto—Molto sostenuto*

(Introduzione): *Allegro—Meno vivo—Allegro—Meno vivo—Molto Adagio*

III. *Allegro vivace—poco più mosso...—a tempo—a tempo (poco più mosso)—Adagio—Più Adagio—Tempo I—Vivo—Poco meno vivo—a tempo—Meno mosso—pesante—più mosso—Ancora più mosso—Maestoso—a tempo—Tempo I. mosso—Più vivo—Adagio—Più largo—Tempo I—Agitato—sempre Agitato—Tempo I—Più vivo—Molto agitato—Presto—molto sostenuto*

String Quartet no. 2, op.17, BB75, Sz. 67 (1914-17)

- I. *Moderato—tranquillo—Poco più mosso—Tempo I—Sostenuto—...
più mosso—...sempre più tranquillo—Tempo I, ma sempre molto tran-
quillo—...più agitato—a tempo—molto tranquillo—molto sostenuto—Più
sostenuto—Tempo I—Molto sostenuto—sempre più agitato—Largo—Tem-
po I (tranquillo)—molto tranquillo—Molto sostenuto—Poco più mosso—
Molto sostenuto*
- II. *Allegro molto capriccioso—[quarter] = 152-160—[quarter] = 132-140—
[quarter] = 152-160—a tempo—vivo—a tempo—[quarter] = 120—
[quarter] = 140—tranquillo—meno tranquillo—più tranquillo...—molto
tranquillo—a tempo—Tempo I—strepitoso—Sostenuto—a tempo...—Al-
legro molto—a tempo—tranquillo—a tempo—Prestissimo—[dotted-half]
= 132—Sostenuto molto*
- III. *Lento—Un poco più andante—Lento assai— [quarter] = 84—Tempo
I—Lento assai—Più andante—Lento assai—a tempo—Tempo I—Più
lento—Tempo I*

INTERMISSION 1

String Quartet no. 3, BB93, Sz. 85 (1927)

- Prima parte: *Moderato—Quasi a tempo, tranquillo—Sostenuto—Più an-
dante—Tempo I—Più lento—Lento—Tempo I*
- Seconda parte: *Allegro—Più mosso—Tempo I—Più mosso—Tempo I—Più
mosso—Ancora più mosso—Meno mosso—Più mosso*
- Ricapitolazione della prima parte: *Moderato—[quarter] = 86— [quarter] =
96—Meno mosso—Più lento—Lento*
- Coda: *Allegro molto—Meno vivo*

String Quartet no. 4, BB95, Sz. 91 (1928)

- I. *Allegro—Più mosso—Pesante*
- II. *Prestissimo, con sordino*
- III. *Non troppo lento—Poco agitato—Tempo I—Agitato—Tempo I—Tran-
quillo*
- IV. *Allegretto pizzicato—un poco più mosso—Tempo I (tranquillo)—Soste-
nuto—Tempo I (tranquillo)*
- V. *Allegro molto—Più vivo—Meno mosso—Pesante*

INTERMISSION 2

String Quartet no. 5, BB110, Sz. 102 (1934)

Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation

Allegro—[quarter] = 120—*Tempo I*—*Meno mosso*—*Tempo I*—*Più mosso*—*Tempo I*—*Mosso*—*Un poco meno mosso*—*Più mosso*—*Tempo I*—*Meno mosso*—*Tempo I*—*Un poco più mosso*—*Allegro molto*—*Più vivo*—*Allegro molto*—*Tempo I*—*Sostenuto*—*Tempo I*—[quarter] = 130

Adagio molto—*Un poco più andante*—*Tempo I*—*Più lento*—[quarter] = 38—[quarter] = 40—[quarter] = 36—*Largo*—*Più andante*—*Tempo I*

Scherzo: *Alla bulgarese (vivace)*—Trio: *Vivacissimo*—[5 eighths] = 144—*Tempo I (Scherzo da capo)*—*Agitato*—*poco slargando*—*a tempo*

Andante—*poco slargando, rubato*—*a tempo*—*poco slargando e rubato*—*a tempo*—*Più andante*—*Più lento*—*poco slargando*—*a tempo*—*Più mosso, agitato*—*Tranquillo (Tempo I)*—*Più andante*—*Più lento*

Finale: *Allegro vivace*—*Presto*—*Poco sostenuto*—*Più presto, scorrevole*—*a tempo*—*Poco sostenuto*—*a tempo*—*Poco sostenuto*—*Prestissimo*—*Allegretto capriccioso*—*Più mosso*—[half] = 50—*Risoluti quasi a tempo*—*Tempo I*—*Più presto*—[half] = 160—*a tempo*—*Tempo I (subito)*—*Più presto*—*Tempo I*—*Meno mosso*—*Allegretto, con indifferenze*—*Tempo I*—*Più presto*—*Prestissimo*—*Stretto*—*Slargando*

String Quartet no. 6, BB119, Sz. 114 (1939)

I. *Mesto*—*Più mosso, pesante*—*Vivace*—*Un poco meno vivo*—*Vivacissimo, agitato*—*Ancora più vivo*—*Tempo I*—*Pesante*—*Tempo I*—*Un poco tranquillo*—*Vivacissimo*—*Tempo I*—*Vivacissimo*—*Meno vivo*—*Vivacissimo, agitato*—[dotted quarter = 150]—*Tempo I*—[dotted quarter = 120]—*a tempo*—*a tempo, ma tranquillo*—*Lento*

II. *Mesto*—Marcia: [quarter = 116]—*Risoluti*—*Tempo I*—*Meno mosso*—*Ancora meno mosso*—*Rubato*—*Animato, molto agitato*—*Sostenuto*—*Molto vivace, agitato e rubato*—*Meno mosso*—*Tempo I*—*Risoluti*—*Tempo I*—*Meno mosso*—*a tempo*

III. *Mesto*—Burletta: *Moderato*—*Un poco più mosso*—*Tempo I*—*Andantino*—*Tempo I*—*Più lento, espressivo*—*Tempo I*—*Un poco più mosso*—*Andantino*—*Tempo I*

IV. *Mesto*—[eighth = 84]—[eighth = 88]—[eighth = 96]—[eighth = 88]—*Più andante*—*Molto tranquillo*—*Tempo I*—*Più andante*—*Tempo I*



About the Program

The string quartets of Béla Bartók occupy a treasured place in the twentieth-century canon; a place earned not just due to their inherent quality but also because of the willingness of performers worldwide to take on their challenges. Composed over the course of Bartók's

lifetime, the quartets offer a microcosmic overview of his output as a whole. For various reasons the quartets are often heard in a variety of orders when performed together or recorded—and only rarely do we hear all within the same concert—but hearing them in chronological order as we will this evening allows us to see something of Bartók's personal path. It is not so much a path of "progress," in which each quartet is "better" than the last, but rather one of moving from strength to strength, and we are allowed to see what the young Bartók could tell us that the older one declined to, and vice versa.

The set of six quartets are not all that Bartók wrote for the medium; he wrote at least three quartets as a teenager (two of which are lost), and he was unable to finish his seventh quartet before his death in 1945. Additionally, as violinist Nicholas Kitchen explored in his preconcert presentation, there are alternative drafts and ideas that Bartók modified to arrive at the final forms of the quartets we know. Some of these aspects are also explored in László Somfai's interesting book on manuscript sources and Bartók's compositional process (*Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts and Autograph Sources*), which covers issues ranging from revision histories to metronome markings and copyist errors. People write articles and books about Bartók's quartets, and due to limited space it is impossible to cover the many thoughtful commentaries that have been contributed over the years. These notes, then, will present a few salient facts and/or theories about each quartet, along with a few thoughts about things to which we might attend as listeners—hardly exhaustive, but a start! The concert will undoubtedly be a treat, and we are pleased to be able to present all of the mature Bartók quartets at our Stradivari Anniversary Concert, with gratitude to the superb musicians of the Borromeo String Quartet for taking on such an intense challenge.

String Quartet no. 1

Bartók's first string quartet, premiered in 1910 by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet, is the work of a composer coming into his own, and certain aspects of the writing are precursors to calling card attributes to be found in many of his later works. These include, for instance, the opening material in which Bartók emphasizes intervallic relationships in a pseudo-fugal context. Symmetries, while not exact, tend to come to the fore as the lines of slow music interact with each other. To me the sound world here is akin to that of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*—a feeling aided by the sense that dissonances are always in the process of being "passed through" instead of "arrived at," that is, the prospect of resolution always seems just a chord or two away.

There may also be a programmatic element in play; without going into too much detail, around the time of the quartet's composition Bartók was hurt by the unwanted end of a relationship. He had written to his romantic interest Stefi Geyer a theme that as a chord formed a minor triad with a major seventh. Bartók told Geyer that this was her "Leitmotiv."¹ This idea was used in works like the first violin concerto, shown to Geyer just before their breakup, and indeed the composite melody of the opening of the first string quartet outlines an upside-down version of this motive.² Malcolm Gillies describes its presence here as part of a "Tristanesque mood of

1 Cooper, David, *Béla Bartók* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 78.
2 *Ibid.*, 90-91.

yearning," with echoes of Strauss and Reger, composers admired by Bartók and Geyer.³ The motive is, however, thoroughly integrated into the musical context, and though referential, the musical development of the material does not offer an obvious programmatic description.⁴

The slightly faster second section contains more whole steps and greater clarity of rhythmic articulation, starting above the open bass strings of the cello. A rising motive plays an important role here, as the music seems to shift into material more influenced by Debussy at measure 44. The cello melody gives way to a hushed, mysterious two-measure passage that beautifully transitions to the opening material, now an octave higher:

EXAMPLE 1

The musical score for Example 1 consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The music is in 3/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two sections by a vertical line. The first section is marked 'a tempo' and the second 'poco rit.'. The Violin I part starts with a rising motive (B-flat, C-sharp, D, E, F, G-flat, A) and then descends. The Violin II, Viola, and Cello parts play a descending line. The Cello part is marked 'pizz.' and 'pp'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Bartók, String Quartet no. 1, I: mm. 51-53

Example 1 also offers an instance of the type of motivic symmetry, "adapted" to a scale with the members B-flat, C-sharp, D, E, F, G-flat, and A (compare the rising figure in the first violin to the descending lines in the middle voices).

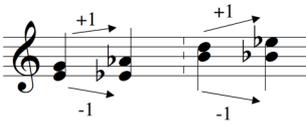
The return of the opening material is abbreviated but intense, and the second movement begins directly after its quiet close. There is a mirrored kinship to the first movement here, as the low instruments play a duet before the violins answer. Tonal implications are greater due to the frequent use of sixths and thirds, but as in the first movement the targets tend to be

3 Gillies, Malcolm, "Bartók, Béla," Grove Music Online (Oxford Music Online: Oxford University Press).

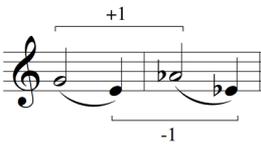
4 Bartók's friend Zoltán Kodály, however, described the musical progression as a "return to life" by the quartet's end. Ibid.

mobile. When the *Allegretto* starts at measure 21, the violin ostinato cuts against the waltz-feel of the other voices, and elements like this give the movement the feeling of an almost-dance that is never able to launch quite as expected. In addition to the dual-role of the ostinato figure (accompanimental and melodic), other figures prominently emerge, such as a small chromatic bump (a half-step up, followed by a half-step down), and a plucked cello rhythm in the bass. The half-step idea develops an increasingly significant melodic role; consider two cases that involve mirrored motion around a third, preceded by a condensed form of the music that shows the expansion from a minor third to a perfect fourth (this kind of expansion would become a common feature of Bartók's music):

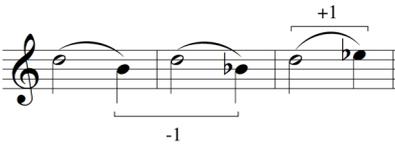
EXAMPLE 2

a) 

Interval expansion, condensed

b) 

Bartók, String Quartet no. 1, II: mm. 217-218, violin II

c) 

Bartók, String Quartet no. 1, II: mm. 269-271, violin I

The half-step provides an easy means of transitioning between the various ideas in the movement, and Bartók takes advantage of this. The long-short rhythm of Example 2b takes on an almost obsessive role as the movement nears its end. In a quiet coda the instruments again work in pairs and together to close. Before the third movement proper begins, however, Bartók includes a highly contrasting "introduction" of thirty three measures that largely features the solo cello alternating with forceful statements from the other instruments. It has been suggested that the cello melody in the introduction "parodies the opening of a popular Hungarian song, *Csak egy szép lány* ('Just a Fair Girl') by Elemér Szentirmai,"⁵ reinforcing the possibility of the influence of Bartók's failed relationship.

The third movement manages to occupy a number of different spaces at once—as in the cases of speedy tremolos (focusing at first on one pitch, and then a cluster) against a deliberate transformation of the ostinato figure from the second movement, or in the case of diatonic/modified scales versus highly chromatic material. The music in this movement has a more rhapsodic feel, both in some solo lines and in the episodic push through a variety of materials, ranging from music that seems to emulate the persistence of a train to loping melodic lines

5 Ibid.

within certain scale sets. In general these episodes tend to become more developed and interrelated as the movement progresses, increasing the sense of unity and imperative. This movement also finds Bartók experimenting more with the interplay between the different voices; at times they are at odds, while at others they work together to articulate a central idea. There are several moments of unexpected open-fifth emphases, such as the E-B arrival at measure 234 and the A-E focus at measure 271. These particular dyads, which happen to be symmetrical fifths above and below the E that starts the movement, are of course not haphazardly arrived at, and in fact serve as the final three pitches presented in three chords at the close of the quartet.

String Quartet no. 2

Much had transpired since the composition of Bartók's first acknowledged string quartet and the completion of his second: he had married Márta Ziegler in 1909, and of course the world was at war, which in addition to its many horrors had the deleterious effect of limiting his access to regions where he was collecting folk music. His second string quartet was composed between 1914 and 1917, and while it was new in many ways, it draws upon ideas first explored in the earlier quartet, particularly with respect to imitative behavior, half-step relations, and symmetrical constructions and motions. Dedicated to and premiered by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet (which had given the premiere of the first quartet as well), contemporary audiences would have been treated to a music at once foreign and familiar.

The opening follows the peculiar trajectory of starting rather unusually with its quiet but tenacious dissonances in the accompaniment against the first violin's melody; the minor seconds in the inner voices gradually expand to thirds, and with the pause at the end of the phrase one has the impression of having interrupted an idea already in the process of being worked out. Of great importance are the groups of three sixteenth notes that lead to a long-short pair; though their interval content changes, they can be thought of as constituting a motive (considering its melodic stance as a head motive and its consistent contour). As an example that can stand for many, consider the shape and content of three early instances of this idea, clearly related despite their differences:

EXAMPLE 3

a) 

Bartók, String Quartet no. 2, I: m. 2, violin I

b) 

Bartók, String Quartet no. 2, I: rehearsal 1, cello

c) 

Bartók, String Quartet no. 2, I: mm.2-4 after rehearsal 1, violin

After the first real moment of silence before rehearsal 3, this motive is treated quasi-canonically, not with the same formal aims as those found in the pseudo-fugal treatment of material in the first quartet's opening movement, but rather as a means of propulsion and accretion of sound. Later a similar process of imitative entry is used with a more stable rising and falling scalar figure that has increasing melodic significance, in increasingly triadic contexts. Occasionally a figure is treated as a localized ostinato, usually within a process of acceleration. Oscillating thirds emerge in some of these passages like that after rehearsal 8, and that motion is of great significance to the quartet's central movement.

Bartók does something very interesting at the point of recapitulation. Less like a Beethovenian false recapitulation and more like an early Brahmsian transformational one (as in the first movement of the C-major piano sonata, op. 1), the accompaniment has the same basic profile against a similar opening melody—but the inner voices now offer a "stable" tritone interval in the center that remains for some time. This is the start of a stabilization process that includes the material in contexts like F major and mixed-mode A major/minor. The final cello statement of the simple rising and falling line occurs beneath a series of augmented triads (on A) that softly ascend.

The second movement is the *scherzando* heart of the quartet. Gillies suggests that Bartók was inspired by music from north Africa,⁶ which may well be the case, but one can also look closer to home for predecessor works. In particular, the opening of this movement immediately calls to my mind the Mephisto Waltz no. 2 of Liszt, which features the same B-F tritone and similar rising scales. Here we become more aware of Bartók the orchestrator, as he cleverly utilizes different string techniques to support a composite sound. Repeated notes play a significant role (as with the first quartet's measured tremolos), and the oscillating thirds prepared in the first movement are put to work in the main thematic material. Bartók manages to take several simple ideas and turn them into an inexhaustible musical resource for the movement, which moves inexorably forward, with tritones, repeated notes or four-note scales almost always in play. There are several moments where this general rule is broken, with dramatic effect: a series of pauses between rehearsal 19 and 21, and an analogous series of melodic fragments that appear between mechanistic statements of the oscillation idea (from rehearsal 25 through 27). After further development of the various ideas, another sequence of melodically punctuated "pauses" leads to a held low E-flat in the cello just past rehearsal 41. A remarkable section then starts that features the oscillation along with a rising and falling process in which notes are added or taken away with each passing melodic hill. Embodied within are 4/4 melodies set against the 6/4 of the other players. The process waxes and wanes until whittled down to the three prominent pitches of the early theme, presented in reverse: F-sharp—F-natural—D. The movement closes with a final turn between F and D, in unison at the octave.

The final movement of Bartók's second quartet contrasts starkly with the energy of the middle movement. The music is slow, at times tortured, and draws on earlier material. The opening minor second interval between the violins recalls the same interval in the accompaniment at the quartet's beginning (the second measure's instance is even at the same register and pitch). At the close of the introductory section are two pitches held in the low strings that

6 Ibid.

seem to offer a point of arrival: C and A (important for a variety of reasons, but especially as structural anchors). Melodic material is treated more traditionally in the next section, though distributed liberally throughout the quartet. After a short breath to engage the mutes, a mysterious march-like passage ensues that prepares another motive laden with implication and frequently isolated: major third dyads rising by a minor third. These thirds appear in different guises, sometimes by themselves in a single register, and at other times occurring in the course of a sequence of chords. One might sense a kind of fatalism as the movement continues, and despite impassioned attempts to strike a new path, the music is gradually stripped down to a snippet of melody and the rising thirds idea before closing with a plucked A/C dyad in the bass voices.

String Quartet no. 3

Bartók's most concise quartet is the third, clocking in at about half the length of his first. Shorter duration does not, in this case, correlate to a deficit of content. The Bartók of 1927 (now divorced and remarried to Ditta Pásztory) continued to address the challenge of the string quartet with great invention and concentration. In some ways Bartók's string quartets are like Mahler's symphonies—one can trace portents of the next work in its predecessor. At the same time, those indicators are not evidence of repetition but renewals of creative energy that blossom in their new settings.

An important thing to note about the third quartet is its unusual structure. The work is not divided into typical movements; rather, Bartók labels four main sections as a first part, second part, recapitulation of the first part, and a coda. This division has led some to think of it as a two part work, perhaps because of the relationships between the first and third parts, and the second part and the coda. However, the sections are to be played *attacca* without stopping, and because of the relationships it is helpful to me to think of the whole quartet as a single, multivalent construct.

Another way of conceptualizing the piece is to consider its structure from a Hungarian standpoint. As David Cooper puts it, the work "invokes the *lassú-friss verbunkos* model in which a moderately slow *prima parte* is linked directly to a brisk *seconda parte*, followed by a *ricapitolazione della prima parte* and closing with an *Allegro molto* coda that is closely related to the *seconda parte*."⁷ Beyond Bartók's intriguing approach to tempo and thematic relationships in the quartet, his masterful use of advanced string techniques shines through. Although Bartók had recently heard Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*⁸—an experience that likely gave him much to think about—Bartók's technical conceits were already handsomely integrated into his musical thinking, and are not mere adornments added to color the music, but rather provide some of the stitching that makes it all hang together. The quartet's reception was positive; it shared a first prize award from the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia,⁹ which hosted the premiere and through its actions (which included a monetary award) garnered the dedication of the quartet from Bartók.

7 Cooper, 221.

8 Gillies.

9 Ibid.

The music of the *Prima parte* is quiet and enigmatic, opening with a layered, spread-apart cluster of the pitches from C-sharp to E, beneath a beautiful melody in the first violin. In the second phrase that starts at measure six, the melodic material emphasizes certain intervals in turn, including the fourth, tritone and minor third. The expression of these intervals is supported by their echo in the other voices. Indeed, we again see that Bartók utilizes the articulative power of the staggered entrance; imitative and suggestive of canon or fugue, but not employed with the same follow-through expected of those techniques. The voice-leading is directed to some degree by contour mirrors between voices and other symmetrical or quasi-symmetrical considerations. Following three sonorous chords and a grand pause, melodically-generated gestures are given the role of canonic ostinati, while the violins play glassy *sul ponticello* figures that periodically involve retrograde rhythms as part of their duet.

The musical ideas continue to develop in interesting constellations of featured groupings. Bartók deftly orchestrates the material, occasionally isolating an idea in octaves in several instruments, contrasting with double- and triple-stop chords. Staggered entry remains a prominent means of launching a section, and Bartók introduces a simple idea that prepares the way for future *glissandi*: a grace note outlining a major third with its primary note in the cello, an ornament later picked up by the other instruments that morphs into a "quasi gliss." in the second part, and ultimately full glissando slides between pitches. The instruments spend more time together as pairs, before closing with a C-sharp/G-sharp fifth in the bass colored by G-natural and D above. Looking at the bass movement from C-sharp to D in the transition to the second part, it is not by accident that D and E-flat are featured in its opening trill (a reference back to the opening cluster).

The second movement is a fleet *Allegro* with an abundance of character, enhanced by plucked chords and scale parts that add up to modal and pentatonic melodic material. The folk sense is augmented by the playful rhythmically-accented groupings. Bartók moves in and out of larger melodic ideas, occasionally fixating on elements like the oscillating trill or ascending scale to give those ideas greater local developmental prominence. Of particular significance is the ascending four-note scale grouping, because at the close of the quartet the inversion of this idea gives cadential weight to the gesture. The timbral shifts and rhythmic control in this *seconda parte* are truly virtuosic, and made more treacherous at times by the notation that requires players to perform in different meters simultaneously. By the close of the section the repeated note and the glissando have attained a prominent status. A unified descent that offers respite only in its final held notes leads directly to the third part, which though given the label of "recapitulation" might be better described as the further development of part one's music, as influenced by features of part two, such as the glissando. This look back at first-part material does not last too long, however, as the spry coda launches with *sul ponticello* repeated notes and wave-like scales. The modal folk material from the second part is given a nod, but increasingly prominent in the textures is the inverted four-note scale motive (in particular, at the pitch levels E-flat-D-C-B). Other transpositions and configurations of this idea occur, and in a memorable passage the cello and viola play the rising and falling (respectively) versions of these ideas in a buildup to the quartet's close, in which the cluster of compacted intervals is finally allowed to explode to feature wider intervals, still based on C-sharp. The major ninths in the violins are balanced by fifths in the low strings, and the final chord is an ebullient set

of C-sharp, D-sharp, G-sharp and A-sharp, which due to the distribution of intervals (and Bartók's insistence), has the feel of an affirmative ending "on" C-sharp.

String Quartet no. 4

The composition of the fourth quartet in 1928 followed fast on the heels of the third, being finished before the third quartet was premiered. It is cast in five movements, and exhibits a superstructural arch form in the way that its movements relate to one other: the material of I is paired with V, and that of II with IV, comprising the outer and inner layers to the "kernel"¹⁰ of the central movement III. It appears, however, that the fourth quartet originally consisted of four movements, and that the symmetry-producing fourth movement was composed and inserted after the others were completed.¹¹ In any event, this more refined consideration of symmetry at such a high structural level was perhaps to be expected from a composer whose local preferences often exhibit symmetrical tendencies (and examples can be found throughout the body of Bartók's quartet output). With respect to the musical material used in the fourth quartet, Gillies mentions that Bartók drew on certain rhythms of Bulgarian, Hungarian and Romanian origin, infusing a folk element into some of the music's bread and butter. Additionally, Bartók had considered adapting the fourth quartet for string orchestra, but unfortunately the project did not happen.¹²

One benefit of hearing Bartók's quartets back-to-back is that even if one is not familiar with them, certain approaches are still identifiable as they become known quantities. These include common motivic materials (such as short descending scales), as well as the staggered entrance. The fourth quartet, while exploring new territory, nevertheless includes many of these trademark ideas. The opening theme and the secondary lines exhibit similar shapes as they pivot away from a central pitch. A descending three-note scale is presented one after the other, rising by a half step with each entrance, and the cello presents a thematic fragment that will grow in importance. Compare, for instance, this early appearance of the idea in the cello in measure seven against the cello's final measure of the movement (there reinforced by the other instruments):

EXAMPLE 4

a)



Bartók, String Quartet no. 4, I: m. 7, cello

10 From Bartók's description, Cooper, 227.

11 Somfai, László, *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100-102.

12 Gillies.

b)

Bartók, String Quartet no. 4, I: mm. 160-161, cello

Throughout the first movement Bartók plays with various localized overlapping ostinati of thematic tidbits like those in Example 4, and fuller-fledged melodic ideas tend to take wing from such nests of material. Overlapping scales and figuration often disguise the source of emergent ideas, but Bartók's careful orchestration allows the ideas to pop out. The glissando once again emerges, acting almost like a constriction of the scales, especially when the voices are layered as heard earlier. The music takes on a *marcatissimo* flair as the gestures grow in strength. One of Bartók's skillful techniques employed here is the exploitation of unison statements (either melodic or accents, or both) as crystallization points, where the overlapping voices suddenly come into focus. This happens with the idea shown in Example 4, and despite the E-natural in the final chord, the motive's trajectory suggests a C-minor conclusion.

The second movement is a remarkable study in noodling (that's the technical term) at high speed. All of the instruments are muted, and at the start work in pairs. Maintaining accuracy while bringing out Bartók's articulations are tall orders for the entire movement. The music shifts to plucked passages and back, with textural oscillations periodically coming to the foreground. Structural articulations are made by shifts in these textures, such as the unexpected move to a series of *glissandi* in all voices followed by coordinated *sul ponticello* gestures. The intense but quick scherzo is followed by the centerpiece of the quartet, the *Non troppo lento*. The treatment of melody and accompaniment is quite different here, where the melodies are given recitative-like treatment against static or slowly shifting chords.¹³ The lines become more interactive and metrically fixed before again dissipating.

What the second movement was to noodling, the fourth is to plucking: the entire movement is played *pizzicato*. The speed that Bartók asks for exceeds the usual cautionary limit of Tchaikovsky's *pizzicato* movement from the fourth symphony (the third movement, outer sections—though that is seen as the advisable speed limit for section plucking), so the performers themselves must possess a great deal of pluck. While for some composers such a restriction might be limiting, in Bartók's hands a considerable variety of interactions is pursued, as well as textural techniques such as guitar-like strumming and the infamous snap *pizzicato*. The snap *pizzicato* is a particularly forceful one, and is often referred to as the "Bartók pizz."¹⁴ Like its partner movement, the fourth requires incredible coordination between the players. It is not obvious from the opening of the fifth movement how it relates to the opening one, given its loud chords and offbeat rhythms. However, familiar material is integrated and emerges

13 There are fascinating assessments of what is going on in this and other movements worthy of further study, such as Amanda Bayley's article "Bartók's String Quartet No. 4/III: A New Interpretive Approach" in *Music Analysis* 19.3 (2000): 353-382. There are also points of coordination where earlier techniques are used, such as the violin and cello duet related by inversion starting at measure 56.

14 I like to imagine that if someone asked Bartók what he called a "Bartók pizzicato," that he would respond with: "It's just "pizzicato" if I do it."

more frequently as the movement progresses. Bartók once again pairs the instruments to layer ideas, sometimes staggered, sometime in inversion. It is the moment of full coordination that signals the final declamatory statement, in the form of an only slightly modified return of the gesture shown in Example 4b. One of the great accomplishments of the fourth quartet is that Bartók managed to create clear relationships while keeping the music fresh at all times through his clever integration of new textures and gestures.

String Quartet no. 5

The Library of Congress is particularly keen on Bartók's fifth string quartet, as it was the fruit of a 1934 Coolidge commission. The work was premiered at the Library of Congress in 1935 by the Kolisch Quartet. Similarly to the fourth quartet, the fifth is also set in five movements with a symmetrical arch structure—it is particularly interesting to listen to Bartók's approach with the fifth just after hearing the fourth. As David Cooper notes, "[the] opening sonata-form movement is itself symmetrically disposed, with three contrasting thematic areas that are recapitulated in reverse order."¹⁵ Indeed, symmetry again takes first billing in numerous ways throughout the quartet. In this case, the central "kernel" movement is a scherzo flanked by slower music

There is something palpably different about the fifth quartet, however, that in my view demonstrates Bartók's absolute command of the medium. While the work is very large, there is a focus to Bartók's use of his material that differs from what came before. This is partially due to the increased unity of presentation that is to be found in each of the movements, along with greater economy of material. It is also owing, perhaps, to the seeming ease with which Bartók treats tonality in the quartet. While stability is not always present, the use of triads and cadential arrivals are not so actively disguised, and symmetrical gestures are often used to emphasize a single pitch, such as the B-flat that dominates the outer movements. Bartók's embrace of the material is absolutely convincing, as he manages to balance the inclinations of the music with certain tonal expectations.

The quartet, which must be as exhausting to play as it would be thrilling, takes off with its famous repeated B-flats in unison at the octave. The tricky rhythms are reinforced in pairs as the instruments split off from each other. The familiar staggered entrances return with a new trill motive, and scales become conflated into quasi glissandi. A new idea with wide leaps leads to a Bartókian melody, and a new configuration of the repeated-note material. At measure 45 the music suddenly changes character, with scalar melodies presented canonically above a unified accompaniment, with the melodic material passing between the instruments. The return of the repeated-note material on E is now followed by scalar variants and a descending fourths/fifths idea. In a lesson learned from the fourth quartet, we hear Bartók again using a spotlight approach on certain material when it is played together at the octave. As the music reverses (by section) back to the opening music, we also start to hear more prominent simultaneous inversions—a technique that yields a highly effective return to the B-flat center on the final note, approached from above and below.

15 Cooper, 266.

The second movement begins and ends with an enigmatic trill plus scale motive. Each voice almost always moves individually, perhaps dovetailing with another from time to time, until Bartók closes in on a rather unexpected chorale-like section. The writing here is effective because of its simplicity: primarily triadic chords held beneath a hauntingly beautiful violin melody that makes an offering just five notes at a time. In the wrong hands this kind of passage can quickly go pear-shaped, but Bartók maintains an intense beauty throughout the movement as he integrates his earlier material and introduces a few new ideas as well, all the while maintaining a rare sense of serenity.

The central "Bulgarian" scherzo is extremely catchy, with its primary melody built on a series of thirds. The melodic material develops in interesting ways, especially as it gets co-opted as accompaniment to new folk-melody-like material. The scherzo's central Trio begins with a nebulous pitch stream in the first violin above a held drone in the viola, and then the second violin begins articulating an underlying meter of 3+2+2+3. A delightful melody pops out following this rhythmic pattern—and of course variants—in the viola and cello. It is a wonderful admixture of the strange and familiar. The scherzo's main material returns to close out the movement, including a delicate cadence in C-sharp minor. The fourth movement *Andante* opens with call-and-response interactions between pairs of instruments that pluck material related by inversion. Bartók very effectively utilizes the pizzicato glissando, which works best on the cello, against the activity of the other strings. Small details like the viola's alternation of open and stopped versions of the same pitch add a great deal. As the movement unfolds, there is an increased amount of activity, including references to the repeated notes of the opening movement. After an impassioned duet in the violins above scalar waves in the lower strings, the *Tranquillo* references the chorale-like passages in the second movement. A remarkable series of pizzicato triple-stop glissandi in the cello closes out the music (in triads voiced a fifth and a tenth above the bass), ending with a G-minor chord in the cello against the B-natural of the quietly held violin tone, giving the movement a mixed-mode kiss goodbye.

David Cooper hears in the opening strains of the final movement a reference to Beethoven's op. 11 piano sonata¹⁶ (presumably the transition from the introduction to the first main theme in the opening movement), which is an interesting comparison when you consider the pacing of the introduction and the contrapuntal nature of the music. Bartók presents his material variously in pairs, or in staggered canons or other configurations. References to the opening movement's music become increasingly clearer, and the fluidity of the writing is exceptional. Periodically Bartók will begin again from a new starting point, such as the *col legno* "march" at letter G after the return of the opening material. At letter M there is a strange shift to an organ grinder/musette tune marked *Allegretto con indifferenza*. It is not known exactly what was intended with this humorous moment, but it often makes me think of Mozart mocking the music of Salieri in the film *Amadeus*. The funny thing about it is not just the tune, but the superimposition of the first violin playing in B-flat above the other instruments in A, as if unaware of the conflict. After this brief aside, the dramatic argument continues to become the pursuit of a path from plurality to singularity, culminating in a transformation of the close of the opening movement: divergent scales converging on B-flat.

16 Cooper, 270.

String Quartet no. 6

There was a moment, in the dark days of 1939, when Bartók's sixth and final completed string quartet almost became another Library of Congress commission. The proposal came about in a remarkable set of correspondence between Bartók and Harold Spivacke, then-Chief of the Music Division. The Library was in the process of booking Bartók as a pianist for a special concert to take place on April 13, 1940 with violinist József Szigeti. This now-legendary recital almost did not take place, as Bartók feared with good reason what would happen if he left Hungary. In a heartfelt letter to Spivacke on November 9th, 1939 (a year to the day after *Kristallnacht*) Bartók wrote: "I wonder if you know our situation here? We see that small countries are are [sic] being invaded from one day to another quite unexpectedly by the most terrible armies and subjected to tortures of every kind... It may happen, if I leave my country for America, that I can't return, can't even have news from my family - - - . I hope you will understand my state of spirit - - - ."17

At this point of doubt over the wisdom of traveling to the United States at the time, Bartók made an intriguing offer. Further in the letter, Bartók wrote: "Now, instead of my own person, I could offer you a new work. Fortunately, I could work until the end of August and I have composed a new string quartet, which is almost completed. My offer is this: would you accept it at the same conditions as my fifth string quartet in 1934?"18 The Library was not able to accept the request, and likewise Bartók rescinded the offer once he had decided to go ahead with his trip to America.¹⁹ With the passing of his mother a short time after this exchange, another reason to remain in Hungary was removed. He would live in America for the remainder of his life.

It seems as if the weight of the world rests on the sixth quartet. While there are moments of fun, the exuberance seems to be kept in check, and any upbeat references are more like memories, their immediacy tinged with self awareness. The quartet is composed of four movements, with a *Mesto* ritornello (motto-like theme) taking a prominent role in each movement. The first instance of this idea opens the work, in the form of a viola solo (so we know things were dire). The full quartet heavily comments on this before the *Vivace* start of the movement proper. Once again we see Bartók's preferred method of staggering the entries of this theme related to the viola solo (but quickly establishing its own recognizable identity). The music in this movement organically evolves, with Bartók employing a variety of contrapuntal and textural techniques to explore the thematic material. Constant activity is punctuated by moments of brief repose at the start of new explorations and when the voices become unified in their support of a theme—such as what occurs at the close of the movement, where the music ascends to a luminous D-major chord. The second movement also begins with a *Mesto* statement of the opening motto, now placed in the cello (modified to bear characteristics of

17 Bartók, Béla, letter to Harold Spivacke, November 9, 1939. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation collection at the Library of Congress, Box 5/20, p.1.

18 Ibid.

19 The back-and-forth negotiations about the Bartók/Szigeti concert are fascinating to follow, and include discussions about issues ranging from the determination of the program to travel arrangements, which were then difficult to obtain.

the *Vivace* from the previous movement, at the slower tempo) and accompanied by the upper strings in three octaves, with the lower parts playing *tremolando*. At the close of this minute-long introduction the second violin introduces an idea that becomes the principal thematic cell for the march that follows. The regular dotted rhythms of the march are occasionally countered with less stable rhythms at moments of transition or closure of sections, and Bartók takes what could be a banal idea in lesser hands in numerous directions. The central section is quite unexpected: starting with a cello solo, the violins accompany in oscillating tremolos while the violist strums the instrument like a guitar.²⁰ This remarkable section closes with cadenza-like repeated figures across the quartet, with each voice dropping out until the return of the march. Here one senses Bartók chuckling, as the first violin plays its tune high above the others in harmonics. Bartók avoided the pitfalls of a literal repeat of the material, instead offering clever transformations of the march to finish the movement.

The third movement begins with the now-expected *Mesto* introduction, this time with the theme in the first violin (later joined by the viola) and accompanied by the other violin and cello. The lament is grotesquely interrupted by the "Burletta" that constitutes the main body of the movement. As the music gets underway, something sounds off—somebody is playing out of tune. It is not evidence that the violinists are getting tired; rather, Bartók asks each violin to play a unison figure a quarter tone lower than the other. These types of orchestrational details add to the movement's humorous character. A nice contrasting *Andantino* section recalls the ritornello in its own memorable way. Bartók continues to pursue the Burletta material with great imagination, interrupting with the *Andantino* before an insistent coda that ends with a playful plucked chord. The final movement in its entirety is devoted to the development of the *Mesto* material. It is Bartók's disturbing and beautiful swan song for the medium, ending ambiguously with plucked cello chords beneath sustained D/A dyads in the violins, suggesting an only momentarily secure arrival in D major before the cello ascends, perhaps hopefully, to a tenth-spaced F-major triad.

It is such a rare experience to hear Bartók's string quartets as a body of work, and even rarer to hear them in the Coolidge Auditorium on the Library's collection of Stradivari instruments. We thank the Borromeo Quartet for their dedication to the project, our patrons Mrs. Coolidge and Mrs. Whittall for the wonderful hall and instruments, and all of the public without whose support and attendance the Library's concerts would not be possible. We also thank Béla Bartók for providing the world with such fascinating music, so full of energy and mystery.

David Henning Plylar
Music Specialist
Library of Congress, Music Division

20 Violists who excel at this passage have what they need: a way out.

About the Artists

Each visionary performance of the award-winning **Borromeo String Quartet** strengthens and deepens its reputation as one of the most important ensembles of our time. Admired and sought after for both its fresh interpretations of the classical music canon and its championing of works by 20th and 21st century composers, the ensemble has been hailed for its “edge-of-the-seat performances,” by the Boston Globe, which called it “simply the best there is.”

Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, the Borromeo continues to be a pioneer in its use of technology, and has the trailblazing distinction of being the first string quartet to utilize laptop computers on the concert stage. Reading music this way helps push artistic boundaries, allowing the artists to perform solely from 4-part scores and composers’ manuscripts, a revealing and metamorphic experience which these dedicated musicians now teach to students around the world. As the New York Times noted, “The digital tide washing over society is lapping at the shores of classical music. The Borromeo players have embraced it in their daily musical lives like no other major chamber music group.” Moreover, the quartet often leads discussions enhanced by projections of handwritten manuscripts, investigating with the audience the creative process of the composer. And in 2003 the Borromeo became the first classical ensemble to make its own live concert recordings and videos, distributing them for many years to audiences through its Living Archive. The next offering of Living Archive, a music learning web portal, will be released next season.

Passionate educators, the Borromeos encourage audiences of all ages to explore and listen to both traditional and contemporary repertoire in new ways. The ensemble uses multi-media tools such as video projection to share the often surprising creative process behind some works, or to show graphically the elaborate architecture behind others. This produces delightfully refreshing viewpoints and has been a springboard for its acclaimed young people’s programs. One such program is MATHEMUSICA which delves into the numerical relationships that under-pin the sounds of music and shows how musical syntax mirrors natural forms. CLASSIC VIDEO uses one movement of a quartet as the platform from which to teach computer drawing, video editing, animation, musical form and production processes to create a meaningful joining of music and visual art.

The Quartet has been ensemble-in-residence at the New England Conservatory and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum for twenty-three years; and has worked extensively as performers and educators with the Library of Congress (highlighting both its manuscripts and instrument collections), the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Taos School of Music. The ensemble joined the Emerson Quartet as the 2014-15 Hittman Ensembles in Residence at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, and its upcoming season includes substantial residencies at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Kansas University in Lawrence, and the San Francisco Conservatory.

The ensemble has been acclaimed for its presentation of the cycle of Bartok String Quartets as well as its lecture “BARTOK: PATHS NOT TAKEN,” both of which give audiences a once-in-a-lifetime chance to hear a set of rediscovered alternate movements Bartók drafted for his six quartets. Describing a Bartok concert at the Curtis Institute, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote that the quartet “performed at a high standard that brought you so deeply into the music’s inner workings that you wondered if your brain could take it all in... The music’s mystery, violence, and sorrow become absolutely inescapable.”

Also noteworthy in the BSQ repertory are its dramatic discoveries within the manuscripts of the Beethoven quartets, and its performances of the complete cycle; the Beethoven Decathlon (four concerts of Beethoven's last ten quartets, all with pre-concert lectures exploring his manuscripts); and single Beethoven Tryptich concerts (one concert including three quartets). Its expansive repertoire also includes the Shostakovich Cycle and those of Mendelssohn, Dvorak, Brahms, Schumann, Schoenberg, Janáček, Lera Auerbach, Tchaikovsky, and Gunther Schuller.

The Quartet has collaborated with some of this generation's most important composers, including Gunther Schuller, John Cage, György Ligeti, Steve Reich, Osvaldo Golijov, Jennifer Higdon, Steve Mackey, John Harbison, and Leon Kirchner, among many others; and has performed on major concert stages across the globe, including appearances at Carnegie Hall, the Berlin Philharmonie, Wigmore Hall, Suntory Hall, the Concertgebouw, Seoul Arts Center, Shanghai Oriental Arts Center, the Incontri in Terra di Siena Chamber Music Festival in Tuscany, the Prague Spring Festival and the Haydn Festival in Eisenstadt.

The 2015-16 season includes performances in Switzerland, Japan, Korea and China; the Bartók Cycle in Boston, San Francisco and at the Library of Congress; and appearances at the Schubert Club in Minneapolis, Amherst College, and Trinity Church Wall Street, to name only a few.

“Nothing less than masterful” (Cleveland.com), the Borromeo Quartet has received numerous awards throughout its illustrious career, including Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Career Grant and Martin E. Segal Award, and Chamber Music America's Cleveland Quartet Award. It was also a recipient of the Young Concert Artists International Auditions and top prizes at the International String Quartet Competition in Evian, France.

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