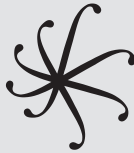

presents

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET
with
ROBERT GREENBERG
music historian-in-residence

Zakarias Grafilo, violin
Frederick Lifsitz, violin
Paul Yarbrough, viola
Sandy Wilson, cello

Saturday, October 29, 2011, 10am
St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

BARTÓK — **String Quartet No. 1, Opus 7**
Lento
Poco a poco accelerando al Allegretto
Introduzione: Allegro; Allegro vivace

KODÁLY — **String Quartet No. 1, Opus 2**
Andante poco rubato; Allegro
Lento assai; Tranquillo
Presto
Allegro

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In addition, Greenberg is a sought-after lecturer and has recently spoken for such diverse organizations as S.C. Johnson, Canadian Pacific, Deutsches Bank, the University of California/Haas School of Business Executive Seminar, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, Harvard Business School Publishing and Kaiser-Permanente. He has been profiled in the *Wall Street Journal,* the *Times of London, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, San Francisco Chronicle,* the *University of California Alumni Magazine* and *Princeton Alumni Weekly.* Greenberg is the resident composer and music historian to National Public Radio's *Weekend All Things Considered.*

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His book, *How to Listen to Great Music,* was published by Penguin Books in early 2011.

The Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet

In 1909 four young Hungarian musicians—violinists Imre Waldbauer and János Temesváry, violist Antal Molnár and cellist Jenö Kerpely—formed a string quartet dedicated to the cause of new music in general and of Hungarian music in particular. At a time when musical life in Hungary was moribund, the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet (as it came to be known) gave the Hungarian premiere of Debussy's *String Quartet* (Debussy was in attendance) and programmed music by Schoenberg and other contemporary composers. But the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet was particularly devoted to the cause of Hungarian music. Its members were friends with two young professors at the Budapest Academy of Music, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, and for their first concerts in March 1910 the Quartet played two "composer evenings," each devoted to the music of one of those composers. On March 17, 1910, the Kodály evening brought the premiere of his *String Quartet No. 1, Cello Sonata* and various piano pieces. Two days later, on March 19, the Bartók evening produced the premiere of his *String Quartet No. 1, Piano Quintet* and short piano works.

The Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet's commitment to these two composers was life-long, and the group gave the premieres of both of Kodály's quartets and Bartók's first four. The Quartet had a long and successful career: it toured throughout Europe, and—with various personnel changes—it survived for nearly 40 years. In 1946, the Quartet gave the Hungarian premiere of Bartók's *String Quartet No. 6,* only a few months after that composer's death, and then disbanded. Both Waldbauer and Kerpely emigrated to the United States: Waldbauer taught at the University of Iowa and Kerpely came to the West Coast, where he taught at the University of Redlands.

This morning's program by the Alexander String Quartet offers two of the works performed on the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet's opening concerts in March 1910, the first quartets of Kodály and Bartók. Both these works have become part of the standard repertoire, but a century ago they were on the cutting edge of avant-garde music, and it is a mark of the dedication of the members of the Walbauer-Kerpely Quartet that they had more than 100 rehearsals before they felt they were ready to give those first concerts.

Program Notes

String Quartet No. 1

Béla Bartók
Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary
Died September 26, 1945, New York City

Bartók wrote his *String Quartet No. 1* in 1908, when he was a 27-year-old professor at the Budapest Academy of Music. This was the period when Bartók was becoming fascinated by Hungarian folk music, which would figure so prominently in his own work, although it does not have much resonance in this piece. When he decided to write a quartet, Bartók chose as his model one of the towering masterpieces of the form, Beethoven's *String Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131,* and the parallels between the quartets are remarkable: Both begin with a long, slow fugue-like movement; both show a similar concentration of thematic material; both have interconnected movements; and both end with three massive, stinging chords.

However, listeners should not expect a Bartók quartet to sound like Beethoven. This quartet may be early Bartók, when the composer was still influenced by late-Romantic music, but in its concentrated handling of themes it is unmistakably the work of this great composer. Listeners new to Bartók's *String Quartet No. 1* might best approach it by listening for this fierce concentration of material. Its themes are tightly interrelated: What appears as a melodic or rhythmic fragment in one movement will become a central theme in the next.

Bartók's opening movement, marked *Lento*, is extremely focused: He varies the fugue-like theme even as it progresses, and the instruments enter at unexpected points with the voices tightly intertwined. The movement is in ABA form, and, after the fugue (perhaps it is more accurately a canon) reaches its climax on an A-major chord, the viola announces the rhythmic second subject, marked *molto appassionato, rubato.* A long development leads to a return of the fugue and the movement's quiet close.

The second movement follows without pause: An opening duet for viola and cello draws us into the movement proper, which is in sonata form. The first theme is a falling figure announced by second violin; the first violin's accompaniment to this theme will become the main theme of the last movement. The second subject, a waltz-like tune for second violin, leads to an extended development in which these simple tunes are made to soar passionately.

The final movement opens with a vigorous introduction stamped out by the three upper voices; in response, the cello has an expansive cadenza that sounds as if it must have its origin in folk material. The *Allegro vivace* is derived, as noted, from the second movement. Full of rhythmic snap, it sounds folk-inspired although Bartók's treatment of it is purely classical—making use of repeated pedal notes and builds the development around an extended fugue. A brilliant coda drives the quartet to its powerful concluding chords.

String Quartet No. 1, Opus 2

Zoltán Kodály
Born December 16, 1882, Kecskemét
Died March 6, 1967, Budapest

Zoltán Kodály composed his *First String Quartet* in 1909. Four years earlier, Kodály and his friend Béla Bartók had embarked on their first expedition to collect Hungarian folk songs, and now Kodály began to incorporate the melodies, rhythms, and shapes of that folk music into his own compositions. *String Quartet No. 1* is one of his earliest works to show this influence. It is a big work (about 40 minutes long), and several of movements are derived directly from folk material.

The first movement opens with a slow introduction dominated by the cello's long song, and this will prove to be the quartet's fundamental material. This theme, built on

continued on page 4

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shifting meters, is derived from an old Hungarian folk song, and when the music leaps ahead at the *Allegro,* the upward sweep of the cello's theme restates that song in a slightly-modified form. This movement is in sonata form, and when the more lyric second theme, marked *Poco sostenuto,* arrives in the first violin, it too is revealed as a variation on the cello's opening song.

After a brief introduction, the second movement takes shape around the first violin's long opening melody in 9/8, itself a derivation of the cello's opening statement at the beginning of the quartet. Kodály builds this movement on several fugato extensions of that theme, and along the way the pizzicato cello reprises the shape of the original song. The third movement, marked *Presto,* is the quartet's scherzo. Its racing opening section gives way to a *Più moderato* central episode built on a long duo for viola and cello; a return of the opening material rushes this movement to its vigorous close.

The last movement is in variation form, but it opens with a re-visiting of material heard earlier in the quartet. Only when this is complete does Kodály announce his basic theme, marked *Allegretto semplice* and played by the first violin over steady accompaniment. There follow eight variations, most of them at quick tempos. A charming story about this movement: Kodály's wife Emma wrote the fifth variation, a brilliant *Allegretto* in 5/8, and in a footnote in the score the composer credits her for it. A *Presto* coda rushes the First String Quartet to its dynamic conclusion.

This music—youthful, vigorous, and flavored with Hungarian inflections—seems entirely normal to us today. It is the work of a young composer heir to the classical tradition and finding a voice of his own in the folk material of his own country. Yet it went straight up the nose of the conservative music critics in Budapest. In his study of Kodály's music, László Eösze quotes several of these reviews. One critic denounced Kodály "for holding both thought and melody in contempt," while another declared that while Kodály was responsible for teaching harmony at the Academy, "he completely shunned it in his own work." Another critic denounced Kodály as "a deliberate heretic."

A century later, we may smile at these statements, but their language and their fury suggest some of the atmosphere that Kodály, Bartók, and the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet had to work in during the first decade of the twentieth century.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger

SAN FRANCISCO **PERFORMANCES**

presents

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET with ROBERT GREENBERG, music historian-in-residence

Zakarias Grafilo, violin
Sandy Wilson, cello
Paul Yarbrough, viola
Frederick Lifsitz, violin

Saturday, December 3, 2011, 10am

St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

BARTÓK — **String Quartet No. 2**
Moderato
Allegro molto capriccioso
Lento

KODÁLY — **String Quartet No. 2, Opus 10**
Allegro
Andante; Allegro giocoso

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His book, *How to Listen to Great Music,* was published by Penguin Books in early 2011.

Program Notes

String Quartet No. 2

Béla Bartók
Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary
Died September 26, 1945, New York City

Even people who have difficulty with the Bartók string quartets concede that his *String Quartet No. 2* is exceptionally beautiful. Critics have described the music as "romantic" and "lyrical," one even declaring it "conceivably the most beautiful work Bartók composed." Given these reactions, it is surprising to learn that it was written under grim circumstances. In 1912, depressed by the state of musical life in Hungary and the failure of his own music to appeal to audiences, Bartók had withdrawn from public life, giving no concerts and introducing no new music. Instead, he concentrated on teaching and researching folk music. Then, when World War I brought musical life in Hungary to a virtual halt, Bartók resumed composing. Begun in 1915, his *String Quartet No. 2* was completed in October 1917; the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet gave the first performance in Budapest on March 3, 1918.

Some years later, in 1936, Bartók was asked to provide an analysis of this quartet, but he refused. "There is in any case nothing extraordinary in the form," he wrote. "The first movement is in normal sonata form, the second a kind of rondo with a development-like section in the middle, and the last the most difficult to define: ultimately it is some kind of augmented ABA form." This statement needs to be taken with a very large grain of salt: There are many extraordinary aspects to the quartet's form. The first of these is the unusual sequence of movements. It begins with a moderately-paced movement, goes on to a powerful and very fast middle movement and concludes surprisingly with a very slow, bleak *Lento.* Bartók's brief description of these movements, while superficially accurate, does not begin to suggest the complexity and ingenuity of each movement or of the quartet as a whole.

The opening *Moderato* does seem to be in sonata form: It introduces several different theme groups and develops all of them. But the extraordinary thing is that all these themes grow out of the first violin's gently soaring opening melody. Listeners may take pleasure in hearing the many ways the shape and sequence of intervals recur throughout the movement, which contrasts explosive episodes with the gentle and lyric.

The *Allegro molto capriccioso* lives up to its name. Anchored on its pounding opening rhythm (frequently described as "barbaric"), the powerful, dancing opening theme will return in various forms throughout. Some have heard the influence of Bartók's research into Arab folk music in this theme: He intersperses episodes of wildly differing character before a *prestissimo* coda drives this movement to its abrupt close.

After the volcanic energy of the middle movement, the end a surprise, concluding with a somber and very slow movement that is drained of the previous movement's drained of the color and vitality. While the tempo is quite slow (the marking is *lento),* Bartók subtly varies the pace with several slow tempos. This movement has also been described as episodic, but it really offers a series of variations on the opening figures. What is not so readily apparent is that these theme shapes are derived from the violin melody at the very beginning of the quartet—the unity of this quartet is extraordinary. The final movement makes its somber way to its conclusion with two ambiguous pizzicato strokes. The color and energy of the opening movements are forgotten, and this stunning music comes to a bleak and uncertain close.

String Quartet No. 2, Opus 10

Zoltán Kodály
Born December 16, 1882, Kecskemét
Died March 6, 1967, Budapest

Zoltan Kodály wrote a comparatively small number of chamber works, completing them early in his career, between 1910 and 1920. During these years, Kodály was teaching at the Academy of Music in Budapest, collecting folk songs with his friend Béla Bartók and composing. Both composers were championed by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet. Made up of four distinguished young musicians who had dedicated themselves to the cause of Hungarian music (and of new music in general), the quartet gave the premieres of Bartók and Kodály's first string quartets in 1910 (and that same year gave the Budapest premiere of Debussy's *String Quartet,* with the composer present). The quartet continued its support of Bartók and Kodály during the difficult years of World War I, and in 1918 it gave the first performances of their second quartets. Bartók, who remained interested in chamber music throughout his life, would go on to write four more quartets, but Kodály changed course about 1920, turning first to orchestral music and later to choral works. He wrote no more quartets after his *String Quartet No. 2.*

That is our loss, for Kodály's two string quartets are remarkable. Unlike Bartók, who didn't play any string instrument, Kodály played violin, viola and cello, and his quartet-writing is idiomatic and assured. His quartets also offer the ideal medium for the fusion he and Bartók sought of Hungarian folk music and classical form. Kodály does not quote Hungarian folk melodies in his *String Quartet No. 2*—all the thematic material is his own—but the melodic shapes and inflections of the Hungarian folk music (and language) he loved so much give it much of its distinctive flavor.

The structure of this quartet is unusual, opening with a concise sonata-form movement and concluding with a long movement that performs the function of both slow movement and finale. The opening *Allegro* is built on three separate melodic ideas, all of which proceed along a gently rocking 6/8 meter. The tone is subdued (though not somber), and it draws to a quiet close. The concluding section opens with a long *Andante* that Kodály specifies should be *quasi recitativo.* It is built on a series of solos structured on *parlando* inflections, mirroring the sound of speech. The music proceeds without pause into the finale, aptly marked *allegro giocoso* ("fast, happy"). This movement is a series of dances and is built on six different thematic ideas. It bursts to life with a vigorous dance over what sounds like the drone of bagpipes. Kodály moves from the swaying 6/8 of the opening movement to the fundamentally duple meter of Hungarian folkmusic here, leaping between dances and finally driving his *String Quartet No. 2* to an exciting close on a great accelerando.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger

SAN FRANCISCO **PERFORMANCES**

presents

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET with ROBERT GREENBERG, music historian-in-residence

Zakarias Grafilo, violin
Sandy Wilson, cello
Paul Yarbrough, viola
Frederick Lifsitz, violin

Saturday, December 10, 2011, 10am

St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

BARTÓK

String Quartet No. 3

Prima parte: Moderato
Seconda parte: Allegro
Ricapitulazione della prima parte: Moderato
Coda: Allegro molto

String Quartet No. 4

Allegro
Prestissimo, con sordino
Non troppo lento
Allegretto pizzicato
Allegro molto

This program is sponsored in part by the Mark D. Kaplanoff Lecture Fund of San Francisco Performances' Endowment.

The Alexander String Quartet is ensemble-in-residence with San Francisco Performances in association with San Francisco State University and the May T. Morrison Chamber Music Center.

The Alexander String Quartet is represented by Besen Arts, New York.

The Quartet frequently performs and records on a matched set of instruments by the San Francisco-based maker Francis Kuttner, circa 1987.

ARTIST PROFILES

See full profiles for the Alexander String Quartet and Robert Greenberg starting pg. 3.

Program Notes

String Quartet No. 3

Bela Bartók
Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary
Died September 26, 1945, New York City

Bartók wrote his *String Quartet No. 3* in the summer of 1927, when he was 46. He composed it specifically for a chamber music contest sponsored by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, but he heard nothing from the Society. After waiting a year, Bartók gave up and began arrangements to have the quartet published in Europe. And of course at just that point the news arrived from America: Bartók had split first prize with the Italian composer Alfredo Casella. Bartók's share of the prize was $3000, welcome news for a composer who was never wholly free from financial worries throughout his life.

The premiere of the *Quartet No. 3* took place in London on February 19, 1929. The shortest of Bartók's six quartets, *No. 3* has also proven to be the thorniest of that magnificent cycle—critics invariably refer to it as "anti-romantic." It's marked by a fierce concentration of materials and Bartók's replacement of traditional melodic themes with short motives that are almost consciously athematic in their brevity. These motives are then subjected to rigorous and concentrated polyphonic development: canons, fugatos and simultaneous presentation of material. The structure is equally focused. The 15-minute quartet is in one movement, divided into four sections: *First Part, Second Part, Recapitulation of the First Part,* and *Coda* (which is in fact a recapitulation of the second part).

The first and second parts are essentially sonata-form movements without their recapitulation sections. The *First Part* (marked *Moderato)* is built on a three-note figure that recurs constantly; 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 lyrically. The *Second Part* (marked *Allegro)* is built on two ideas: the cello's pizzicato near the opening and the first violin's hurtling dance rhythms. As the movement progresses, Bartók treats these themes fugally and at one point even combines them. The two brief concluding

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SAN FRANCISCO **PERFORMANCES**

presents

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET with ROBERT GREENBERG, music historian-in-residence

Zakarias Grafilo, violin
Sandy Wilson, cello
Paul Yarbrough, viola
Frederick Lifsitz, violin

Saturday, December 17, 2011, 10am
St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

BARTÓK

String Quartet No. 5
Allegro
Adagio molto
Scherzo: Alla bulgarese (vivace)
Andante
Finale: Allegro vivace

String Quartet No. 6
Mesto; Vivace
Mesto; Marcia
Mesto; Burletta
Mesto

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ARTIST PROFILES

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Program Notes

String Quartet No. 5

Béla Bartók
Born March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary
Died September 26, 1945, in New York City

Bartók wrote his *String Quartet No. 5* in 1934 within the span of one month (August 6–September 6). It had been commissioned by the American patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and the Kolisch Quartet gave the first performance in Washington on April 8, 1935. It is one of the most immediately accessible of Bartók's quartets, dazzling in its writing and striking for its variety of sound and form. During the 1930s, Bartók became interested in symmetrical form, almost obsessively in this quartet. The five movements are constructed in the shape of a palindrome (sometimes called arch structure): powerful first and last movements, both in sonata form, frame the quartet, while the even-numbered movements—based on similar material—provide balance with their night-music eeriness. At the center of the quartet is a dazzling scherzo built on folk rhythms; its ABA form provides the capstone of the arch and is itself a palindromic form.

While the *Quartet No. 5* is not in a particular key, its tonality is centered on B-flat, and the opening *Allegro* hammers out a sequence of B-flats at the very beginning. The movement is based on three quite different (and extremely animated) theme-groups; Bartók turns the entire movement into a small arch-form of its own by recapitulating these themes in reverse order, and the music powers to a close on a unison B-flat. The second movement, *Adagio molto*, opens with a series of quiet trills, and over chorale-like chords the first violin plays the first true theme. Swirling "night" sounds—tremolos, pizzicatos and tiny runs—make up the center section. The opening material returns, and the movement vanishes with a quiet cello glissando that trails off into nothing.

At the center of the quartet is a dizzying scherzo that Bartók marks *Alla bulgarese*—"In the Bulgarian manner"—referring to the folk-dance rhythms that drive the movement and give the music its curiously unbalanced pulse. The opening rhythm is a pattern of 4+2+3 eighths; the trio section rushes ahead on a pattern of

3+2+2+3 eighths. Despite what seem impossible rhythms, this movement truly does dance, at times furiously, and at the very end the music flickers out on a fragment of the opening theme.

The *Andante* is the companion to the second movement, and it opens with similar music, this time not trilled but played pizzicato. In this opening section comes one of the most impressive sounds in the quartet: all four instruments have unison patterns of quiet sextuplets, played with a ricochet bow. The animated center section swirls ahead violently, then subsides as the ricochet patterns return and the movement ends with triple-stopped cello glissandos.

The powerful final movement returns to the mood and manner of the opening. It is in modified sonata form, and along the way the viola launches a fugato that is almost buried inside the whirling texture. The many ingenuities of this movement, which include inversion of its main themes, are too numerous to trace here. Some of the music's character may be taken from Bartók's indications in the score: passages are marked *strepitoso* ("noisy") and *con slancio* ("with rage"). Near the end comes a passage that has unsettled many: The music grows quiet, and a simple little tune emerges in A major and repeats in B-flat while the accompaniment stays in A major. The resulting discord sounds mindless, and Bartók gives the section the wonderful marking *Allegretto, con indifferenza*. No one is quite sure what this 22-measure aside is doing here, and one troubled commentator has compared it to a torn bus ticket stuck in the middle of a great painting. The music resumes furiously and rushes to its close on another unison B-flat.

String Quartet No. 6

While the late 1930s saw the creation of some of Bartók's finest works, these were difficult years for the composer, and he found himself increasingly alienated from Europe and life there. The Nazis' rise to power troubled him deeply (he forbade the performance of any of his works in Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933), and the growing Nazi influence in Hungary made his position there precarious. The summer of 1939, which he spent in Switzerland, brought a moment of relief amid the gathering gloom—there he wrote the *Divertimento* for string orchestra and began a new string quartet, his sixth. He had the music only partially drafted when war broke out in September, and he completed the quartet in November after returning to Budapest. The death of his mother in December, an event so devastating to Bartók that he could not attend her funeral, cut his last remaining tie to Europe, and he moved the following year to America, where he would spend the five final, very difficult years of his life.

Given the circumstances of its creation, one would expect this quartet to be somber, and so it is. But it is also extraordinarily beautiful and moving. Listeners instinctively sense the depth of feeling in the last work he completed in Europe, but they differ sharply over what the music "means." Halsey Stevens hears "despair" in the final movement, while in *The New Grove Dictionary* Vera Lampert and László Somfai believe the work to have sprung from "an abyss of emotional upheaval or collapse." Others, though, have heard a measure of acceptance, of calm, in the stunning final measures.

No. 6 is the only one of Bartók's quartets in the traditional four movements, but even here Bartók could not be "traditional." He had originally intended to preface each movement with a slow section marked *Mesto* (sad). He stayed with this plan through the first three movements but was emotionally unable to write the rousing rondo-finale he had originally intended (he actually began to compose this finale but abandoned the plan after sketching its first ninety measures). Instead, he expanded the fourth *Mesto* into a separate movement and the quartet concludes on a bleak note.

Solo viola sings the haunting first *Mesto*, 13 measures of yearning, lonely music. The *Vivace* that follows is in sonata form, based on the vigorous opening figure and a slightly-swung second subject. Full of sudden tempo shifts and ingenious treatment of thematic motifs, the first movement closes with the first violin's high A shimmering quietly all alone. The second movement opens with a *Mesto* played by cello and characterized by the rustle of tremolo inner voices; the movement itself—*Marcia*—is based on rhythms derived from the *verbunkos*, the old Hungarian recruiting dance. This raspy march, marked *risoluto, ben marcato*, lurches along dotted rhythms, unexpected accents and glissandos; the middle section offers virtuoso passages for cello and first violin in their highest registers while the viola plays a cimbalon-like accompaniment. After a somber *Mesto* interlude featuring the first violin, the third movement (also in three-part form) is marked *Burletta*, and a burlesque it certainly is, with the jokes built around snapped pizzicatos and violin glissandos set a grinding quarter-tone apart. The fourth movement opens again with the *Mesto* theme introduced by the first violin but subsequently shared by all. Bartók constructs the ensuing finale entirely from that bleak melody. This is briefly relieved by reminiscences of themes from the first movement, but the *Mesto* music reasserts itself before the unnerving close: below a quiet chord from the violins, the cello slowly sounds the ambiguous concluding pizzicato chords, themselves a distant memory of the Mesto theme. Bartók bids farewell to Europe—and perhaps to an entire way of life—as this haunting music fades into silence.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger

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sections bring the missing recapitulations, but now Bartók—who never liked to repeat anything literally—shortens and concentrates his material even further. In the words of Bartók's biographer Halsey Stevens, the material makes "a psychological return, not a physical one." The dance rhy thms of the *Second Part* race ahead, and the *Quartet No. 3* ends with massive chords hammered out by all four instruments.

One of the remarkable things about this music (and the entire cycle of quartets) is Bartók's breathtaking writing for strings. A virtuoso pianist, he did not play a string instrument, but he seems to have had an instinctive grasp of their possibilities, and this music exploits the whole range of sounds possible from strings: pizzicato, glissando, ponticello (bowing on top of the bridge to produce a hollow, buzzing sound), tastiera (bowing on top of the fingerboard to produce a muted sound), col legno (bowing with the wood of the bow rather than the hair), as well as complex multiple-chording by all four players. This music demands virtuoso performers of the highest order, players who can take their instruments to the very limit of their capacity, yet play with the intelligence and sensitivity this music demands.

String Quartet No. 4

Bartók's *String Quartet No. 4* from 1928 is a work of extraordinary concentration. Over its 22-minute span, materials that at first seem unpromising are transformed into music of breathtaking virtuosity and expressiveness. Halsey Stevens suggests that *No. 4* "is a quartet almost without themes, with only motives and their development," and one of the most remarkable things about the work 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 the work sound cerebral and abstract, but in fact it offers some of the most exciting music Bartók ever wrote.

It is also one of the finest examples of Bartók's "arch" form, a plan of musical con-

struction that became increasingly important to him in the later stages of his career. The *Quartet No. 4* is in five movements, and these form a kind of musical arch. There are close relationships between the first and last movements—both are large and fast, and developing the thematic cell explicitly—as well as between the second and fourth movements, both being scherzos in ABA form and related thematically. At the very center is an eerie slow movement, one of Bartók's "night-music" movements; in ABA form, it forms the capstone to the arch.

The opening *Allegro* is in sonata form. Its spiky beginning quickly leads to the cello's statement of the thematic cell; virtually all thematic material in this movement is derived from this cell, and the movement closes with a massive restatement of that figure. Bartók marks the second movement *Prestissimo, con sordino:* An extremely fast scherzo, it is muted throughout. The outer sections are built on the opening theme, sounded in unison by viola and cello, and listeners will detect the shape of the quartet's thematic cell in this theme. The movement rushes to a stunning close: Glissandos swoop upward and the music vanishes on nearly-silent harmonics. The night-music movement at the quartet's center—*Non troppo lento*—is remarkable for its sonorities. Bartók asks the upper voices to play without vibrato at times, and the icy stillness of that sound contrasts with the warmer texture of passages with vibrato; in the center section, the first violin offers a series of bird calls. The fourth movement is the second scherzo, played entirely pizzicato; the viola's main theme is a variant of the thematic cell. Brutal chords open the final movement, *Allegro molto,* and quickly the two violins outline the main theme, a further variation of the cell. That cell returns to its original form as this music rushes along its vigorous way, and the quartet finally ends with a massive restatement of that figure.

Bartók's *String Quartet No. 4* offers a dazzling musical journey, and listeners may approach it any number of ways: by following the arch structure, by tracing the quartet's thematic cell through its many evolutions or simply by listening for the array of its astonishing sonorities including massed chords, glissandi, ponticello, col legno, and—in the fourth movement—the famous "Bartók pizzicato": strings plucked so fiercely that they rebound off the fingerboard with a resounding snap.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger