

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

ARTARIA STRING QUARTET

January 2023

Zhou Tian (b. 1981) String Quartet No. 1

Allegro
Amoroso
Allegro con brio

Composed: 2000
Approximate duration: 15 minutes



Grammy-nominated composer Zhou Tian was born into a musical family in 1981 in Hangzhou, China, and moved to the United States by his 19th birthday. He holds a bachelor's degree from the Curtis Institute of Music, a master's degree from The Juilliard School, and a doctoral degree from the University of Southern California. His studies include those with Jennifer Higdon, Christopher Rouse, and Stephen Hartke.

Zhou Tian makes the following comment on this *String Quartet No. 1*: *Written in 2000, my first quartet was the last work I composed in China before moving to the US to study at the Curtis Institute of Music. The work captures my state of mind of creating music as an 18-year-old – composing anything was exhilarating, and inspirations seemed coming from everywhere. I wanted to embed my love of music from the past and present – Bach, Ravel, Prokofiev, Chick Corea and more – into a fusion of my own taste.*

Whatever his state of mind at the time, Zhou Tian, at the age of 18, produced a wonderful and exciting work for string quartet. The first movement *Allegro* offers a breathtaking opening that varies between fast, march-like moments and a beautiful song with virtuosic demands throughout. The second movement *Amoroso* is lovely and lyrical with an edge of sadness. The third movement *Allegro con brio* is again lively but in a new way from the first movement. Brightness persists in it with a touch of humor and a moment of thoughtfulness before a race to the end.

Zhou Tian's String Quartet No. 1 was premiered in 2002 at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) String Quartet in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1

Molto allegro vivace
Minuetto: Un poco allegretto
Andante espressivo ma con moto
Presto con brio

Composed: 1837-38
Approximate duration: 30 minutes



Mendelssohn's few critics suggest that he missed the mark of greatness because of his birthright as a member of the wealthy bourgeoisie. That Mendelssohn was free of the impoverishment so often associated with musical careers and that he wore his genius lightly should not obscure his greatness. It would seem a harsh sentence for a composer whose particular talent is unmatched, so much so that Robert Schumann, in an 1840 edition of *Neue Zeitschrift*, called him the "Mozart of the 19th century."

Yet it was Beethoven that Mendelssohn most admired. In an 1830 letter to his composition teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, Mendelssohn wrote: *In your last letter you seemed to be anxious lest, following my predilection for one of the great masters, I might... be led into imitation. Such, however, is certainly not the case... Naturally, nobody can forbid me to enjoy the inheritance left by the great masters nor to continue to work at it, because not everybody has to begin at the beginning. But then it must be continued creation according to one's ability, and not a lifeless repetition of what is already there.* Continue Mendelssohn did and with anything but lifeless repetition or imitation. By the time he was twenty, Mendelssohn would conduct the first performance of *St. Matthew's Passion* since Bach's death in 1750 as well as compose his famous Octet, the first two of his six great string quartets, the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the first of the two string quintets that would punctuate the beginning and end of his career.

Anti-Semitic trends already evident in the mid-19th century, including Wagner's notorious essay, *Judaism in Music*, limited the spread of Mendelssohn's music, and the Nazi era completely suppressed it. His memorial in Leipzig was destroyed in 1936 by the Fascists. Fortunately, today his music has been restored to its rightfully high place in history. In his impressive book,

The Romantic Generation, Charles Rosen calls Mendelssohn “the greatest child prodigy the history of Western music has ever known.” Furthermore, Rosen adds that Mendelssohn’s models were “the most eccentric and imaginative works of the final years of Beethoven’s life, the last sonatas and quartets.”

The three quartets of Mendelssohn’s Op. 44 are considered his masterpieces in the form, and among them, the D Major is said to have been his favorite. Written between 1837 and 1838, it was third in composition despite its numbering. The graciousness that marks the work suggests the happy period of Mendelssohn’s life from which it sprang. His son was born the year before, he had achieved international recognition as a composer, and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, which he had conducted since 1835, was flourishing.

More important than any of these circumstances, however, is the nature of Mendelssohn himself. It is well to remember that he was not only the composer whom Schumann compared to Mozart but also the one Liszt referred to as “Bach reborn.” Pablo Casals described him as “a Romantic who felt at ease within the world of Classicism.”

The music of Op. 44, No. 1 speaks for itself, but it might be worthwhile to point out the crackling spirit of the opening movement, the contrasting quietness of the two inner movements with the lovely song of the third movement, and the brilliant drive of the final movement written in the form of a *saltarello*, a 16th century dance form with a dotted note skipping rhythm.

All three quartets of Op. 44 were dedicated to the Crown Prince of Sweden.

Béla Bartók ((1881-1945))

String Quartet No. 4

Allegro

Prestissimo, con sordino

Non troppo lento

Allegretto pizzicato

Allegro molto

Composed: 1928

Approximate duration: 23 minutes



Béla Bartók’s place in musical history is unique since he represents no one school of music. At a time when the German traditions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms were giving way to the Second Viennese School led by Arnold Schoenberg, Bartók stood alone. While his early music was fed by the Romantic traditions of Brahms and Wagner, it is his own unique exploration of folk music, dissonance, rhythmic vigor and color, and a sense of the spiritual that most govern his important work. In a 1905 letter to his mother, he said knowingly, “I prophesy, I have foreknowledge that this spiritual loneliness is to be my destiny.” Despite that loneliness, he breathed new life into an old system without joining the Serialists who would themselves ultimately suffer a kind of isolation.

With his friend Zoltán Kodály, he compiled a collection of Hungarian folk songs, a project that absorbed him from 1905 to 1921. This exploration was to influence his music greatly, but a word must be said about that. While he ardently espoused Hungarian nationalism, he is also quoted in József Ujfalussy’s 1971 biography as having said, “The composer does not use genuine peasant melodies, but devises instead something imitating a peasant melody.” For Bartók the art lay in complex devising, not simple imitation.

Bartók’s life was not a happy one. Usually outside the mainstream of the European avant-garde of his time, he emigrated to New York in 1940 to become a research fellow at Columbia University working on Serbo-Croatian music. For his last five years, precarious finances, a sense of alienation, and poor health plagued him. Serge Koussevitzky, one of his few champions, went to Bartók’s hospital room to offer a much-needed check for \$500, which represented half the commission for the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Harvard, where he was to deliver a series of lectures but was too ill to do so, and later the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) sponsored medical examinations for Bartók after his weight sank to 87 pounds. He rallied enough to write the *Concerto for Orchestra* but, less than a year later, died of leukemia in New York’s West Side Hospital. Today his string quartets and orchestral works are monuments of the 20th century repertoire.

The string quartet spanned Bartók’s works from the first one in 1908 to the sixth and last written in 1939. The second came in 1917, the third in 1927, the fourth in 1928, and the fifth in 1934. As Beethoven’s quartets mark his so-called “periods,” so do Bartók’s quartets divide his compositional life into three periods, the first ending with the First Quartet, the second with the Fourth Quartet, and the Fifth and Sixth quartets belonging to the third period. While the first period contained few references to folk music, the second was rich in them as well as in harmonic and rhythmic experimentation. The third period is a culmination of what came before but in sparer terms, not unlike the late works of Beethoven.

Like other composers, Bartók made his most intimate statements in the string quartet form as well as his most serious, inventive, and powerful. Today Bartók’s string quartets are ranked with no less than those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In the 20th century, only those of Schoenberg, Berg, Shostakovich and Carter approach Bartók’s.

Bartók thoroughly explores melody in the first movement of his Fourth Quartet. His love of Hungarian folk tunes—thus his love of melody—pervades his music. It is treated in a complex modern musical language fully employed in the second movement with its dazzling display of tonal effects. Folk melody, however, returns in the central movement with its cello solo reflective of a Hungarian folk instrument related to the oboe or clarinet. Bird songs enter the middle section of the movement in what Bartók referred to as “night music.” The fourth and fifth movements are melodically related to the first and second and give to the whole Quartet the strict form that Bartók honored in his work.

The exquisite arc of the Quartet, with its fast outer movements clustered around the central slow movement, is a monumental achievement in cyclical writing in contemporary music. Transcending melody and form, however, is a spirituality that rivets us to the work. But it may have also caused Bartók to question his own Modernism.

“Mr. Nielsen, do you think my music is modern enough?” Béla Bartók is said to have asked Carl Nielsen in 1920. Whatever insecurities Bartók might have had on that score were probably based on his awareness of the traditional aspects of his music, namely melody and form, which we tend to forget because of the still challenging Modernism of its overall effect.

Dedicated to the Pro Arte Quartet, the String Quartet No. 4 was premiered by the Waldbauer Quartet on March 20, 1929, in Budapest.

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