## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM by Eric Bromberger

**BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945)**
*String Quartet No. 1, Sz. 40 (1908–09)*
*String Quartet No. 2, Sz. 67 (1914–17)*
*String Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85 (1927)*
*String Quartet No. 4, Sz. 91 (1928)*
*String Quartet No. 5, Sz. 102 (1934)*
*String Quartet No. 6, Sz. 114 (1939)*

Bartók began writing his **String Quartet No. 1** in 1908, when he was a young professor at the Budapest Academy of Music. He completed the work on January 27, 1909, but it didn't receive its premiere until March 19, 1910, when the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet performed it at an all-Bartók concert in Budapest.

All composers who set out to write a string quartet are conscious of the thunder behind them—of the magnificent literature created for this most demanding of forms. When Beethoven composed his first set of string quartets in the last years of the 18th century, he was very aware of the examples of Haydn and Mozart. A century later, Bartók, too, was aware of the examples of the past, and many have noted that in his First Quartet, he chose as his model one of the towering masterpieces of the form: Beethoven's String Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131. Both quartets begin with a long, slow, contrapuntal movement that opens with the sound of the two violins alone; both show a similar concentration of thematic material; both are performed without breaks between their movements; both recall, in their finales, themes that had been introduced earlier; and both end with three massive, stinging chords. Yet Bartók's First Quartet doesn't sound like Beethoven, nor was he trying to write a Beethoven-like quartet. Instead, Bartók took as a very general model a quartet that he deeply admired, and he used that model as the starting point to write music that was very much his own.

The First Quartet gets faster and faster as it proceeds, and, as simply a musical journey, it offers a very exciting ride. It gets off to quite a subdued start with its *Lento* opening movement. The two violins are in close canon, and their falling figure gives shape to much of the thematic material that follows. The cello and viola also enter in canon, and this ternary-form movement rises to a resounding climax before the viola introduces the central episode with a chiseled theme marked *Molto appassionato, rubato* ("Very passionate and played with expressive and rhythmic freedom").

Bartók proceeds without pause into the second movement. A duet for the viola and cello and then for the two violins suggests another fundamental shape, and then the movement takes wing at the *Allegretto*. The first violin's first three notes here take their shape from the very opening of the *Lento*, but now they become the thematic cell of a very active movement. Some have been tempted to call this movement, in 3/4, a waltz, but the music never settles comfortably into a waltz-rhythm, and soon the cello's firm pizzicato pattern introduces a second episode.

After all this energy, this movement reaches a quiet close that Bartók marks *Dolce*, and then the music goes right on to the *Introduzione* of the finale. Here the cello has a free solo of cadenza-like character (Bartók marks it *Rubato*), and

the music leaps ahead on the second violin's repeated E notes. Bartók marks this section *Allegro vivace*, and he means it: This will be a finale filled with scalding energy. In unison, the viola and cello sound the main theme, and off the music goes.

For all its length and variety, the finale is in sonata form, with a second theme, a recurring *Adagio* episode, and a lengthy fugue whose subject is derived from what we now recognize as the quartet's fundamental shape. As he nears the conclusion, Bartók pushes the tempo steadily forward, and his First Quartet hurtles to its three massive final chords.

In 1912, depressed by the state of musical life in Hungary and by the failure of his own music to find an audience, Bartók withdrew from public life. He stopped composing, gave no concerts (he was a pianist), and introduced no new music, choosing instead to concentrate on teaching and conducting folk-music research. But then, World War I brought musical life in Hungary to a virtual halt, and Bartók—with time on his hands and perhaps refreshed by a self-imposed silence that had lasted three years—resumed composing. In 1915, he wrote his Romanian Folk Dances, a product of his folk-music research, and a year earlier, he'd begun work on his **String Quartet No. 2**, which he completed in October 1917. The Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet gave the work's first performance in Budapest on March 3, 1918.

The most immediately striking feature of this quartet is its form. Bartók's First Quartet had offered a dizzying accelerando across its three-movement span, and while his Second Quartet is also in three movements, they take a wholly unexpected order: A moderately paced opening movement is followed by a very fast central movement, and the final movement is very slow. In 1936, Bartók was asked to provide an analysis of this quartet, but he refused, saying:

> There is in any case nothing extraordinary in the form. 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 is accurate as far as it goes, but it doesn't begin to suggest the complexity and ingenuity of each movement or of the quartet as a whole. Nor does it suggest the emotional impact of this music. Critics have described this quartet as "romantic" and "lyrical," and one has even gone so far as to call it "conceivably the most beautiful work Bartók composed."

The opening *Moderato* does seem to be in sonata form: It introduces several different theme-groups and develops all of them. But for all their contrasts, these themes are cousins: They all grow out of the first violin's gently soaring opening melody, and one of the pleasures of this music is recognizing the many ways this shape and sequence of intervals recurs throughout the movement. There are moments of power here, but the fundamental impulse in this movement is lyric, and one of the incarnations of the opening shape, marked *Tranquillo* on each appearance, sings with a breathtaking loveliness.

Commentators invariably link the *Allegro molto capriccioso* with Bartók's one folk-music gathering trip to Africa. (In 1913, not long before he began this quartet, Bartók visited Biskra, in the desert of Algeria, and collected about 200 local melodies.) This second movement's powerful, dancing opening theme, anchored on its pounding opening rhythm, returns in various forms throughout the movement. There's a wildness to this music, which is full of swooping glissandos and snapping pizzicatos, and while Bartók relaxes the pace for a more lyric central episode, the opening energy soon returns. The ending of this movement is dazzling, as Bartók mutes all four instruments for the *Prestissimo* coda. The upper three voices are in 6/4, but the cello is in 4/4 as this music races ahead—first at a whisper and then, as the mutes come off, at a shout. The movement is cut off by a fierce recall of the drumbeat rhythm from the very beginning.

After the volcanic energy of the middle movement, the quartet concludes with a somber and very slow movement, although Bartók subtly varies its pace. This movement has been described as episodic, but it really offers a series of variations on its opening figures. What isn't so readily apparent, however, is that these theme-shapes are themselves derived from

the violin melody at the very beginning of this extraordinarily unified quartet.

The final movement, *Lento*, makes its somber way to its close, and the color and energy of the opening movements are left far in the past as this stunning music comes to its uncertain conclusion with two ambiguous pizzicato strokes.

In the fall of 1927, just as he was leaving on his first concert tour of America, Bartók submitted the manuscript for his **String Quartet No. 3** to a chamber music competition sponsored by The Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia. Bartók returned to Europe in March of 1928 without having heard anything about the competition, so he began to make arrangements to have the quartet published. At just that point, however, the news arrived: Bartók and the Italian composer Alfredo Casella had both won first prize. His share of the award was $3,000, which was welcome news for a composer who was never wholly free from financial worries.

The shortest of Bartók's six quartets, the Third Quartet has proven the thorniest of this cycle. (Critics invariably refer to it as "anti-Romantic.") The Third Quartet is marked by a fierce concentration of materials and by Bartók's refusal to use traditional melodic themes. In their place he makes use of short motifs that are almost consciously athematic in their brevity.

The quartet takes as its basic thematic cell a three-note figure that the first violin announces in the sixth measure: G rising to D and falling to A. That motif and a handful of others are then subjected to the most rigorous and concentrated polyphonic development: canon, fugato, inversion, and simultaneous presentation of material. The structure is equally concentrated. Only 15 minutes long and played without pause, the Third Quartet is nevertheless divided into four sections: a first part, second part, recapitulation of the first part, and coda (which is essentially a recapitulation, or a revisiting, of the second part).

Bartók accentuates the fierce concentration of this music by enlivening it with one of the richest palettes of sound of any of his quartets. The Third Quartet opens with a sound he rarely used in his quartets—artificial harmonics—and then takes the music through a panoply of string sonorities: slithering ponticellos, martellato chords snapped off at the frog of the bow, passages tapped out with the wood of the bow rather than bowed with the hair, quick glissandos that span more than an octave, and passages played entirely over the fingerboard to produce the most whispery textures. One can't separate music and sound, of course, and the sonic phantasmagoria of this quartet is part of its unbelievable concentration of material.

The first and second parts are basically sonata-form movements without their recapitulation sections. The *Prima parte* (marked *Moderato*) is built on the seminal three-note figure, which will then recur in untold shapes. Three strident chords mark the transition to the second subject, yet here the "accompaniment" of the lower strings incorporates the basic shape of this quartet, as does the violin duet above them. At the very end of the movement, the second violin and viola have a sustained duet in which this figure is finally made to sing diatonically (and very beautifully).

The *Seconda parte*, marked *Allegro*, begins with a sustained trill: Moving between different instruments, this trill goes on for 39 measures and then returns throughout. This "part" is built on two ideas: the cello's strummed pizzicato chords near the opening and the first violin's hurtling dance tune, draped along asymmetric meters. As part of the vigorous development, Bartók treats these themes fugally and at one point even combines them. The brief concluding sections bring the missing recapitulations, but now Bartók, who never liked to repeat anything literally, shortens and concentrates his material even more stringently. The dance rhythms of the second part race ahead, and the Third Quartet concludes on stinging dissonances hammered out by all four instruments.

Bartók's **String Quartet No. 4** of 1928 is a work of extraordinary concentration. Over its roughly 23-minute span, materials that at first seem unpromising are transformed into music of breathtaking virtuosity and expressiveness.

Bartók's biographer Halsey Stevens suggested that the Fourth "is a quartet almost without themes, with only motives and their

development," and one of the most remarkable things about this 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 that six-note thematic cell through a stunning sequence of changes, as it goes on to appear in an almost infinite variety of rhythms, harmonies, and permutations. And while so technical a description makes this music sound cerebral and abstract, the Fourth Quartet offers some of the most exciting music Bartók ever wrote—as if the "cerebral" technique of the Third Quartet was the gateway into this new world of passion and beauty.

The Fourth Quartet is also one of the earliest examples of Bartók's fascination with arch form, which would, in some ways, shape how he composed for the rest of his life. At the center of this five-movement quartet is a long slow movement that Bartók described as "the kernel" of the entire work. Two scherzos ("the inner shell"), which are built on related material, surround that central movement, and the powerful opening and closing movements ("the outer shell"), which also share thematic material, anchor the entire quartet.

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

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

If the outer movements are marked by a seething dynamism, the three interior movements take us into a different world altogether. Bartók marks the second movement *Prestissimo, con sordino* ("As fast as possible and muted"), and Bartók does indeed mute the instruments throughout. The outer sections are built on the opening theme, which is announced by the viola and cello in octaves. The central section, which doesn't relax the tempo in any way, rushes through a cascade of changing sonorities—glissandos, pizzicatos, grainy sul ponticello bowings (which require playing on top of the bridge)—before the return of the opening material. This movement then comes to a stunning close: glissandos swoop upward, and the music vanishes on delicate harmonics.

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

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

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

Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (1864–1953), a generous champion of contemporary music, commissioned Bartók's **String Quartet No. 5**. Bartók composed the quartet within the span of one month (August 6–September 6, 1934), apparently intending it for the Pro Arte Quartet, but it was the Kolisch Quartet that gave the work's first performance at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, on April 8, 1935. The Fifth Quartet is one of the most immediately accessible of Bartók's quartets—dazzling in its writing for the four instruments and striking for the variety of sound it generates.

In some outward respects, Bartók's Fifth Quartet duplicates the arch structure of his Fourth Quartet. Its five movements are constructed in the shape of a palindrome: Powerful first and last movements frame the quartet, while the even-numbered movements (based on similar material) provide balance with their night-music eeriness. At the very 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. But there are differences from the Fourth Quartet: Bartók specified that the outer movements here are in classical forms (sonata form and rondo), and he reverses the sequence of the inner movements so that two slow movements frame a central scherzo.

While the Fifth Quartet isn't "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 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 its first true theme, a subdued rising sequence marked *pianissimo*. 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. Despite its seemingly daunting rhythms, this movement truly does dance—at times furiously—and at the very end the music flickers out on a fragment of its opening theme.

The *Andante* fourth-movement companion to the second movement, 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 and then subsides as the ricochet patterns return and the movement ends with a series of triple-stopped cello glissandos.

The powerful *Finale* returns to the mood and manner of the opening. It's in modified sonata form, and along the way the viola launches a fugato that's almost buried inside the whirling texture. 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's unsettled many: The music grows quiet, and a simple little tune emerges in A Major. This tune seems at first hopelessly innocent (it's been described as a "hurdy-gurdy tune"), but it's actually a derivation of the main theme of the second movement and has recurred in many forms since. Having ground out this seemingly absurd tune in A Major, Bartók moves it up to B-flat Major but keeps the accompaniment in A Major. The resulting discord sounds mindless, and Bartók gives this section the wonderful marking *Allegretto, con indifferenza*. The Fifth Quartet hurtles to its close on another resounding B-flat.

Bartók and violinist Zoltán Székely were longtime friends and colleagues. The two gave numerous duo-recitals, and it was for Székely that Bartók wrote both his Second Rhapsody and his Second Violin Concerto. In 1937, Székely became first violinist of the Hungarian String Quartet, and one of the first things he did in his new position was

commission a string quartet from Bartók.

While the late 1930s saw the creation of some of Bartók's finest works, it was a difficult time for the composer, who found himself increasingly alienated from Europe and from life there. The Nazis' rise to power troubled Bartók deeply (after Hitler came to power in 1933, Bartók forbade the performance or broadcast of any of his works in Germany), and the growing Nazi influence in Hungary made his position there precarious.

The summer of 1939, which Bartók spent in Switzerland, brought a moment of relief amid the gathering gloom, and it was during that time that Bartók wrote his Divertimento for string orchestra and began his **String Quartet No. 6**. He had the first movements sketched when war broke out in September, and he completed the quartet in November after returning to Budapest. The death of his mother that December—an event so devastating for Bartók that he couldn't attend her funeral—cut his last remaining tie to Europe. The following year, he moved to America, where he wound up spending the five final—and very difficult—years of his life.

Given the circumstances of its creation, one would expect this quartet to be somber, and it is. But it's also extraordinarily beautiful and moving. All listeners instinctively sense the depth of feeling in this quartet, the last work Bartók completed in Europe, but they differ sharply over what the music "means." Halsey Stevens hears "despair" in the final movement, and others have suggested that the quartet sprang from "an abyss of emotional upheaval or collapse." Others, though, have heard a measure of acceptance, of calm, in the quartet's stunning final measures.

The Sixth Quartet is the only one of Bartók's quartets in the traditional four movements, but even here Bartók couldn't be "traditional." He originally intended to preface each movement with a slow section marked *Mesto* ("Sad") and to write a rousing rondo-finale. Upon returning to Budapest in the fall of 1939, however, he was emotionally unable to write such a finale, so he expanded the fourth *Mesto* section into a movement of its own, and it's on this bleak note that the quartet concludes.

The solo viola sings the haunting first *Mesto*, which is 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 treatments 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 the cello and colored by the rustle of the tremolo inner voices. The second movement itself, titled *Marcia*, is based on rhythms derived from the verbunkos, an old Hungarian recruiting dance. This raspy march (Bartók marks it *Risoluto, ben marcato*) lurches along dotted rhythms, unexpected accents, and glissandos; its middle section offers virtuoso passages for the cello and first violin in their highest registers while the viola plays a cimbalom-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 that are 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, and 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.

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