

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Quartet No. 3

Bartók was preoccupied with the problems and solutions of string quartet writing throughout his life. Apart from the six surviving quartets whose dates of composition span more than 30 years (Quartet No. 1 was written in 1908, No. 6 in 1939), he composed but later suppressed a quartet as early as 1899, and shortly before his death he was planning and sketching another. This intense focus on a single musical form is revealing. In the last 2 centuries most composers of note have written at least one string quartet, but only a few have written a quantity of them. The great quartet composers of the past were Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. In the last century perhaps only Bartók and Shostakovich have written quartets worthy to stand in such company. To listen to Bartók's string quartets sequentially is to become immersed in a compelling and mesmerizing musical journey revealing the maturation of a profound artistic and humanitarian intellect.

According to musicologist James Goodfriend, the mystique of the string quartet is twofold: "In the first place, it must be classically controlled and balanced. In the second, it must express the composer's innermost feelings. The relationship between a quartet and a symphony, for example, is much like that of poetry and prose: they may each say similar things, but the former must say it with fewer words and with greater restrictions." In addressing these challenges Bartók forged a highly personal style combining unique instrumental colors, astringent harmonies, and themes and rhythms derived from his studies of Hungarian and Balkan folk music with classical structures such as sonata or variation forms. From his search for a unifying principle came the ideas of motivic generation (in place of clearly differentiated themes) and continuous development. All of these characteristic features are strongly apparent in the third quartet.

The String Quartet No. 3 was completed in 1927 when Bartók was 46 years old. He entered the quartet in a competition sponsored by the Musical Fund of Philadelphia, and that same year made his first visit to the USA for a concert tour on which he played his first piano concerto, then recently completed. Back in Budapest the following year, Bartók was astonished to learn that he had shared first prize in the contest with the Italian composer, Alfredo Casella. Never financially well-off, the \$3000, which constituted his share of the prize, was of considerable help to him. Bartók's quartet in fact is based on only 2 or 3 brief, pithy motifs that continually change and evolve in ingenious fashion into new motifs, fugue subjects, harmonies, and rhythmic patterns. Although the piece is in one movement there are 4 sections, designated *Prima parte*, *Seconda parte*, *Ricapitolazione della Prima parte*, and *Coda*, the latter actually based on musical materials from the *Seconda parte*. Effectively then this is an A-B-A-B design, but there is not one measure that is the same in the first part and its recapitulation or in the second part and the coda. One of the oldest musical devices is used to hold this music together- the distinct and easily recognized rhythmic figure. Another building tool is Bartók's use of instrumental colors- *pizzicatos*, *glissandos*, *col legnos* (hitting the string with the wood of the bow), and *sul ponticellos* (playing near the bridge of the instruments producing an icy, glassy sound)- in a structural way as "color motifs." The concept of color motifs has been taken up by many subsequent composers including György Kurtág and another Hungarian composer, Györgi Ligeti whose second string quartet is based to a large extent on this device.

The Quartet No. 3 opens *Moderato* with a canon in which an ornamented theme interweaves with the same theme unornamented. The *Prime parte* is an arch form with a central section more

insistent than its framing parts. The *Seconda parte, Allegro*, is highly rhythmic and strongly reminiscent of Balkan folk dance music. In the *Ricapitulazione*, announced by a brief passage for solo cello, the material from the first part is reorganized and condensed into about half its original length. The Coda, commencing after a second appearance of a solo cello passage, incorporates a variety of canons and fugues based on motifs from the second part and drives to a whirlwind conclusion.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Animé et très décidé ~ Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino, doucement expressif ~ Très Modéré; Très mouvementé et avec passion

The period around 1890 was a crucial time in Debussy's life. The composer had just returned to Paris after a two-year Prix de Rome residency in Italy and was eager to rid himself of the restraints of the academicians. One of the first works in which he struck a new artistic direction was the Quartet in G minor, which, along with "L'Après-midi d'un faune" from the same time, established what is called the Impressionist style in music. Its varied tonal effects, soulful beauty, and freedom of form and structure provide an excellent musical counterpart to the Impressionist paintings and Symbolist poetry of the time.

The opening notes of the first movement are of overriding importance. They make up the germ, the melodic cell, from which the entire quartet unfolds and grows. This germinal motif is a rather rough-sounding motto; rhythmically complex and melodically convoluted, it zigzags back and forth within a comparatively limited tessitura. A distinguishing feature is the rapid three-note ornamental fillip at the central turning point.

Following the short motif and its repetition, three other melodies are heard. They come between restatements of the motif, each time, though in a slightly different form. The various themes, and especially the opening motto, are then heard in an imaginative procession of transformed shapes and guises – now surging with great passion, now stated in stentorian splendor, now stretched and drawn out in length, now plaintively sung – until the movement races to its climactic resolution.

The second movement offers a profusion of sparkling tonal effects, led by the viola playing an obstinately repeated, quickened version of the motif. Above, beneath, and all around this ostinato figure, the other instruments furnish brilliant pizzicato flourishes and scintillating cross-rhythms. The cello brings this section to a close and establishes the murmuring accompaniment for the first violin playing the opening motif in leisurely augmentation. Sections of new and derived melodic material follow, including a rhythmically attractive pizzicato passage in which the original motto is transformed into five-beat meter. Then, just as the cello seems to be starting the murmuring accompaniment again, the movement fades away.

After false starts by the second violin and viola, the third movement starts with the first violin softly singing a languid melody that rocks gently back and forth in pitch. The viola next seizes one fragment of the melody and expands it into a slightly faster theme. Another theme, also introduced by the viola, includes the three-note figure of the opening motto. It is worked up to an impassioned climax before a return of the quiet rocking theme brings the movement to a subdued conclusion.

The introduction to the final movement, also based on the original motif, continues the quiet mood. The music grows somewhat more animated as the cello starts a fugue-like passage, using a further transformation of the germinal motif. The fast part of the last movement then starts with a rapid, cluster-of-notes theme in the viola. From the final notes of this theme, Debussy spins out another melody. The shared notes of both themes become the accompaniment for the motif, this theme in grandiose elongation. A reminder of the opening theme of this movement leads to a coda and conclusion that provide a final, exciting glimpse of the considerably altered germinal motto.

Completed early in 1893, the quartet was dedicated to the Ysaÿe Quartet, which gave the first performance in Paris on December 29, 1893.

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