

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 16 March 2026
1.00pm

Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg violin
Serena Canin violin
Misha Amory viola
Nina Maria Lee cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in C minor Op. 17 No. 4 (1771)
*I. Moderato • II. Menuet. Allegretto – Trio •
III. Adagio cantabile • IV. Finale. Allegro*

Timo Andres (b.1985) Machine, Learning (2019)
I. Light Weight • II. Hammerspace • III. Earthly Bodies

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No. 4 BB95 (1928)
*I. Allegro • II. Prestissimo, con sordino • III. Non troppo lento •
IV. Allegretto pizzicato • V. Allegro molto*



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Haydn String Quartet Op. 17 No. 4

Ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning both confuse and delight our senses. Misdirection enchants and invites discovery, suggesting richness beyond the immediately apparent. The ability to exploit this to magical effect reveals an artist in full command of his or her powers.

One such artist is Diego Velázquez, who, in his seminal painting *Las Meninas*, from 1656, creates a canvas in which the viewer is made aware of the presence of the painter, the space around the scene depicted, and the coexistence of multiple focal points. Velázquez himself is shown in the act of painting a portrait of the king and queen, here seen only in a mirrored reflection, alongside the five year old Infanta with her ladies in waiting, as well as two dwarves, a dog and other figures. We look at the painting, and some of the people in the painting seem to be looking at us, in turn, some beyond us, some at each other. Mastery in steering the gaze makes for a particularly complex and textured experience. In some sense, this is art about art, a vision created to explore the phenomenon of looking itself. The painting reaches far beyond its two dimensional canvas, engaging the act of viewing with self-conscious artifice, rendering the scene vibrantly alive in the moment of its apprehension. It is a nearly impossible task to examine the painting without feeling included in the captured moment, the eye primed for manipulation, sent from place to place in the hope of gathering the scene into sense.

Just over a century later, in 1771, Joseph Haydn pens his Quartet in C minor, Op. 17 No. 4, and the opening movement of this work, too, is conjured through magical and self-aware misdirection. Tonal harmony is largely predicated on collections of three notes creating chords with varying qualities, the most common being major and minor. Just as two points define the possibility of a line (two dimensions), while a third is needed to suggest a plane (three dimensions) – of which there are still infinite possibilities available while only two points are known – likewise in music two notes leave open multiple interpretations of harmony, each with a different sense of space and texture. Haydn masterfully capitalises upon this ambiguity. He chooses a key here, C minor, that is often dark and melancholic. But the most obvious interpretation of the unaccompanied first two notes of this movement, as the ear gathers them toward a chord, would be as a launchpad for the key of E flat major, rather more optimistic and noble. Only at the arrival of the third note are we made to understand where we truly stand. (Haydn wrote a piano sonata in the same key in the same year, and uses the exact same technique in the opening of that work, though it is far more quickly resolved there.) This feint is used again and again in the movement, creating a sense of drift and discovery; we first see only the pointing finger, and only in the fullness of time come to see, each time anew, where it is directing our gaze. We are left guessing again and

again, and revel in the cleverness and artful machinations of the composer. This is not unlike the breaking of the fourth wall in the theater, or the drawing of attention to the craft of narration in the midst of that very narration found in *Tristram Shandy*, by Laurence Sterne, an author to whom contemporaries often compared Haydn. There is formal misdirection here, as well: the composer twice leads us to believe, falsely, that we have come back to the opening idea before, at long last, once we have likely given up hope of finding our way back, allowing the recapitulation of the opening to take hold.

The *Minuet* movement is jovial, untroubled and resonant, having cast aside the shadow of C minor. But that shadow reasserts itself in spades in the contrasting trio section which, oddly for a dance movement, competes in intensity and pathos with the more substantial first movement. Perhaps here, again, we become uncertain of our own vantage point, whether to find more truth in the scene before us or the hidden regions around its periphery.

The slow movement is an effulgent aria sung by the first violin, in the radiant key of E flat major, the key we seem to have been promised at the opening of the work. The movement is earnest and highly sensitive. The playing style at that time would have been full of sentiment, featuring a wide variety of vocal inflections and colorations. Mozart owned a copy of Haydn's Op. 17 quartets in which he made multiple notations indicating the nuances of interpretation that would have been expected and appropriate, a highly stylised and mercurial way of playing, immediate and emotionally protean. Haydn himself indicates a florid ornamentation of the initial song when it returns for a second time. Perhaps if we were in Velázquez's painting we would be seeing the opera singer in the mirror.

The final movement of the work also refers outside of itself, often gesturing toward the symphonic in its energies and textures. Haydn wrote only a single symphony in C minor (No. 95, out of 104!), much later than this quartet, but strangely the figuration that introduces the last movement here is nearly identical to the first motif of the opening movement of that symphony. C minor is also the key in which Haydn depicts Chaos at the start of *The Creation*, preceding the eruption of C major where the Lord says 'Let there be Light!' And, again, it is the key in which Haydn writes the movement illustrating the earthquake that followed the Crucifixion in the *Seven Last Words of Christ*, the ending of which is uncannily akin to the ending of this quartet. The movement is a marvel of at times feverish excitement, featuring textures both sophisticated and contrapuntal, and in other moments, purely theatrical and tempestuous.

Throughout, Haydn is the master of guiding our perceptions, directing and redirecting our gaze, suggesting slippages away from the conclusions the

rhetoric suggests, and beyond the instrumental forces involved. Velásquez would have recognised a kindred spirit here, and we are all the richer for being taken in along the way.

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Timo Andres Machine, Learning

Machine, Learning is a short string quartet that interrogates the possibilities of a sequence of intervals over the course of three movements. The first, *Light Weight*, subjects the sequence to several rhythmic processes. As the instruments chase each other in canon, they cycle rapidly through every permutation of the intervals.

The second movement, *Hammerspace*, tries at a more grammatically coherent sort of music by making a lilting tune from the same intervals, but it keeps getting jumbled, interrupted, or stuck.

Finally, in *Earthly Bodies*, the interval pattern is sufficiently slowed down as to reveal the melody hidden within the mechanism.

© Timo Andres

Bartók String Quartet No. 4

In the late 1920s, Bartók was living in Budapest and was starting to be known all over the world. Despite this fame, however, he remained an intensely private and introverted person. He was not fond of teaching or performing, although he had to do both to support his family. He spoke and wrote very little about his own compositions, preferring to let the music represent itself. The one topic that made his eyes light up was the collection and study of folk music – Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian and even Arabian – that had occupied him from his youth and continued to be central to his life. To Bartók's thinking, folk music was of more than scientific interest: it was the life-giving seed without which there was no way forward in musical creation. His ideal was to internalise the rhythms and contours of the folk melodies he collected, to a point where his own compositions were the natural result.

He composed his Fourth Quartet in 1928. Considered by many to be among his very greatest compositions, it represents in some sense an extreme case. Taut, economical, almost geometrical in its arguments, it is music that wastes not a single note, and thus conveys a kind of athletic exuberance.

Everything about the piece betrays Bartók's obsession with mirror-images and symmetry, a hallmark of his mature style. In every movement one hears a melody in one voice, which is answered by the

same melody upside down in another voice. Elsewhere there are abundant examples of a motif answered by its duplicate on a different pitch, echoed back across the quartet. Once in a while a melody is even replied to by its retrograde: the same melody played backwards. These contrapuntal games are hardly unique to Bartók among composers, but he saturated this music with them to an unusual extent. The obsession with symmetry, imitation and mirror-reflection is so omnipresent that it virtually defines his style during these years.

Nor is the pursuit of symmetry confined to local neighbourhoods: the entire, five-movement layout of the quartet is symmetrical as well. Bartók cast the piece in an 'arch form', much as he did later in the Fifth Quartet and the Concerto for Orchestra. That is, he coupled the first movement with the fifth movement, and the second movement with the fourth movement, with the third movement standing alone as the work's solitary capstone. The paired movements share various characteristics: basic soundscape, motivic material and emotional heft.

The outer movements are both lively, energetic and bold. The first movement, on the face of it, might seem somewhat more serious, developing its material in an orderly and considered fashion; one might even say that it is forbiddingly heavy in its dense textures and its forests of semitones. At the same time, though, there is an enormous energy in this movement's activity, and it has a positive, not a destructive, aspect; with every imitation, every reflected melody, every exclamatory chord, one hears the verve of new creation, of musical DNA being mapped and remapped. Central to the movement is a galloping six-note idea, consisting of three rising chromatic notes followed by three faster falling ones, which is first heard about ten bars in. This 'motto' idea returns in the last movement and binds the piece together.

The fifth and final movement, for its part, is a rugged, stamping folk dance. The main melody of this movement reminds us of Bartók's deep connection to folk music: a simple, primal idea that goes up and down four notes of an exotic scale. The accompanimental rhythms that punctuate the texture of the first section recall, superficially, the irregular and exciting rhythms in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; undoubtedly Bartók sought here to evoke a rustic, vital energy of his own. In the central, more quiet episode of this movement, the galloping 'motto' idea from the first movement starts to sneak back in, first in the cello part and eventually moving up through the whole quartet. The main material from the finale returns to do battle with this intruder, and they vie to the end of the movement, but the 'motto' theme gets the last word, with an ending that resembles the first movement's conclusion, only in a more extended and emphatic form.

The second and fourth movements are lighter scherzo movements. The second movement is muted, weightless and fleet, a four-way game of catch on fast-forward. The movement is mainly concerned with rapid-fire counterpoint – the passing around of ideas; but at times it seems as if the music evaporates into pure texture, just a few cirrus clouds scudding about in the sky, before it descends back to the plane of reality. Other striking effects abound: glissandi that smear the canvas, the glassy sound of ponticello (playing near the bridge), harmonics and pizzicati.

The fourth movement is a close variant of the second; it is possible actually to map one movement onto the other, section by section. Here, however, the feet stay on the ground: this is a charming, somewhat rustic tableau wherein the quartet plays only pizzicato. We seem to have stumbled across a village scene where a band of four balalaika players (or perhaps cimbaloms) are entertaining the locals. The strings are often strummed back and forth, guitar-like, and

sometimes snapped harshly against the fingerboard: the celebrated ‘Bartók pizzicato’.

The third movement foreshadows, in its atmosphere and role, the same movement in the Concerto for Orchestra, still 15 years in the future. This is night music, solitary and mournful. A chord fades in, note by note, at the beginning, and becomes a backdrop for a melody in the cello part, which sings, weeps and yodels, questing ever upward through three ascending verses. The first violin responds: nervous, improvised, altogether more airborne, a winged creature expressing its own very different frame of mind. Gruffly, the second violin cuts in, having its own say on the G-string, bringing the movement to its point of greatest intensity; and the outer voices effect a kind of return, singing sorrowfully in mirror-image canon. At last the first violin flutters off into oblivion, and the chord that ushered in the movement fades away again, once more note by note.

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