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## Shanghai Quartet

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## BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945) PROGRAM NOTES

### Program I (4:00pm)

#### String Quartet no. 1

In a letter to violinist Stefi Geyer, Bartók described the opening movement of this quartet as his “funeral dirge.” The quartet’s first four notes are nearly identical to the opening motif of the second movement of the Violin Concerto no. 1 (1908), Bartók’s musical portrait of Geyer, with whom he was unrequitedly in love. Bartók dealt with the rejection of his love in a series of autobiographical works, of which this quartet is the culmination. Kodály called this quartet a “return to life,” and its three accelerating movements plainly trace a course from the anguish of the convoluted first movement to the heady, forceful finale.

The Lento is marked by a hyper-chromatic Romantic mood. Sadness and despair are the prevailing sentiments in this work, with wistful nostalgia expressed in passing episodes of Impressionistic delicacy that are quickly subsumed by the darker mood. After the first theme is explored, a funereal element is introduced with forceful, bell-like fifths on the cello, over which sounds a sobbing second theme on viola and second violin harmonized in thirds, while the first violin muses detachedly in the upper register. A hesitant bridge passage accelerates gradually to the next movement, which presents a delicate and witty theme, a stepwise motif that is subjected to a series of explorations. The mood is ambiguous; when a distinct mood finally manifests itself toward the end of the movement, it is one of anger, driven by an insistent pulsing ostinato on a single note that begins as an ominous pizzicato on the cello and grows to fist-shaking open fifths arco. The mood is not resolved by movement’s end. Another bridge passage leads to the finale, an accelerating Allegro vivace. In the first movement, there was only a brief suggestion of Hungarian folk music; here the character of folk music is more pronounced and seems central to the composer’s “return to life” after a period of despair. The main theme, which has a scolding quality (and is intervallically related to the descending sixths of the first movement), is developed through a series of episodes, one of which parodies European café music, after which it is treated, fugato-style, in a grotesque, scherzando section. The coda is fast and propulsive, the final, emphatic chords of open fifths barely able to block its momentum.

#### String Quartet no. 3

Bartok’s String Quartet no. 3 shared first prize at the 1927 Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia Competition. Of Bartok’s six quartets, the third is the most concentrated in thematic material and structure. In this quartet, Bartók subjected folk-style themes and motifs to a technique he called “expansion in range,” wherein melodic shape and intervallic relations were stretched to produce themes that develop freely without compromising musical unity.

The String Quartet no. 3 is in a single movement divided into two main parts, Moderato and Allegro, plus a recapitulation of the first part and a short coda that reprises material from the second part. The “Prima parte” begins with a short-breathed parlando-style theme on violin over a dissonant chord centered around C sharp. The mood is desolate, though the folk-like themes are clear. Subsequent development extends the short motives in length and explores tightly integrated counterpoint in increasingly arduous rhetoric. A technical feature that will grow into an important dramatic device first appears here; glissandi that function as stylized portamenti add an inquisitive quality to the proceedings.

A return of the initial parlando motif, now on the cello, launches the “Seconda parte” where the folk-like material drives the proceedings into a wild episodic dance. Here Bartók employs unusual techniques that would subsequently become regular features of his string writing, including *sul ponticello* (playing close to the bridge), *jeté* (bouncing the bow off the strings), *col legno* (playing with the wood of the bow), and the “Bartók pizzicato,” in which the string snaps back audibly on the fingerboard. Toward the end of the second part there is a nervous fugato that is brought to a full stop by a series of glissando chords, followed by a vigorous stretto of double- and triple-stopped chords. The recapitulation of the first part is even more desolate than the original, with a Pierrot-like sadness created by the glissandi, which recur like question marks. A tender lament from the violin leads to an anguished outcry of dissonant chords before the coda swirls in, ghostly and fugitive at first, then with full force and vigor. Some precipitous, downward swooping glissandi in the lower strings lead to a fierce stretto on the first violin in primitive open fifths. Brutal chords end the work brusquely.

#### String Quartet no. 5

For his fifth string quartet, Bartók again used the five-movement arch form, this time employing a variation technique in which the first and fifth movements and the second and fourth closely mirror each other. The opening movement presents its three ideas in rapid succession: the first is a series of unison repeated notes from which rockets a querulous, chromatic melody; the second features a trilling figuration; and the third is rhythmically irregular with many double-stops. The development is introduced by a quiet, sinuous passage based on the first theme in imitative counterpoint, after which the theme turns into a fugue. A dance-like passage emerges as the third theme, which then becomes an accompaniment for the second theme. The structure of the movement is loosely palindromic, and the themes are subjected to numerous variations. The inverted first theme brings the movement to an emphatic close.

The second movement begins in “night music” mode, with evanescent trills leading to a prayerful chorale in simple triadic harmony and short-

breathed sighs in unrelated keys from the violin. The nocturnal atmosphere takes over in the middle section, with trills and pizzicati evoking the sounds of birds and insects. After a restrained climax, the chorale resumes, but the triads are now chromatically tinged and anxious.

The keystone of the quartet’s arch form is the middle movement, a scherzo in which 10 eighth notes per bar are subdivided according to the formula 5+2+3. A short arpeggiated theme is answered by a lively, irregular dance melody. In the middle section, the arpeggiated theme is intervallically compressed to become a high, skirling ostinato on the violin, against which a simple tune is sounded alternately by the other instruments. The dance tune returns with even higher spirits, though the ending is quiet and droll.

The fourth movement harks back to the second and varies its material expressively. Desolate night music elements are now laced with a touch of humor, glissando pizzicati and short tremolando chords filling in for the second movement’s prayerful sighs. The movement rises to an angry climax before closing with a series of glissando pizzicato chords from the cello that rise like question marks.

The finale, a variant of the first movement, modifies the original themes and sets them to a vigorous dance rhythm. The demands on the players are great, and the movement’s propulsion is interrupted only by a short, satiric episode in which the violin plays a banal scale a half-tone higher than its accompaniment. A fast coda abruptly ends the work.

### Program 2 (8:00pm)

#### String Quartet no. 2

The second quartet is in three movements, an Allegro molto capriccioso framed by two slow movements, marked Moderato and Lento, a disposition that seems to anticipate the arch forms that would later fascinate the composer. The first movement opens with soft murmuring from second violin and viola on the close interval of the minor second; major and minor seconds will play an important harmonic role throughout the work. The main theme is pensive, a rising fillip on an augmented fourth setting the unsettled tone. Bartók here approaches a “pseudo-atonality” that is partly a function of his radical, harmonically advanced polyphony, wherein melodies that have clear and easily comprehended shapes intertwine with each other in ways that produce great intervallic and harmonic tensions; yet these same processes also yield gem-like moments of diatonic triads, all the more beautiful for their rarity. A moment of exquisite and limpid beauty occurs midway through when a folk-like theme emerges from the polyphony; after a more serious development section, this theme returns, its triple time gently counterbalanced by double-time pizzicato chords that suggest the strumming of a guitar.

By contrast, the second movement is wild and driving. Its main theme, a relentless ostinato emphasizing the minor third, is evocative of the primitive Arabian tunes Bartók had collected in North Africa a few years previously. The accompaniment is even more primitive, a one-note ostinato punctuated by pizzicato notes, giving the effect of Arabian drumming. Although the music’s limited scale gives it a grim sound, the treatment is clearly playful. Midway there is a slower section that quickly gives way to a return of the driving main theme, which is subjected to increasing expansion and variation within a rondo-like structure. The coda is fast and light, swirling through briefly and then disappearing.

Where the opening Moderato is perhaps the most sonically ravishing music Bartók ever wrote, the concluding Lento is the strangest and most desolate. The instruments muse on fragments of themes, more intervallic phrases than melodies. The material slowly coalesces into longer shapes as the movement proceeds but cannot sustain any lengthy argument; after a brief but intense chordal climax, there are a few more sighs, then two quiet pizzicato notes from the cello draw the curtain.

#### String Quartet no. 4

String Quartet no. 4 represents both an intensification and relaxation of elements present in Bartók’s previous quartet, completed a year earlier. While the dissonant harmonic language and rigorous motivic development in the third string quartet are intensified in the fourth quartet, the third’s single-movement structure is, in the fourth, “opened out” into a five-movement span arranged in Bartók’s characteristic “arch” form. The composer pointed out that the five movements functioned collectively according to the template of sonata form.

Earlier commentators suggested that Bartók had ventured into a style of serialism or even complete atonality with this work. The first movement presents in rapid succession three motive-groupings, small melodic cells that are expanded and embellished. The first is a dissonant giusto phrase in counterpoint, the second a six-note declamation that twists upward a minor third and brusquely drops back down, and the third a longer, lyrical phrase that is related in shape to the second. These Ur-melodies are intervallically related to primitive Magyar folk music, but their setting is more dissonant, abstract, and expressionistic. A dark, nocturnal mood prevails through the entire work.

The second movement is a ghostly scherzo, played almost entirely with mutes. The players must execute fast shifts from arco to pizzicato throughout as they negotiate compressed and fragmented themes derived primarily from the second motivic cell of the first movement. The movement disappears in a series of fast, rising glissandi.

The keystone of the “arch” is the third movement, Non troppo lento, a night-song. Over a quiet, tightly voiced chord suggesting droning bagpipes, the cello sings a Magyar-style melody that is answered by the violin in a lengthy variation. The central portion is limned with high, squeaking notes from the upper instruments, suggesting nocturnal insects, before the cello and violin return in counterpoint with the parlando melody. The movement closes with a fragmented reprise of the middle section, very quiet and with mutes on.

The second scherzo is entirely pizzicato, and the dissonant harmonies are relaxed. A modal theme, again related to the second cell, is treated in a subtly burlesque manner. There is the suggestion of Arabian music in the sinuous nature of the theme as well as the drumming and strumming effects in the accompaniments, liberally punctuated by the snapping Bartók pizzicato.

Shrill chords and driving rhythms launch the finale, whose main theme refers to the opening cell of the first movement. The other thematic cells are also evoked, the third lyrical cell expanded to a long-breathed arching melody. The second, brusque cell is inverted in the middle section and grows in importance until it brings the work to an angry conclusion.

#### String Quartet no. 6

In Bartók’s last completed quartet, each movement is preceded by an introductory section marked “Mesto” (“sadly”), with increasing complexity at each appearance. The “mesto” theme functions both as a motto and as the source of much of the quartet’s thematic substance. In the fourth movement, rather than giving way to a lively finale (the original plan as indicated by Bartók’s sketches), the motto continues on to become the conclusion itself.

The sad introductory theme is played first by solo viola, whose last notes are the germ for a unison statement by all four instruments in peremptory three-note phrases that will return later. The first theme is in quick, chromatically sinuous triplets. The second theme is a folk-like melody with a prominent “Scotch snap” rhythm. The first theme dominates the development. After a brief appearance of the second theme, the movement ends simply with a reprise of the first theme, now detached and musing.

The “mesto” introduction to the second movement is in two-part counterpoint, the cello stating the melody accompanied by upper strings in a tremolando counter-melody. The subsequent Marcia is bitter and ironic, and the “Scotch snap” rhythm is prominent. The appearance of the second theme is ingenious: the march rhythm continues as an accompaniment to the rising glissandi of the new tune. The middle section suspends the march as the cello rhapsodizes on a variation of the second theme, accompanied by high trills from the violins and harsh strumming on the viola. The return of the march is bizarre, with extremely high octave

doubling from the first violin and a filling out of the implied triadic harmonies, which create an ironic, hallucinatory effect.

For its third appearance, the “mesto” ritornello is in three-part harmony; it leads to a rude burlesque with vulgar stamping rhythms and a melody reminiscent of the “teasing songs” in Eastern European folk music. The second theme evokes the Arabic melodies Bartók collected in North Africa. In the central part, the “Scotch snap” theme from the first movement is mused upon before the burlesque returns, pizzicato. At the conclusion, an attempt to sound the “Scotch snap” theme is shouted down by angry chords.

In the slow finale, the “mesto” melody, now in four parts, becomes the entire movement, and the second theme recalls the unison motto of the first movement. The triplet theme is also recalled, now in a setting of profound desolation, and the “Scotch snap” tune makes a wistful appearance. Ghostly tremolandi accompany the return of the “mesto” theme; there is a moment of half-hearted protest that dwindles to resignation. The cello ends it all with a question mark, plucked chords based on the “mesto” motto.

*Notes by Mark Satola (source:All Music Guide, www.allmusic.com).*

## ABOUT THE SHANGHAI QUARTET

Renowned for its passionate musicality and impressive technique, the Shanghai Quartet has become one of the world’s foremost chamber ensembles. Its elegant style melds the delicacy of Eastern music with the emotional breadth of Western repertoire, allowing it to traverse musical genres from masterpieces of Western music to cutting-edge contemporary works.

Formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, the Shanghai Quartet has worked with the world’s most distinguished artists and regularly tours the major music centers of Europe, North America, and Asia, from the Beijing International Music Festival to Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. Among innumerable collaborations with noted artists, they have performed with the Tokyo, Juilliard, and Guarneri Quartets, Yo-Yo Ma, Lynn Harrell, and Peter Serkin. The Quartet has a long history of championing new music and has premiered works by such composers as Krzysztof Penderecki, Chen Yi, Bright Sheng, and Zhou Long. Their extensive discography includes more than 25 recordings, the most recent of which are the complete Beethoven String Quartets on Camerata.

The Shanghai Quartet currently serves as Quartet-in-Residence at Montclair State University and Ensemble-in-Residence with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. They are visiting guest professors at the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory in Beijing.

## Music

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featuring

**Weigang Li**, violin  
**Yi-Wen Jiang**, violin  
**Honggang Li**, viola  
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### PROGRAM I (4:00pm)

**String Quartet no. 1**

Lento  
 Allegretto  
 Allegro vivace

**String Quartet no. 5**

Allegro  
 Adagio molto  
 Scherzo: alla bulgarese  
 Andante  
 Finale: Allegro vivace

**String Quartet no. 3**

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

~~Intermission~~

Duration: 1 hour 30 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

### PROGRAM 2 (8:00pm)

**String Quartet no. 2**

Moderato  
 Allegro molto capriccioso  
 Lento

**String Quartet no. 6**

Mesto – Vivace  
 Mesto – Marcia  
 Mesto – Burletta  
 Mesto – Molto tranquillo

**String Quartet no. 4**

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

~~Intermission~~

Duration: 1 hour 30 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

Since 2002 the Shanghai Quartet has been “Quartet-in-Residence” at Montclair State University. The Shanghai Quartet proudly coaches chamber music, teaches individual lessons, and acts as coordinator of the strings department of the John J. Cali School of Music.

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**11/12**



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**Shanghai Quartet**  
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**of Béla Bartók**  
**May 5, 2012 • 4:00pm and 8:00pm**  
**Alexander Kasser Theater**  
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