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Bartók Quartet #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 internalize 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 neighborhoods: 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 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 fifteen 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.

Note by Misha Amory