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## **Ligeti Quartet #2**

György Ligeti wrote the second of his two String Quartets in 1968, when he was in his mid-forties and already a noted composer at the forefront of the European avant-garde. In this piece, a unifying theme persists throughout all five movements. However, this theme is not a melody or a leitmotif as an earlier composer might have used to bind a work together. Rather, it is a commitment to an idea of texture: several instruments are engaged in a single texture, wherein they sometimes meld together almost into unanimity, and at other times drift apart and become more distinct from one another, but never lose their textural similarity. Sometimes only two or three voices are involved, but more often it is all four instruments. This "micropolyphonic" technique is the abiding idea of the piece, applied repeatedly across its many changeable atmospheres. Ligeti has said that the Second Quartet is his favorite work from this period in his life.

The Quartet opens with a texture of frenetic, hushed activity that persists for some time, now a tremolo, now a texture of rapid separate bowing, now an extremely quiet crawling legato, punctuated by aggressive outbursts of forte playing. Late in the movement, the energy accumulates, and the quartet is asked to reach a climax where they perform "very ferociously, maximum force, as if crazed", leaping through jagged lines of sevenths and ninths. In a particularly extraordinary transformation, the dynamic dies gradually away to pianissimo, while the notes slowly speed up and the leaps become smaller and smaller, so that the texture becomes ever more attenuated and distant. The movement ends in a hushed series of chromatically descending harmonics.

The second movement opens with an almost static fantasy on one note, played very softly with various timbres in an overlapping way, gradually fanning out to include nearby pitches. The image evoked might be a shimmering, primitive organism beheld under a microscope. The sense of gray drifting persists throughout the movement, interrupted only occasionally by more sudden activity. In this movement Ligeti also makes use of microtones, which are pitches that fall in between the notes one finds on a piano, for example; the result is that the blurring effect of the movement's texture is enhanced.

In the third movement, which the composer entitles "Come un meccanismo di precisione", pointillism is the order of the day. The quartet plays pizzicato almost exclusively throughout, excepting only a brief ricochet passage in the middle. The very strict, uniform rhythm which opens the movement starts to disintegrate almost immediately, like a metronome gone wrong, as the

individual instruments slip away into faster and faster rhythms, each at its own rate. At one point in the movement the activity becomes very fast and almost inaudible, as if the music is fading completely from the page, before it is revived with a whoosh and set back on course. Palindromically, the end of the movement refocuses the quartet's multifaceted rhythmic activity slowly into the single strict rhythm of the opening, and dwindles to nothing.

The fourth movement is two brutal minutes long. Characterized by furious, slashing chords, which evoke a pitched battle between pairs of players, the movement requires playing "with exaggerated haste," pressing the bow "strongly on the strings (scratching noise)." In places the activity breaks off abruptly to reveal a frozen chord, held pianissimo, which holds the ear in suspense until the next outburst. The movement ends with the most vicious passage of all, a set of sul ponticello attacks, played "short and harsh" at the frog of the bow, stopping "as though torn off".

The last movement opens with a swaying, shimmering feeling, the entire quartet rhapsodizing very softly between two pitches in variable gentle rhythms, a sense of light seen dimly through water. The pitches become three, then four, then start to be altered bit by bit as the texture evolves into a more complex lifeform. The music becomes a procession through many different hushed textures -- glinting harmonic grace-note bursts, a shadowy, rapid legato passage in unison, a gulping exchange of rapid-fire fragments between the upper pair and lower pair of players, and eventually dissolves into quiet, slowly changing tremoli in the violins over gleaming harmonics in the lower instruments. Finally the movement returns to the same two pitches with which it began, and with one final swift scale in the softest dynamic, the work closes.

Note by Misha Amory