10 The String Quartets and works for chamber orchestra

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The Six String Quartets offer a fascinating insight into the chronology of Bartók's musical style, as they span some thirty years of his compositional career. Their stylistic development is such that each Quartet is the culmination of a different phase of his artistic growth, focusing almost all his creative ideas and compositional techniques into a single genre. On the one hand they represent the continuation of a Classical tradition through an intensity of motivic writing that parallels Beethoven's, while on the other they reflect developments in musical language and a changing aesthetic during the first half of the twentieth century.

Unlike his Austro-German contemporary Arnold Schoenberg, Bartók did not consciously seek to champion the cause of atonality. Rather, his interest lay in the fusion of folk and art music, the synthesis of East and West Europe: his inspiration from the folk music of different nationalities uniquely influenced the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic structures of his own music. Furthermore, developments within the realm of his string music – the String Quartets, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* and the Divertimento for string orchestra – include the many imaginative ways in which he exploited the timbral properties of stringed instruments, devising techniques new to the idiom in order to achieve a whole new range of sonorities within the context of an extended tonality.

Background

The First Quartet (1908–09), written within the early period of Bartók's mature style, reveals Romantic qualities with influences in its chromaticism that could be identified as Liszt, Strauss or Wagner. Some of the individual sonorities and overlapping textures reflect Bartók's acquaintance with the music of Debussy, while references to folk music emanate from his relatively recent interest in collecting folksongs. His absorption in the folk idiom was already leading him to incorporate some of its characteristics into his music.

Bartók began the Second String Quartet in 1915 although it was not completed until 1917, after a surge of compositional creativity which

included *The Wooden Prince*, several piano pieces and the Opp. 15 and 16 songs. He dedicated the work to the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet following their successful premiere of the First Quartet.[1] Following his increasing involvement in the collection and study of folk music, the Second Quartet shows a more direct use of folksong than the First. The discovery of unusual scale structures provided him with new melodic and harmonic formations to explore in response to the general weakening of tonality at the beginning of the twentieth century, although his use of folk music is not yet all-encompassing. The piece contains the seeds for the full germination of Bartók's compositional style in the Third and Fourth Quartets, completed in 1927 and 1928 respectively.

The ten years that separate the Third Quartet from the Second represent Bartók's development towards an intense, expressionist style during which time he wrote such radical works as *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–19), the two Violin Sonatas (1921 and 1922), the Piano Sonata (1926) and the First Piano Concerto (1926). The Third Quartet won him joint first prize in a competition run by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, although it was again the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet who gave the first public performance.

The 1920s have sometimes been labelled Bartók's experimental period and, although his music could never be described as atonal, extremes in his style are reached in the Third and Fourth Quartets where all twelve notes of the chromatic scale are kept in play, with individual pitch centres functioning as focal points. In these Quartets he creates unusual sound effects and fully explores the different ways of incorporating folk music into new formal structures.

The Fifth Quartet was completed in 1934 as a result of a commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation and was premiered in America by the Kolisch Quartet. Prior to this, apart from numerous folksong settings and arrangements, Bartók had written only two major works since the Fourth Quartet in 1928. After 1934, however, he proceeded to write a series of large-scale works in fairly quick succession. He was encouraged by the commissions he received from the Swiss conductor, Paul Sacher, which resulted in the unique *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936) and the Divertimento (1939), both written for the Basle Chamber Orchestra. These pieces are more accurately described as orchestral rather than chamber works but they are discussed here in the context of the String Quartets with which they have much in common, especially regarding thematic integration.

The Divertimento for string orchestra was written as a result of the seclusion Paul Sacher offered Bartók and his wife away from the increasingly depressing political situation in Hungary. Before Bartók left for the

USA he composed the Sixth String Quartet in 1939 for his long-time duo partner Zoltán Székely, leader of the New Hungarian Quartet, although the work was eventually dedicated to the Kolisch Quartet who gave its premiere in New York in 1941. Bartók started writing it in the same month that he completed the Divertimento: both these pieces relate to established traditions whereas *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, where the combination of instruments enabled him to explore a more unfamiliar sound-world, reflects his most innovative writing.

This chapter will focus on some of the ways in which Bartók developed his variation technique within an extended tonality expressed in terms of degrees of chromaticism. As he himself said: 'You have probably noticed that I lay great emphasis on the work of technical development, that I do not like to repeat a musical thought identically and that I never bring back a single detail exactly as it was the first time. This treatment stems from my inclination towards variation and transformation of themes.'[2] The technique of variation developed throughout the chamber works can be attributed to two sources: the Austro-German tradition he inherited, and the experience of studying and notating folksongs. In addition to pitch, harmony, rhythm and metre, details of accentuation, articulation, dynamics, timbre and tempo become increasingly important in outlining structure. Such a change in emphasis is typical of twentieth-century works in general, but for Bartók the roles of such seemingly small-scale details are to become of crucial importance in motivic, thematic and textural definition.

String Quartet No. 4

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

Even though the Fourth Quartet (1928) was written only a year after the Third, it immediately reveals differences of both form and content. Uncharacteristically, Bartók provided his own structural outline of the piece:

> the slow movement is the kernel of the work; the other movements are, as it were, arranged in layers around it. Movement IV. is a free variation of II., and I. and V. have the same thematic material; that is, around the kernel (Movement III.), metaphorically speaking, I. and V. are the outer, II. and IV. are the inner layers.[14]

This arch form was likewise to be the basis of the Fifth Quartet, and Bartók was also to use it for individual movements, such as the third movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*.

Whereas in the Third Quartet the thematic material is developmentally fragmented from the very start, the Fourth Quartet presents an identifiable motif as early as the cadential conclusion to the opening phrase in bar 7 (Ex. 10.7). This motif is the outcome of the vertical interaction of melodic lines which open the piece – a different relationship between melody and harmony than that observed at the beginning of the Third Quartet. Here harmonic orientation depends upon the outcome of the horizontal lines in the polyphonic texture, as explained by Halsey Stevens: 'the harmonic idiom of the Fourth Quartet can hardly be called harmonic at all. The coincidence of sounds at any point is so completely dependent upon the horizontal motion of the voices that it seems illogical to analyze them vertically'.[15]

Example 10.7 String Quartet No. 4, I, bar 7

Example 10.8 String Quartet No. 4
(a) I, bar 16

(b) V, bars 16–17

Although it undergoes various transformations, this principal motif – now the underlying feature of the piece – retains its articulation throughout, returning in its original form, and with its characteristic half-tenuto/legato identity, in the very last bar of the piece. The distinctive character of each movement is achieved through Bartók's extended range of developmental procedures. For example, changes in rhythm, metre, articulation, dynamics and tempo are all used to vary the character of the otherwise similar themes of the first and last movements (Ex. 10.8). The second movement is likewise based on the principal motif of the first by extending the rising/falling chromatic line in a new *prestissimo* tempo to create a joyful scherzo played *pianissimo* (see Ex. 10.9a). Intervallic compression and expansion are also to be found among Bartók's repertoire of transformational techniques, and are responsible for changing the emphasis of chromaticism to diatonicism and vice versa: the transitional theme from the first movement (Ex. 10.8a) is already a diatonic expansion of the chromatic motif in Example 10.7. Similarly, the thematic material of the lively fourth movement (Ex. 10.9b) is an expanded diatonic version of that of the second (Ex. 10.9a).

Further exploitation of instrumental techniques increases Bartók's rich palette of timbral qualities for stringed instruments. The middle section of the scherzo-like Prestissimo already develops the glissando to an even greater extreme than in the Third Quartet, while the first instance of the percussive 'snap' pizzicato for which Bartók is widely known (whereby the string is plucked between two fingers to rebound on the fingerboard)

Example 10.9 String Quartet No. 4
(a) II, chromatic melody, bars 1–4

Prestissimo, con sordino 𝅗𝅥. = 88-98

(b) IV, diatonic melody, bars 6–9

(**Allegretto pizzicato** ♩ = 142)

occurs in the penultimate Allegretto pizzicato. In the central Non troppo lento the unusual changes from non-vibrato to vibrato take on a unique form-defining role, demarcating each section.[16] László Somfai comments on this technique as 'a stylized and sublime version of the *dűvő* accompaniment in instrumental folk music'.[17]

In the Fourth Quartet, Bartók's solution to the problem of the new music is different from the Third: his inspiration is derived specifically from folk music, even though he avoids direct quotations. One of his recommendations to composers was 'not [to] make use of a real peasant melody' but to 'invent [an] imitation' of it: for the most part it was less important for Bartók to copy an exact folk melody than to let the music be 'pervaded by the atmosphere of peasant music'.[18] For instance, an immediately striking feature of the cello's rhapsodic *parlando rubato* melody in the third movement is the downbeat semiquaver/dotted-quaver rhythm intrinsic to Hungarian prosody: the strong-beat start to the phrase is indigenous to 'old'-style Hungarian melodies. This type of melody, whose 'long notes are encircled by shorter ornamental notes', is identified by Judit Frigyesi as 'a lament or slow *verbunkos* belonging to the Hungarian tradition'.[19] Yet the construction of the melody throughout the movement also fits Bartók's description of the Romanian *hora lungă*: 'a single melody in numerous variants. Its features are strong, instrumental character, very ornamented, and indeterminate content structure'.[20]

bars		
6–13	A^1B^1	exposition
14–21	A^2B^2	
22–33	A^3B^3	
34–54	$A^4B^4A^5$	development
55–71	B^5A^6	recapitulation (coda)

Figure 10.1 Three-part structure of String Quartet No. 4, III, showing the construction of verses.

The folksong characteristics are moulded into a Classical art-song structure. Bartók's own brief analysis identifies three sections and a Coda,[21] although closer examination of the melody reveals a sentence structure based on verses. Figure 10.1 shows how these verses fit into Bartók's three-part structure.

The 'numerous variants' Bartók describes in Romanian folk music are here coloured by changes in register, timbre and specific techniques, such as the dramatic use of tremolo, and the use of harmonics in the representation of 'night' music (bars 47–49, itself a development of bars 35–40). The 'development' section contains the first examples of 'night' music in the quartet genre with the depiction of birdsong heard from the upbeat to bar 35. The ethereal quality of the birdsong section continues as the accompaniment changes from tremolo to *sul ponticello* in alternation with *ordinario*. The distribution of such instrumental techniques in the third movement contributes to its arch form as well as to the overall shape of the work.

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta

Andante tranquillo – Allegro – Adagio – Allegro molto

The commission received from Paul Sacher in 1936 gave Bartók the oppor-tunity to explore an unusual combination of instruments (double string orchestra with celesta, harp, piano, xylophone, timpani and percussion) and to reconsider their traditional roles. The antiphonal use of two string orchestras justifies Bartók's symmetrical layout in which he divides the strings into two groups on each side of the central group of piano, celesta, harp and percussion. Placing the piano within the percussion team means that the work fits the orchestral rather than the concerto repertoire, although even in the First and Second Piano Concertos (1926 and 1931, respectively) and the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (1937) the piano has a percussive as well as a soloistic role. This is just one example of the many overlaps between the styles of different genres in Bartók's music.

Like the Fourth Quartet, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* derives its dissonant harmony from the vertical coincidence of the pitches of individual lines. However, underlying the chromatic foreground of the opening fugue is a surprisingly tonal construction based on the cycle of fifths. The composer explained that:

> The second entry appears a fifth higher; the 4th again a fifth higher than the 2nd; the 6th, 8th, and so on, again a fifth higher than the preceding one. The 3rd, 5th, 7th, and so on, on the other hand, each enter a fifth lower. After the remotest key – *E flat* – has been reached (the climax of the movement) the following entries render the theme in contrary motion until the fundamental key – *A* – is again reached, after which a short coda follows.[27]

The superimposition of chromatic and diatonic elements in the first movement is just one example which shows Bartók extending tonality beyond the extreme dissonance of the Fourth Quartet while stopping short of total chromaticism. Another is the way in which he contrasts chromatic and diatonic elements across the time-span of the entire piece

Example 10.15 chromatic and diatonic melodies of similar contour

String Quartet No. 4, I, bar 16 — (**Allegro** ♩= 110) Vln II *p*

Piano Concerto No. 2, I, bars 81-2 — *Tranquillo* ♩= 88 Pno *p sub.* *grazioso*

Piano Concerto No. 2, I, bars 104-6 — (*Mosso* ♩= 104) wind *ff*

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, I, bar 2 — **Andante tranquillo** ♪= ca 116-112 *con sord.* Vla *pp*

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, II, bars 5-6 — **Allegro** ♩ = ca 138-144 Vlns *f*

so that their alternation on a large scale outlines the harmonic orientation of each of the four movements. On a smaller scale the function of intervallic expansion and compression in changing the emphasis of chromaticism and diatonicism has already been identified in the Fourth Quartet. In the Harvard lectures of 1943 Bartók explained this apparently new device, which he called 'extension in range', by which the chromatic form of a melody could be turned into a diatonic one: 'such an extension will considerably change the character of the melody, sometimes to such a degree that its relation to the original, non-extended form will be scarcely recognizable'.[28] Examples of the altered character of the chromatic and diatonic melodies of the first and second movements of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* are shown in Example 10.15; above these are further examples of melodic contours from the Fourth String Quartet and Second Piano Concerto whose shapes can also be regarded as variants of each other. (The respective tempo indications of these phrases are given, although their different harmonic contexts obviously require reference to the scores.) Comparing the diatonic theme of the Allegro with the chromatic theme of the Andante tranquillo it will be seen that the metre has shifted, the phrase has been extended, and its character transformed by a new rhythmic definition highlighted by changes in dynamics, articulation and tempo.

In the chromatic context of the two slow movements the timbral qualities of instruments are fully exploited. Following the fugal entries of the opening Andante based on the cycle of fifths, Bartók marks the arrival point of the final melodic statement beginning on A (bar 77) by introducing

contrasting 'night music' timbres. Supported by tremolo muted strings, shimmering arpeggiations in the celesta juxtapose a quasi-dominant cluster (E–E♭–D–C♯) prior to the final 'tonic' resolution.

The 'tonic' harmony of the Adagio third movement in rondo form is provided by a C–F♯ tritone, and again it is the timbral characteristics, combined with changes in rhythmic and melodic articulation, that define the sections of the arch form identified by Bartók.[29] The prosodic nature of the folk-like melody is strongly reminiscent of that in the third movement of the Fourth Quartet, as are its 'night music' qualities, although here they persist throughout the movement as an introduction and accompaniment to the melody rather than as a development of it. Extremes of register and timbre play an important part in depicting the different sounds of Nature within each section, while melodic connections are ensured by a return of thematic material from the Andante.

Bartók's varied use of instruments helps to project the opposing characters of successive movements. From its first entrance in the second movement it is the piano that immediately adopts a percussive, quasi-soloistic role before engaging in a melodic dialogue with the strings. The strings, harp and timpani also have dual roles and it is the way these percussive/melodic elements are integrated and varied that makes for such striking contrasts. For example, during the development section of the Allegro Bartók gives all the strings a strong rhythmic identity, using punctuating unison chords to define a forceful cadence in bars 177–82. Following a brief canon between the two orchestras he then proceeds to divide their roles so that one has more of a rhythmic function while the other has a melodic one (bars 199–220). Despite the different structures of the Allegro movements – the sonata form of the second and the rondo-like structure of the fourth – Bartók makes full use of changes in sonority to mark each section, such as the distinctive *staccatissimo* piano combined with pizzicato strings at bar 28 in the fourth movement (compare a similar sonority in the second movement at bar 200).

The A major tonality of the Allegro molto is an unexpected yet powerful conclusion to a piece whose rhythmic vitality is occasionally reminiscent of Stravinsky. The sharpened fourth degree of the scale relates to the tritonal harmony of the preceding Adagio and contributes to the exuberant character of the movement. Following the model of a conventional finale the Allegro molto restates material from previous movements: the chromatic theme of the first (bar 203), followed by the 'night music' elements of the third (bar 232), are now incorporated into a diatonic background where the new slower tempi help to reinstate their original characters.