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Béla Bartók

The Six String Quartets

The Fine Arts Quartet

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The New York Times

Béla Bartók: *The Six String Quartets*

The Fine Arts Quartet

CD 1 of 3

<i>String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7</i> (1908)	(30:50)
1) I Lento	(9:19)
2) II Poco a poco accelerando al Allegretto	(8:59)
3) (Introduzione.) Allegro	(12:32)
III Allegro vivace	

<i>String Quartet No. 2, Op. 17</i> (1917)	(28:28)
4) I Moderato	(10:59)
5) II Allegro molto capriccioso	(8:24)
6) III Lento	(9:05)

<i>String Quartet No. 3</i> (1927)	(17:16)
7) I Prima parte. Moderato	(5:41)
8) II Seconda parte. Allegro	(6:12)
9) III Ricapitolazione della prima parte, Moderato	(5:23)
Coda. Allegro molto	

Total time 1:16:46

CD 2 of 3

<i>String Quartet No. 4</i> (1928)	(23:07)
1) I Allegro	(6:15)
2) II Prestissimo, con sordino	(2:56)
3) III Non troppo lento	(5:26)
4) IV Allegretto pizzicato	(2:56)
5) V Allegro molto	(5:34)

<i>String Quartet No. 5</i> (1934)	(31:05)
6) I Allegro	(7:40)
7) II Adagio molto	(5:38)
8) III Scherzo. Alla bulgarese (vivace)	(5:08)
9) IV Andante	(5:18)
10) V Finale. Allegro vivace/Presto	(7:21)

Total time 54:19

IRVING ILMER was the violist of The Fine Arts Quartet from 1952 to 1963. Born in Vienna, he came to America as an infant. After study at Chicago's De Paul University in the mid-30s, he served as violinist in the Indianapolis Symphony, in Stokowski's South American tour with the All-American Youth Orchestra, as concertmaster of the San Antonio Symphony, and as member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1946-52). During his years with the FAQ, he figured in a significant portion of its recorded chamber music library, its programs for National Educational Television (including six discussion/performance telecasts on the Bartók quartet cycle), its tours in America and Canada, the first five of its European tours, and its first tour of Australia and New Zealand, as well as in its chamber music workshops. After leaving the quartet, he performed as both violinist and violist, was concertmaster of the Kitchener (Canada) Symphony, and taught at the University of Indiana and the University of Kentucky. He died in Chicago in 1997.

GEORGE SOPKIN, a cello pupil of Emanuel Feuermann in Switzerland and New York, began his career as one of the youngest members of the Chicago Symphony. After World War II he was a founding member of the Fine Arts Quartet. In 1979 Mr. Sopkin retired from the quartet and from his faculty position at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, bearing the title, Distinguished Professor Emeritus. He moved to Maine and until recently was a member of the New England Piano Quartette. In 1997 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. And in 1998 he received the title, Chevalier du Violoncelle, from the University of Indiana, a signal honor among his various awards.

He has performed as soloist and recitalist, taught cello and coached chamber music widely in America and Europe. In addition to his own continued teaching activity, he serves on the faculty of the prestigious Kneisel Hall School of chamber music in Blue Hill, Maine, and also is director and faculty member of that school's Adult Chamber Music Institute.

In addition to his performing and teaching activity, Sorkin was chief editor and technical director in the production of the large library of chamber music recordings of The Fine Arts Quartet. These were pioneer releases in stereophonic audio, at first on reel-to-reel tape, then LPs, and some of them eventually in re-mastered CD versions.



ABRAM LOFT studied violin in New York, earned a Ph.D. in musicology (his research focus, the history of musicians' guilds and unions) at Columbia University and served on its faculty for eight years. He joined The Fine Arts Quartet in 1954. From 1963, he and his colleagues were professors at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 1979, Loft moved to the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester to be head of the string department and professor of chamber music, retiring in 1986. His books include *Violin and Keyboard: the Duo Repertoire* (1973; 1991); *Ensemble: A Rehearsal Guide to Thirty Great Works of Chamber Music* (1992); and *How to Succeed in an Ensemble* (2003). A contributor to the American Grove's Dictionary, he also served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and the College Music Society's *Symposium*.

He's been a competition judge and chamber music coach in America and abroad; holds the Curtis Award for Undergraduate Teaching (U. of Rochester), the ASTA Distinguished Service Award; and the title of Distinguished Professor Emeritus both from UW-M and from the U. of Rochester/Eastman School of Music.

CD 3 of 3

<i>String Quartet No. 6</i> (1939)	(30:10)
1) I Mesto/Più mosso, pesante/ Vivace	(7:44)
2) II Mesto/Marcia	(8:19)
3) III Mesto/Burletta	(7:23)
4) IV Mesto	(6:44)

WTTW Channel 11, Chicago, Illinois television presentation: The Fine Arts Quartet Plays Bartók: (Leonard Sorkin and Abram Loft, violin; Irving Ilmer, viola; George Sopkin, violoncello); with program announcer, Norman Pellegrini. Discussion of Bartók String Quartet No. 1 (26:41)

- 5) Music intro—ending of Bartók *Quartet No. 1* (1:02)
- 6) Pellegrini: Introduction to TV program (00:58)
- 7) Rehearsal discussion: voices heard, in sequence—Pellegrini, Sorkin, Sopkin, Ilmer, Pellegrini, Loft.
- 8) Excerpt: mvt 3, Sorkin introduces examples (working back from end of quartet), Loft shows illustrations, examples are played. (3:04)
- 9) Pellegrini; Loft lists movement titles, describes form. Excerpt, opening of 1st movement. Loft shows graph of melodies, with examples (3:50)
- (10) Loft describes melodic construction, Sopkin illustrates with shaped-wire graph, Sorkin describes four-voice texture, Ilmer introduces example (2:59)

- 11) Closing phase of 1st movement; Sopkin sets stage for new section, Loft introduces examples, shows illustration; examples are played. (2:04)
- 12) Sorkin introduces excerpt from end of 1st movement; Sopkin, Pellegrini. (1:36)
- 13) Loft, then Sorkin, discuss transition; examples played. (2:53)
- 14) Discussion about contrast: Sorkin introduces example; Ilmer, closing excerpt (1:27)
- 15) Introduzione: Pellegrini; Sopkin cites fanfare that announces the Introduction; Sopkin and Sorkin play their respective cadenzas in that section. (1:07)
- 16) 3rd movement: Loft leads off; Ilmer plays dance-like theme transformation; Sopkin and Loft cite later excerpt. (1:42)
- 17) Pellegrini: conclusion (00:34)

Total time 57:07

Recorded in 1959 in the Masonic Hall, Wilmette, Illinois; produced by the Fine Arts Quartet; engineer/editor: Leonard Sorkin. First released on the Concert-Disc label on 3 stereo LPs CS-207/209. . Restored from the original master tapes (preserved by George Sopkin) in 2005 by Maggi Payne. Notes by Abram Loft. Licensed by Countdown Media, current owners of the rights.

The Six String Quartets of Béla Bartók

The music of the eminent Hungarian-born composer, Béla Bartók (1881-1915), is original, uncompromising, exciting. Its sound seems to rise out of an inner necessity in the composition. Nothing is accidental, incidental; everything is logical, forceful growth. Bartók's musical ideas flower into ever-new manifestations, each claiming our attention in its own right. The linking of phrase, section, movement, and entire composition is convincing, inevitable.

Bartók drew inspiration from many sources, ranging from his beloved folk music of Hungary and other regions, to the most advanced art-music of the day. Inspiration only, however, for the final idea and treatment is distinctively Bartók's; so also the attendant impact of his music. Listeners, novice and expert alike, respond so strongly to his music that in recent years Bartók—long recognized as a musician's musician—has become not only one of the most generally popular of composers in our own time, but indeed one of the great names in the history of Western music.



String Quartet No. 1, Opus 7

Lento

Allegretto

Introduzione: Allegro-Allegro vivace

The First Quartet, completed when Bartók was 27, is the most nostalgic and familiar-sounding of his six string quartets. The work starts slowly, picks up momentum steadily, and ends in a whirlwind finale. There are detours along the way and—especially toward the end of the quartet—many a climax and regeneration of motion, lending the music a sense of continually mounting excitement.

The three movements are played without pause. A built-in transition connects the first and second movements. The interval between the end of the second movement and the beginning of the finale's *Introduction* is marked with a fermata; even so, the break must be short, with the players unmoving, so that the dramatic suspense remains unbroken.



The Fine Arts Quartet at WTTW in 1959—(from top left, clockwise: Abram Loft, 2nd violin; Irving Ilmer, viola; Leonard Sorkin, 1st violin; George Sopkin, cello; Norman Pellegrini; (center) The FAQ in performance. All photos drawn from the WTTW videotape.

Notes on the individual performers, in instrument order:

LEONARD SORKIN, a native of Chicago, studied violin there at the Chicago Musical College and the American Conservatory. His major teacher was Mischa Mischakoff, during the latter's tenure as concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Sorkin himself was a member of the CSO before his military service in World War II. He was first violin of The Fine Arts Quartet from its official beginning in 1946 until he left to direct the Leonard Sorkin Institute of Chamber Music of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1983 until his death in 1986). He held the title of Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

From the 1960-61 season, the FAQ was featured in its own concert series in Chicago and in the city's North Shore suburbs, never less than seven pairs of concerts each year. Violist Irving Ilmer left the quartet in 1963, to be succeeded by a Canadian, Gerald Stanick. That same year, the Fine Arts Quartet was appointed quartet in residence at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The demands of academic life were now added to the quartet's accustomed activities. Among other items, a campus concert series that paralleled the Chicago/North Shore pair was now on the docket.

In 1968, Stanick resigned, to be replaced by violist Bernard Zaslav. And in 1979, George Sopkin retired and Abram Loft resigned, after 33 years and 25 years of membership, respectively. These four musicians, as well as Leonard Sorkin, went on to further important service in the sphere of chamber music (see bios of the individual members). For the Fine Arts Quartet, however, a distinctive and decades-long period of activity had ended. The quartet of those years, however, lives on in the esteem of many of today's established chamber musicians, as well as of young entrants into the profession, who grew up listening to the recorded performances of the ensemble.



The opening *Lento* of the quartet begins with a duet, the 1st violin line followed by an essentially similar melodic thread in the 2nd violin. Cello and viola, in turn, enter with their own duet some measures later. All four melodic strands merge into one web of sound that expands, contracts, finally rises and tapers off in a high register.

The spell is broken abruptly by a ponderous, open-string drone in the lowest register of the cello. Over this, the two inner voices play a throbbing, appassionato duet in the middle register. And high above floats the 1st violin line. The whole texture of the music has opened out. Soon we are led to a passage where the cello, now in high register, plays forcefully against a shimmering backdrop provided by the other three voices. After a dramatic pause, it seems as though the process will continue, now in quiet, with the 1st violin taking over the solo role; this in turn, however, breaks off after just two measures.

The opening melody now returns as we start the final section of the movement. In a culminating moment, and for the first time in this *Lento*, all four instruments move together in massive chords. From this peak, the movement recedes to a pensive and quiet mood.

At the very last the two violins play alone, ending the movement with a pianissimo exhalation. However, the viola and cello disturb the finality, drawing us forward hesitantly, then with increased energy into the waltz-like second movement. And as that *Allegretto* unfolds, we realize that this second movement (as will be the case also with the finale) derives its melodic material from that of the opening *Lento*. In all three movements, the predominating theme emphasizes a falling motion. In the *Lento*, the theme glides downward slowly and rests momentarily on its low note. The second movement theme poises on its first, high note, then drops quickly to the low note. The theme of the *Allegro vivace* is the most angular, the most emphatic in its downward plunge. The changing character of these related melodic ideas contributes to the stepping-up of pace as we move through the concluding two movements of the piece.

And always, there is plenty of contrast. The second movement, easygoing though it is at the start, passes through some very turbulent episodes, only to subside quietly in its turn. The cello has the last, wistful word at the close of the *Allegretto*. A startlingly brisk fanfare from the three upper voices ushers the cello into a bold cadenza-like passage in the *Introduction* section. The 1st violin then takes over in a quiet soliloquy to bring the

introduction to a tremulous pause. Whereupon the 2nd violin sounds an open-E-string tattoo to fire up the engine of the *Allegro vivace*.

The finale is a mixture of pounding, hard-driving rhythmic passages and others of playful, strutting, dance-like nature. Fugal episodes, with the voices following one another imitatively; massive chordal passages, where the instruments pile up an incredible amount of sound—the gamut of quartet sonority is run in this movement. Climaxes roll out in youthful abundance; and the finish is one last, breathless sprint.

The First Quartet is not particularly radical or new-sounding. Bartók is at the early stage of his career in this work. Clearly, however, he is supremely comfortable in the quartet medium, and ready to follow his musical ideas wherever they will lead. They move, in the later quartets, to ever more fascinating sounds and vital listening experiences.

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 17

Moderato

Allegro molto capriccioso

Lento

Bartók composed his *Quartet No. 2* in 1915-17. He had been busy as composer, as professor of piano at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, and had distinguished himself also as a scholar in the folk music of the entire east-central European region around Hungary. The short, crisp melodies and sharp rhythms of folk music inspired similar qualities in his own writing, as evident in the *Second Quartet*.

2nd violin and viola establish the mood of the work at the very outset. In their rocking accompaniment to the two outer voices they constantly slur over the joint from weak to strong beat. The resultant veiling of the strong beat creates a feeling of quiet but insistent restlessness. Around this central thread, the cello and 1st violin try to rise boldly, only to slow their ascent by repeated fallbacks. The 1st violin persists, spanning wider and wider upward arcs. This upward striving, in varying degrees of intensity, dominates the opening lines of the movement.

The Fine Arts Quartet.

This distinguished American ensemble traces its beginnings to the early 1940s in Chicago. Military service in World War II intervened, however, and it was not until 1946 that the definitive career of the quartet began, with members Leonard Sorkin and Joseph Stepansky, violins; Shephard Lehnhoff, viola; and George Sopkin, cello. For eight years, the quartet was staff ensemble at the ABC studios in Chicago, presenting weekly network broadcasts of chamber music, both from the string quartet and mixed ensemble repertoire. Irving Ilmer succeeded Lehnhoff as violist in 1952.

In 1954 (at the start of the relentless divestment of live music by the radio and television stations of America), the FAQ was dismissed from its radio post and embarked on a decade of freelance activity. It was at this point that Stepansky left the group, to be replaced by Abram Loft as second violin.

With the lineup of Sorkin, Loft, Ilmer, and Sopkin, the FAQ established itself as one of the country's foremost concert ensembles, touring throughout America and Canada and (starting in 1958) in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the Far East—by the late 70s, the tour list encompassed 270 cities in 28 countries, with repeat appearances in many locales. The quartet was featured a number of times on the *Today Show*, performed on a Chicago production of the *Ed Sullivan Show*, produced 20 hour-length programs on the quartet repertoire for National Educational Television (predecessor of PBS), and performed many broadcasts on Chicago's good-music station, WFMT, as well as taping archival programs for radio stations in England, Germany, Holland, France, and elsewhere. The foursome began producing a library of chamber music records that, by the late 70s, comprised 60 LP discs, with works by composers ranging from J. S. Bach to Charles Wuorinen. The labels of the various releases: Concert-Tapes, Concert-Disc, Everest, Musicaphon, Composers Recordings, Inc., Columbia, Vanguard, and Gasparo Records. CD labels include Pantheon, Omega, Boston Skyline, and Music and Arts Programs of America. Over the years, the ensemble also added the Ravinia, Aspen and Edinburgh festivals to an early-career appearance at Tanglewood.

With the vagaries of the passing years, it transpires that only a very few tapes from the set of twenty have survived at all; and of these, only the one with Bartók's *Quartet No. 1* has come down to us in close to pristine condition. The FAQ's cycle of the six Bartók quartets was recorded shortly before the ensemble began work on the related TV shows. Professional musicians as well as amateur aficionados recall the whole series of twenty programs fondly. As a pertinent souvenir of a time when such specialized cultural television programs could be funded, produced, and disseminated in the U.S., the sound-track of the discussion portion of the *Bartók No. 1* television tape is included as part of the third CD in this new release of the Fine Arts Quartet's Bartók cycle.



L. to r.: Irving Ilmer; viola; Leonard Sorokin, 1st violin; George Sopkin, cello; Abram Loft, 2nd violin.
Photo by Y. Ernest Satow of Rapbo Guillumette Pictures.

A transitional passage and the ensuing second theme seem to promise relief from the earlier strain, but instead progress toward new heights of agitation. Several measures, marked *tranquillo* by the composer, relax the tension enough to bring us to the brief and lyric closing theme (in *piano dolce*), declaimed in parallel octaves by the 1st violin and viola.

Typical is not the proper adjective for either a sonata form movement or the development section thereof when they are the product of a fine composer. “Typically,” however, the development is the stage for exploration of various attributes of the themes earlier set forth, as well as for interplay between the several melodic ideas. Bartók presses these maneuvers quite aggressively in this middle section, especially in a fortissimo, marcatisimo passage. Here the violin/viola voices seem to reflect their weak-strong pulsation of the movement's beginning, but now translated into 16th-note, strong-weak couplets that fuel a very heated and turbulent climax.

The recapitulation is much shorter than the exposition section, as though evincing some exhaustion after the rigors experienced in the development. Not so tired though, that it can't announce the closing theme with a short, fortissimo, stentorian outcry from all four voices in slow motion (specified to be played high up on the lower strings of the instrument, for maximum tension of effect). As though in utter lassitude, the closing theme is then played briefly, quietly, to the accompaniment of very softly plucked chords on the cello. Even in the coda, Bartók cannot forego several outcries, yielding at last to a quiet ascent and a final thematic sigh from the cello.

The second movement's title includes the word, *capriccioso*. To be sure, there are enough “capricious” episodes en route: elaborate melodic yawns and stretches, countered immediately by scurrying fragments and musical pratfalls; fitful bits of thematic statement separated by teasing grand pauses; swooping arcs of pizzicato by the violins against muttering comments in the low voices; languorous bowed lines propped up by plucked chordal stilts; and so on. These are brief oases in the brash course of the movement, but are overwhelmed by its increasingly headlong pace. The pulse quickens from the original marching count to a rolling, tumbling beat, *Allegro molto*; then to a *Prestissimo*, the more furious for being hushed and muted. The burst of speed grinds to a halt, lashed down with a final roar of the melodic fragment that has dominated the entire movement.

The third and last movement of the quartet returns us to the mood of the first, now with even greater emphasis on the sense of resignation. Once again, the upward-reaching process is heard, underscored with moments of sharp outcry. But it is a sense almost of depression that wins out, as typified by passages of deathly-cold “half-voice” color. The end is a final sigh, a feeble pulsing.

With so much striving and resignation discernible in this music, there is temptation to point out that it was written when Europe was embroiled in World War I, and to cite that as the source of the melancholy that seems to pervade the work. Temptation also, to seek out touches of darkness and foreboding in each of the quartets to come, no matter how flamboyant may be the more positive areas of the writing. As we shall see, this mixed emotional palette will be fully realized in the *Sixth Quartet*, from even darker times in the world’s history.

String Quartet No. 3
Prima parte: Moderato
Seconda parte: Allegro
Ricapitulazione della prima parte: Moderato
Coda: Allegro molto

Bartók’s *Third Quartet* was composed in Budapest in 1927. In December of that year, he came to America for his first concert tour here, one of the more far-flung of such trips he was then making. As composer, Bartók at that time found more ready acceptance abroad than in his own country, where many found his music strange and unpalatable.

Quartet No. 3 is barely seventeen minutes long; but is vital, intense, highly charged. An important clue to the organization of the work is found at the very outset. Four tones—C sharp, D, D sharp, and E—are played and held by the cello, viola, and 2nd violin, creating a shimmering backdrop of sound. Against this, the first violin spins a delicately arched melody consisting of the remaining eight tones available in our musical palette: F, F sharp, G, G sharp, A, A sharp, B, C. This is not an indication that the work is in the twelve-tone technique of Schoenberg (though Bartók was interested in 12-tone writing, as indeed in all the musical currents of his time). It does establish a division of musical activity that is to be

The *Sixth Quartet* was written in 1939, shortly before Bartók left Hungary for America. He not want to leave, but could not exist in the cloud that was covering Europe in those years. Such was his strength of spirit that he continued his composing and scholarly work, despite illness, in the five years of life that remained to him in America. He persevered until the end and died with much left unsaid. In the quartets, though, not to mention his many other compositions, he did have his say, one of the most telling contributions to the culture of our time.

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(Adapted by Abram Loft from his notes to the 1959 Concert-Disc release of the Bartók quartet cycle, as performed by The Fine Arts Quartet: Leonard Sorkin and Abram Loft, violins; Irving Ilmer, viola; George Sopkin, cello.)

A note on the discussion of the Bartók Quartet No. 1:

In 1958, 1959, and the early 60s, the Fine Arts Quartet—Leonard Sorkin and Abram Loft, violins; Irving Ilmer, viola; and George Sopkin, cello—were featured in twenty hour-length programs on the string quartet repertoire, produced by National Educational Television, the predecessor of today’s Public Broadcasting System. The taping of the shows took place in the studio—located at that time in the Museum of Science and Industry—of Chicago’s NET station, WTTW. There were six programs on quartets from Beethoven’s early, middle, and late periods. Then came six shows presenting the entire cycle of six Bartók quartets. Finally there were eight programs on quartets by composers from Haydn to Hindemith. In each hour, the performance of the entire composition at hand was preceded by an informative exploration of the music’s plan, apparent purpose, and strategies. The scripts, devised by 2nd violinist Loft, were designed to involve the entire ensemble in the discussion and were brought to life by the able ad-libbing of the foursome. Playing of pertinent musical excerpts illustrated the points being made. And in the case of the Bartók series, added comment was interspersed by a fifth and very practiced speaker: Norman Pellegrini, program manager and head announcer of Chicago’s radio station WFMT.

provides more of a sustained-voice supporting role in the second half of this introduction. As already said, the final *Mesto* is a full-fledged movement in its own right, running about six minutes in length, and grippingly textured throughout.

Each of the first three movements seems to attempt to break out of its preceding solemn introduction. A downward motion ends the viola solo of the first *Mesto*. Right after, there is a loud, pounding, four-voiced, upward-reaching chorus poising at last on a sustained chord before the 1st violin launches us into the *Vivace*. The focus of this fast movement is on the opposition between the ponderous and the running elements in the writing. There seems to be a reflection here, in a vigorous temper, of the larger conflict that will prevail throughout, between the sad introductions and the faster chapters. Characteristically, the first movement subsides into a *Lento*, marked by a descending sigh in the 2nd violin part.

The *Marcia* is a sardonic march-to-end-all-marches. It is a parade by limping troops, with a display of rather doomed jauntiness about it. Note the romantic, yearning, desperate solo of the 2nd violin; the cello solo, with the banjo-like accompaniment of the viola and the boiling background provided by the violins; and the 1st violin solo, high on the low string instrument, with the sound tight and suggestively strangulated.

Stretched and tight, too, is the sense of the *Burletta*. This “little joke” is one played on the whole world. Its sound is tart, hard-bitten, the accents grotesque. No matter how bouncy this music gets, there’s always the plaintive side of the story waiting to show through. The very ending of the movement is a last attempt at wistfulness.

The closing *Mesto* is of almost unendurable intensity, prone to evoke tears in the eyes of performers and hearers alike. The experience of the preceding movements is here extended and deepened. Significant moments from the first *Mesto* are presented in new stature. Melodies from the *Vivace* are recalled. Over all, there lies a wash of cold color. Some last desperate outcries give way to the viola’s mournful recall of its initial plaint and, at the very end, a faint and distant note of hope in the cello’s pizzicato chords.

significant for the entire composition: one or more instruments provide a background against which an instrument plays an active, moving line.

As the music continues, we find the 1st violin reaching upward in successively greater arching of the melodic line. The sound spreads out, just as ripples spread out on the surface of a still pool. Three weighty chords, followed by a short silence, wrap up the opening section of this first part of the quartet. Sounding through these chords is an important bit of melody, the succession of tones, G-C-A.

Of this fragment, the cello and viola make a new, muted, background drone. Over it, the two violins spin out a sharper line, edged in the glassy sound of ponticello (near-the-bridge) bowing. Bartók’s wonderful ear for sound-textures is seen in this new passage. Small steps in contrary motion are spelled out between the pairs of instruments. Then both groups spread out expansively. Soon, patches of the melodic line are being supported and colored by great clusters of tones, ripped out by the four instruments.

The extreme is represented a bit later, when the chords reach their tightest, most compressed rhythmic setting. The whole surrounding passage gives the effect of a very excited and agitated conversation, with repeated statements finding answers that are shouted louder and louder.

All this takes place in the first three minutes of the work. In the remainder of the section, the music unwinds; 2nd violin and viola have an easy, simple tune, growing out of the three-note figure, G-C-A, mentioned above.

A loud pizzicato in the 1st violin and cello triggers the *Seconda parte*. The 2nd violin emerges, playing a long trill, a new drone background. Things get very busy in part two, but the thread of the drone, in one form or another, is ever prominent. The trilling, for one thing, carries on for about the first sixth of the section. Other drones make themselves heard later, such as cello and viola playing both trill and tremolo near the bridge; or again, a drumming figure in the 2nd violin, with the other three instruments lending reinforcement by tapping their strings with the stick of the bow.

Around this droning, a small, dance-like forward-and-back melody spins itself out and goes through an amazing number of transformations as the section unfolds. The cello puts things in play with rolling, strummed pizzicato chords. Things whirl on feverishly, through freewheeling rhythmic settings; plaintive or brutal variations; eerie and breathless moments; and on into waltz-time version. Intoxication takes hold, with the sound literally reeling, slipping, sliding. The brakes start going on until the crisis is reached: a screaming chord, triple forte, played with intense vibrato.

The tight chords return, signaling the transition to the Ricapitolazione, just as they had the end of Part One. The Ricapitolazione is a brief section: three pages of score as compared with five in Part One. Though a restatement of the opening section of the quartet, it is colored by the experience of Part Two. Everything is now calmer, more reflective than in the quartet's beginning.

Yet again we hear the tight chords, now giving us entry to the Coda. In measures of infinite weariness, a little glissando slide runs through all four instruments...

And we're off! In the Coda the melodic ideas of the quartet are whipped into a last, wild frenzy. The four instruments chase each other closely, doggedly, pile up into a log-jam of sound, tear apart from one another. The maelstrom ends with the same snapping chords that have served as landmarks throughout the course of the work.

String Quartet No. 4
Allegro
Prestissimo, con sordino
Non troppo lento
Allegretto pizzicato
Allegro molto

The *Fourth Quartet* of Béla Bartók was written in 1928. Considerably longer than its predecessor of the year before, it is constructed of fully five movements. Of these, the fourth, *Allegretto pizzicato*, reflects the innovative temper of the work: true to its title, it is played in plucked strings, with not a bowed note anywhere. And what pizzicato! The buzzing kind,

All this excitement highlights the surprise of the passage that occurs shortly before the end of the movement: we seem to stumble suddenly on a lone violinist (here, the 2nd violin), practicing a scale in quavering tones, or as Bartók instructs, "with indifference." To this writer, it seems that Bartók is poking fun at his movement's theme fragment, drawn here in bare-bones caricature. Others have seen it as a wry comment on his long service as piano teacher at the Budapest Academy, something he gave up in the year this quartet was written. In any event, the foursome takes up the hue and cry with renewed vigor in the race toward the final double bar.

Like the entire quartet, this finale is great fun to play, but it is not for the faint of heart. Especially in the madcap passages of the last movement, the performer who gets lost may never be found again!

String Quartet No. 6
Mesto; Vivace
Mesto; Marcia
Mesto; Burletta
Mesto

Bartók's ability to put his wonderful command of sound and his composer's craftsmanship at the service of the expressive goal of his music is particularly well demonstrated by the *Sixth Quartet*. The quiet mood of the slow movements of both the *Fourth* and *Fifth Quartets* carries over into the *Sixth*, but with even more powerful intensity. *Mesto* ("Sad") is the title of the prelude to each of the first three movements, and also of the entire finale, where it attains overwhelming impact.

The *Mesto* grows with each appearance, somewhat in length, but more noticeably in sound. The first, about one minute long, is for viola alone. The second involves all four instruments, but is really written for two prominent parts—the cello as prominent voice, with the muted 1st violin in duet with it—supported by the muted and tremolo inner voices. The 2nd violin is left in solo in the last two measures to preview the theme of the succeeding *Marcia*. Both violins and the cello start the third *Mesto*, with the viola joining in the tenth measure. Over all, the thematic activity involves all four parts, though the cello

The second and fourth movements are spine-tinglers: the sound shimmers, hovers in the air, casting a spell. A moment of special fascination in the second movement combines the tremolo of the 2nd violin with whispering scale-wise runs in the other three voices. A turbulent episode, the only such in the whole movement, subsides in a return to quietness. To end, Bartók tapers the sound down to a muted version of the opening's whisps of trill among the several instruments, fading away at last in a notated, descending quasi glissando run by the cello, a composed exhalation.

The fourth movement, again, begins with a gathering of sound, from high, from low, from the middle registers, this time with the added color of pizzicato. The little scale-run from the second movement appears again in the fourth, this time as a longer swirl of notes. This *Andante*, too, offers its area of exciting (rather stormy) climax. Also like the *Adagio molto*, this movement tapers away in reflection of its beginning. Now though, the cello exits in a brief succession of upward moving, plucked glissando chords.

First and last movements of the quartet are also related. The opening *Allegro* starts with a hammering on B flat; from this the music flares out to start the movement. Some seven minutes later, Bartók ends with the same tone. The characteristic drumming on a repeated note is heard at various landmark points in the movement, each time a notch or two higher, as though Bartók is marking out a pathway in sound. The music that moves on and around these stations does a lot of climbing up and down on its own. One of the most exciting passages in the whole movement is that in which all four instruments step on each other's heels, in that pile-up of voices that is so effectively used by Bartók: two against two, then four parts, all chasing one another.

The opening measures of the last movement are like a fuse: they sputter along, then suddenly the movement explodes around them into a wild dance on a scale-wise melodic pattern. As in the first movement, so here in the fifth the music of the finale's opening recurs periodically. Between these mileposts the music races frenetically. Some of the excitement comes from the stacking of voices; but there are two spots where the four instruments flare out in a great vortex of sound.

where the finger-tip is hooked under the string, pulling it up and releasing it to snap against the fingerboard of the instrument. Glissando pizzicato, where the player slides from the first note of a pair to the next with the left hand. Harp-style, arpeggiando sweeping of chords. Guitar-like strumming of the strings. And a glassy kind of pizzicato, played close to the bridge of the instrument. The various kinds of pizzicato are even combined simultaneously. The colors and textures are things of fantasy.

In fact, every movement of the quartet offers new surprises of sound. But in the overall plan of the quartet the five are tightly linked to one another. The outline of the work has been compared to that of an arch: first and last movements, the ends of the arch; second and fourth, the next innermost components; and movement three, the *Non troppo lento*, the keystone of the structure.

The opening and final movements end in very similar fashion—with a sprint section that lands finally on a little melodic curve: D, E flat/F sharp, F, E flat/E natural, D flat, C, with additional tones lending spice and crunchiness to the succession of chords, all played heavily and broadly. The feeling of stability, of standing firmly on the two feet of the grand structural arch of the quartet, is very marked. This is especially so since we can see, from the very beginning of the work, that the melodic fragment just quoted is the kernel of the composition. It appears first in the cello in bar seven of the first movement. There it is spelled out as B, C, D flat, C, B, B flat. And it is in this version, made up entirely of a succession of half-step intervals, the smallest spacing available to us in our conventional gamut of tones, that the melodic figure plays its role as the molecular basis of the work. Indeed, all four instruments work up to this fragment from the first measure of the quartet, rubbing out a series of half-steps until the complete melodic element finally emerges in the cello part.

As the movement runs its course, you hear the half-step figure win out over all contrasting, opposing elements in the movement, while itself appearing in ever-new aspects. One of the most striking of these is a sizzling trill figure, the tightest, most condensed melodic expression of the half-step idea.

The second movement, *Prestissimo con sordino*, has to be perceived in its relation to the fourth movement; the two have the most striking sounds in the entire quartet. The fourth, played pizzicato; the second, bowed, but in hushed, whispering, running mode, with the mute (sordino) helping the instruments give the impression of scurrying, rustling celerity.

The opening line of the *Prestissimo* offers a stepped-up, extended sweep of the half-step motion inherited from the first movement. In this fast version is color, mystery, excitement. The dovetailing of bits and pieces of sound among the four instruments presents a fascinating interplay to the listener. A particularly interesting moment occurs midway through the movement, where Bartók piles slide upon slide to create a shimmering wave of sound.

All this speed and steam can end only by boiling off. And indeed, the movement seems finally to evaporate, a last little wisp of glissando trailing off into silence. The same holds true of the fourth movement, which at its end bubbles around, disappearing at last in one vaporous chord. In general, the fourth movement is a funny-mirror reflection of the second. It's humorous, jaunty, sardonic, gay. And—wheels within wheels!—the theme of the pizzicato movement is again an extension of the nuclear arch that has sparked the quartet from its beginning.

The meshing of musical gears continues in the last movement. Here, secondary melodic statements from the first movement set the stage for the gradual and irresistible return of the germinal theme that will blare forth to end the quartet.

The third movement, structural center of this composition, offers rest from the hectic activity of the outer movements. Bartók drew peace and restored strength from the woodland countryside; one might picture that kind of setting as the inspiration for this music. The violin solo, especially, seems to suggest a forest scene. Evident to the listener, in any case, is the structural balance of the movement, serving as a fulcrum for the entire quartet. The beginning and end of this “Not too slow” chapter are like mirror-images of each other: growing at the start from one thread of sound (1st violin) and returning to that same lone voice at the close.

For both performer and audience, the *Fourth Quartet* is a challenging and fulfilling experience: fresh sounds, readily discernible musical architecture, convincing expressive purpose—an all too rare combination of traits.

String Quartet No. 5

Allegro

Adagio molto

Scherzo: Alla bulgarese

Andante

Finale: Allegro vivace

Bartók's *Fifth*, expansive and bold, is the longest of his six quartets (closely followed by the *First* and *Sixth*). Commissioned in 1934 by America's prominent chamber music patroness, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, it was apparently written in the incredibly short period of one month. The same general structural outline is followed here as in the *Fourth Quartet*: five movements, related to each other in arch fashion. The two fast end movements are again the feet of the arch. Now, however, the second and fourth movements are slow; the central third movement is fast.

The sounds in this work, though certainly interesting, are not as bizarre and attention-claiming as in the *Fourth*. It's as though Bartók takes newness of sound more in stride, having explored that realm especially in the second and fourth movements of the earlier quartet.

In the present work, one focus of our attention should well be on the rhythm of the third movement. It has an unfamiliar swing, plucked out (almost like the drum-beat in a jazz combo) by the cello at the start: one-two-three-four, one-two, one-two-three/ one-two-three-four, one-two, one-two-three... Recite this pattern several times and it comes to seem normal. It is, after all, a distinctive re-grouping of what we would otherwise call our familiar 9/8 meter. The *bulgarese* in the movement title indicates that Bartók derived this rhythmic pattern from folk music, that it is not some tricky kind of writing, but rather something quite close to our instinctive feelings.

Bartók switches to another unfamiliar count in the middle, Trio section of the movement. Now the pulse is 3-2-2-3. Played at speed, the notes merge into a background for a saucy “whistling” tune. After the Trio, Bartók returns to the melodies of the opening bulgarese, as in the da capo of the traditional *Scherzo*.