Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

NEW MILESTONES
STRING QUARTET EVOLUTION

2019–2020
50TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
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Anna Clyne's Breathing Statues *was commissioned by* ***Music Accord****, a consortium that commissions new works in the chamber music, instrumental recital, and song genres. Music Accord is comprised of top classical music presenting organizations, including the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.*

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NEW MILESTONES

STRING QUARTET EVOLUTION: GUBAIDULINA'S STRING QUARTET NO. 4

ANNA CLYNE
(b. 1980)

***Breathing Statues* for String Quartet** (2019) (CMS Co-Commission)

CONLON NANCARROW
(1912-1997)

Quartet No. 1 for Strings (1945)
- Allegro molto
- Andante moderato
- Prestissimo

JOAN TOWER
(b. 1938)

***White Water* for String Quartet** (2011)

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA
(b. 1931)

Quartet No. 4 for Strings with Tape (1993)

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

"Must it be? It must be," reads Beethoven's note in his last string quartet, the Op. 135 in F major. The self-contained inquiry underlines the hesitant musical question that is followed by two repetitions of a firm answer, punctuated by poignant silences. Beethoven came late to the quartet genre, perhaps chafing under mounting pressure to respond to towering examples by Mozart and Haydn. And yet, in finally exploring it by the age of 27 and continuing through his last major work, he found the inherent challenge of the medium to his liking. There is a Platonic perfection in the symmetry, the transparency of the instrumentation; daunting and inspiring is the sheer craft required to draw coloristic variety out of four timbral siblings.

Just as his immediate forebears in Vienna hung over a young Beethoven's head, so too does the legacy of Beethoven's 16 quartets stimulate the imaginations of most every composer who has since attempted to scale that hallowed peak of chamber music. Though the 20th century yielded a bevy of branching aesthetic philosophies—including diverging opinions about the ability of music to represent non-musical objects—and a trove of extended string techniques to apply in their service, an entry into the quartet medium by necessity implicates a conversation or an argument with the genre's past. Just as the two violins, viola, and cello are placed into internal dialogue, so too is the work, as a whole, poised to square up with that weighty question, "Must it be?"

In her work, explicitly inspired by the Beethoven quartets, Anna Clyne sculpts material quoted from that cycle, taking advantage of the dexterity of modern performance practice to craft complex and exacting rhythmic passages. Clyne's expression markings, reading "getting weirder" and "oppressed," signal to the performer that her narrative arc has roots extending beyond the container of music alone, a trait shared by Joan Tower's *White Water*, which is intended as a sonic sculpture of motion—a representation of a running river.

That investment in extra-musical representation—a repudiation of self-contained, absolute music—is shared in turn by Sofia Gubaidulina, who has spoken of her desire to create music that is ritual and narrative, and in her Fourth Quartet creates a space beyond live music with electronics and elements of technical theater. Gubaidulina's graphically notated ricochets simulate dialogue within the larger disagreement of two taped string quartets playing less than a half-step apart.

The cyclical chase of the canons in Conlon Nancarrow's Quartet No. 1 demonstrates another perspective on the debate stage of the string quartet. Nancarrow's canons chase each other throughout the piece, and a continual motion drives his ideas to their conclusion. The syncopations driving Nancarrow's and Tower's work reveal that both owe as much fealty to jazz and blues as to the classical tradition.

Breathing Statues for String Quartet

ANNA CLYNE

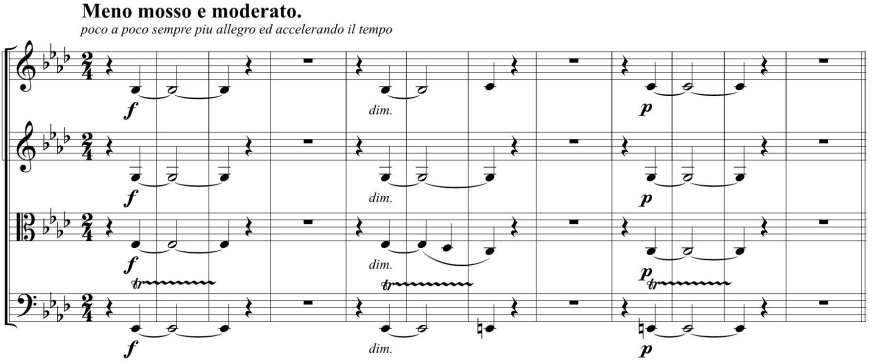
- Born March 9, 1980 in London.

Composed in 2019.

- Premiered on February 20, 2020 in Princeton, NJ by the Calidore Quartet.
- Duration: 16 minutes

London-born composer Anna Clyne has a history of working with fixed media, manipulating pre-existing sonic material into a new assemblage. Every piece on her debut album, *Blue Moth* (Tzadik, 2012) included an interaction with tape recordings. In *Breathing Statues*, she treats quotations and fragments of late Beethoven quartets in a similar fashion: as fixed, yet living, ideas.

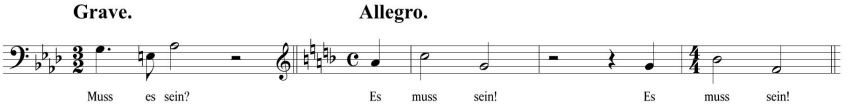
Clyne found her initial inspiration for *Breathing Statues* in "a poignant moment in the *Grosse Fuge* where the music stops and, in between moments of silence, breathes as it shifts from a root position E-flat major chord to a first inversion C major chord."



This idea of the music breathing reminded her of "another poignant moment in the Op. 130 B-flat major Quartet (for which the *Grosse Fuge* was originally the final movement) when the lower strings provide a pulsing accompaniment to a violin melody that is marked *beklemmt* (oppressed, heavy of heart) and the voice almost stutters as if out of breath."

Clyne does not simply embed passages of late Beethoven into her own musical landscape, but transforms and processes them, amassing a broad palette of emotions and textures. The alchemy Clyne performs on these dispatches from the 19th century reaffirms Beethoven's own decree that his work was "for a later age."

Op. 135's last movement is titled "Der schwer gefasste Entschluss" (The Difficult Decision) and it is there where Clyne begins her meditative journey. The movement opens with a searching three-note melody and the words "Muss es sein?" answered by the inversion of the phrase and beginning the Allegro that follows: "Es muss sein!"



As annotator Patrick Castillo writes, "This opening section gradually morphs into a strange echo of Beethoven before giving flight to music of 'suppressed intensity' (per the composer's expressive marking), based on the Cavatina from Op. 130. Pulsing chords, played *sul tasto* by the lower strings, accompany the first violin melody, which Clyne marks "oppressed, stuttered breath," echoing Beethoven's own marking (*Beklemmt*). This music soon blossoms into a fanciful cantabile. After descending to a tentative *pianissimo*, the quartet grandly summons the *Grosse Fuge*.

Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the most prominent German-language poets of the last few centuries, was himself a Beethoven devotee. The composer writes, 'The concept of breath—of the music and musicians breathing—sometimes together and sometimes apart, reminded me of Rilke's poem *On Music*, from which *Breathing Statues* derives its title.'"

On Music
Music: the breathing of statues. Perhaps:
the silence of paintings. Language where
language ends. Time
that stands head-up in the direction
of hearts that wear out.

Feeling...for whom? Place where feeling is
transformed...into what? Into a countryside we can hear.
Music: you stranger. You feeling space, growing
away from us. The deepest thing in us, that
rising above us, forces its way out...
a holy goodbye:
when the innermost point in us stands
outside, as amazing space, as the other
side of the air:
pure,
immense,
not for us to live in now.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Clyne writes, "Breathing Statues is dedicated to Nils Vigeland in celebration of his 70th birthday and with thanks for his mentorship." ◆

Quartet No. 1 for Strings

CONLON NANCARROW

- Born October 27, 1912 in Texarkana, AR.
- Died August 10, 1997 in Mexico City.

Composed in 1945.

- Duration: 11 minutes

Conlon Nancarrow's name has become almost synonymous with the canon, that fugue-indebted and yet quintessentially American construction that sets multiple statements of the exact same melodic line careening after each other in blissful contrapuntal harmony or discordance. After a youth spent studying jazz trumpet and classical composition, Nancarrow was effectively exiled to Mexico City in 1940 due to murky political allegiances. Beginning anew as a somewhat hermitic ex-pat, Nancarrow explored hyper-complex rhythms that led him to an obsession with the player piano, which could reproduce rigorous polyrhythms with a precision unmatched by any live musician. His Studies for the instrument consumed his life from 1948 through 1992. Eventually, certain intrepid human musicians—the Arditti Quartet foremost among them—began to reclaim this complex mechanical music for live performance.

Dated 1945, three years before he would punch out his first piano roll, the First String Quartet foreshadows Nancarrow's eventual hyper-technical direction even as it demonstrates the influence of Walter Piston and Nicolas Slonimsky, two of his former professors. Canons abound throughout its three movements—in fact, the second movement is a near-perfect canon, transposed across the voices in perfect interval relationships, which lends distinct sweetness that would become increasingly rare as Nancarrow's oeuvre complexified. That restless nature is expressed clearly in the rhythmic drive maintained throughout the work, a characteristic that recalls the jazz Nancarrow played in his youth. An instruction to slap and pop the cello strings in the third movement is styled rather transparently after the walking line of an upright bass in a jazz combo. The most significant harbinger of Nancarrow's evolution is this early foray into individual tempos and accelerations. Throughout the work, Nancarrow breaks rhythms into irregular divisions of the beat in order to give the impression of voices accelerating against each other. One can easily imagine the progression from there to his scale of tempi, one of the cornerstones of his later compositional practice. ◆

THROUGHOUT THE WORK, NANCARROW BREAKS RHYTHMS INTO IRREGULAR DIVISIONS OF THE BEAT IN ORDER TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF VOICES ACCELERATING AGAINST EACH OTHER.

White Water for String Quartet

JOAN TOWER

- Born September 6, 1938 in New Rochelle, NY.

Composed in 2011.

- Premiered on April 14, 2012 at Chamber Music Monterey Bay in Carmel, California by the Daedalus String Quartet.
- First CMS performance (and NY premiere) on January 31, 2013 by the Daedalus Quartet.
- Duration: 18 minutes

Joan Tower thinks of composers in three camps: there are composers who want to envelop the audience in their work and communicate something powerful; there are those who care about the audience, but have their own agenda, and those who do not consider the audience at all. As the first woman to win the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music, in 1990, Tower takes pride in her membership in the first camp. She is by all rights a touchstone for a more accessible, friendly school of late 20th- and early 21st-century classical music, having reconsidered the merits of the rigorous atonal serialism of her mid-century Columbia doctorate. Tower's eighth decade yielded two luminous string quartets, cementing her legacy in contemporary iterations of the genre. Her five quartets—beginning with 1994's "Night Fields"—tend to emphasize tiny motivic cells that rearrange and recombine themselves throughout the works, passing around the ensemble.

White Water was the first of four commissions for Chamber Music Monterey Bay's "Arc of Life" project. The artist Bill Viola shared excerpts from his video installation "Going Forth by Day"—a depiction of life in all its stages—with the four commissioned composers to serve as their inspirational focal point. Joan Tower writes: "When I saw [Bill] Viola's work, I was quite fascinated with how he used water as an encompassing image which influenced everything I saw about the 'person' inside the water. My piece is not directly associated by what he specifically did but it does have a strong connection to the image of water as a powerful basic idea and action. The many glissandos hopefully create a 'fluid' environment that connects the various ideas and registers together, while 'white water' somehow implies more rapid 'cascading' types of action which occur throughout the piece."

Tower expertly conjures a river's current. Opening with a trickle of viola and cello slowly welling out of the headwaters, a continually upward motion augmented by glissandos reaches surfacewards. Soon, the music spills over and begins to run downhill. Slowing briefly, the stream abruptly becomes a torrent and overflows. Tower continues to use the motif of the glissando to evoke running water, ebbing and flowing. *White Water* remains driving and rhythmic throughout—at times furiously gushing towards the sea, at times lazily flowing through

fields. The influence of both jazz and Latin American folk music—redolent of Tower's youth, spent largely in Bolivia—is audible here as well. *White Water* holds the listener in suspense until the closing resolution, a Picardy third, releases the tension suspended in the river as it runs into the delta. ◆

Quartet No. 4 for Strings with Tape

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

▸ Born October 24, 1931 in Chistopol, Russia.

Composed in 1993.

▸ Premiered in 1994 in New York City by the Kronos Quartet.

▸ Duration: 12 minutes

In 1959, partway through her continued studies of composition and piano at the Moscow Conservatory, Sofia Gubaidulina met Dmitri Shostakovich and played for him the symphony she had recently written as her final examination. Shostakovich praised the young composer's work and told her to "continue along your mistaken path." Following his advice expectedly worsened the shadow of the Soviet authorities, which escalated dramatically after the end of Khrushchev's Thaw in 1964. In 1979, the Union of Soviet Composers blacklisted her as one of the Khrennikov Seven for writing "noisy mud instead of musical innovation, unconnected with real life." However, Gubaidulina took the denunciation in stride, enduring the poverty that arose from the subsequent lack of paying commissions in order to take advantage of the creative liberty it afforded her.

By 1993, thanks to the fall of the Iron Curtain, Gubaidulina found herself resettled in Hamburg. The Quartet No. 4, from that unencumbered year, suffers from no shortage of modern techniques and philosophies far removed from those approved by the Soviet authorities.

Gubaidulina focused on "how the 'real' arises from the 'unreal'"—the dialogue of the physical and the intangible—in three carefully considered and totally original methods. First, "the normal play of *arco* or *pizzicato*" juxtaposed with the exaggerated texture of the playing of a plastic ball on the strings. Moreover, the "'real' playing of the quartet physically present on stage" is distinct from the "'unreal' play of the same performers on pre-recorded tape," detuned by a microtonal interval from the live quartet in order to blur the work's temperament. Bringing in technical theater elements, the detailed lighting instructions that Gubaidulina includes with the piece are intended to distinguish "the real essence of the light from the unreal (creatively speaking) white and black light. (Black and white, after all, represent the absence of light. Color loses its reality within them.)"

From these three methods, "three trinities resulted: (1) the sound of

the quartet and its two recorded hypostases, (2) the real form and its two recorded satellites, and (3) the creative reality of the play of light and its two ordinary (i.e., unreal) protagonists: complete light and complete darkness."

Gubaidulina cites the *Four Quartets* of T.S. Eliot as inspiration for this dichotomous approach. "If my composition were to be heard and perceived as a musical reaction to the creative world of this great poet, I would be content." ◆

Josh Davidoff is a New York-based composer and arts administrator.