

Ligeti String Quartets Barber Adagio
Keller Quartett

ECM NEW SERIES



György Ligeti
Samuel Barber

Keller Quartett

György Ligeti (1923–2006)

- 1 **String Quartet No. 1** (1953–54) 22:08
Métamorphoses nocturnes

Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

- 2 **Molto adagio** 7:42
from String Quartet op. 11 (1935–36)

András Keller violin

János Pilz violin

Zoltán Gál viola

Judit Szabó violoncello





György Ligeti

3–7	String Quartet No. 2 (1968)	21:02
I	Allegro nervoso	4:50
II	Sostenuto, molto calmo	4:48
III	Come un meccanismo di precisione	3:37
IV	Presto furioso, brutale, tumultuoso	2:09
V	Allegro con delicatezza – stets sehr mild	5:36

András Keller violin
Zsófia Környei violin
Zoltán Gál viola
Judit Szabó violoncello



where is home

When Ligeti's Second Quartet was receiving its early performances, forty years or so ago, to programme it with the Barber *Adagio* would have been unthinkable. Ligeti was new music; Barber, though he was actively composing, was not. What could a work that took Webern as starting point say to an adagio in B flat minor? The Ligeti quartet was surely everything the Barber movement was not: novel in its soundscape, restlessly exploratory, suspicious of former rhetoric, questing and questioning. It appeared to show the Barber, long established as a popular classic through the composer's transcription for orchestral strings, as irrelevant to the progress of music, a mis-step from a year, 1936, that had also seen the composition of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, Schoenberg's Fourth Quartet and Varèse's *Density 21.5* – or, to limit the field to compatriots and close contemporaries of Barber's, works by John Cage and Elliott Carter. This was Ligeti's continuing tradition; Barber's was in the deep past. Ligeti was all about leaving what for Barber was solid home.

How times have changed.

How a recording can change them.

As presented here, Ligeti's music and Barber's no longer seem to come from separate, even antagonistic universes. This is partly because both belong to the world of performance, because both are

being drawn out of their time haunts into the immediate present, the now of fingers and bows on strings, of resonating wood (whose character is heard with such warm clarity in the pizzicato middle movement of the Ligeti Second Quartet especially). Physically actualized in the recording, the music is also being all the time remade by performers searching for what a motif can convey, must convey, and finding an abundance of expressive contours in Ligeti's quartets as much as in Barber's. The gesture of lament, of course, is common to both, if differently articulated. But what startles in these performances is the urgency of that gesture, whether in Barber or in Ligeti, and the destabilized ground on which it takes place.

The Barber, needless to say, is a tonal composition, one whose means would have been fully understood half a century before the piece was written. By 1936, though, those means had lost their universality, and the Keller Quartett's performance speaks of that loss. The almost *non vibrato* entry of the first violin removes any clothing of confidence: this is an instrument coming naked into the world, and showing, when increasing its vibration, only a flickering of insecurity. Its steps are tentative. They also lead nowhere, in a lodgeless world, ever returning and ever retracing. When the high point is reached, by all four instruments, it is the discovery of light but of a light that cannot be seen, because we are forced to tighten

our eyes against it. And the final chord is more expiration than arrival, more exhaustion than homecoming.

Ligeti's distrust or uncertainty, where homes are concerned, he revealed in his attitudes to his own early work, even as those attitudes changed. One relic of his Hungarian-Bartókian-ethnographical past was his string quartet *Métamorphoses nocturnes* (1953–54), which he took with him when he left Budapest toward the end of 1956, and which had a performance in Vienna a year and a half later. The work had been too challenging for presentation back home, but for Ligeti, who by the time of its première had worked on three electronic pieces in Cologne, it was not challenging enough. Though he implicitly legitimized it by calling his next quartet "No. 2", he did not encourage further performances, and the quartet was not recorded until 1976. By then changes in his way of working – including, soon, a renewed enthusiasm for folk music – were beginning to make his *Métamorphoses nocturnes* less distant. What the Keller Quartett's performance demonstrates is that this 'prehistoric' work (the composer's own term) is already fully Ligetian in its busy polyphony, its abundance of new colours and its dissatisfaction with received information, even – or especially – the information it was so skilfully incorporating from Hungarian sources, rustic and learned.

That intensity of dissatisfaction, conjoined with great authority, is vitally communicated by this recording. Ligeti was ably proceeding from Bartók (whose Sixth Quartet, we should recall, was barely more than a decade old), and achieving a continuous concatenation of episodes – atmospheric, macabre, dancing, humorous – threaded through with references to a motif that magically first emerges, in the form G–A–G–A, as a variation on parallel chromatic scales. Other features include the progressive expansion and contraction of intervals to move from oscillations to more jagged contours and back again (in the Prestissimo towards the close), as well as the first signs of a concern with string harmonics. The Keller Quartett realize all these aspects of the music's power and drive – and all its details, not least a wonderful pizzicato glissando – while suggesting, also, that for the composer they are not sufficient. What is home for this music, the home it at once establishes and undermines, is a place to leave. The last trailing statements of the main motif come from instruments that, after a tipsy farewell party, are already moving on.

Yet even the remarkable Second Quartet is not the destination, rather a waystage. Ligeti wrote it swiftly, between March and July 1968, at a time when, in parallel with the *événements* in Paris, what remained of the musical avantgarde's solidarity, always more wishful than binding, was breaking down. So was its pursuit of

innovation. On this point Ligeti has always been wary, as witness his playful introduction of quasi-human vocalizing into the supposedly pure electronic medium in the last of his 1957–58 essays, *Artikulation*, or the echoes of the late Romantic orchestra that had filtered into his *Lontano* the year before the quartet, or his choice of the quartet genre at all. More than his contemporaries who had been brought up in western Europe, he was aware that history cannot be forgotten. “The entire string quartet tradition from Beethoven to Webern is there somewhere in the quartet,” he was to say, “even sonata form, although only like an immured corpse.” That final word, though, is significant. No sooner does he mention the most central feature of the central tradition than he stops himself. Amnesia may be impossible, but there are parts of history that have died. The past is another country. We are no longer at home there.

Hence the need Ligeti felt to redefine the quartet, which he did by redefining its sound. In particular, harmonics are no longer exceptional; indeed, they are almost the rule, creating a music that glistens. The effort to produce those harmonics, at the level of intonational clarity the piece demands, explains the long gap before the first performance, which the LaSalle Quartet, then the leading exponents of the quartets of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, gave in Baden-Baden on December 14, 1969. Almost half a century later, the work

is as near as any quartet of its period to being part of the repertory, which means not only that its technical difficulties have been absorbed but also that it can profit from a performance that, as this one does, brings fresh and keenly expressive life to its sounds, with whistling harmonics of mystery, pain or hilarity and marvellous effects of bending intonation when one instrument slides past another.

Unlike its predecessor, the Second Quartet is in distinct movements – five of them, in homage to Bartók's Fourth and Fifth Quartets, if with markings more reminiscent of Berg's *Lyric Suite* (*Allegro nervoso* and *Prestissimo sfrenato* in the first movement). However, the principle of continuous variation is maintained.

"I wanted to realize one and the same concept in the five movements of the string quartet", Ligeti recalled, and went on: "In the first movement the structure is largely broken up, as in the Requiem or in *Aventures*: one could almost describe it as an instrumental variant of these works. In the second movement everything is reduced to very slow motion... The third movement is a pizzicato piece... The net-formations, which were very soft until this point, now become hard and mechanical: the movement is like a machine that breaks down... The fourth movement is a very brutal movement... Everything that had happened before is now crammed together... And the fifth movement – in great contrast

with the compressed fourth – spreads itself out just, just... like a cloud.”

The first movement is concerned very much with abrupt changes from slow to fast and back again, with vigorous gallops being suddenly braked into stillness, and then as suddenly set racing again. On the melodic level, these changes are equalled by transitions from highly angular motion to tremolando, developed from the First Quartet almost beyond recognition. The second movement introduces specified quarter-tones into the cluster image; the third is one of Ligeti's misbehaving clocks, just as the finale is one of his coloured clouds. The work, which had become very physical and near in its fourth movement, withdraws again from us.

Ligeti himself again referred to his Requiem in connection with this last movement, comparing it with that earlier work's *Lacrimosa*, but this is music also of teeming life. Precisely midway through the movement there arrives a moment of poignancy – extreme poignancy, Barberian, as it is in this most characterful recording – which Ligeti typically follows with a smokescreen in the form of a rushing quadruple helix, which typically comes adrift. The temptation to start over suggests itself, with reminiscences of the movement's quivering start, but it is as useless to seek a new beginning as to bemoan our fate. Once again the music ends with a departure.

Paul Griffiths

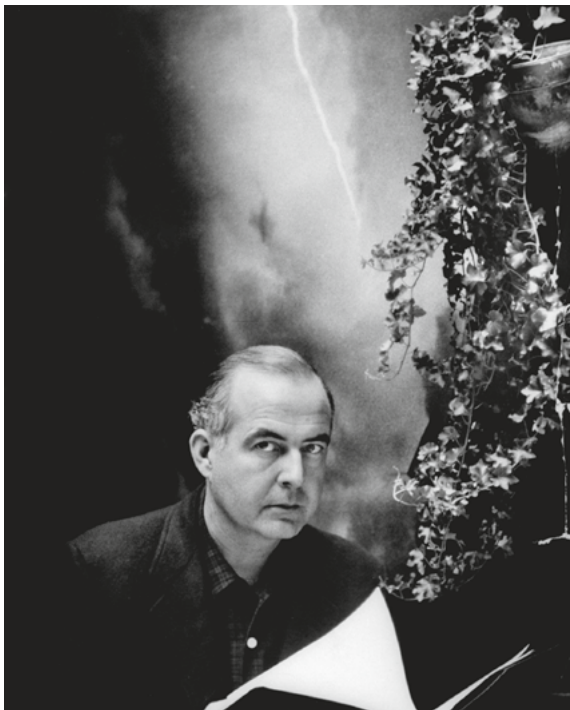
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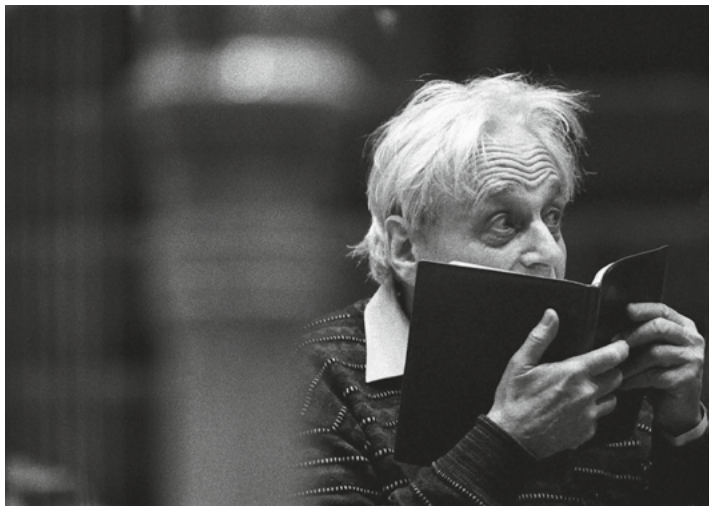
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