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Postmodernism and the professional String Quartet

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Postmodernism and the Professional String Quartet

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2010

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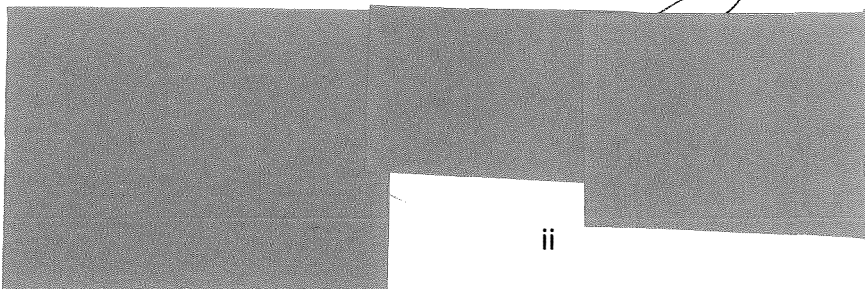
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I. Introduction

While there had always been quartets that specialized in modern music, Kronos was the first post-modern quartet.¹

This claim by classical music critic, Mark Swed, naturally raises the question of what exactly is a postmodern quartet, if it is possible to apply such a definition in the first place. In this essay, I will endeavour to describe certain attributes of postmodernism, which have been embraced by a growing number of professional string quartets since the latter quarter of the twentieth century. This will be discussed in relation to repertoire (new and existing), and performance culture. By no means attempting to provide a detailed list of every ensemble making efforts in this area, I will provide examples of different approaches by several contemporary quartets, who represent a broad range of postmodern practices in existence today. These quartets, which include the Kronos, Balanescu and Turtle Island string quartets, are passionate about their medium and equally committed to sharing this passion. They are making a conscious effort to revitalise and redefine the string quartet. They are making their idiom more relevant to and in tune with contemporary society and attempting to close the gap between classical and popular music, simultaneously increasing accessibility without compromising skill, musicianship, or integrity.

Examples of these efforts, relating to the above categories, include incorporating different styles of music previously alien to the quartet repertoire, performing in alternative venues, collaborating with non-classical and non-musical artists, and presenting an image more akin to that of a rock group. Although many of these ensembles' practices reflect postmodern attitudes, I will refrain from labeling them as "postmodern quartets," as I feel that to pigeon-hole any artist in this way is potentially restrictive and unhelpful, especially as postmodernism itself evades

¹ Mark Swed, "An Eclectic Lineup, Fit for the Kronos," *New York Times*, January 22, 1989, Arts section.

precise definition. Before elaborating on specific professional quartets, I will put their practices into context by briefly examining postmodern theory and its musical implications, as well as the development of the string quartet itself, from the perspectives of both the performers and the audience.

II. Postmodern Tendencies

A. *Some Descriptors*

Defying precise definition, postmodernism as a movement and aesthetic is more easily discussed in terms of observable attributes. Genre mixing, immediacy and the narrowing of the gap between high and low art are key features. In relation to music, genre mixing, also known as hybridity, can be seen in both the mixing of disparate musical genres as well as the mixing of music with different artistic genres, especially in performance. The mixing of musical genres often takes the form of a hybrid between formal European traditions, such as classical forms or romantic harmony, and non-European styles, such as rap, jazz or world music.² The genres can be historically, geographically, or culturally disparate. Composers such as John Zorn and Alfred Schnittke often employ direct quotations and juxtapose diverse source material.

With regard to hybrid artistic performances, one can witness the mixing of music with theatre, dance, film or even balloon artistry, in novel ways that evade categorisation. Fredric Jameson avoids the hybridity tag and prefers the term "*pastiche*," which he uses to describe the "*blank parody*" of juxtaposed, disparate styles in a world where everything has already been invented and innovation is no longer possible.³ The creation of completely new styles is viewed as redundant,

² Garth Alper, "Making sense out of postmodern music?" *Popular Music and Society* 24:4 (Winter 2000): 2.

³ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 114-115.

and all there is left to do is to cut and paste what already exists, which, however, could be seen as new in its potential of different approaches, if not in its nature. With this blending of different musical and artistic genres, distinctions between art music (“high art”) and popular music (“low art”) begin to blur, and old lines need to be re-drawn or erased.

Accessibility to these manipulated worldwide musical styles and traditions is facilitated by recent rapid progress in the field of technology. As Jonathan Kramer summarises, postmodernism “considers technology not only as a way to preserve and transmit music but also as deeply implicated in the production and essence of music.”⁴ The fragmentation, discontinuity and multiplicity created by technology has had a direct impact on postmodern artistic endeavours.⁵ Moreover, information is instantly available at the touch of a button, and surface exposure to different musical genres and worldwide music traditions no longer requires trips to specialist record stores or travel to foreign lands. This sense of immediacy and lack of distinction between past and present underpins much postmodern theory⁶ and is discernable in the repertoire of many of the ensembles to be discussed. Combined with an emphasis on relevance and vitality, these features are also reflected in the performance practices of certain quartets. From less formal dress and venues, to eclectic programming, to the incorporation of modern technologies, to encouraging spontaneous applause, a selection of professional string quartets are turning established performance tradition on its head and giving audiences experiences closer to those of popular music concerts.

⁴ Jonathan D. Kramer, “The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism,” *Current Musicology* (Spring 1999): 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

B. *Reactions against Modernism*

In relation to the preceding cultural movement of “modernism,” postmodernism can be seen, in part, as an attempt to reject and re-evaluate associated theory and practice. Emerging in the early twentieth century, modernism sought to totally rewrite the rulebook by inventing completely new concepts such as total serialism, with its twelve-tone rows instead of conventional tonality or modality. Composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Milton Babbitt presented the public with intellectually and aurally challenging works in which general public acceptance was not a priority. As Schoenberg argued, “if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art.”⁷ A conscious, elitist attitude prevailed, elevating “art” above popular culture and propagating the notion of the genius composer. In reaction to this, postmodern theory, emerging since the 1960s, advocates the removal of an artistic hierarchy, putting popular and art music on a level playing field, crossing the boundaries and even obliterating their distinction altogether.⁸

While modernism (and preceding musical movements) saw itself improving upon past practices in a sustained evolutionary chain of development, postmodernism avoids linear thinking and is happy to acknowledge the past without feeling superior to it.⁹ Another facet to the reaction against modernism has been a steady return to tonality,¹⁰ such as observed in minimalism. This can be observed within the works of individual composers. For example, American composer George Rochberg, once strongly influenced by Schoenberg and Anton Webern, discarded serialism in 1964 and began incorporating a much greater amount of tonality into his works, even quoting Beethoven and Mahler in

⁷ Franklin, Peter. “Audiences, Critics and the Depurification of Music: Reflections on a 1920s Controversy.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 114, no.1 (1989): 80.

⁸ Alper, 1.

⁹ Kramer, 12.

¹⁰ Alper, 3.

his *Third String Quartet* (which is a fine example of musical pastiche).¹¹ This return to tonality has helped make musical works accessible to a wider audience.

III. The String Quartet

A. Beginnings

The string quartet first emerged as a distinct idiom in the late 1750's¹² and is often regarded as the highest form of chamber music.¹³ This combination of four string instruments, usually two violins, viola and violoncello, was first introduced by Germanic composers, such as Joseph Haydn.¹⁴ Significantly, the early quartets were divorced from the need to have basso continuo accompaniment, which had been prevalent in earlier chamber works (such as the trio sonata).¹⁵ The instruments had individual parts, although a quartet played with doubled parts could become a symphony (and vice-versa a symphony played one-to-a-part could become a chamber work).

String instruments are often seen as the instruments which are most representative of the human voice, with their singing, expressive nature—as the quartet combination encompasses the four standard ranges of the human voice used in choral writing: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. String quartets became the most celebrated form of chamber music. Most of the great composers since Haydn have enthusiastically taken on the challenge of writing for this unique and versatile format, many writing some of their most seminal masterpieces for this idiom, including

¹¹ Austin Clarkson and Steven Johnson, "George Rochberg," *Grove Music Online* (2007-2008), <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed September 30, 2008).

¹² Cliff Eisen et al., "String Quartet," *Grove Music Online* (2007-2008), <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed August 7, 2008).

¹³ Roger Fiske, *Chamber Music* (London: BBC, 1969), 30.

¹⁴ Eisen.

¹⁵ Wulf Konold, *The String Quartet, from it's Beginnings to Franz Schubert* (New York: C.F. Peters, 1983), 17.

Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorák, Debussy, Shostakovich, and Bartók (to name a few).¹⁶

The string quartet also exhibits numerous possibilities of textural and timbral variety, from plucking and bowing, to percussion, muting and amplification. Examples of more recent developments in articulation include Krzysztof Penderecki's finger and palm slaps in his *String Quartet No. 1*,¹⁷ and George Crumb's *Black Angels*, which involves, amongst other techniques, a battuto effect using glass rods on the strings.¹⁸

B. Professional Ensembles: Importance and Impact

The professional ensembles I will be examining have actually helped to drive many recent changes in the programming and presentation of their idiom. One of the reasons for the wealth of string quartet repertoire in existence in the first place is due to the establishment of professional ensembles from around 1800, who were on hand to rehearse and perform new compositions, such as those of Baillot in Paris and Schuppanzigh in Vienna.¹⁹ The latter premiered many of Beethoven's quartets.²⁰ Professional string quartets continued to emerge throughout the nineteenth century, including the Quatuor Armingaud (1820-1900), the Dresden String Quartet (1840–60), and the Joachim Quartet (1869–1907), whose leader was the direct impetus for Brahms' quartets.²¹ So, from fairly early in the idiom's history, one can note the importance of the actual ensembles themselves in the creation of new works. While many

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Patricia Strange and Allen Strange, *The Contemporary Violin: Extended Performance Techniques* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 98.

¹⁸ Ibid., 108.

¹⁹ Eisen.

²⁰ Stratton Rawson, "Overview: Beethoven's Quartets," *American Record Guide*, 69:6 (November-December 2006): 55.

²¹ Eisen.

quartets in the twentieth century tended to focus on playing existing masterworks, there were also those who supported new works. Vienna's Kolisch Quartet (1922-39), in particular, premiered Bartók's last two quartets, Schoenberg's last two quartets, Berg's *Lyric Suite* and Webern's *Opus 28*.²² Like many of the great European quartets, the Kolisch emigrated to the United States of America, where the genre thrived, thanks in part to funding from local philanthropists, such as Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who established a fund for chamber music at the Library of Congress.²³ Perhaps such philanthropy is a factor in The United States being the centre of many new developments and approaches by professional quartets today.

While many composers in the twentieth century chose specific ensembles to premiere their works, including the Beethoven Quartet performing all but one of Shostakovich's fifteen quartets,²⁴ there seems to be more of a trend into the twenty-first century for quartets to approach composers to write works for them rather than the other way around. Paul Griffiths observes that since the late twentieth century, professional quartets have increasingly become specialists and the definers of new repertoire, and that their prestige has continued to be enhanced in the public's eye.²⁵ Many more ensembles are performing new music today than they were in the 1950s and 1960s, resulting in unprecedented abundance and variety for audiences.²⁶ It is within this climate that quartets are able to experiment and follow adventurous, new directions.

²² Eisen.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 308-309.

²⁶ Ibid.

IV. Repertoire: Challenging Tradition and Definition

A slowly growing number of professional ensembles today are beginning to challenge traditional notions of acceptable repertoire for the string quartet. This can be seen in terms of new music compositions, collaborations with musicians and other artists from a wide variety of backgrounds, arrangements of existing works, and concert programming. While many string quartet concerts around the world incorporate some element of new music into their programmes, these works are usually performed alongside expected and accepted standards from the past two centuries.

For example, in its forthcoming 2009 national season, the Australian String Quartet will be presenting new works by Australian composers Nigel Westlake, Brett Dean and Gordon Kerry, accompanied by a larger proportion of standard classical quartet repertoire, such as pieces by Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn and Schubert.²⁷ This formula is mirrored throughout contemporary Western society, especially regarding internationally touring ensembles: give the audience some old favourites and sneak in something new, in support of living composers, to add variety, expose audiences to new music and/or to satisfy sponsorship requirements. Many quartets rarely play any music by living composers, and carve their reputation from their skill in interpreting music from the past. Examples of professional quartets who follow this pattern include the Borodin, Belcea and Eroica Quartets. Artists' manager David Rowe recently completed a study of seventy-six chamber music organizations across the United States and discovered that ninety-eight percent of presented works fit into the traditional classical category.²⁸

While I would not suggest we abandon performing music from the past altogether, the majority of performed repertoire in Western countries

²⁷ Australian String Quartet, "National Season 2009," <http://www.asq.com.au/performances09.php> (accessed September 21, 2008).

²⁸ Anne Midgette, "Music That Thinks Outside the Chamber," *New York Times*, June 24, 2007, Arts Section.

does appear heavily weighted in that direction at the expense of works by recent or living composers, perhaps partially due to the inaccessibility of high modern, atonal works, which turned many listeners away from new music. In reaction to this, a recent return to tonality is being observed in many new compositions, and it may take several years or decades for the general public to embrace this. That said, and as mentioned earlier, there are an increasing number of quartets playing new music, but new music does not necessarily imply postmodern music or approach. Many of these quartets, like the Arditti, although committed to new repertoire and exceedingly skilful, maintain a fairly traditional approach, generally performing in formal attire, in concert halls and theatres, to an almost religiously silent audience. One dramatic exception to this, for the Arditti Quartet, is, of course, their performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Helicopter Quartet* on June 24th, 1995, which saw each musician transported above Amsterdam in four, separate helicopters, playing while their performances were individually recorded and later reassembled for audiovisual performance.²⁹ This was certainly a break in performance convention, more typical of postmodern practice, but not usual for the Arditti and not initiated by them. One of the main differences between these new music ensembles and others who are more representative of postmodern practice is that the latter actively seek new repertoire that challenges preconceptions of Western art music, its presentation, and performance.

As previously mentioned, one of the features of postmodernism in music is the mixing of seemingly unrelated genres. This can be observed in the mixing of classical with popular genres, as well as the mixing of Western and non-Western genres. It may consist of works commissioned by professional ensembles, works composed by members of professional ensembles, or works arranged by professional ensembles. Emergent

²⁹ Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Helicopter Quartet,"
http://www.stockhausen.org/helicopter_intro.html (accessed September 30, 2008).

hybrid styles of repertoire serve to narrow the gap between art and popular music culture: as borders blur, listeners' values are challenged.

A. *Kronos: Leading the Way*

The internationally-acclaimed Kronos Quartet has been a leader in the commissioning of new works for string quartet since its formation in San Francisco in 1973.³⁰ Throughout the past thirty-five years, its founder, David Harrington, has actively sought to re-write the rule book in terms of the type of music played by quartets, and has pursued composers from all corners of the globe to help achieve this:

I've always wanted the string quartet to be vital, and energetic, and alive, and cool, and not afraid to kick ass and be absolutely beautiful and ugly if it has to be. But it has to be expressive of life. To tell the whole story, if possible...³¹

Kronos has, in fact, commissioned over five hundred scores in their commitment to expand the range and context of the string quartet, keeping the medium relevant to today's society, and have formed close bonds with many composers with whom they have had long-running collaborations.³² Members of this group seek to actively participate in as wide and diverse a range of musical cultures as possible, viewing themselves not purely as classical musicians, Western musicians or American musicians, but musicians who are a part of a twenty-first century global village.³³ To this end, Kronos has collaborated with an eclectic mixture of composers, beginning with minimalist, Terry Riley. This composer has supplied the ensemble with over twenty major new works since they eventually persuaded him to return to notation and

³⁰ Kronos Quartet, "Biography," <http://kronosquartet.org/info/bio.html> (accessed July 20, 2008).

³¹ Kronos Quartet, <http://kronosquartet.org/> (accessed July 20, 2008).

³² Terry Riley et al., *Kronos Collection Volume 1* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2006), 39-40.

³³ Mark Swed, "2003 Musicians of the Year: Kronos Quartet," In Kronos Quartet Website, <http://kronosquartet.org/30th/01.html> (accessed July 20, 2008).

write for them.³⁴ Riley's *The Cusp of Magic* was commissioned by Kronos in 2005 to honour the composer's seventieth birthday, and features Chinese *pipa* virtuoso, Wu Man,³⁵ demonstrating the group's close relationship with Riley, as well as their eagerness to incorporate musical elements from non-Western sources. Other examples of their search for non-Western and non-classical sources for string quartet include the commissioning of works from Azerbaijani Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, Egyptian Hamza El Din, Polish Henryk Mikolaj Górecki, and Argentinian Osvaldo Golijov.³⁶ Of their more than forty albums, most feature the work of a single composer, usually commissioned or arranged by the group. For example, in 1991, they released *Five Tango Sensations*,³⁷ which is a collection of works by *nuevo tango* maestro Astor Piazzolla, written specifically for Kronos, and featuring Piazzolla on bandoneon. Each piece represents a different mental state or emotion (such as sleep or anxiety), with the composer serving up his unique hybrid of folk and classical styles in an atypical format (string quartet plus bandoneon).

Their search also features collaborations with a wide range of musical artists, such as Bollywood singer Asha Bhosle, Mexican band Café Tacuba, British cabaret trio the Tiger Lillies, and rock musicians from Tom Waits and David Bowie to Nelly Furtado and Joan Armatrading.³⁸ Arrangements of works from non-classical origins are also common with this quartet, including arrangements of pieces by Jimi Hendrix, Thelonius Monk and Pakistani vocal master, Pandit Pran Nath.³⁹ A recent, bold series of arrangements by Kronos has been included on their recent concert tour, entitled, *Awakening: A Musical Meditation on the Fifth Anniversary of 9/11*, which premiered in San Francisco on September 11, 2006. In their own words:

³⁴ Riley, xiii.

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁶ Kronos Quartet [website]

³⁷ Kronos Quartet, *Astor Piazzolla: Five Tango Sensations*, Elektra/Nonesuch [CD], 1991.

³⁸ Riley, 40.

³⁹ Ibid.

[this is] a new soundtrack to an internal movie, a creation of equilibrium in the midst of imbalance: a special covering on an open wound by using a wide range of sonic building blocks from 12 countries.⁴⁰

Musical quotations include Turkish, Afghan and Saudi *adhans* (calls to prayer) and the musical compositions and arrangements are sourced from countries as diverse as Iran, India, and Argentina.⁴¹ This reinforces Kronos' desire to unite disparate music genres and share non-Western music traditions with new audiences. Exposure to originally marginalised styles of music by Western audiences, because of groups like Kronos, has had a distinct effect on the new music scene. A shift in attitudes has been created, influencing other performers and composers.⁴²

B. Flux and Molinari: Further Hybrid Exploration

Two examples of newer professional string quartets which actively seek commissions from a wide variety of sources are the Flux Quartet from New York and Canada's Molinari Quartet. Described by critic Joshua Kosman as "one of the most fearless and important new-music ensembles around,"⁴³ the Flux quartet was formed in the 1990's by violinist Tom Chiu, partly as an homage to the Fluxus movement of the 1960's.⁴⁴ As stated on their website, this ensemble, similar to Kronos, has the following aims:

⁴⁰ Jeff Dunn, "If Only...", *San Francisco Classical Voice* (2006), http://www.sfcv.org/arts_revs/kronos_9_12_06.php (accessed September 13, 2008).

⁴¹ Jason Serinus, "Concerts Everywhere: San Francisco - Kronos's Meditation on 9-11," *American Record Guide* 70:1 (January-February 2007): 40.

⁴² Robert Carl, "Kronos at Twenty-Five: A Conversation with David Harrington, and Thoughts on the Anniversary Collection," *Fanfare - The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors* 22:3 (January-February 1999): 99.

⁴³ Flux Quartet, "Biography," <http://www.fluxquartet.com/bio.html> (accessed September 12, 2008).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

...to explore and expand stylistic boundaries...with a quest similar to that of some of the original Fluxus artists: a search for a living art for all people with an embracing "anything-goes" spirit.⁴⁵

Recent challenging projects include the performance of Morton Feldman's second string quartet, comprised of more than six hours of continuous music, and microtonal pieces by American Ben Johnston and Mexican Julian Carrillo.⁴⁶ Again, like Kronos, they have also collaborated with genre-transcending artists like Ornette Coleman, and musicians not generally associated with Western art music or the string quartet, like bagpipe virtuoso, Matthew Welch.⁴⁷ They are able to seek regular commissions from a broad range of composers and produce their own compositions, largely due to grants from organisations such as the Aaron Copland Fund,⁴⁸ which ensures continued opportunity for the flourishing of new ideas and musical adventures.

In an effort to uncover hidden treasures, in terms of unique compositional voices from around the world, the Molinari Quartet has established a biennial composition competition.⁴⁹ The inaugural competition of 2001/2002 yielded prizewinners from Russia, Germany, Canada and Italy, and subsequent recipients have come from Malaysia, Greece, Japan and Mexico, to name a few.⁵⁰ Such a bevy of international flavours can only enrich the new music scene and make it more relevant to global consumers. In addition to this, Molinari presents these works, and those of twentieth century masters, in quite a unique, accessible format, which will be addressed at a later stage.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Kyle Gann, "The Flux Quartet Explores the Cracks Between the Piano Keys: Micro-Monuments," *The Village Voice* 48:12 (19 March 2003-25 March 2003): 66.

⁴⁷ Flux Quartet, "Biography."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Molinari Quartet, "Competition," <http://www.quatuormolinari.qc.ca/indexa.php> (accessed September 12, 2008).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

C. Turtle Island and Balanescu: Composers as Performers

There then exists an assortment of professional string quartets which do not seek commissions, but write the music themselves or actively make arrangements of existing works. A successful example of this is the Turtle Island Quartet. Also from San Francisco, Turtle Island has been blurring the lines between classical, jazz, blues and world music since its foundation by David Balakrishnan over two decades ago. Citing some of their influences as folk, Latin, Indian, swing, funk, rock and new age,⁵¹ this quartet is most commonly labeled as a jazz quartet, and is one of the most commercially successful jazz string groups to exist.⁵² Jazz has long been regarded as a popular style of music by many, so marrying this jazz-inspired style with the medium of the classical string quartet confuses genres and cultural traditions, thereby challenging preconceptions and relating more closely to contemporary culture.

It was not until the 1960s that string instruments began earnestly contributing to the rhythmic feel of jazz music, as opposed to filling out a big band sound or featuring in solos.⁵³ The area of jazz strings has become quite expanded and diverse since the 1980s, and its popularity is evident in the current offering of renowned, specialist jazz string programmes at Berklee College of Music in Boston and Belmont College in Nashville.⁵⁴ Researcher in this area, Sonya Lawson, observes that The Turtle Island Quartet “creates a sense of swing that propels the music forward,”⁵⁵ resulting in a strong rhythmic drive, which is a distinguishable trait of this commercially successful group. This rhythmic drive is largely created by a combination of percussive

⁵¹ Turtle Island Quartet, “Biography,” <http://turtleislandquartet.com/> (accessed July 25, 2008).

⁵² Sonya Lawson, “Yes, Virginia, There Really ARE Jazz Violists,” *American String Teacher* 54:1 (February 2004): 94.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

techniques and non-classical bowing techniques, such as chopping and playing staccato bow strokes at the frog.⁵⁶ In this way, the group is not only challenging established expectations of the styles of music a string quartet should play, but also the expectations of playing techniques and articulation. Classically-trained and aiming to strike a balance between classical and jazz music, Turtle Island perform a combination of original and arranged material, created by Balakrishnan and other members of the group, often including significant doses of improvisation.⁵⁷ While most figures accompanying improvised solos are written out in their entirety, some are also improvised, according to given chord changes.⁵⁸ As with standard jazz practice, each member of Turtle Island usually performs a solo in most works, not just the violins; most players also take a turn at creating the rhythmic basis to a piece.⁵⁹

Their most recent recording is a series of arrangements of works by legendary saxophonist, John Coltrane, entitled *A Love Supreme*,⁶⁰ and gave Turtle Island their second Grammy Award for Best Classical Crossover Album (2008).⁶¹ The group's cellist, Mark Summer, was recently interviewed on radio:

This music is so inspiring that when I first heard 'Moment's Notice' it literally blew my mind. I thought, 'This is exactly what I want to be doing.' I had the same reaction that I have when I hear an amazing classical symphony.⁶²

Great music is seen as great music, regardless of origin. Turtle Island has also collaborated with Cuban clarinetist and composer, Paquito

⁵⁶ Sonya Lawson, "The Origins and Development of the Use of Violins, Violas and Cellos in Jazz in the United States of America" (PhD diss., University Of Oregon, 2003), 213.

⁵⁷ Turtle Island Quartet [website]

⁵⁸ Lawson, "The Origins and Development...", 214.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 213.

⁶⁰ Turtle Island Quartet, *A Love Supreme: The Legacy of John Coltrane*, Telarc International [CD], 2007.

⁶¹ Turtle Island Quartet [website]

⁶² Mark Summer, interview by Robert Siegel, *All Things Considered*, NPR, April 20, 2007.

D’Rivera, on the album *Danzon*.⁶³ This recording incorporates Afro-Cuban and Mexican, as well as jazz and Western musical traditions, in a seamless blending of styles. As expressed by Rebeca Mauleon-Santana in the CD’s liner notes, “TISQ...again proves there are no boundaries, only limitless possibilities.”⁶⁴ The track, *Girl from Pathetique*, is a prime example of this, innovatively melding Jobim’s Brazilian, bossa nova classic, *The Girl From Ipanema*, with Tchaikovsky’s *Pathetique Symphony*.⁶⁵ Original rhythms and melodies weave in and out of each other, sometimes in isolation, but usually in novel combination, in a prime example of pastiche.

The Turtle Island Quartet’s 2005 project, *4 + Four*,⁶⁶ was a collaborative venture with the classical Ying Quartet. Both ensembles shared their different playing styles and techniques, blending traditional and non-traditional approaches. Turtle Island’s contribution to contemporary music culture can be summed up by Philip Ying:

We’ve always admired the Turtle Island quartet...[and] what they’ve done with the string quartet, on the one hand, respecting that tradition and wanting to be a part of it, and yet having the flexibility to include all of the kinds of music that they love...What I love about the project is that this is music for our time in the truest sense of the word.⁶⁷

A European quartet which also composes and arranges its own music is that of Romanian-born violin virtuoso, Alexander Balanescu. After having performed with the Michael Nyman and Gavin Bryars ensembles, and later with the Arditti Quartet, Balanescu formed his own quartet in 1987.⁶⁸ Playing predominantly Balanescu’s own compositions,

⁶³ Turtle Island String Quartet & Paquito d’Rivera, *Danzon*, Koch International Classics [CD], 2001.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Turtle Island String Quartet / Ying Quartet, *4 + Four*, Telarc International [CD], 2005.

⁶⁷ R J DeLuke, “Cross Currents: Turtle Island and Ying String Quartets Get Along Swimmily On New CD Project,” *Strings* 19:8:127 (March 2005): 44-49.

⁶⁸ Alexander Balanescu, <http://www.balanescu.com> (accessed June 25, 2008).

which often mix genres, his ensemble has had a great deal of success and toured extensively. Difficult to pigeon-hole, his compositional style represents an eclectic mixture of classical, jazz, folk, electronic and other influences. The group's 1995 recording, *Maria T*,⁶⁹ contains works inspired by the iconic Romanian folk singer, Maria Tanase (1913-1963),⁷⁰ including the incorporation of archival recordings of the singer into four of the pieces.⁷¹ According to one reviewer, "Much like the Kronos Quartet, the Balanescu Quartet have often shrugged-off many expectations one may have of a string quartet."⁷² There is also an audiovisual component to the live performance of this collection of works. The Balanescu Quartet also mixes genres when arranging existing works. Their recording and subsequent touring of *Possessed*,⁷³ contains five arrangements of pieces by innovative popular music group, Kraftwerk.⁷⁴ Balanescu explains his choice of source material:

I feel they're a very important name in new music...I think Kraftwerk's music has even more power than Stockhausen's; because of its simplicity...The music is tied in with ideas about our society, and that's what really attracted me.⁷⁵

The Balanescu Quartet have collaborated with a number of other musicians from the "popular" field, including David Byrne, Pet Shop Boys and Kate Bush.⁷⁶ This serves as another example of the blurring of boundaries between popular and classical music, and the desire to reflect contemporary culture and society, typical in postmodern thought.

⁶⁹ Balanescu Quartet, *Maria T*, Mute Records [CD], 2005.

⁷⁰ Alexander Balanescu [website]

⁷¹ Etan Rosenbloom, "Balanescu Quartet: Maria T," *Prefixmag* (April 19, 2005) <http://www.prefixmag.com/reviews/balanescu-quartet/maria-t/14484/> (accessed September 12, 2008).

⁷² Almost Cool Music Reviews, "Balanescu Quartet: Maria T," <http://www.almostcool.org/mr/203/> (accessed June 30, 2008).

⁷³ Balanescu Quartet, *Possessed*, Mute Records [CD], 1992.

⁷⁴ Mute Records, "Balanescu Quartet", <http://www.mute.com/artists/publicArtistLoad.do?id=1790&forward=longBio> (accessed August 12, 2008).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Alexander Balanescu [website]

D. *Fourplay: Eclectic Electric*

An Australian ensemble which has a postmodern take on repertoire choice is Sydney-based FourPlay. Labelling themselves as an eclectic electric string quartet, the group was formed in 1995, initially playing covers of rock songs for friends.⁷⁷ They have since developed a successful reputation for doing exactly that, having performed and recorded instrumental arrangements of songs by rock bands like the Strokes, Metallica, the Beastie Boys, Depeche Mode and Radiohead, as well as their own compositions, which encompass mixtures of genres like rock, dub, folk, gypsy, electronica, and jazz.⁷⁸ With regard to the rock arrangements, the group does not attempt to prettify the originals in a romantic, syrupy orchestration. Rather, Fourplay embraces the rawness and strong riffs and beats of the chosen rock songs, and skillfully and energetically represents the common combination of vocals, guitar, bass and drums, often utilising percussive and other extended techniques. Reviews of the group by popular music publications, and airplay on youth-oriented national radio station Triple J, underlines their ability to overlap the art and popular music scenes. They have also appeared and performed on ABC television's popular music quiz show, *Spicks and Specks*. According to Australian website, *The Dwarf*:

I highly recommend this album [*Now to the Future* – 2006] to anyone who loves music... it may change your understanding of music that you like and inspire you to check out stuff you never thought you'd enjoy.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ FourPlay String Quartet, "About FourPlay," <http://www.fourplay.com.au/about.php> (accessed September 12, 2008).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jennifer Land, "FourPlay – Now to the Future," *The Dwarf* (July 24, 2006), <http://thedwarf.com.au/nd/content/view/full/39257> (accessed September 12, 2008).

Using two violas and one violin, rather than the traditional two violins and one viola, they are also challenging accepted ideas about what constitutes a string quartet in the first place.⁸⁰

V. Performance Culture: Removing Boundaries, Awakening the Senses

Aside from the repertoire choices themselves, the methods in which the works are then presented and performed are also diverse and visionary. Concert experiences range from the theatrical to the sublime, and performers' expectations of audience behaviour is becoming far more relaxed and less threatening. Before outlining specific examples in this realm, it is necessary to examine the development and establishment of chamber music performance traditions, which are still prevalent today. How often do concert-goers question the abundance of unspoken rules of audience etiquette?

A. Why So Quiet?

The string quartet, as a form of chamber music, began literally as such – music for private chambers of the aristocracy and nobility, mainly in the Western European centres of Paris, Vienna and London. Often heard alongside vocal music in mixed 'variety' concert programmes, quartets soon set a new standard for high-level music-making in the early nineteenth century.⁸¹ Intimate settings soon gave way to larger performance venues, as demand rose from society's burgeoning middle class.⁸² What was once a privileged activity of an elite few became widely available to an emergently powerful bourgeoisie, in a period of social and

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 140.

⁸² Konold, 12.

cultural upheaval. Much general concert programming of the time reflected a desire to appeal to this large group – as Schumann’s journal commented in 1835, the concerts were “bringing classical music directly to the middling classes.”⁸³ Programmes tended to feature a varied selection of works, including well-known operatic arias and popular songs in conjunction with individual symphonic movements or overtures and smaller scale virtuosic pieces.⁸⁴ Distinctions between light and serious music began to become more clearly defined as idealists and traditionalists reacted against such programming. In 1827, a London critic complained about the “trash” of excerpts by Giovanni Pacini and Vincenzo Frederico, describing the pieces as music that, “all who possess any real knowledge of music, or a particle of genuine taste, must condemn.”⁸⁵ In 1843, in reaction to the common inclusion of virtuosic fantasias in concert programmes, a reviewer for the *Musical Examiner* stated that “we strongly object to [performers] being allowed to play their own music, in the shape of trivial fantasias...[among] a grave and classically-included body of artists.”⁸⁶ Others, commenting in Schumann’s magazine, for example, complained of audiences being too unruly,⁸⁷ as previously accepted norms were brought into question by those who sought to take classical concerts more seriously. A prime example of the older values can be viewed in a famous Parisian engraving, depicting a concert scene in 1766, where people seem to chat while Mozart begins to play.⁸⁸

The revived chamber music forum of the “concert spirituel” further influenced attitudes and customs of educated, upper middle class audiences. Originating in Paris in the early eighteenth century, the

⁸³ Weber, 184.

⁸⁴ Weber, 183.

⁸⁵ *Harmonicum* 5 (1827), 145-6, In Weber, 188.

⁸⁶ *Musical Examiner* (March 11, 1843), 133-134, In Weber, 188.

⁸⁷ Weber, 197.

⁸⁸ William Weber, “Did People Listen in the Eighteenth Century?” *Early Music* 25:4 (November 1997): 678-691.

concert spirituel began in the form of a programme of sacred chamber music,⁸⁹ and was re-introduced during the Restoration in early nineteenth century France.⁹⁰ These concerts soon spread across the major European centres. This appears to be a major factor in the emergent tradition of listening to classical concerts in religious silence. Quartets, in particular, by as early as 1820, comprised one extreme of this formal audience etiquette, due to strictness in genres and association with aristocratic and educated listeners.⁹¹

By understanding and abiding by accepted listener etiquette, an audience member could continue to secure their place in this new social, bourgeois elite.⁹² Today, audience members are shunned and shamed if they dare to begin to applaud between movements, even though Mozart and Haydn would have composed with the anticipation of applause between movements. This can be observed until into the beginning of the twentieth century, including the reportedly long ovation after the slow movement of Dvorák's *New World Symphony* at its premiere in Carnegie Hall, and Dvorák smiling, standing and waving to the audience.⁹³ While larger scale concerts maintained less strict audience conventions for a time, even these events were soon to become solemn and worshipful after the influence of Richard Wagner. In the late nineteenth century, Wagner introduced the practice of lowering the house lights at symphony concerts, as well as solo recitals, ensuring the main focus was on the music, as opposed to socialising, card games or amorous pursuits.⁹⁴ The rising status of the genius composer continued to grow, as the gaps

⁸⁹ "Concert Spirituel." In Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.ecu.edu.au:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/06257> (accessed October 5, 2008).

⁹⁰ Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste*, 191.

⁹¹ Ibid., 208.

⁹² Alex Ross, "Why So Serious?" *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2008, Arts & Culture section.

⁹³ Henry Fogel, "Formality in concert: have we gone too far?" *On the Record* (2007), http://www.artsjournal.com/ontherecord/2007/11/formality_in_concert_have_we_g.html (accessed September 10, 2008).

⁹⁴ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Volume 3* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 564.

between composer, performer and audience widened. Admittedly, there are many works composed since the advent of such restrictions that benefit from the silence, as a certain subtle and poetic atmosphere is maintained—for example, works by Debussy and Ravel.

However, for today's audience members to be virtually banned from clapping until the end of any complete work seems somewhat irrelevant and creates a potentially alienating environment for new listeners. In today's concert halls, it is not uncommon for conductors to scold audience members who are unaware of certain rules of etiquette, who dare to applaud between movements. To cite a recent experience by critic, Henry Fogel:

A few years ago, a conductor at the New Jersey Symphony was upset that the audience applauded after the first movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," which is actually not even a structured symphony. He turned to the audience, wagged his finger at them, and then held up four fingers and pointed to them, one at a time, to indicate there were four movements! It was humiliating to those in the audience who had applauded.⁹⁵

These rules of audience behaviour are actively perpetuated by many chamber music organizations worldwide. A Kansas City promoter, *The Friends of Chamber Music*, gives instruction on its website about appropriate behaviour at its concerts. While acknowledging that it was usual practice to clap between movements in Beethoven's day, the organization informs readers that it should not be done today, in order to "better preserve...the emotion of the music."⁹⁶ Readers are also warned against coughing, and kindly made aware that free cough drops will be available at each concert, in an attempt to eradicate any opportunity for any noise whatsoever.⁹⁷ Have things gone too far? Is there a risk of turning away new listeners through such stringent, institutionalised

⁹⁵ Fogel.

⁹⁶ The Friends of Chamber Music, "The Concert Experience," (2008), <http://www.chambermusic.org/default.aspx?tabid=93> (accessed September 20, 2008).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

guidelines, regardless of the potential appeal of the music itself? In his recent book, *This is Your Brain on Music* (2006), David Levitin is among a growing number of theorists advocating a shift in classical performance culture and attitudes. He argues for concert halls where listeners are free to respond to the music, “the way children do before it’s ‘civilised’ out of them.”⁹⁸

B. Chiara: Connecting With New Audiences

A small selection of professional string quartets are starting to loosen these restrictions and remove existing barriers between performer and audience, making the concert experience more relevant and interactive and less threatening. In so doing, they are also breaking down the artistic hierarchy between highbrow and lowbrow, and putting all listeners on a level playing field. This is largely done through reduced formality in attitude, dress and venues. New York’s Chiara String Quartet is one such ensemble. Unlike the group of new music ensembles mentioned above, this string quartet plays many existing works from the “classical” canon, alongside newer works by composers such as Gabriela Lena Frank. While their recording of Andean folk-inspired pieces by this latter composer⁹⁹ is another example of mixing genres, it is less in the music but more in its presentation that Chiara demonstrates postmodern approaches, as the group is dedicated to bringing well and lesser-known masterpieces to new audiences.¹⁰⁰ Not only do they frequently play separate, selected movements from quartet repertoire, but they also encourage applause between movements when quartets are played in their entirety. After hearing spontaneous applause from a small section of the theatre at the end of the first movement of a Mozart quartet at a recent concert, Chiara’s violist put the uninitiated clappers at ease, by

⁹⁸ Judith Logan, “Crossing Over to the Dark Side,” *The Strad* 119: 1416, (April 2008): 61.

⁹⁹ Chiara String Quartet, *Leyendas: An Andean Walkabout – Gabriela Lena Frank*, 700261202075 [CD], 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Chiara String Quartet, “Info,” <http://www.chiaraquartet.net/index.php?page=bio> (accessed September 15, 2008).

standing up and proclaiming that the audience should feel free to applaud whenever the spirit took them.¹⁰¹ The Chiara is breaking down barriers in other areas of performance culture, too. Traditionally, performers are positioned on stage, facing a seated audience. However, at the same concert afore-mentioned, members of the quartet performed “in the round”. Performers sat facing each other in a circle, with audience members radiating outwards from them, some in seats, some on the stage.¹⁰² According to attendee, Jeffrey Rossman:

Because of the configuration, everyone was behind one of the players so there was some concern about the balance and sound. This was quickly dispelled as we were awash with the most lush, distinct and naturally reverberant sound that I have ever heard in person. You actually felt the sound, especially the cello with the sound traveling down the endpin into the floor and back up into your seat.¹⁰³

Relating to traditional venue choice, Chiara, as one of a handful of ensembles using a similar strategy, is committed to performing “chamber works in any chamber.”¹⁰⁴ To this end, they regularly play in bars, clubs and restaurants, reconnecting with the original, intimate atmosphere of string quartet performances, whilst concurrently providing a relaxed and welcoming ambience. Their venue and programming decisions cater to the expectations of a popular music audience, not requiring listeners to sit unnaturally still and quiet for long periods of time, and often including arrangements of familiar material, such as Prince’s *Let’s Go Crazy*.¹⁰⁵ In this way, new listeners gain a positive experience of the music and the idiom of the string quartet, which serves to stand both in good stead for the future and hopefully helps reverse the current trend of declining

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Rossman, “Chiara String Quartet Triangle Residency: Day Two,” *Classical Voice of North Carolina*, September 6, 2008, <http://www.cvnc.org/reviews/2008/092008/Chiara2.html> (accessed September 14, 2008).

¹⁰² Rossman.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Chiara String Quartet, “Info.”

¹⁰⁵ Chiara String Quartet, “Press,” <http://www.chiaraquartet.net/index.php?page=press&display=109> (accessed September 15, 2008).

audience numbers, despite the proliferation of performing ensembles.¹⁰⁶ It is important to note that the quartet's approach should not be seen as dumbing down the music, as it is played with virtuosic precision and musicality. Their high calibre is demonstrated by the fact that they have been selected as the Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at Harvard University, from September, 2008.¹⁰⁷

C. Narrowing Gaps, Crossing Lines

Employing a different tactic to reach and bond with contemporary audiences, the Molinari Quartet precede each of their concert series with *Dialogues at the Chappelle*.¹⁰⁸ These unique events consist of two parts. Firstly, the quartet plays excerpts from their upcoming programme, and discusses each with the public, who are then invited to join the discussion and ask questions. In this way, audiences are made to feel more included, welcomed and informed. The second part of these evenings sees different selections of visual artists presenting and discussing their works in an open forum:

These dialogues are an extremely rich and stimulating source of interdisciplinary art. The object of these events is to demystify modern art by making the artists available to the public in informal and open-ended discussions and exchanges.¹⁰⁹

In fact, the quartet derives its name from Canadian visual artist, Guido Molinari, from whose work and approach they find inspiration – he also designed the group's logo.¹¹⁰ This reflects their respect for and close professional and personal ties with artists from non-musical genres, and a reluctance to define and delineate separate artforms

¹⁰⁶ Midgette.

¹⁰⁷ The Chiara String Quartet, "Info."

¹⁰⁸ Molinari Quartet, <http://www.quatuormolinari.gc.ca/indexa.php> (accessed September 21, 2008).

¹⁰⁹ Molinari Quartet, "Mandate."

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

D. The Multi-Sensory Experience

This willingness to incorporate interdisciplinary artforms into quartet performance, creating interesting hybrid styles, is a feature of several groups discussed. Just as with many popular music concerts today, the visual element and whole concert experience is becoming more important, as Western consumers grow accustomed to being bombarded by multi-sensorial stimulation on a daily basis. Several ensembles now regularly include visual and other artistic elements into their performances, adding increased theatricality. The Kronos Quartet is the most well-known example of this. David Harrington explains:

What our goal always is, is to find ways to make the concert experience as expansive as possible, as dramatic as possible, as memorable as possible.¹¹¹

Since 1979, when they performed an arrangement of James Brown's *Sex Machine* on stage alongside a giant, singing robot, members of Kronos have enjoyed challenging expectations of what a chamber music concert should be, as well as eagerly experimenting with new technologies.¹¹² A more recent example is their performance of Terry Riley's *Sun Rings*. First performed in 2002, this large-scale project was a collaborative creation between Kronos, Riley, NASA, visual artist Willie Williams, lighting designer Larry Neff and sound designer Mark Grey.¹¹³ A true multimedia production, *Sun Rings* features a choir, as well as sounds and images from outer space.¹¹⁴ Another instance of Kronos' embracing of new technologies in performance can be noted in its penchant for using

¹¹¹ David Templeton, "Casting Call: The Tried-and-True Takes Some Tips From the New as Chamber Music Goes Theatrical," *Strings* 19:10:129 (May 2005): 71.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Kronos Quartet, "Sun Rings," <http://kronosquartet.org/SR/index.html> (accessed August 15, 2008).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

amplified instruments. Former Kronos member, cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, has continued these practices in her solo ventures. She explains:

The attempt to try new things with chamber music is valid. When it's done poorly, it's disappointing, but when it's done right it's dynamic and interesting and exciting-and it's certainly not boring.¹¹⁵

Other ensembles making similar forays include the Balanescu Quartet, whose live performances of *Maria T* repertoire incorporate projections by Austrian video artist, Klaus Obermeier.¹¹⁶ This group also uses amplification and often appears dressed in unconventional costumes.¹¹⁷

VI. Music as Commodity

Postmodern thinking accepts that music and all art is a commodity, and decisions are made with this in mind, rather than ignoring or denying music's economic status, as modernists were seen to do.¹¹⁸ For example, another common feature of Balanescu and similar new music ensembles is the close association of touring schedules and programmes with recently-released recorded material. In this way, such groups again mirror popular bands, who release a CD, then follow up with a tour largely based around the new material. In terms of the CDs themselves, images of most quartets discussed in this essay feature more prominently in the cover design than the composers, which is a fairly recent phenomenon. As part of contemporary Western consumer society, these groups cultivate a specific, marketable image. This is often fresh, youthful, informal, quirky, or "cool". For example, the main image on the Flux Quartet's website is that of four empty specimen jars,¹¹⁹ while

¹¹⁵ Templeton, 71.

¹¹⁶ Alexander Balanescu website

¹¹⁷ Mute Records, "Balanescu Quartet."

¹¹⁸ Kramer, 17.

¹¹⁹ Flux Quartet, "Biographies," <http://www.fluxquartet.com/bio.html> (accessed October 10, 2008).

publicity photographs usually involve relaxed poses of the group, wearing casual clothes, hanging out in the back streets of New York City.¹²⁰ CD covers and websites are more similar to those of rock bands than most classical chamber music groups. Decisions regarding repertoire and performance by the above string quartets are based, at least in part, on appealing to a broad range of consumers. This is not necessarily seen as negative, or a form of compromise or betrayal, but just part and parcel of the everyday life these groups seek to reflect.

VII. Conclusion

Enjoying the challenge of disintegrating hierarchical boundaries and redefining repertory and performance norms, the above string quartets are indeed revitalising the medium and bringing it to new, broader, younger audiences. They are making the music more relevant and immediate, seeking to reflect the mood of contemporary, postmodern culture. To again quote Harrington, "I'm looking for that moment when a composer finds that crystalline idea that defines both themselves and their time."¹²¹ To this end, new repertoire and performances challenge genre definitions and traditions. Kronos performs Bartok and Shostakovich works, alongside Kraftwerk arrangements and Islamic calls to prayer, amidst a host of multimedia technologies. Turtle Island signifies a return to pre-classical traditions of the composer being also performer and improviser, while blending jazz rhythms and harmony with classical Indian and Western influences. The Balanescu Quartet has opened a Pet Shop Boys concert at Wembley Arena in front of ten thousand people,¹²² and the Chiara Quartet has performed Mozart to

¹²⁰ Mode Records, "Flux Quartet," www.moderecords.com/profiles/fluxquartet.html (accessed October 10, 2008).

¹²¹ Ken Smith, "Kronos Quartet – Still Rebellious at 30," *The Strad* 114: 1357 (2003): 475.

¹²² Alexander Balanescu website

Friday-night, thirty-something drinkers at a Brooklyn nightclub.¹²³ Most importantly, these quartets are passionate about their versatile and expressive medium and want the music they play to connect with contemporary audiences of all ages. Bravo to them for their bold experiments in challenging elitist traditions. Such ensembles may be often showered with awards and commercial success, but it is the audiences who are the real beneficiaries, as more ears are privy to the subtle, sublime, exciting, intricate idiom of the string quartet.

¹²³ Bernard Holland, "Bar Chatter, Weekend Cheer, Intimate Tables and, Yes, Chamber Music," *New York Times*, July 2, 2007, Arts Section.

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