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Math, Music, and Identity

Prof. Gareth Roberts

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The Brentano String Quartet: Bartòk's "Quartet No. 3"

On a sunny afternoon on May 1st, 2015 at Brooks Concert Hall, The Brentano String Quartet brought listeners into the strange and mesmerizing world of Bela Bartòk's music. The four members of the world-renowned quartet – Misha Amory (viola), Nina Lee (cello), Mark Steinberg (violin), and Serena Canin (violin) – have been playing together for over twenty years. Steinberg himself said that they all have tremendous "respect and trust" for one another, and it is evident in their music. No single member seems to try and take the lead; they all worked together to unravel the mysterious and often chaotic 3rd String Quartet by Bela Bartòk.

I've always had an interest in Bela Bartòk's music. I've always been fascinated by many challenging modern classical composers like Schonberg, Ligeti, and Bartòk. Something about their music – and Bartòk's in particular – is incredible in that the pieces I've heard have such great emotional depth, even though they don't conform to pre-modern ideas of what sounds good to the ear. In that sense, when an artist is not restricted to creating what is pleasing to people, they have a much greater opportunity to instill emotional depth into their work.

Before the concert, I didn't know all too much about Bartòk's life and music. I had been taught of his mathematical and folk influences, as well as his reclusive nature; otherwise, I couldn't tell you the difference between Bela Bartòk and Bela Fleck. Before the four musicians played the fifteen minute-long "Quartet No. 3 in C-minor" (composed in 1926), violinist Mark Steinberg gave a succinct and captivating presentation on Bartòk and his influences.

Hungarian native Bartók was born in 1881. Growing up as a trained pianist, he was a prodigy comparable to greats like Handel or Bach. Perhaps his greatest influence was folk music and dance from all around the Eastern Hemisphere. Travelling from East Europe to North Africa, Bartók collected folk music from small villages and incorporate elements of that music into his own. One such example is in the 2nd movement of this quartet, in which the accented singing of a village recording is reflected in the rhythmic accentuation of the strings. This is not to say Bartók was entirely unoriginal in writing his music – quite the opposite.

The quartet begins with legato notes played in all four voices. Descending atonal scales unnerve listeners, and then each voice takes a turn in playing short parts ascending that same atonal scale. Although each part seems to be in its own world, all four parts have a certain direction that binds them together. Sudden rests lead to quickly intensifying dissonant chords, emerging from unnatural silence. Bartók not only uses dynamics to express emotion in his piece, he also uses textural elements as well. Starkly contrasting pizzicato, trilling, and legato parts; eerie, elongated glissandos; and the unnerving tip-tap sound of col legno (“hit with the wood”) techniques all paint a picture more dynamic than simple movements from *piano* to *forte*. As Steinberg put it, these techniques “evoke other realms, instruments, and voices.”

At one point near the end of the quartet, Bartók wrote in a canon. While not as pleasing to the ear as Pachelbel’s own Canon, the Quartet nonetheless evokes a similar winding pattern of melody throughout the four voices. A canon is actually a great example of a horizontal shift in music.

Seeing Bartók’s music performed live by such an impressive collective of musicians opened my ears up to his music. I can’t say I entirely appreciate his music to the fullest extent, but I’m certainly one step closer.