

About the Music.

Modernism and Its Legacy

It may be something of a contradiction in terms to speak of the “avant-garde tradition” of 20th-century Modernism; self-styled revolutionaries and iconoclasts, the Modernists were, after all, spiritually allergic to upholding tradition. Yet what ties together the three works on this afternoon’s performance by the Poiesis Quartet is the lasting influence and impact of Modernism. On the first half of the concert, two works composed in the last forty years — Michi Wiancko’s *To Unpathed Waters, Undreamed Shores* (2020) and Eleanor Alberga’s *String Quartet No. 2* (1994) — demonstrate two living composers who have made elements of Modernism part of their own vocabularies. To close, the Quartet performs Béla Bartók’s *String Quartet No. 5* (1934), a masterpiece of the genre and a high watermark of Modernism from one of the period’s boldest composers.

To get a general sense of Modernism, one may look to Béla Bartók’s rebuke of Romanticism as simultaneously acute and indicative of larger trends. Like many of his generation, Bartók became overwhelmingly disillusioned with society. On a global level, the ethnically Hungarian composer lived through World War I and saw the Habsburg Empire of his youth crumble into factional ethnostates by age forty. On a personal level, he became disillusioned with love after violinist Stefi Geyer rejected his marriage proposal, expressing his experience in the *Violin Concerto*

he wrote for her: Its successive movements turn from idealistic Romanticism to cynical Modernism. As social ideals appeared increasingly artificial, Bartók made music that was emotionally true, if at times ugly. He described his style as “grotesque,” although more broadly his attitude may be called Expressionist (like the early works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky). While Bartók remained true to himself, his audiences often responded negatively to such dissonant music — something many of his Modernist peers experienced.

Over time, Bartók would develop his own deeply original style by looking to folk music (more on that later). But the subsequent generations of avant-garde Modernists also sought to find their own voices, leading to a series of “-isms”: Expressionism, Serialism, Sonorism, and Minimalism, to name a few. Despite surface differences, what underpinned most of these “-isms” was the idea that music was objective (devoid of semantic meaning) and abstract (sounding structures, techniques, and processes). As such, Modernist music often kept audiences at arm’s length, at times casting a pall that has left these works less frequently performed, despite their lasting impact.

By the time **Michi Wiancko** started composing in the 21st century, she had at her fingertips — quite literally, in the era of MP3s and streaming — libraries’ worth of music to explore, from classical to jazz, pop to

traditional music, and of course, all those 20th-century “-isms.” And Wiancko’s open palette reflects that musical cornucopia.

Trained at the Cleveland Institute of Music and The Juilliard School, she began her career as a violinist leading a double life. In the Classical world, she made debuts with the New York and Los Angeles philharmonics and at Carnegie Hall; released a world-premiere recording of music by French composer Émile Sauret (1852–1920); and co-founded the East Coast Chamber Orchestra. But she was also growing discontented with the lonely, stressful life of a classical soloist. “On the side, sort of in secret,” she explained in a recent interview, “I’m playing with hip-hop bands. I’m playing with country bands. I’m playing in these divey bars or going on these weird tours and sleeping on these stinky couches.” She started composing more and even formed the indie band Kono Michi, releasing songs and an EP in the 2010s. Slowly identifying primarily as a composer, she started to integrate her range of experiences, including her cultural heritage as Japanese American.

While her particular constellation of influences is unique, Wiancko is emblematic of her generation, too. Characterized as musical “omnivores,” composers today are known to traverse commercial music and Classical arts freely without hardened allegiances to the superiority of any one genre. Crossing boundaries in the music industry, Wiancko found a voice that is true to and for her, all the while

releasing herself from social pressure — accomplishing what the Modernists envisioned for us all.

If her self-actualization is one legacy of Modernism, Wiancko’s style in ***To Unpathed Waters, Undreamed Shores*** also draws on a variety of Modernist vocabularies across its seven movements. The first and third, *Pelagic Within* and *Central Park Microbial*, use extended techniques such as tapping on the body of the instrument, plucking below the bridge, dampening the sound with cloths, and using cards as picks, to create a range of sound effects. Other movements evoke various “-isms”: The sophisticated handoffs between instruments in *Xerxes Blue* recreates acoustical effects of 1960s Sonorism, while the troubled and anxious *Crying Together* recalls Expressionism, and the hopeful *Rise Up* uses static, repetitive arpeggios of Minimalism. Although objectivity was the overarching agenda of Modernism, Wiancko and her generation have repurposed these techniques, imbuing them with new meaning. Ultimately narrating a powerful journey from uncertainty through struggle to optimism, Wiancko’s work turned what might have been an objective environmental soundscape into a moving subjective landscape with a robust inner life.

The road from the Modernists like Bartók to the omnivores like Wiancko came by way of Postmodernism, a period famously debated for its paradoxical pluralism and contradictions. Many Postmodernists rejected the idea that isolating

audiences was an inevitable byproduct of innovation. They engaged directly with tradition to signify the subjective historical and cultural contingencies of their identities: many returned to consonant harmonies, and some created a Neoromantic style. Innovation and stylistic individuality, nevertheless, remained paramount. The music of Jamaican-born, British composer **Eleanor Alberga** navigates Postmodernity's many contradictions, including assumptions about to whom Classical music belongs.

In her own telling, Alberga decided to become a concert pianist at age five after attending a recital. She studied piano and heard quite a bit of classical music (not uncommon in Jamaica during her childhood, she notes). She was inspired by the works of Bartók, and soon developed attachments to Bach, Beethoven, Prokofiev, and Messiaen. She won the Royal Schools of Music Scholarship for the West Indies, which allowed her to study at London's Royal Academy of Music. There, she too began her career as a soloist, but upon taking a position with the London Contemporary Dance Company in 1978, she started composing more, famously improvising during company dance classes. By the late 1980s, she focused exclusively on composition, writing works for the BBC Proms and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, among her many prestigious commissions.

While in school and during her early career, Alberga performed with the acclaimed Jamaican Folk Singers and Fantomfrom, an African dance

company. However, she insists, "Classical music is just as much a part of me as the Jamaican folk and pop I grew up hearing around me. In fact, it is more a part of me, as I was drawn to it and chose to study it. Music, if it's anything, is simply itself ... If my composition is a fusion, this certainly isn't a project I am consciously trying to get done." The idea that music "is simply itself" is a classic example of Modernist objectivity, but Alberga leverages that objectivity to counter reductive aspects of Postmodernism's identity politics, as seen in the hunt for stereotypically "Jamaican" features in her music.

Across her output, Alberga has works that are approachably Postmodernist, like her programmatic String Quartet No. 1, which depicts swirling particles of stardust. **String Quartet No. 2**, however, draws on Modernism in her abstract, architectural conception: "It was what the listener will hear in the first two seconds that yielded all the raw material needed. This short motive is treated to all manner of variation — inversions, expansions, and so on." In one continuous movement, she creates a "compressed" sonata with an intense opening, followed by a lyrical "slow movement" and a light "scherzo" before recapitulating.

According to scholar Sophie Fuller, Alberga's Second String Quartet is notably dissonant compared to her other works. Indeed, at the beginning and the end, the music has a jarring, at times, barbaric quality reminiscent of Expressionism. But in equal measure, the "slow movement" gives

lyrical melodies with lush harmonies in a Neoromantic style, while the pizzicato “scherzo” provides levity before the work builds to a climactic, if dissonant, end.

Both works by Wiancko and Alberga represent the legacy of Modernism in today’s music, and as such, they may suggest that Modernists did achieve their revolution. But returning to **Belá Bartók** and his personal journey reveals a deeper truth about the Modernist ethos. Initially oppositional, as he was against tradition, Bartók eventually discovered that to create something new meant he needed to be *for* something. After several works were poorly received, he retreated from composition briefly and explored the world around him. What he found was folk music, which he would study firsthand in Central and Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. He wrote down what he heard with razor-sharp accuracy, capturing many of its aberrant and strange aspects, relative to Classical norms.

Based on his empirical (that is, objective) study, he abstracted a theory to apply in his compositions. Melodically, he observed how folk tunes often had narrow ranges and more chromatic notes. Harmonically, he noted how prominent dissonance was in some traditions. Rhythmically, he appreciated asymmetrical “compound meters,” wherein strong beats are of unequal lengths. Formally, he pointed out the widespread use of arch form, a palindrome approach to the sequence of ideas.

His theory found its apotheosis in the five movements of **String Quartet No. 5**, which alternate between fast and slow tempos, creating a scintilla of arch form across the entire work. The three inner movements are each in ternary (ABA) form, the simplest arch. He nodded to folk music most explicitly in the third movement, *Scherzo: Alla bulgarese* (“In Bulgarian style”), with its compound meters starting and ending with 4+2+3, and shifting to 3+2+2+3 in the Trio.

Yet the accomplishment of the Fifth String Quartet rests not only on its realization of theory, but also its maturity: Bartók moderated his taste for jarring, emotional extremes without retreating from them. Less “grotesque” than merely distorted, his twisting chromatic melodies and blunted harmonies feel almost familiar, almost traditional, if not quite right. His Expressionist tendencies still peek through: the three fast movements contain driving and propulsive melodies, and the slow movements use atmospheric effects like slides and pizzicato to harmonize somber melodies with nuanced psychological depth.

Ultimately, his evocative and subtle quartet broke through to audiences and has become a mainstay on concert programs — something few of his Modernist peers accomplished. As he found his way, Bartók maintained his objectivity but found his voice by keeping an ear to living traditions practiced and, perhaps most importantly, enjoyed by real people. And isn’t that always revolutionary?

— Eric Lubarsky