

**CHRISTIAN WOLFF** (b. 1934)  
**3 STRING QUARTETS**

**QUATUOR BOZZINI**

Clemens Merkel, Alissa Cheung, violins; Stéphanie Bozzini, viola; Isabelle Bozzini, cello

*String Quartet Exercises out of Songs* (1974–76) 27:24

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3. *Exercises out of Songs 3* 12:29

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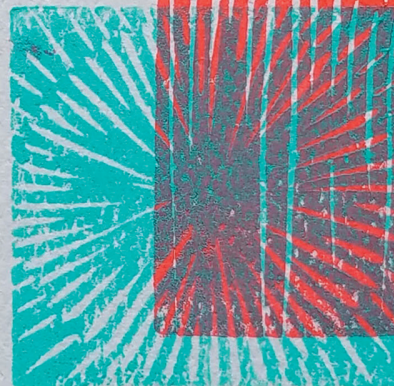
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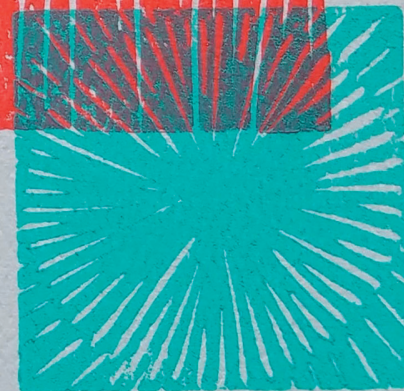
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**3 STRING QUARTETS**



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## Christian Wolff— 3 String Quartets

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Starting with his music of the 1960s and early 1970s, with works such as *For 1, 2 or 3 People* (1964), the *Prose Collection* (1968–71), and *Changing the System* (1974), Christian Wolff quietly re-invented chamber music. He created music in which the activities of the performers—timing, cueing, assembling, and selecting materials—were foregrounded. Although to some extent these activities were always a part of classical music, Wolff opened them up for creative decision-making by the musicians themselves.

There is a corresponding shift in terminology. Wolff likes to refer to the performers as people, or more often, players. A musician is a specialist. Players are those who include instruments or voices as a part of an organism that can make and interact on a broader scale with instrumental and “non-instrumental” sounds and actions. This terminology reflects a different view of how scores can shape the process of making music.

The classical European string quartet begins in the 17th century, but really picks up with Haydn, continuing thereafter as arguably the most significant form of chamber music. In the traditional string quartet, the four instruments combine to produce the affectively colored projection of a score. The score provides detailed agreements that define the relations of the group. Specificity of pitch, rhythm, intensity and so on, vastly narrows the range of possible disagreement and disunity. This system allows for the incorporation of the musicians’ ideas only to the point where the perceptual identity of the score’s domain is not threatened.

Charles Ives began to develop a different conception with (among other works) his *String Quartet No. 2* (1913). It portrays four individuals who come together to have a discussion that turns into an argument (presumably over politics) and then its transcendental resolution in the mountains. Although the score is traditionally notated, it is a mixture of a wide—almost incongruous—range of styles, and each instrumental part at times points to a more specific (fictional) character who sits behind the notes. With Ives and then others from the American Experimental Tradition (including John Cage), chamber music starts to become a place where differences are unleashed.

When chamber music has begun to offer this broadened set of possibilities, what does it mean to return to its archetype in classical music? Given his exploration of the ontology of *people making music together*, the string quartet, laden as it is with the tradition of unity, might not at first seem to be an obvious fit to Wolff’s sensibilities. But his quartet music stems as much from Ives and Cage as from the European art music tradition. The four characters of Ives become four people playing music. In one piece he simply calls them “2 violinists, violist and cellist.” Sometimes they are asked to coordinate like a traditional quartet. But at other times (often in the same piece), they are pushed to the point of dissolution. Here we find a music that allows for the spontaneous expression of four musicians who are bound together by something more than the rule of the bar line.

Quatuor Bozzini has long championed Wolff’s music and they are, amongst active string quartets, especially well-suited to perform it. They are as at home with Beethoven as they are with complex forms of contemporary music. But they have an equal commitment to experimental music. They have developed as performers in tandem with Wolff’s music. Violinist

Clemens Merkel explained to me that “no matter how hard you work you never quite feel like you are on top of it. The music keeps surprising you.” (It is nonetheless clear from this recording that the quartet has spent many hours rehearsing and performing these pieces.) “You work decades to play together as a quartet, but then Wolff’s music asks you to function differently.” The group premiered two of the works on this disc and have taken ownership of the other.<sup>1</sup>

### *String Quartet Exercises out of Songs* (1974–76)

This work dates from a period in which Wolff’s music became more political. Concerning the change, Wolff, in his notes for the 1972 composition *Accompaniments* writes:

This piece marks a break from what preceded, due partly to a growing impatience with what seemed to me the overly introverted feeling in much of my earlier music, with a sense of contradiction between the situation of its players—social, cooperative as well as calling on great individual alertness—and the way the resulting music seemed to affect its audience—as something remote, abstract and “pure.” At the same time my interest in social and political questions had intensified and taken a more specific direction, and so I decided to attempt to make a more explicit connection between it and my music.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although premiered by the Concord Quartet in 1976, the *Exercises out of Songs* was hardly performed at all before Quatuor Bozzini took it up as a regular part of their repertoire in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Wolff, Liner notes to “Accompaniments” from *Christian Wolff: Lines and Accompaniments*, NWCRL357 (New York: New World Records, 2012) <https://www.newworldrecords.org/products/christian-wolff-lines-accompaniments>. Accessed June 19, 2021.

From this point forward, Wolff will often incorporate protest or political songs in the musical material. The music becomes more outgoing, as Wolff had hoped, but it is not propaganda. It does not engage the world of revolutionary politics in an active way. As Wolff says: “Most political music, paradoxically enough, is for the converted.”<sup>3</sup> It is a complex art, in which the political impulses are woven into compositional practices continued from the more recognizably experimental techniques of his music from the preceding years. Wolff says it has a “political character”<sup>4</sup>—but it also has an experimental character.

Wolff has many works that are given this name “Exercises,” most with loosely connected melodic materials. As he writes: “I also continue to think that all music, on a wide spectrum, plain and simple to intricate, is melody; and at the same time that each individual detail of a sound matters also entirely for its own sake.”<sup>5</sup> These pieces are designed to exercise the player’s capacity to create different types of continuity out of fragments with varying degrees of connection.

The first Exercise is based on “Workers and Peasants are One Family,” which is an adaptation of a Chinese folksong to something explicitly Communist. The new lyrics have lines such as “Workers and Peasants are brothers, we are one family from the selfsame root” and “Smash the dark old world, we will then be free.”<sup>6</sup> From this rousing song in D major (played at the start) Wolff generates a set of fourteen short variations. Each of the variations is further broken down into phrases with rests of indeterminate length between them. (The duration of these rests is to be

<sup>3</sup> Christian Wolff, “Interview with Cole Gagne (1992),” from *Occasional Pieces: Writings and Interviews, 1952–2013*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Wolff, “Interview with Markus Trunk (1992),” *Occasional Pieces*, p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> Wolff, “Sketch of a Statement (1993),” *Occasional Pieces*, p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> “Workers and Peasants Are One Family,” from *Historical Revolutionary Songs* (Peking: Revolutionary Press, 1971), p.3.

determined by the quartet.) Quatuor Bozzini finds a way to convey both the fragmentary structure and to keep a sense of momentum, giving the whole exercise the character of an irregular march. (Wolff would eventually become fond of making pieces called “Peace March.”)

The second Exercise is a set of contrapuntal variations based on melodic material derived from the stirring revolutionary anthem “Comintern Song” by Hanns Eisler (heard at the beginning). Much of the music is in two parts, with a slower-moving melodic line (sometimes functioning like a *cantus firmus*) set against a faster-moving decorative line. At times the Exercise feels like a toccata, with pedals distributed throughout the quartet. It is technically very difficult. The Bozzini’s seemingly effortless rendering is vigorous and lyrical at the same time.

The third Exercise uses as its basis Florence Reece’s 1912/1931 song for union solidarity, “Which Side Are You On?” You might know it from Reece’s performance in Barbara Kopple’s 1976 documentary, *Harlan County, USA*, or from a multitude of other singers (including Pete Seeger, who, as the son of Charles Seeger, had a pedigree in political *and* experimental music). Although the course of Wolff’s music was decisively altered by his encounter with John Cage, there are significant ways in which it also reflects pre-Cagean experimental music. Wolff mentions Charles Ives as a point of reference. Ives, for example, also loved to combine popular song with avant-garde techniques, reinserting the songs into the noisy world in which they are often heard. With Wolff the effect is more subtle. The use of songs as a (sometimes disguised) basis, creates a music that never drifts too far from its lyric core, no matter how dissonant or hard-edged it becomes. By being embedded in an avant-garde, experimental musical

language, usually without their text, the songs become abstracted. But their sublimated message can infuse the music with earnest commitment.

This Exercise was finished in 1976, two years after the series had begun. The first half features gentle arpeggiation spread throughout the quartet, like they are playing a big harp. This is interrupted by beautifully harmonized versions of the tune. Over the course of the Exercise the arpeggiation-variations display an increasingly wider range of figuration, leading to a section in which the whole quartet alternates natural harmonics with stopped notes and open strings. Towards the end (at 10:07) there is a solo for the second violinist (which is then picked up by the first) that uses Wolff’s own song, “Freedom.” The quartet concludes with another chorus of “Which Side Are You On?”—which has moved from B minor to D minor to F# minor over the course of the piece.

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*For 2 violinists, violist, and cellist* (2008)

Wolff in his program note says he began writing this work “partly under the sign of contingency.” Responding to a tentative request, he started a duo for violin and cello. But when a commission by Maerzmusik (Berlin) for a new work for Quatuor Bozzini arrived, the duo became the beginning of a string quartet.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the piece sounds like it is in continuous transformation. It does not feel improvisatory or tentative, but there is a sense of passing through stages of a journey with an unforeseeable arrival. As Wolff puts it: “It seems to me one of the few areas left somewhat open is structure, what follows what. My own tendency is to avoid one idea or procedure or texture, homogenizing. I prefer possible

disruption and inconsequence, not so much out of affection for disorder but as a way of looking for other forms of order, fluid and flexible ones, in which the performers and the performance are what matter most, that is, what actually is done and happens can be surprising, while the players find a confidence in acting under partially indeterminate conditions.”<sup>7</sup> The piece is a mosaic of many sections whose coherence is as much in how it is played and how we listen as it is in the score.

The longest section is the duo for the first violinist and the cellist with which it begins (0:00–7:42). Angular, dissonant, and punctuated by silence, its sound harkens back to the avant-garde of Webern, Schoenberg, and Ives. It explores a range of coordination techniques: at times syncing, at other times independent, with some gradations in between (passages of interlocking parts and hockets, melody with accompaniment, and so on).

From here Wolff explores a variety of ensemble configurations. The other duo (second violinist/violist) takes its turn (7:43) until, already a third of the way though the piece(!), the first (brief) tutti sounds (10:19). After a measured trio (starting at 10:40), there is the first of several sections with indeterminate notation. Here (11:35) the musicians are asked to proceed through a series of seventeen written-out motives at their own rate. At 14:06 there is a lengthy solo for the second violinist, a quartet member who is never neglected by Wolff’s egalitarian outlook.

At 15:20 there is another classic bit of Wolff scoring: A grid indicates a succession of sounds, distributed through various string playing techniques: extra bow pressure, *col legno battuto*, *spiccato*, etc. It is a section that will always sound different, no matter how settled it might

have seemed in rehearsal. This is followed by sections of concertante (18:00) where individual players take turns playing in free time against the other, measured parts.

Starting from a haunting, almost-melodic tutti section of harmonics (21:01), the quartet alternates sections of measured playing with more open, independent (and interdependent) ensemble organization. Through all the variation of texture, the quartet has now formed a complex bond: They play with solidarity, regardless of the changes in styles of coordination. Wolff asks the quartet to become something like a small society—one that can function collectively *and* independently. To perform this piece the quartet has had to make thousands of decisions together, but to play expressively, they must each have confidence in those decisions. The Bozzini quartet knows that this takes time and patience. When it works, the music produces a complex joy.

The work ends in a pensive, questioning mood that reminds me of Wallace Stevens’ line from “July Mountain”: “Thinkers without final thoughts, In an always incipient cosmos.”

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### *Out of Kilter (String Quartet 5) (2019)*

*Out of Kilter* was the second commission for Quatuor Bozzini, and it is another complex piece on a formal level. It is in nine sections. The way they follow one another reminds me of the alternately fluid and abrupt connections found in some of the last quartets of Beethoven (especially Op. 131 in C# minor). Perhaps Christian Wolff is a classical composer after all? But there is something charmingly off-kilter (even haphazard) about some of these connections. Once (in a class at CalArts), when discussing his appreciation for the “smoothness” of Ockeghem’s music, Christian paused and said, “But I don’t do ‘smooth’.”

<sup>7</sup> Christian Wolff, Program note, *For 2 violinists, violist and cellist* (2008) (New York: Edition Peters, EP68284)

Movement 1 is a vigorous scherzo which begins pizzicato and then seems to pick up, eleven years later, from where *For 2 violinists, violist and cellist* left off.

Movement 2 reminds me a bit of Wolff's very earliest, minimalist pieces, in that it makes use of just two pitch classes (D and E♭). (The earlier pieces are even more limited in that they restrict pitch class *and* octave.)

Movement 3 begins with folksong-derived material, but then quickly breaks down into independent lines.

Movement 4 starts with sustained chords that consolidate around a unison C♯ before falling into slight disunity, consolidating again at the end.

Movement 5 is a quiet Ivesian interlude that leads right into—

Movement 6, which begins with string noises, and then alternates with more lyrical passages that wander into a free microtonality. (Wolff allows the players to find their exact tuning.)

Movement 7 is a longer and more complex section than any of the preceding. It moves through a variety of textures including scurrying runs, dissonant counterpoint, folk-influenced riffs and ornaments.

Movement 8 is played with mutes. It is a somber meditation. This section comes to a climax when the quartet plays a long quasi-unison—a strange, anomalous moment.

Movement 9, the last, is even more somber. There is a special atmosphere to this music that I would identify as almost philosophical.<sup>8</sup> Much of Wolff's music feels extroverted—this is a rare moment of intimate dialogue. The quartet takes turns playing solos with accompaniment. Finally, the cellist arrives gently on a long, sustained D. She is reassuring the first violinist that he is not alone. It's an extremely tender moment ... but maybe it goes a little too far? Whatever the case, the second violinist has clearly had enough. She interrupts with a loud, rude pizzicato tremolo, the open D swinging and dangling like a loose banjo string. The cellist is now asleep, but the violist and first violinist are roused briefly to end the quartet on a note of defiance.

—Michael Pisaro-Liu (3 July 2021)

*Michael Pisaro-Liu is a composer and Director of Composition and Experimental Music at the California Institute of the Arts (Valencia, CA).*

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**Christian Wolff** (born 1934, Nice, France) is a composer, teacher, and sometime performer. Since 1941 he has lived in the United States. He studied piano with Grete Sultan and composition briefly with John Cage, in whose company, along with Morton Feldman, then David Tudor and Earle Brown, his work found inspiration and encouragement, as it did subsequently from association with Frederic Rzewski and Cornelius Cardew. He also had a long association with Merce Cunningham and his dance company. As an improviser he has played with the English group

<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps, in its mixture of tragedy and comedy, and its delving into the realm of individual psychology, there is an echo of Euripides, the “experimental” dramatist who is Wolff's area of expertise as a Classics scholar?



AMM, Christian Marclay, Takehisa Kosugi, Keith Rowe, Steve Lacy, Larry Polansky, and Kui Dong. Academically trained as a classicist, he has taught at Harvard, then, from 1971 to 1999, in music, comparative literature, and classics, at Dartmouth College.

Since 1999, **Quatuor Bozzini** has been an original voice and strong advocate in new, experimental, and classical music. Propelling the hypercreative Montreal scene and beyond, the quartet cultivates an ethos of risk-taking, experimentation, and collaboration, boldly venturing off the beaten track. With rigorous qualitative criteria, they have nurtured a vastly diverse repertoire, unbiased by the currents of fashion. This has led to more than four hundred commissioned pieces, as well as close to five hundred premiered works. Their conception-to-production collaborative approach has also developed numerous successful and authentic transdisciplinary projects with film, theater, and dance artists.

To ensure continual development in their art, the quartet's musical laboratories, the Composer's Kitchen, Performer's Kitchen, and Bozzini Lab, work to mentor and support new generations of composers and performers. The quartet runs its own recording label, Collection QB, and has issued critically acclaimed albums (JUNO nomination 2020, German Record Critics Prize 2009), many of which have become reference recordings in the field. They have also released albums on Wergo–Deutscher Musikrat, Edition Wandelweiser, Another Timbre, Hubro, ATMA Classique, and Centrediscs. Quatuor Bozzini is a self-managed organization, producing a concert series in Montreal and touring extensively in Canada, the USA, and Europe.

<https://quatuorbozzini.ca/en>

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