

Siglind Bruhn

Institute for the Humanities, University of Michigan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3803-804X>

Merging Modernity and Tradition in Penderecki's *String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4*

In Krzysztof Penderecki's oeuvre, string quartets are spaced with marked interruptions: The first two, conceived in an experimental language with improvisational qualities that became known as sonorism, appeared in 1960 and 1968 respectively; the last two, again with an eight-year hiatus between them, were composed in 2008 and 2016. Thus the quartets stand paradigmatically for the two major creative phases in Penderecki's oeuvre and its monumental change of style. The 40-year gap between nos. 2 and 3 is bridged by the short, unnumbered string quartet from 1988, completed at what in retrospect turns out to have been the precise temporal midpoint in this development. Its title, "Der unterbrochene Gedanke" ("The Interrupted Thought"), seems like a commentary on this memorable sequence.

The composer evidently understood this piece as reminding himself and his audiences of a thread that was merely interrupted but not cut off. Five years after its completion, in 1993, and two years after his *String Trio*, he declared that his renewed attention to music for small ensembles was essential for his future:

Today, after passing through a lesson in late romanticism and utilizing the possibilities of post-modernistic thinking, I see my artistic ideal in *claritas*. I am returning to chamber music, for I realize that more can be said in a hushed voice condensed in the sound of three or four instruments [...] It is precisely

chamber music that is the source of the approach to the *materia prima* of music for me. Will this stage lead me to the anticipated Grand Synthesis, the Opus Magnum? It seems to me that the recovery of the genuine and natural, the universal language of music, is possible only through such a purification and transmutation of everything that already exists.¹

String Quartet No. 3 is subtitled "Leaves of an unwritten diary." It was commissioned for the composer's 75th birthday and the 25th anniversary of the Shanghai Quartet, who premiered it on 21 November 2008. The work has generated various descendants. In 2012, Penderecki's adaptation for string orchestra was published as *Sinfonietta No. 3*. A year later, the Sinfonietta's double bass part was added to the original string quartet, and the work received a third lease of life as a string quintet. The original string quartet has become very popular. The catalogue of the publisher Schott Music lists to date 35 performances in 12 different countries, most of them in Poland, Germany and the United States, but also one or two each in Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Spain, China and South Korea. The quartet is conceived as a single-movement work. The design and the tonal language are an ingenious merger of the modern and the traditional. The extended string techniques, clusters, special effects, and avant-garde notation that were prevalent in Penderecki's first two quartets have been left behind. Penderecki's tonal language now blends triadic harmonies with melodic contours that show a marked avoidance of diatonic scales. In all these respects, *String Quartet No. 3* expands upon three other chamber music compositions by Penderecki: his *String Trio* of 1991, his *Quartet for clarinet, violin, viola and violoncello* of 1993, and his *Sextet for clarinet, horn, violin, viola, violoncello and piano* from the year 2000. When the acolytes of the avant-garde attacked Penderecki for what they considered a betrayal, he replied: "We have reached the point where opening the door behind us is the summit of creativity."²

In *String Quartet No. 3* as in several other works by Penderecki, the viola has the prominent role:

- it presents the leading melodic contour in the introduction,
- it initiates the first and second sections featuring the principal thematic components,
- it also leads in the return of the secondary theme,
- it is the only instrument to play solo cadenzas.

1 Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time: Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium*, ed. by Ray Robinson, transl. by William Brand (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1998), 18–19.

2 Ibidem, 24.

The overall structure of *String Quartet No. 3* features three extensive thematic sections along with one recurring motif. The first and second thematic blocks, A and B in my diagram, do not differ from one another in terms of their harmonic position, as would the themes in a sonata allegro form and a classical string quartet, since both are rooted in G minor. But they are distinctly opposite in their character. Section A is a *Vivace* in 3/4 time, section B an *Adagio* in 6/8 time. Section A concludes its segments on its dominant D while section B alternates G minor with B-flat minor. Section C, while not rooted in G, expands the progression by fifths as it alternates D major with its dominant A major. Finally, the string quartet ends with a 37-bar coda anchored in the cello's D. There is thus neither a development into remote tonal areas, nor could there be a return to a home key.

An altogether different story is told in the four areas my graphic has left white. While rather short and never recurring, they each represent a unique musical color. The ten-bar introduction preceding the first *Vivace* is marked *Grave*, the 20-bar section following the first *Vivace* carries the heading *Tempo di valse, poco rubato e sentimentale*, the 24-bar segment preceding the recurrence of section B towards the end of the work sounds like a chorale, and the final 18 measures of the coda return to the static harmony of the *Grave* introduction.

Tonally interesting is particularly the unexpected connection between the *Grave* and the concluding harmony of the coda. As I will show in more detail later, the *Grave* rests for the first eight of its ten measures on an E-flat minor pedal chord, moving in the final two measures to a triad that sounds like D-flat minor. In the final 18 measures of the coda, this chordal progression is as if complemented with an A-flat minor chord. The framing passages of the work thus superimpose the main body's G—D progression with a kind of plagal cadence on the upper semitone neighbor, consisting of the steps E-flat minor—D-flat minor—A-flat minor.

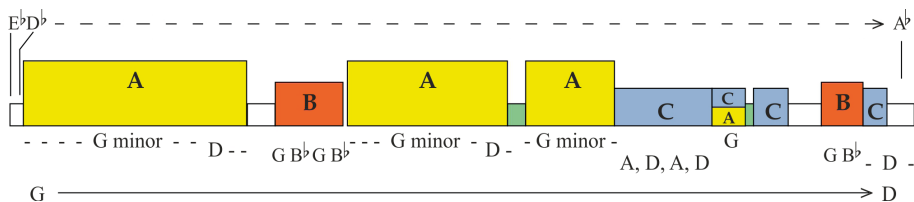


Figure 1. *String Quartet No. 3*: Structural components and tonal design

As a result, this triadically based string quartet is marked by two prominent tritones: The first occurs at the transition from the introductory *Grave* to section A, where an *attacca* leads in a tritone step from D-flat to G, the tonic of the work's

main body. The second tritone colors the ending, where (except for a brief tonal deviation) the three higher instruments sustain the minor-mode chord on A-flat, the tritone above the work's dominant anchor D in the cello, from which they are aurally separated by two octaves.

The 10-bar *Grave* begins with a look backward at a precursor before prefiguring aspects of the work it introduces. Its underlying chord repetition quotes the initiating rhythmic gesture of the aphoristic string-quartet piece *Der unterbrochene Gedanke*: three separate, ametrically placed note pairs in iambic rhythm.



Example 1. *String Quartet No. 3*: The opening rhythm, echoing an earlier work for string quartet



Der unterbrochene Gedanke (1988), cello
String Quartet No. 3 (2008), cello

The rudimentary chordal progression proceeding from this figure repeats an E-flat-minor six-four chord – which fades in the course of eight measures from *forte* to *piano* – before falling to the six-four chord one whole step below. This minimalist harmonic progression underlies the first prominent viola contour. As the next example shows, the contour is designed as a chain of chromatic fragments colored by octave displacements. There are three tonally related groups rising from one octave position to the next, each beginning with the semitone B-to-C. Octave displacements are also interposed in the chromatic fragments themselves (see, e.g., in m.2 the downward leap from E-natural to E-flat, in m. 3 the upward leap from D-flat to D-natural, and in m. 8 the downward leap from C-sharp to C-natural). The viola's rhythm is replete with syncopations and duplet-to-triplet changes. The character is darkly lyrical. After the contour has reached the highest register and fallen to C, Penderecki complements it with two harmonics (not shown in the example). These ethereal sounds then usher in the lowering of the accompanying triad from the E-flat-minor six-four chord to an enharmonically notated D-flat-minor six-four chord.

With this range of effects, the brief introduction is thus full of expressionistic drama. At the same time the pitch sequence and rhythm in the viola contour function as precursors of aspects that, as I will show, recur – separately or jointly – in the major thematic components.

Grave
viola

chromaticism
in the viola part

background
harmony

$E^b\text{-minor } \frac{6}{4}$ - - - - - $C^\sharp\text{-minor } \frac{6}{4}$

$G^b\text{-F-E-E}^b$, $C\text{-D}^b\text{-D}$, $B\text{-C}$, $G^b\text{-F-E-E}^b$, $B\text{-C}$, $D^\sharp\text{-C}^\sharp\text{-C}$

Example 2. *String Quartet No. 3*: The Grave introduction

I now turn to the principal thematic component in the *Vivace* section. Its basis is an ostinato originally consisting only of the two pitches G and B-flat. The phrase is introduced by the viola with initial reinforcement by a single cello pizzicato, with seven identical measures in 3/4 time, each with a downbeat accent, complemented with a general pause under a fermata.

Vivace

viola

cello
(pizz.)

f pp

G.P.

Example 3. *String Quartet No. 3*: The G-minor ostinato underlying the principal component

In the course of the extensive first section, the ostinato theme is followed by eight variations. These present changes in all parameters.

- The length of the ostinato varies between 7, 9 and 11 measures.
- The vertical density in the ostinato grows when the violins join in variations 2, when some instruments add eighth notes in variation 3, triplets in variation 4, four-part pizzicato chords in variation 5, harmonics in variation 6, an independent bass line in variation 7 and three-octave arpeggios in variation 8.
- The harmony is enriched as ever more non-triadic pitches are added to the G-minor triad.
- The general pause complementing the ostinato phrase is repeatedly replaced by chains of chromatic fragments. These begin with a single line in regular quarter-notes and grow to polyphonic duets, canons, and fugatos, where the semi-

tones are occasionally distorted with octave displacements and the chromatic groups linked by tritones.

Example 4. *String Quartet No. 3*: The development in the chains of chromatic fragments

- Finally, there follows an extensive codetta that begins with 20 *pesante* down-bows and ends in diminuendo *rallentando* before giving way to the 20-bar waltz.

The *Vivace* section refers back to the second movement of Penderecki's *String Trio*, whose refrain-like principal theme is also based on a G-minor unit with alternating minor thirds in 3/4 time.

Example 5. *String Quartet No. 3*: The ostinato theme and its precursor in the *String Trio*

Moreover, the three main sections of the Trio movement each conclude with down-bow chains. In the codetta of his string quartet's *Vivace* section, Penderecki quotes the first codetta of these *String Trio* codettas with only minor changes.

String Quartet No. 3, pesante

violins

viola

cello

ff

Example 6. *String Quartet No. 3*: The down-bow chains in the codetta, quoted almost verbatim from the String Trio

The subsequent waltz is notable for the erratic changes in its tempo. Initially, the suggestion of dancing seems to offer a welcome relaxation after the almost mechanical motion in the ostinato variations. However, although the time signature is 3/4 throughout, there are so many hemiolas as to make actual waltzing almost impossible to imagine. At the same time, the virtuoso ending in ever-increasing rhythmic density, the prolonged *agitato crescendo* that breaks off abruptly before the *p subito* of the following component, and the cesura marking in all four instruments speak of Penderecki's intention that this waltz, though short, be perceived as a dance form in its own right rather than as a mere insertion.

For the secondary thematic component in this string quartet, Penderecki creates a greatest possible contrast both with the *Vivace* material and with the interspersed waltz. The tempo is *Adagio*, qualified with the attribute *Notturmo*. Its basis is a melodic period in two balanced phrases made up primarily of chromatic contours in a rhythm whose many syncopations are reminiscent of the viola cantilena in the *Grave* introduction.

Adagio Notturmo

violin I

p espr.

violin II
+ cello

Example 7. *String Quartet No. 3*: The thematic period of the secondary component

The structure of section B is an expanded ternary form: the thematic period is contrasted with a slightly faster free development, which is rounded off with a brief but very virtuosic bridge of the soloistic viola before concluding with a return of snippets from the initial phrases. A codetta culminating in a crescendo rising into the high register breaks off abruptly with a seven-part *sfz* chord. This conclusion is then affirmed by a longer viola cadenza that begins *scherzando* and ends by imitating the rising crescendo, climaxing with a pizzicato chord in *ff*.

Following the general pause at the end of this cadenza, the *Vivace* material recurs. The viola initiates a new introduction, this time prefiguring the characteristic ostinato measure as well as other snippets from section A. It leads into a sequence of variations 3 to 8. All are only slightly altered and thus easily recognizable, and they conclude as before. After this renewed conclusion and before recalling the missing beginning with the original ostinato theme followed by variations 1 and 2, Penderecki inserts a contrast. Under a tremoloed, high-register pedal note in the first violin, the three lower instruments introduce an independent motif from which they build three fugatos similar to the one shown below.

Example 8. *String Quartet No. 3*: The independent motif inserted in the return of the principal component

As the example shows, the tempo is reduced to *meno mosso*, the volume hushed to *piano* and *pianissimo*, and all motivic notes are tremoloed *sul ponticello*. This whispered motif is designed as yet another chain of chromatic fragments torn asunder by octave displacements.

An extension in four-part unison with an intensification all the way up to *ff* leads to the third, lavishly spread-out thematic component of the work. Its main line

consists of two starkly contrasted segments: a *ff* preamble with five homorhythmic down-bows around the pitch C-sharp followed *p subito* by a monodic dance tune.³ The down-bow repetition is related to similar *pesante* gestures in several of Penderecki's late chamber music works for string ensembles. The complementing monodic phrase is anchored in an ornamented A/E pedal above which the first violin, playing in a sultry tone color on the G string, circles between the major third and minor sixth above A, i.e., within the four pitches characteristic of Jewish melodies. While there are, for once, no chains of chromatic fragments, the Phrygian dominant or "Freygish" scale underlying the phrase (A–B-flat, C-sharp–D, E–F, G, A) encompasses three semitones. Penderecki's repeated metric changes between 3/4 and 2/4 time add to the impression of folk music.

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The Phrygian dominant scale: A-B \flat C \sharp -D E-F G A

Example 9. *String Quartet No. 3*: The folkloristic dance tune with down-bow introduction

- 3 Penderecki described his use of this dance tune as "a sentimental journey," since he associated it with childhood memories. As Ewa Wójtowicz writes, he believed first hearing the Hutsul tune he quotes in this theme – a *kolomyika* – played on the violin by his father, a native of Rohatyn, Ukraine (see Ewa Wójtowicz, *Oblicza kwartetu smyczkowego w twórczości kompozytorów krakowskich* [Facets of String Quartet in the Works of Krakow Composers] (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2021), 306. Wójtowicz also refers to the discussion of the work on the website "Trzej kompozytorzy" (Three Composers), offered on the platform *Ninateka*). The composer's memory seems precious and, given his father's Ukrainian descent, imminently plausible. Tonally, however, the dance tune Penderecki composed for his *String Quartet No. 3* does not use the characteristic scale of the *kolomyika* genre. Nevertheless, to honor the composer, I will speak of this theme as "the *kolomyika*."

In an interview conducted by Alexander Woodman on 14 June 2019 and published a year later in the British journal *Tempo*, Penderecki explained: "I was born [...] in a small town where the majority of people made up an active Jewish community. Although Catholic families lived there, they were considered to be the minority. Almost all of my friends and colleagues had their origins from Jewish families. All of a sudden, the peace was broken by the Holocaust. I was a witness to much of the horrible tragedy that took place in small towns. [...]"⁴ And in an interview with Polish radio, Penderecki acknowledged the considerable influence that his early exposure to Jewish life had on his music, saying, "It is strange that after all these years the music that I had in my ears comes back."⁵

Penderecki has organized this dance material in proportions of numbers 5 and 15: The five homorhythmic down-bows are complemented by a monodic phrase spanning 15 quarter notes. The second phrase, still rooted in the bass A, is extended to twice its length with a mirror of the two segments: 5 + 15, 15 + 5. There follows a 15-measure development transposed to D and a 15-measure extension in which the violins' *kolomyika* sounds in polymetric counterpoint with the viola and cello's *Vivace* ostinato. After a new insertion of the independent fugato motif with its multiple tremolos, Penderecki adds a development of the tune in a meditative *tranquillo*. The phrase spans another 15 measures before leading into a kind of codetta marked *molto tranquillo*. Its homophonic extension, now in quarter notes and half notes, assumes the character of a chorale. The melodic progression sounds like a remote relative of the *shtetl* tune's contour, an impression that is corroborated by the identical phrase ending. Distinguished by the sound of *ppp* bowed *sul tasto*, this chorale extension describes a gradual cancellation of all motion, from *ancora più tranquillo* via *più lento* and *Adagio assai* up to *morendo*. With this, the music of the string quartet's main body rises into the high register where it fades into a general pause with fermata.

4 Penderecki in Alexander Woodman, "An interview with Krzysztof Penderecki," *Tempo* 74 (294), 77–84 [80].

5 Quoted in "Mazes, Notes & Dali: The Extraordinary Life of Krzysztof Penderecki," an article published on occasion of Penderecki's 80th birthday by Culture.pl.

Tranquillo

ancora più tranquillo

Example 10. *String Quartet No. 3*: The chorale extension following the *Tranquillo* version of the *kolomyika*

The transient silence is followed by a varied and abbreviated recapitulation of the *Notturmo* theme, initiated by the viola. Yet instead of the soft tones that reigned until shortly before the end when this material was first introduced, the two basic phrases now each describe a powerful crescendo climaxing in agitated homophonic *ff* repetitions. After the second climax, the viola adds its second solo cadenza, which is much simpler and barely half as long as the first one.

In the first half of the coda above the dominant pedal D, the violins play reminiscences of the *kolomyika*, presented first in harmonics and then *sul tasto* and thus evoking a faint echo of earlier gaiety. The melodic strand in this renewed *Tranquillo*, initiated by the second violin and then joined by the first violin, can be heard as a palindromic counterpart of the viola's cantilena with cello support in the *Grave* introduction. While the viola's cantilena in the *Grave* prefigures the mood and languor of the *Notturmo* (the secondary component prevalent in the first half of the work), the violins' reminiscences in the coda echo the *kolomyika* (the subsidiary component prevalent in the work's second half). One might even imagine an implicit connection between the harmonics with which the viola concludes its line in the *Grave* and those with which the second violin opens the coda. They sound in the same range and could be imagined as adjacent – were it not for the fifteen minutes of music separating them.

Looking at the overall structure of this fascinating string quartet, I would like to suggest that Penderecki has conceived the two dances of very different proportions, the brief allusion to a West European waltz and the much-segmented East European *kolomyika*, in structural correspondence. Based on this assumption, the layout of *String Quartet No. 3* emerges as a binary form in which the first two components are not only varied but eccentrically expanded while the third and fourth components are compressed. These unequal halves are framed by a *Grave* introduction and a *Tranquillo* coda that both begin in monodic texture and end, very softly, in a harmonically unexpected static chord undisturbed by further melodic motion.

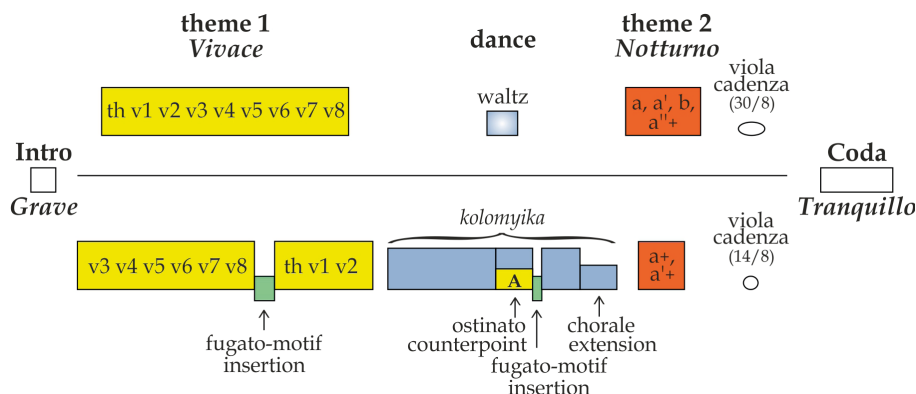


Figure 2. *String Quartet No. 3*: Binary structure with frame

In 2016 Penderecki began work on his fourth string quartet. The first two movements of the intended three-movement composition were soon completed; they were premiered on December 11, 2016 in London's Wigmore Hall by the British Belcea Quartet. Work on the finale, though, was repeatedly interrupted due to the composer's declining health. When Penderecki passed away on March 29, 2020, he left a manuscript with elaborate sketches for the third movement, comprising a complete design and many finished passages but no full score. In 2022, Madam Elżbieta Penderecka entrusted Claus-Dieter Ludwig, the maestro's long-time editor at Schott Music, with the task of completing the movement. Once this was achieved, *String Quartet No. 4* was premiered by the Apollon Musagète Quartet in Warsaw on March 29, 2023, in a concert commemorating the third anniversary of the composer's death.

I greatly appreciate that Claus-Dieter Ludwig responded to some of my questions regarding his work on this completion. Unfortunately though, he declared that it would not be possible for me to see and study Penderecki's sketches myself, which would have allowed me to distinguish between the maestro's hand and that of his editor. As a result, I have no choice but to treat the version published by Schott Music as the authentic score of this work.

On the surface, this is a work in three movements. Yet this simple statement is slightly misleading. While the first movement shows only the single heading *Andante*, its 15 measures consist of an extensive viola cadenza in *senza misura* notation and tempo before reaching the metrically stable ensemble coda. Movements

II and III are both lively in their main body – *Vivo* and *Allegro risoluto* respectively – but in each case, Penderecki adds to their main bodies several segments of considerable extension in contrasting tempo and character. A closer analysis further reveals that movement II actually comprises two self-contained structures, separated both visually by a double bar line in the score and materially by the juxtaposition of unrelated thematic material in two self-contained harmonic realms. (I will refer to these entities as movements IIa and IIb). The situation is different in the Finale. Here, the first two segments with deviating tempo, *Adagio* and *Allegretto*, indications emerge as inserts before a brief recapitulation of the opening material. The other three, *Andantino*, *Presto* and *Andante*, form the coda.

I will begin my analysis with the central movement, whose two unequal halves encompass developments and derivatives of parameters found in *String Quartet No. 3*. The opening theme under the heading *Vivo* is based on a three-note ostinato figure that sets out in stable pulse but then freely changes its metric position. The figure is soon interrupted by rests and later even torn apart by insertions of unrelated snippets. These utterly irregular displacements cause listeners to temporarily lose their sense of a predictable pulse, before the basic unit is complemented with a brief linear *Klangfarbenmelodie*.



Example 11. *String Quartet No. 4, IIa*: The principal theme of the *Vivo*

The three-note figure F–A-flat–G traces its ancestry back not only to the G–B-flat–G in the ostinato theme of its predecessor, but even to its precursor in the *String Trio*. Its complement, too, continues a process begun in *String Quartet No. 3*. In that work's *Vivace*, as discussed earlier, Penderecki proceeds from a simple chromatic line (in variation 1) through chains of chromatic fragments (in variation 2) and semitone contours distorted by octave displacements (in variation 5) to chromatic groups repeatedly linked by tritones (in variation 8). In the *Klangfarbenmelodie* complement to the ostinato figure in the *Vivo* of *String Quartet No. 4*, the chromatic fragments are now all linked by tritones and include one semitone with an octave leap.

The secondary thematic component in this movement, characterized as *pesante*, presents 38 repetitions of an (enharmonically spelled) E-major ninth chord in first inversion, played in relentless down-bows whose *ff* diminishes only at the very end, and only to *f*. This feature goes back directly to the opening of Penderecki's *String Trio*, where slightly shorter stretches of repeated eight-note chords played as down-bow repetitions in *ff feroce* alternate with cadenzas for each of the three players, and to *String Quartet No. 3*, where a related down-bow sequence prefaces Penderecki's Jewish-sounding *kolomyika*.

Here in *String Quartet No. 4*, the downbow repetition of the cluster does not alternate with the melodic elements; instead, it accompanies them. These snippets convey the flair of Klezmer music but not yet the full sentimental value, which Penderecki reserves for the separate second half of the quartet's central movement.

String Quartet No. 4, IIa, pesante

Example 12. *String Quartet No. 4, IIa, pesante*: First suggestions of Klezmer music

In the *Vivo* section as a whole, the composer builds an A A B A form in which the framing segments contain variants of principal and secondary components while the contrast, marked *scherzando*, explores the semitone/tritone combination with octave displacements just shown in the *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The *Vivo* ends with a cello cadenza followed by a very soft ensemble answer in *Andante*, which the soloist rejoins as a leader before being re-absorbed into the string quartet texture. The ensemble answer ends with a semitone/tritone chain in brilliant *ff* unison.

Movement IIb opens under the heading *Allegro giocoso* with the suggestion of genuine Klezmer music, related in style and mood to the dance tune in *String Quartet No. 3*. The underlying scale is again "Freygish," here the Phrygian dominant mode on D.

Allegro giocoso

Phrygian dominant scale
D-E \flat F \sharp -G A-B \flat C D

ff feroce

Allegretto

poco meno mosso calmo

senza dim.

Example 13. *String Quartet No. 4*, IIb: Klezmer music

For the first 13 measures, the three instruments not entrusted with the tune contribute short alternating attacks to create a constant layer of the open fifth D/A, a pedal function reminiscent of musettes that is typical of this folk music and was also heard in *String Quartet No. 3*. After two phrases and a short development in a third line, Penderecki inserts a contrast, in which the rhythm intensifies to a long string of semitone/tritone combinations in uninterrupted triplet sixteenths played *ff feroce* in four-part unison. The contrast ends with viola and cello in octave parallel fashioning the semitone/tritone combination into a sturdy motif under a shimmering seven-bar octave trill of the violins. In a kind of recapitulation marked *Allegretto*, the viola then echoes the Klezmer melody among multiple D/A intervals in violins and cello. The folk dance, and with it the central movement of *String Quartet No. 4*, concludes with a calm coda in which the viola's repeated anchor tone D ticks like a clock in regular beats, first among scattered minor ninths rising and falling around it, then all alone. The note repetition, strung out without *ritardando* or *diminuendo*, seems intent on continuing forever but suddenly misses two beats, then four, and finally breaks off altogether.

Movement III, the Finale, is longer and more complex in its structure than the two-part movement II. Nevertheless, it shares many of its essential features, notably

- the semitone/tritone chains with various octave displacements,
- the unison passages,
- the *pesante* components with down-bows,
- and the insertion of solo cadenzas followed by ensemble answers into which the soloist is gradually re-embedded.

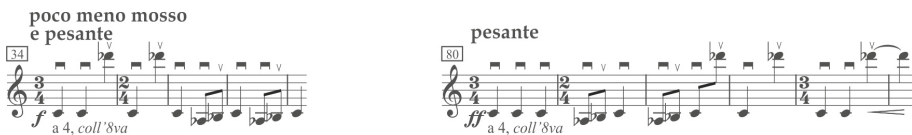
Each of these components is both related to and distinctly different from its counterpart in the preceding movement and in the earlier string quartet.

This begins with the principal theme of the Finale, which introduces a note repetition in dotted rhythm. Above a minimal accompaniment, violins and viola begin in unison, then spread in homorhythmic play before giving way to the first violin's contour in a chain of semitone fragments linked with tritones where the final semitone is stretched by a two-octave downward leap.



Example 14. *String Quartet No. 4, III*: The principal theme

After a development combining the semitone/tritone chains with inserted dotted-rhythm groups and unison passages, the principal theme recurs in six shorter entries, each concluding with at least two if not all four instruments in unison. Wedged between the third and fourth and again between the fifth and the sixth entries appear two brief passages with starkly contrasting material. They are two related versions of a component played in four-part unison in a pattern based on the violent down-bows typical for Penderecki's *pesante*. Unlike the *pesante* segments in the preceding second movement, in *String Quartet No. 3* and in the *String Trio*, Penderecki now abandons simple repetition in favor of a play with four pitches in starkly different registers integrating the final interval in the principal theme, the semitone D-flat–C stretched by a two-octave leap.



Example 15. *String Quartet No. 4, III*: The *pesante* component and its first variation

In the center between the two structurally corresponding portions of the finale, the composer inserts a viola cadenza. The soloist plays freely with fragments of the movement's principal theme before melting back into the quartet. A brief scher-

zando, different from the other components in its rhythm, character and transparent texture, completes this central insert and with it, the main section of movement III.

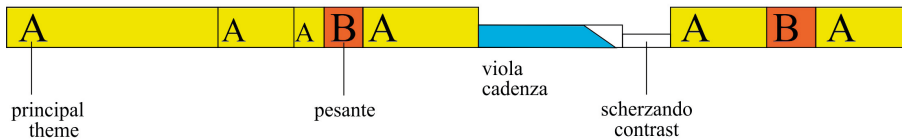


Figure 3. *String Quartet No. 4, III: The main section*

According to Claus-Dieter Ludwig, Penderecki's fully written-out score ends shortly after the conclusion of this tripartite main section, i.e., after about one third of the movement as it now appears in publication. The remaining two thirds are based on sketches found in the composer's manuscript.

A second section of roughly equal extension follows as a kind of multi-colored development. It comprises new variants of the principal theme's components and of the *pesante*, but also majestic crescendi to *fff*, breath-taking general pauses, a slowdown to *Adagio*, and a long, varied cello cadenza with independent material. Like the preceding cadenzas, this one ends with the soloist's gradual re-embedding into the quartet. The quartet answer concludes with another general pause, followed by a retransition created from two variants of the *Klangfarbenmelodie* and two variants of a four-part polyphonic stretto.

The recapitulation within this unique movement in a freely understood sonata allegro form is restricted to a 14-bar segment with reminiscences of the principal theme and a new version of the *pesante* component. Interestingly, the character of these basic thematic units is reversed: The principal theme now sounds *ff* in a dense, partly polyphonic texture with sudden accented chords. Conversely, the *pesante* begins uncharacteristically in *piano*. Moreover, its original unison texture is replete here with small imitations that enrich the tonal material with the three-note ascent reminiscent of the earlier *pesante* material. And what is more, the eccentric leaps from the central C to the semitone D-flat two octaves above are expanded by means of another semitone to D-natural: a preview of the work's anchor tone. At the end of this segment, a tritone glissando from the *pesante* ending on A-flat leads conclusively to the bass note D that links the Finale to movement II. With it, we reach the coda of the final movement.

180 **Pesante**

Example 16. *String Quartet No. 4*, III: The *pesante* variation in the recapitulation

This coda is dramatic in unexpected ways. It begins with an echo of the Klezmer tune around which Penderecki built movement IIb. There follows a two-bar *Presto* with a unison of yet another semitone/tritone chain in sixteenth notes, leading to a unison on the tritone above the tonic D, which then explodes into a *ff* chord. As the violins and the cello break off, the viola alone lingers with the open fifth D/A, which it plays in high harmonics throughout the remaining 15 measures. The violins repeatedly juxtapose small tonal provocations in the form of the open fifth on the semitone below the anchor and three-note groups rising and falling around D and A. Finally, the quartet partners cease their attempted disturbances and confirm the viola's open fifth on the tonic, which fades in *diminuendo al niente* into ultimate silence.

I have presented movements IIa, IIb and III as three separate entities. Actually though, Penderecki establishes a close relationship between these sections. This is corroborated by means of the Klezmer tune: see the preview of the style in movement IIa and the echo of the melodic component defining the *Allegro giocoso* in the coda of the Finale.

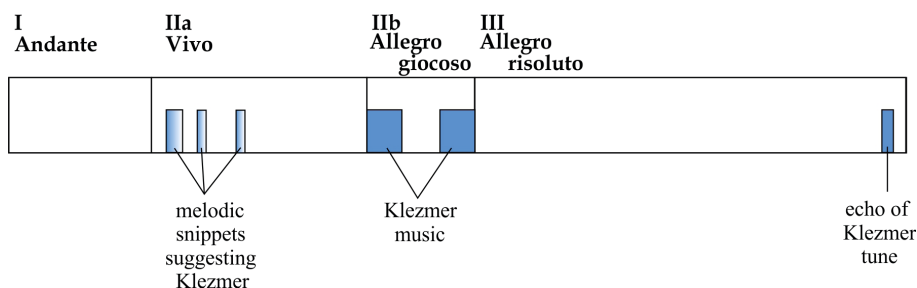


Figure 4. *String Quartet No. 4*, II and III: Stylistically related passages

Another feature unique to Penderecki's chamber-music style in this work, the cadenza whose soloist blends gradually back into the ensemble complement, links these segments to the first movement. In fact, the four-part structure of movements I, IIa, IIb and III is overlaid with a different four-part division created by the work's four cadenzas – two each for the viola and the cello. The two outer ones are substantial and independent in their melodic material, while the two inner ones are comparably short and thematically related to their surroundings.

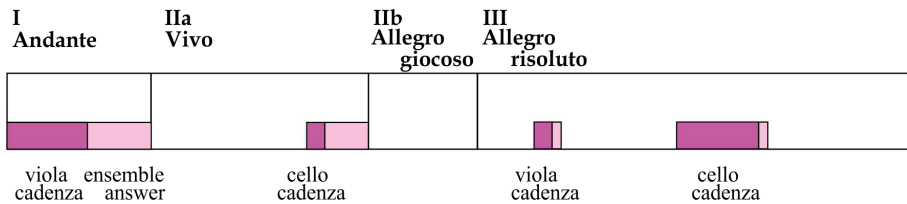


Figure 5. *String Quartet No. 4*, I, II and III: The cadenzas and their ensemble answers

This brings me to the opening movement of the work, which Penderecki devotes entirely to this idea of a cadenza with its quartet complement. This *Andante* movement is in many respects my personal favorite. Its design and rhythm are both wonderfully free and ingeniously balanced, its tonal anchoring is subtle but instinctively convincing, and its emotional quality is exquisite.

As in the opening *Grave* of *String Quartet No. 3*, the viola is the featured soloist. It sets out with an extensive *ad libitum* contour in free rhythm and meter whose notes span three octaves. (I have transcribed the entire solo in treble clef to give a visual impression of its raggedness.) Penderecki structures this long solo in many subtle ways. Three times do the two violins and the cello give support to their partner's solo with a homophonic utterance in the form of a single diminished-seventh chord. (These supporting chords appear in the score between sudden pairs of bar lines; in my diagram they are marked with grey areas). This gives the cadenza the appearance of a recitative: The viola "speaks" in three phrases, and its listeners, the other three instruments, nod their consent. The fourth phrase differs in two respects: first, in that its line is lavishly ornamented with a turn and many grace-notes, and secondly, in that it is not affirmed with a chord.

As the example shows, the first two longer phrases, which are more or less equally long – they fill a whole line in the example – conclude soon after their chordal affirmation. The much shorter third phrase closes together with the accompanying instruments. The contrasting fourth phrase functions as a transition to the remainder of the movement.



Example 17. *String Quartet No. 4, I*: The viola solo, transcribed in treble clef, with affirming chords

The three cadenza phrases are marked by several features characteristic of “speech,” which I have marked with different colors.

- In phrase 1, Penderecki uses confirmed anchor tones – first F, then C – to mark the end of a segment (see my red commas in the following score excerpt).
- In phrase 2, he introduces a phrasal rhyme, which consists of a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note in a rising semitone. (These musical rhyme sounds are marked below with red circles.) At the end of the transition, the phrasal rhyme is taken up with a falling semitone.
- The various speech segments are also related in their beginnings. As the blue rectangles indicate, the last segment of phrase 2 and the first segment of phrase 3 both open with an only slightly varied internal repetition before a brief development.
- Moreover, the pair of two triplets leading from G-flat to C at the beginning of the final segment in phrase 1 is taken up in a variant of its horizontal mirror – its “crab” transformation – at the beginning of phrase 2, again leading from G-flat to C.

Andante

phrase 1

phrase 2

phrase 3

transition

Example 18. *String Quartet No. 4, I*: Eloquent phrases in the viola solo

The transitional fourth phrase leads into a seven-bar ensemble phrase that offers all the ingredients of a coda. It complements the viola recitative while at the same time contrasting its utter tonal and rhythmic freedom with a regulated harmonic and metric ending. The viola expands the end of its transitional fourth phrase by first playing with the notes of the final falling semitone C-flat—B-flat, and ultimately settling, with a varied duplication in the higher octave, on the concluding B-flat. In contrast to the *ad libitum* character upheld before by the soloist, the seven measures unfold in metrical regularity. Violins and cello contribute with individual albeit minimal gestures of major or minor thirds to a protracted vertical stacking that develops from an E-flat minor six-four chord through an E-flat-minor seventh chord before it concludes on an E-flat minor triad.

To conclude my analysis: Penderecki's language in his two late string quartets is supremely free in its tonal contours but intermittently anchored, be it in direct or indirect pedal notes or in diatonic arrival points, which often appear as open-position inversions of diminished-seventh chords. While the structures of his movements do not adhere in any immediate way to conventional models, they show stringent designs that respond to his listeners' subconscious expectations of architectural balance, development, and closure. The alternation of components in stable meter with passages in often surprising rhythmic and metric irregularity create a wonderful liveliness. In all these parameters, the two string quartets emerge in a line of natural but never predictable internal relationship with Penderecki's other chamber music works from the early 21st century, whose

thematic ideas they develop in ever new ways while establishing them as integral parts of Penderecki's idiosyncratic musical vocabulary. In their felicitous merger of modernity with tradition, these quartet compositions may rightly be considered Penderecki's musical testament.⁶

In a final step, I would like to complement my analysis with a brief hermeneutic reading of these two string quartets. In this endeavor, I observe the following:

In *String Quartet No. 3*, the most prominent thematic component is the unrelenting *Vivace* with its ostinato followed by eight variations shortly after the beginning and their recurrence – full but in slightly different order and with a very soft motivic insert – at the beginning of the second half of the work. The impression is of energetic mechanical motion that is intensified by material piled on top of it the longer it continues. I read this as a musical representation of modernity, which started in a mode of welcome neutrality but became more and more antagonistic to true human values the longer it has lasted.

Penderecki contrasts this principal material in two ways: in the first half of the piece with an *Adagio notturno* whose romantic melodic intensity and traditional arch form stand for the regretted heritage of the European musical tradition, and in the second half of the quartet, with the Yiddish tune comforting our estranged modern feeling with memories of childhood embedments.⁷ Moreover, the Yiddish tune ultimately slows down and turns into a chorale-like texture, additionally underscoring the vital importance of a religious dimension to balance clashes with aspects of modernity that risk to alienate the more human needs in us.

Before the *Adagio* theme, the short waltz insert does not contribute to an alleviation of the discomfort with modernity as its hemiolas overwriting the dance meter prevent all relaxation into a simple dance mode. Preceding the tune suggesting memories from shtetl life, the pesante down-bows have a similar role: their somewhat brutal insistence on repetition counteract our modern need for reminiscences of earlier, happier, gentler times and experiences.

6 See the corresponding wording in Paul Schäffer, *Quartetto per archi No. 4*, "Preface" (Mainz: Schott Music, 2023): "[...] ein beeindruckendes und tiefgründiges Zeugnis seines kompositorischen Schaffens, das in seiner Dichte eine Art musikalisches Testament darstellt" "[...] an impressive and profound testimony to his compositional work, which in its density represents a kind of musical testament."].

7 I call a tune that is typical of shtetl life and that, if sung, would be sung to Yiddish words, a "Yiddish" tune (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yiddish_song).

In *String Quartet No. 4*, the balance has shifted. The Vivo of movement II begins with an ostinato, but the music does not allow this component to determine the overall impression. Instead, the ostinato figure is interrupted, complemented in ever new ways and soon abandoned. The mechanical aspects of modernity are here more successfully counteracted.

The Klezmer tune, taking a role similar to the one it had in the earlier piece, is here much more spread out. It is prefigured and echoed, not allowing the energetic and mechanical components to dominate too much of the music.

A role that was present but less prominent in the earlier quartet is that of the solo cadenza. The viola is one of the instruments that in music transporting extra-musical meaning is most often scored to represent the human voice. I hear it as the voice of the human individual – a female voice in the viola and a male voice in the cello, if you want, but more generally, both together may represent the ungendered human as such. Cadenzas of viola and cello have moved to the foreground and are much more prominent than in the earlier quartet; they are heard four times in the course of the work. Most notable is the long and haunting viola solo in the opening movement – which for this reason among others my presentation left for a kind of final intimate climax.

Hence in 2016, our musical heritage in the romantic moods of Mahler and his 19th-century predecessors has made room for the needs of the individual, who speaks in most eloquent ways before rejoining the ensemble of like-minded kinsfolk – in this case, the soloist's quartet partners.

In this sense, Penderecki's merging of modernity and tradition in his two late string quartets assumes an additional hermeneutic dimension.

Summary

In "The Tree Inside," an address delivered on receipt of the title of Doctor honoris causa of the University of Warsaw on December 21, 1993 and published in 1998 in *Labyrinth of Time: Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium*, Krzysztof Penderecki declared: "I see my artistic ideal in claritas. I am returning to chamber music, for I realize that more can be said in a hushed voice condensed in the sound of three or four instruments." The above analysis and interpretation focuses on Penderecki's last two string quartets, composed in 2008 and 2016 respectively (the latter posthumously completed in 2022). The intention is to show that Penderecki's language in these two works of chamber music is supremely free in its tonal contours but intermittently anchored. While the structures of his move-

ments do not adhere in any immediate way to conventional models, they show stringent designs that respond to listeners' subconscious need for architectural balance, development, and closure. At the same time, the two string quartets emerge in natural but never predictable internal relationship with Penderecki's other chamber music works from the early 21st century, whose thematic ideas they develop in ever new ways while establishing them as integral parts of the composer's idiosyncratic musical vocabulary. In their felicitous merger of modernity with tradition, these quartet compositions may rightly be considered Penderecki's musical testament.

Keywords: late string quartets, design and thematic layout, role of Klezmer elements and solo cadenzas, nostalgic memories of shtetl life vs. a focus on the individual

Siglind Bruhn – born in Hamburg, Germany, is a music analyst/musicologist, concert pianist, and interdisciplinary scholar. Since 1993 she has been affiliated with the University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities as a full-time researcher focused on "Music in Interdisciplinary Dialogue." In addition she was, from 2002 to 2010, Distinguished Senior Research Fellow at the University of Copenhagen's Center for Christianity and the Arts and, for the period 2003-2008, chercheur invité at the Sorbonne's Institut d'esthétique des arts contemporains. In numerous articles and more than 40 book-length monographs she explores musical works of the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly in their relationship to literature, the visual arts, and religion. In 2001 she was elected to the European Academy of Sciences and Arts; in 2008 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by Linné-University of Sweden.