

# STRING QUARTET

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## Notes,

I have long skirted the kinds of pieces too familiar to me: too familiar in the sense that I have played them myself on the violin and the “practice” of writing such a thing is too firmly ingrained that, perhaps, the nature of writing it for me is disassociated from the blank slate as I would like to see it. I have played string quartets, not just as a violinist but as a violist as well. My familiarity extends not to the instrumentation, as such, but to the idea of playing together, of an intimate assemblage of four musicians in a (theoretically) small space, where it is not playing for the audience, but for each other, that makes the difference. Shedding myself of the chains of history and historical practice, I thought of what a quartet really is, what it means, in terms of energy, of sound, of range, of simply playing together. Is it a difference that it is four, and not three, or five? It is only some perfect sonic quality that has given the string quartet its unassailable place as the archetype of chamber music.

The sonic quality, the energy: I have thought of this piece in those terms. I have not set out to recreate the string quartet, or to take it down a road of further complexity and irrelevance. I don’t know if such a piece is playable by amateurs (or if, even amateurs exist anymore) but I would like to think it returns to that idea of *stretching the capability of amateur players in a private setting* as I have always thought string quartets, and any real traditional form of chamber music, could do, even contemporaneously. I admit that this piece is a bit of an experiment in voicing and containing energy, and in that sense, it follows from many other pieces of mine. It is, however, very different in the way it unites my own ideas about harmony and voiceleading, how it unites my choral and instrumental music thematically. I have begun to think of a string quartet as a kind of instrumental parable for the choir.

I sought, then, to approach these stringed voices as true voices; the breath of chamber music as real breath; the blend of register and sound as a path to follow.

25 December 2012, Oakland, CA, USA – Eugene A. Birman

*Written for the Cavaleri Quartet*

Duration: Approximately 7’15”

### Performance Notes

- \* The piece is comprised of events, instead of bars and barlines. The length of each “event” is up to the discretion of the performers, however events are scaled to each other. Some events depend on the dissipation of sound or on the accumulation of pressure. An estimated total time of performance is stated at the end. Performers should know not to perform the piece any faster than that, but may take their time where they see fit.
- \* Semibreves (held) are used not as a rhythmic standard but as a general duration. Use of other values is, on the other hand, specific, and should be followed exactly.
- \* Cues are indicated by vertical arrows. If the vertical arrow connects one note to the other, then they should be played together.
- \* Besides, as indicated by space, duration may also be indicated by open slurs in the case of sound dissipating.
- \* Dynamics are indicated specifically and should be followed at all times. Indicated dynamics for each instrument are to be executed relative to the sound production of the instrument (ie. a played *forte*, not a heard *forte*.)
- \* Figures that appear as quavers but beamed across significantly longer distances, such as Violin I’s notes on page 13 are beamed for the purposes of organization and phrasing, not as a specific duration of time
- \* Glissandi should generally start from the minute the performer hits the given note, unless it is otherwise specified. Some glissandi may be executed slightly differently at the discretion of the performers.
- \* Commas indicate a definite completion of a given note value, and may be used as breath instances as well.
- \* Downward arrows signify exhalations.
- \* The piece is to be played *con sordino* throughout, except for the Violin I at the end.
- \* At the end, page 14, the remaining musicians sing the assigned chord based on their respective ranges. The chord should be sung in its indicated position.

# String Quartet

**E. A. Birman (b. 1987)**

*Like a veil unfurling, coming closer and closer into focus:*

[tutti con sord.]

*nonvib., sul pont.*

change bow freely

change bow freely

Violin I

*ppp* *>* *pppp*  
*nonvib., sul pont.*  
change bow freely

Violin II

*ppp* *>* *pppp*

non vib., sul pont.

Viola

Violoncello

nonvib., sul pont.

*pp* *mp* *p*

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

The image displays a page from a musical score, likely for a symphony or concert suite, featuring four staves: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello/Double Bass (Vc.).

**Violin I (Vln. I):** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a series of notes, including a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. Dynamic markings include *pp* (pianissimo) and *sf* (sforzando). A performance instruction "almost a norm." is written above the staff, followed by a "crunch" marking.

**Violin II (Vln. II):** The staff also begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. It contains a series of notes, including a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. Dynamic markings include *pp* (pianissimo) and *sf* (sforzando). A performance instruction "almost a norm." is written above the staff, followed by a "crunch" marking.

**Viola (Vla.):** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. It contains a series of notes, including a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. Dynamic markings include *pp* (pianissimo) and *sf* (sforzando). A performance instruction "almost a norm." is written above the staff, followed by a "crunch" marking.

**Violoncello/Double Bass (Vc.):** The staff begins with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. It contains a series of notes, including a half note G3, a quarter note A3, and a half note B3. Dynamic markings include *pp* (pianissimo) and *sf* (sforzando). A performance instruction "almost a norm." is written above the staff, followed by a "crunch" marking.

The score includes various dynamic markings such as *pp* (pianissimo), *ff* (fortissimo), *sf* (sforzando), *p* (piano), and *sf sost.* (sforzando sostenuto). The notation also includes slurs, ties, and a variety of note values (half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes).

The musical score for "The Great Wall" by John Adams is presented for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and two Violoncello parts. The score is written in 2/4 time and features a variety of musical notations and performance instructions.

**Violin I:** The first staff begins with a "1 h. pizz." instruction. It includes dynamics such as *ff*, *p*, *ppp*, *f*, *mp*, and *ppp*. There are also articulations like "crunch" and "bright:", and a performance instruction "quasi sul pont." with an arrow pointing to a specific passage.

**Violin II:** The second staff features dynamics like *ff*, *ppp*, and *mf*. It includes a "crunch" articulation and a "suddenly" instruction with an arrow pointing to a passage.

**Viola:** The third staff includes dynamics like *ff*, *p*, and *mp*. It features a "crunch" articulation and a "gradually" instruction with an arrow pointing to a passage.

**Violoncello:** The fourth and fifth staves include dynamics like *ff*, *p*, *ppp*, *f*, *mp*, and *ppp*. They feature various articulations like "crunch", "bright:", and "subito *mf*", and performance instructions like "quasi sul pont.", "suddenly", "gradually", and "norm.".

becoming more dull and almost unpitched → *sul tasto*, essentially unpitched

*A short period  
of intense quiet*

The musical score for 'The Great Wall' by Tan Dun, featuring Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mf*, *f*, *pp*, and *pp sost.*, along with performance instructions like 'sul pont.' and 'crunch'.

[tutti con sord.]

→ *quasi sul pont, quasi trem.*

Vln. I *ff* *molto* *ppp* *sim.*

Vln. II *ff* *molto* *ppp* *sim.*

Vla. *ff* *molto* *ppp* *sim.*

Vc. *ff* *molto* *ppp* *sim.*

*poco a poco* → *molto sul pont. Uncomfortably calm; slower* → *norm.*

Vln. I *mp* *molto* *mppp* *subito pppp sost.*

Vln. II *mp* *molto* *mppp* *subito pppp sost.*

Vla. *mp* *molto* *mppp* *subito pppp sost.*

Vc. *mp* *molto* *mppp* *subito pppp sost.*

[tutti con sord.]

*poco a poco* → *molto sul pont.* → *sub. norm*

*slow gliss.*

*ppp* *p* *ppp* *sost.* *subito p*

*ppp* *pp* *ppp* *fp* *ppp* *sost.* *subito p*

*p* *subito mp* *p* *subito ppp* *sost.* *subito p*

*sul pont.*

→ *molto vib.* → *norm.*

*subito pp* *sost.* *p* *subito pp* *sost.* *subito p*

*quasi sul pont.* *pp* *pp* *pp* *sost.* *subito p*

*even faster*

*f*

*subito p*

*Light and naturalistic; improvisatory*

accel. - - - - - allarg.

*A long pause for  
silence, as the  
energy subsides.*

[illegible]



[tutti con sord.]

with bow pressure, slowly expand to form triple-stop

as fast as possible:

as fast as possible:

accel. molto

as loud as possible

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

The musical score consists of five staves:

- Vln. I**: Starts with a whole note G4. The first staff has two systems. The first system is marked *mp*, *mf*, and *p*. The second system is marked *ppp* and *p*. Above the staff, there are markings: "light, as if with a soft brush; quasi sul pont." above the first system, and "(ten.) norm." above the second system.
- Vln II**: Starts with a whole note G4. The first staff has two systems. The first system is marked *ppp* and *mp*. The second system is marked *ppp* and *p*. Above the staff, there is a marking: "light, as if with a soft brush; quasi sul pont." above the first system.
- Vla.**: Starts with a whole note G4. The first staff has two systems. The first system is marked *p* and *mp*. The second system is marked *mp*. Above the staff, there is a marking: "(ten.)" above the first system.
- Vc.**: Starts with a whole note G4. The first staff has two systems. The first system is marked *p* and *mp*. The second system is marked *mp*. Above the staff, there is a marking: "(ten.)" above the first system.

[tutti con sord.]

musical score for Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. with performance instructions:

- Vln. I:** *(norm.)* → *sul pont.* *molto sul pont.* *fp > ppp norm.* *mf* *p* *f* *molto vib., then like a *sfz**
- Vln. II:** *f* *ppp sost.*
- Vla.:** *f* *subito ppp sost.* *fff*
- Vc.:** *f* *fff*

[mechanical]  
*col legno*

musical score for Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. with performance instructions:

- Vln. I:** *ppp* *exhale slowly and audibly* *0*
- Vln. II:** *(ppp)* *0* *(exhale)*
- Vla.:** *(ppp)* *0*
- Vc.:** *molto sul pont.* *0* *exhale slowly and audibly*

*Something retained from the beginning:*

A short pause  
of true silence

[illegible]

[tutti con sord.]  
like an accel. —————→ a "tempo"

*molto*  
*pesante*

[illegible]

*Full of power, and now with more finality:*

*light, as if with a soft brush; quasi sul pont.*

Full of power, and now with more finality:  
light, as if with a soft brush; quasi sul pont.

*ppp* → *crunch* → *mp* → *mf* → *p*

*subito ppp* → *fff*

*subito mf sost.*

*subito ff* → *molto sul pont. → norm.*

*subito ff* → *p* → *mf*

[tutti con sord.]

(quasi sul pont.)

*pppp*

*sfz* sost.

ten.

as fast as possible, accel. to sul pont. →

*pppp* < *f* *pppp* < *f* *pppp* < *f* *pppp* < *sfz*

*ff*

*pppp*

(play all 3 at once)

*fff*

still and lifeless:

*fff* subito *ppppp*

aggressive:

*fff*

molto sul pont.

→ trem.

*pppp*

0

sul pont.

*ppppp*

*ppppp* sost.

[tutti con sord.]

[mechanical]  
*col legno*

Vln. I

hold breath, do not breathe until

Vln II

hold breath, do not breathe until

Vla.

*ppppp*

Vc.

transition directly to hummed note

Vln. I

exhale slowly, gently, but audibly

Vln II

Vla.

*ppppp*

Vc.

exhale gently

very quiet but still audible

Ethereal, slower:  
transition from each phrase/chord directly to the next; Vln. I cues the changes. Use open strings as much as possible for a "baroque" feeling. Only Vln. I uses vibrato, senza sord.

Score for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The music is written in treble clef for Violin I and II, and bass clef for Viola and Violoncello. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Violin I: *pp* (first phrase), *pp* (second phrase), *pppp* (third phrase), *pp* (fourth phrase), *pppp* (fifth phrase).

Violin II: *pp* (first phrase), *pp* (second phrase), *pppp* (third phrase), *pp* (fourth phrase), *pppp* (fifth phrase).

Viola: *pppp* (first phrase), *pp* (second phrase), *pppp* (third phrase), *pp* (fourth phrase), *pppp* (fifth phrase).

Violoncello: *pp* (first phrase), *pp* (second phrase), *pppp* (third phrase), *pp* (fourth phrase), *pppp* (fifth phrase).

Score for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The music is written in treble clef for Violin I and II, and bass clef for Viola and Violoncello. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Violin I: *ppp* (first phrase), *ppp* (second phrase), *ppp* (third phrase), *ppp* (fourth phrase), *ppp* (fifth phrase).

Violin II: *ppp* (first phrase), *ppp* (second phrase), *ppp* (third phrase), *ppp* (fourth phrase), *ppp* (fifth phrase).

Viola: *ppp* (first phrase), *ppp* (second phrase), *ppp* (third phrase), *ppp* (fourth phrase), *ppp* (fifth phrase).

Violoncello: *ppp* (first phrase), *ppp* (second phrase), *ppp* (third phrase), *ppp* (fourth phrase), *ppp* (fifth phrase).

*allarg.* ----- *slower, but still moving:* ----- 3

Vln. I *ppp sost.*

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

until run out of bow

until run out of bow

until run out of bow

hum chord, at any octave:  
(until out of breath)

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

[hum chord until out of breath]

6 January 2013  
Oakland, CA, USA  
7 ' 15 "