

Bela Bartók, String quartet No. 5, Adagio Molto  
Overview Analysis by Mark Feezell

The Adagio Molto from Bartók's string quartet is divided into 5 sections according to a symmetrical pattern. Bartók himself highlighted this symmetry by noting the durations of the five sections beneath the final system of the movement (see Table A below). However, the symmetry is not exact, and a precise mirroring of the materials does not occur. Bartók instead incorporates a more sophisticated process which can indeed be explained as a form of development.

Bartók bases his developmental process on the modification and recovery of a symmetric four-note set class [0134] that consists of a whole step surrounded by two half steps. The symmetric set "theme" (hereafter motive X) is presented first in the lowest register of the cello, followed by a statement in the viola. Accompanying the exposition of motive X is a closely-related falling half-step figure (motive Y) in the violins. At measure three, the first violin states a motive that synthesizes the half step motion with motive X (i.e. G#-A-B-A#, not G#-A-B-C), with octave displacement. A third important motive (motive Z), interval class 5, closes this brief exposition at measure 5, and a transitional passage moves the music toward the next section, intensifying the counterpoint.

The relationships among the sections of the piece are based primarily on their approach to the three motives X, Y, and Z. In the second and fourth sections, motive Z is stated harmonically as an accompaniment to five-note variants of motive X. Section two states motive Z in long held notes in the lower instruments, and adds an extra whole step or half step to motive X (five notes, not four). Section four states motive Z as an arpeggiated figure in the upper instruments, while placing a variant of motive X in the cello and later the first violin. Similarly, sections 1 and 5 integrate all three motives, but emphasize motives X and Y. Again, the music from the earlier section is not restated literally or in literal retrograde, but reinterpreted somewhat freely. Of particular note in this regard are the retrograde inversion statements of motive X in the final few measures of the piece. The middle section serves as a transition between sections 2 and 4, and emphasizes variants of X and Y.

There is a general tonal emphasis on the pitch D. It is the final note of the piece, and several important internal motions point toward D (mm. 22, 46, etc.) or its tritone axis relative G# (measure 36). Bartók also incorporates some augmentations of motives, such as the significant arrivals on C# (m. 1), C (m. 10), D (m. 20, regained just before measure 40), and Eb (m. 41).

**Table A. Bartók's Divisions**

Section	Rehearsal letters	measures	length	duration
A	A	mm. 1-10	10 measures	58.5"
B	A-B	mm. 10-25	15 measures	1' 14"
C	B-C	mm. 26-35	10 measures	56"
D	C-D	mm. 35-46	10 mm. (w/rall)	1' 18"
E	D-end	mm. 46-56	10 measures	53"