

Joan Tower (b. 1938)**String Quartets Nos. 3-5 • Dumbarton Quintet**

Joan Tower is widely regarded as one of the most important American composers living today. During a lifetime of composing, performing, and teaching, many prominent soloists, ensembles, and orchestras have given committed and repeated performances of her music. Tower was the first woman to receive the prestigious Grawemeyer Award in Composition for *Silver Ladders*, a work she'd written for the St. Louis Symphony. She was the first composer chosen for a Ford Made in America consortium commission shared by an unheard of sixty-five orchestras, which played *Made in America* in every state in the USA. Leonard Slatkin and the Nashville Symphony recorded it in 2008 (along with *Tambor* and *Concerto for Orchestra* [Naxos 8.559328]). That album collected three GRAMMY® awards: Best Classical Contemporary Composition, Best Classical Album, and Best Orchestral Performance. She received the Letter of Distinction in 2008 from the American Music Center. She was pianist and founding member of the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players, which commissioned and premiered many of her most popular works. She was Composer-in-Residence with the St. Louis Symphony (1984-87), Orchestra of St. Luke's (1997-2007), Pittsburgh Symphony (2010-11), and Albany Symphony (2013-14). Tower's tremendously popular *Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman* have been played by over 500 different ensembles. She is Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York), where she has taught since 1972.

White Water (String Quartet No. 5) (2012)

Like all of Tower's music, *White Water*, her fifth string quartet, began with an invitation to compose, in this case a commission from the Chamber Music Monterey Bay organization. This piece had an unusual starting point. Tower was to view the artist Bill Viola's video installation *Going Forth by Day*, and his images would serve as her inspirational focal point before taking pencil to paper. She wrote of his work, "I was quite fascinated with how he

used water as an encompassing image which influenced everything I saw about the 'person' inside the water. My piece is not directly associated by what he specifically did but it does have a strong connection to the image of water as a powerful basic idea and action. The many glissandos hopefully create a 'fluid' environment that connects the various ideas and registers together, while 'white water' somehow implies more rapid 'cascading' types of action which occur throughout the piece."

In 2012, the Daedalus String Quartet gave *White Water* its première for Chamber Music Monterey Bay in a location appropriate to its title: close to the Pacific Ocean in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California.

Incandescent (String Quartet No. 3) (2003)

Architecture is a strong principle of Tower's music; her scores are the blueprints to build music that is organic, visceral, and coherent. The celebration of a new concert hall of Frank Gehry's design brought the Emerson Quartet to première *Incandescent*, a co-commission of South Mountain Association and Bard College, at the Fisher Center on the Bard campus in 2003, where Tower has taught for many years.

This was her third string quartet, and its title was to be *White Heat*, but friends convinced her to pick a title with fewer associations. "Incandescent" appeared at the head of the score, but the heat remained in the composition. "What I try to do in my music, and particularly in this piece, is to create a heat from within," Tower said, "so that what unfolds is not only motivated by the architecture of the piece (which I consider the most important goal), but also that each idea or phrase contains a strong 'radiance' of texture and feeling about it." She explained, "In other words, the complete 'action' of rhythm, texture, dynamic, harmony, and register has a strong enough profile that it creates an identity with a 'temperature,' one felt rather than observed."

Three solo cadenzas occur as her score unfolds – unusual in a string quartet: first for violin, later viola, and

finally cello. As time stops for the other players, the violin slowly introduces wide leaps across the range of the instrument (a motif later taken by the viola after play resumes). The viola's wild cadenza appears gradually, culminating with an intense toccata, its "melody" chiseled out by the passage's upper notes. The cello's has a light accompaniment in a challenging, Vivaldi toccata-like solo. In the final moments of *Incandescent*, the piece's first note, a D, returns, enclosed tightly in a cluster from which it struggles to break free.

Angels (String Quartet No. 4) (2008)

The title *Angels* comes with multiple layers of thanks. One is to the New Mexico festival, Music from Angel Fire, which commissioned Tower's fourth string quartet to celebrate 25 seasons of chamber music and asked the Miami String Quartet to première it in 2008. Earlier that year, Tower's younger brother had had a major stroke, and she also chose the quartet's title to give heartfelt thanks to those around her who had helped in his recovery. She wrote, "They include my sister Ellen, a former student of mine (Erin), a doctor (Dr. Stenehjelm), a nurse (Courtney) and two real estate agents (Ann and Dale). These are caring people whose generosity of spirit and love of humanity make them very special 'angels.'" They appear on the score's front page beneath her dedication, "to the 'Angels' who took care of my brother."

After hearing *Angels*, Allan Kozinn wrote in *The New York Times* that her music "demands a stealthy virtuosity." This is evident in the work's rapid start: a tendril of triplet figures branch from the viola to the other players, swarming into upward finger-slides on the strings (a technique that sounds effortless but in practice is hard when composers set precise landing targets). Interplay, conversation, change, development; these occur between the players in her quartets, characteristics influenced by Tower's experiences playing chamber music. About *Angels*, she said, "I have come to love the way string quartets are so deeply creative and passionate about the music they play. They are really like four 'composers' at work."

Dumbarton Quintet (2003)

In 2003, Tower became the third composer commissioned by the Dumbarton Oaks Foundation, joining Igor Stravinsky (*Concerto in E flat, 'Dumbarton Oaks'*) and Aaron Copland (*Nonet for Strings*). She had already dedicated two of her most popular compositions to the pair: her mixed chamber ensemble *Petroushskates* to Stravinsky, and her short brass and percussion pieces *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman* to Copland. "My musical debt to these two great composers is profound," Tower felt. She chose to add piano to the standard string quartet.

Music performances have a long history at Dumbarton Oaks, dating to its original owners, Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss, through its 1940 transition into a research library and collection under Harvard University; Tower took part in the première at the Dumbarton Oaks concerts with the Ensō Quartet in 2008. (Tower is both a composer and pianist; she was a founding member of the Da Capo Chamber Players, which premiered several of her pieces while she was in the group. Blair McMillen, the pianist for this recording, succeeded her as the ensemble's pianist.)

She described the several subjects encountered in her piece: "The first is a flowing line that is cast in a narrow space of smaller intervals first soft, then loud but with a restrained kind of intensity that finally 'bursts out' into a more 'forward' and visceral type of intensity. This shifting between intensities, in fact, is part of the 'DNA' of the work and, as the piece progresses, each side tends to take on more and more extremes of expression. At particular points, the 'softer' material becomes almost romantic, consonant and singing in its expression, whereas the 'louder' passages become the opposite — manic and aggressively dissonant."

Tower added that "with all due respect to Stravinsky and Copland, I must admit that this particular quintet was more influenced by and sounds more like Shostakovich, who had become a recent influence."

Ed Matthew

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Blair McMillen

Photo: Daniel d'Ottavio

Blair McMillen is one of the most versatile and sought-after pianists today. He has performed in major venues including Carnegie Hall, the Moscow Conservatory, Lincoln Center, Miller Theatre, and the Library of Congress. A member of the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players and the American Modern Ensemble, McMillen serves on the music faculty at Bard College and Conservatory.

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Daedalus Quartet

Min-Young Kim, Violin • Matilda Kaul, Violin • Jessica Thompson, Viola • Thomas Kraines, Cello



Left to right: Min-Young Kim, Thomas Kraines, Matilda Kaul, Jessica Thompson

Photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

Praised by *The New Yorker* as “a fresh and vital young participant in what is a golden age of American string quartets,” the Daedalus Quartet has performed in many of the world’s leading musical venues, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Library of Congress, the Musikverein (Vienna), the Mozarteum (Salzburg), the Concertgebouw (Amsterdam), Cité de la Musique (Paris), and in major venues in Canada, Japan, Germany, and Belgium. They have given premières of works by Joan Tower, Fred Lerdahl, Richard Wernick, Lawrence Dillon, and David Horne, and have recorded extensively for Bridge Records. They have forged associations with some of America’s leading classical music and educational institutions, including Lincoln Centre, which appointed the Quartet as the Chamber Music Society Two quartet for 2005-07. They have performed frequently for the Great Performers series and the Mostly Mozart Festival, Carnegie Hall, through its European Concert Hall Organization (ECHO) Rising Stars program, and as Quartet-in-Residence at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania.

www.daedalusquartet.com

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Miami String Quartet

Benny Kim, Violin • Cathy Meng Robinson, Violin • Scott Lee, Viola • Keith Robinson, Cello



Photo: Tara McMullen

For over twenty-five years the Miami String Quartet has been one of America’s top-rank chamber ensembles, with frequent performances at Alice Tully Hall, the 92nd Street Y, and the Kennedy Center, as well as engagements in Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and St. Paul. International highlights include Cologne, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Montreal, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Paris. The Quartet has served as resident ensemble at the Kent/Blossom Music Festival, and has appeared at festivals including Chamber Music Northwest, Mostly Mozart, Ravinia, Angel Fire, Virginia Arts, La Jolla, and Santa Fe. Laureates of the 1993 Evian Competition, the 1992 Concert Artists Guild Competition, and the 1991 London String Quartet Competition, Grand Prize Winner of the 1989 Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition, winners of the 2000 Cleveland Quartet Award and Chamber Music Society Two ensemble of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center from 1999-2001, the Quartet has been in residence at Hugh A. Glauser School of Music at Kent State University since 2004. It has commissioned and given premières of works from Bruce Adolphe to Ellen Taaffe Zwilich – as well as Ricky Ian Gordon, Annie Gosfield, Philip Maneval, Roberto Sierra, Robert Starer, Augusta Read Thomas, Joan Tower, and Peteris Vasks – and have recorded the music of Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Ginastera, and Vasks.

www.miamistringquartet.com

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TOWER****String Quartets
Nos. 3-5****Dumbarton Quintet****Daedalus Quartet****Miami String Quartet****Blair McMillen, Piano**

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