

SIMON CHRISTENSEN

NEOQUARTET

EKS TA SIS

POLYPHŌNOS DISCORDIAE

Simon Christensen (b. 1971)

EKSTASIS – Polyphōnos discordiae

NeoQuartet

EKSTASIS – Polyphōnos discordiae (2019–20, rev. 2023)
For string quartet

1	I.	10:06
2	II.	4:35
3	III.	11:10
4	IV.	6:06
5	V.	11:21

World premiere recording

Total 43:21

Commissioned by and dedicated to the NeoQuartet

NeoQuartet

Karolina Piątkowska-Nowicka, violin

Paweł Kapica, violin

Michał Markiewicz, viola

Krzysztof Pawłowski, cello



Simon Christensen

A New Beauty

By Andrew Mellor

Taking deep care to calibrate its sonority, meticulous in its rhythmic bricolage and determined to listen beyond the twelve notes of the equally tempered scale, Simon Christensen's music opens up its own space with generosity and character. His music is often heavily engineered but resounds with a simplicity that carries a direct beauty. Christensen's fascination with the aural experience leads him to seek out sound in all its complexity, before distilling it down to a patient, lucid music with a rare capacity to absorb human attention.

Christensen studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen with Hans Abrahamsen, Ivar Frounberg and Niels Rosing-Schow and at the Paris Conservatoire with Frédéric Durieux. His musical background is eclectic. Now employed as an organist, he played drums in the band New Paragraphs and was part of both electronica duo Mobile Soundscapes and the experimental new music ensemble Kundi Bombo. While the aesthetics of popular music are a vital part of Christensen's creative DNA, his intense interest in rhythm ultimately led him beyond a genre in which that musical property is almost inevitably homogenized. Rhythmic complexity, even in service of surface sheen, is at the heart of Christensen's work.

That forms part of what the composer and music journalist Frank J. Oteri has described as Christensen's 'ability to harness the off-kilter'. Christensen's interest in rhythm invests much of his music with the feeling of a pulsating inner life and constant micro-movement, even when it appears to

hover motionless. Rhythm, he insists, is a legitimate sound in itself and one that richly serves his project to create something clear and moving from something complex and potentially abrasive.

The string quartet genre has been central to Christensen output. His early quartet *Towards Nothingness* (Dacapo 8.226530), composed in 2008, is a dense, dark piece with a distinctive rhythmic groove that gradually disintegrates as it plots an ambiguous relationship with a melody based on a third. The surface of the music glints with the sound of harmonics and is spiced with quartertones. The first performance of Christensen's string quartet *MANIFEST – But There's No Need to Shout* (Dacapo 8.226587) in 2014 proved a moment in Danish music. The 70-minute work probed the very idea of what a string quartet could be, using only the open strings of the (retuned) instruments and their rich overtone series to create a work described by one of the composer's peers as 'beautiful in a way music has never been beautiful before'. That work used rhythm to invest music with inner life, even in its near total absence of traditional melodic motion.

Christensen's next major work in quartet form would thrust the idea of rhythmic complexity into the foreground. *EKSTASIS – Polyphōnos discordiae* was written from 2019 to 2020 to a commission from the Polish ensemble NeoQuartet, who gave its first performance at Rudersdal Summer Concerts (Denmark) in 2021. It follows Christensen's string quartet *The Whistle Quartet* from 2018, also written for NeoQuartet. The composer describes the various implications of the title thus: *ekstasis* suggesting 'a state of mind, to be out of oneself'; *polyphōnos* referring to 'a diverse expression and polyphone' and *discordiae* referencing 'wholeness by the combination of conflicting elements'.

For convenience, the quartet is tracked on five movements on this recording but the score is written as a single movement and should be performed and heard as such. The whole is spiked by a feeling of awry tuning derived from the instruction to tune two of each instrument's strings down by one eighth of a tone, while the remaining two strings remain truly tuned. Traditional, full-contact bowing of the strings is used sparingly in the score. Bowing is often used to conjure up overtones rather than play the fundamental note.

In isolation, the constituent parts of Christensen's quartet can seem like the very essence of 'musique concrète' – music as an object, a sound in space. And yet, the 45-minute span of *EKSTASIS* undoubtedly charts some sort of journey. The music shifts perspective in paragraphs, examining gestural material close up and at distance. The tight discourse between the four instruments can appear to be in a state of constant evolutionary development towards new breakthroughs or horizons – always on the hunt for an accord that will prove a passport to the next viable soundscape.

That process is carried by a rhythmic propulsion that can be light and gentle or stern and motoric. In both states, it is frequently eddied by 'tuplet' sequences – sudden lurches (as well as deep dives) into quintuplets, sextuplets or septuplets. These distortions of the time signature give the impression of the music momentarily gusting into a higher velocity or being weighted into a lower one – its metre compressed and then expanded – thus altering our perception of rhythmic progress and of time itself. Repetition, likewise, gives the impression of gently shifting the meaning or message of what we are hearing.

The quartet's apparently continuous but gradual process of rhythmic and material divergence and convergence takes it into differing terrains, from light swaying dances and introspective, glacial chords to what the composer describes as 'rattling noisy sections' comprised of brutal, blade-like gestures from bowed strings. From the very start of the piece, we might have had the sense of a melody existing in low hinterlands courtesy of viola and cello (an echo of *Towards Nothingness*) and within that we might discern the falling interval of a 'compressed' fifth – a Christensen hallmark, where one eighth of a note is missing. All the material is bound together as if it had been shattered and resolutely reassembled – melodies, if we even perceive them as such, are hocketed around the ensemble as if no single instrument can speak without the assistance of the others.

Through it all, the four players of the quartet are intensely co-dependent while somehow retaining autonomy. When you stand back from all the fastidious detail – aurally speaking – a sense of the broader musical tapestry emerges. It is this clear picture from a mass of detail, at once meditative and ferocious, which defines the new sound dimension Christensen has found in the string quartet and draws us so powerfully into.

Andrew Mellor is author of The Northern Silence – Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture (Yale University Press)

NeoQuartet has emerged as one of Europe's most dynamic and forward-thinking contemporary music ensembles, dedicated to reimagining the boundaries of the string quartet tradition. With a commitment to innovation and artistic exploration, this Polish quartet has garnered international acclaim for their electrifying performances and bold creative ventures.

NeoQuartet is Karolina Piątkowska-Nowicka (first violin), Paweł Kapica (second violin), Michał Markiewicz (viola) and Krzysztof Pawłowski (cello). Together, they are the driving force behind the NeoArte Synthesizer of Arts Festival, held annually in Gdańsk, Poland, since 2012 – a testament to their dedication to cultivating a vibrant, cross-disciplinary artistic community.

At the heart of NeoQuartet's identity lies an insatiable curiosity for new artistic horizons. Their work is defined by outstanding energy, expressive freedom, and a fearless approach to challenging conventions. The quartet thrives on collaboration, drawing inspiration from partnerships with diverse artists while forging profound connections with their audiences. As a quartet, they are renowned for inviting listeners to explore alternative dimensions of sound and perspective, offering a fresh lens through which to experience contemporary music.

A laureate of the prestigious Pomeranian Artistic Award and a nominee for accolades such as the Fryderyk Awards and *Sztorm Roku*, NeoQuartet has released an impressive catalogue of 12 recordings under esteemed labels in Poland, Germany, Greece and the United States. Their repertoire spans the full spectrum of contemporary classical music, and since 2017, they have pioneered the use of electric MIDI string instruments, synthesizers and loopers. Their 2022

album *String Theory* showcases their own compositions, charting new paths for the development of the string quartet in the 21st century.

With over 500 performances in 21 countries to date, NeoQuartet has graced some of the world's most iconic concert halls, including Carnegie Hall in New York and the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing.



NeoQuartet

En ny skønhed

Af Andrew Mellor

Med præcist kalibreret klangbehandling, minutiøst konstrueret rytmik og vilje til at lytte ud over den tempererede skalas tolv toner åbner Simon Christensens musik sit eget rum både gavmildt og karakterfuldt. Hans musik er ofte yderst nøje tilrettelagt, men klinger også med en enkelhed fuld af direkte skønhed. Christensens fascination af den auditive oplevelse fører ham til at opsøge lyden i al dens kompleksitet og derefter destillere den til en tålmodig, transparent musik med en sjælden evne til at tiltrække sig menneskelig opmærksomhed.

Christensen er uddannet på Det Kongelige Danske Musik-konservatorium i København hos Hans Abrahamsen, Ivar Frounberg og Niels Rosing-Schow samt på Pariserkonservatoriet hos Frédéric Durieux. Hans musikalske baggrund er ganske alsidig. I dag er han ansat som organist, men han har også spillet trommer i bandet New Paragraphs og været medlem af såvel electronica-duoen Mobile Soundscapes som det eksperimenterende ny musik-ensemble Kundi Bombo.

Selv om populærmusikkens æstetik er en central del af Christensens kunstneriske dna, førte hans intense optagethed af rytmer ham imidlertid med tiden ud over en genre, hvor netop denne musikalske parameter så godt som altid bliver ensrettet. Rytmisk kompleksitet står som noget helt centralt i Christensens værker, også når den ligger gemt under en glansfuld overflade. Det indgår som en del af det, komponisten og musikskribenten Frank J. Oteri har kaldt Christensens "evne til at mobilisere det uregelmæssige".

Christensens interesse for rytme tilfører meget af hans musik en fornemmelse af et pulserende indre liv i konstant mikrobevægelse, selv når den tilsyneladende er statisk svævende. Rytme er, insisterer han, en legitim lyd i sig selv og tjener til fulde hans projekt om at skabe noget klart og bevægeligt ud af noget komplekst og potentielt stødende.

Strygekvartetten står som en central genre i Christensens produktion. Hans tidlige kvartet *Towards Nothingness* fra 2008 (Dacapo 8.226530) er et fortættet, mørkt værk, hvor et karakteristisk rytmisk groove gradvis går i opløsning sideløbende med etableringen af en tvetydig forbindelse til en tertsbaseret melodi. Musikkens overflade glimter af overtoner og er krydret med kvarttoner. Uropførelsen i 2014 af Christensens strygekvartet *MANIFEST – But There's No Need to Shout* (Dacapo 8.226587) blev en begivenhed i dansk musik. Det 70 minutter lange værk udfordrede selve forestillingen om en strygekvartet ved – gennem udelukkende at bruge løse strenge på de (omstemte) instrumenter og deres righoldige overtonerækker – at skabe et værk, som af en af komponistens jævnaldrende er blevet kaldt "smukt på en måde, som musik aldrig før har været smuk på." I dette værk blev rytme brugt til at tilføre musikken et indre liv, uanset det næsten totale fravær af traditionel melodisk bevægelse.

Christensens næste store værk i kvartetform satte derimod forestillingen om rytmisk kompleksitet i forgrunden. *EKSTASIS – Polyphōnos discordiae* fra 2019-2020 er et bestillingsværk fra det polske ensemble NeoQuartet, der uropførte det ved Rudersdal Sommerkoncerter i 2021. Det ligger i forlængelse af Christensens strygekvartet *The Whistle Quartet* fra 2018, ligeledes skrevet til NeoQuartet. Komponisten beskriver titlens forskellige betydninger således: *Ekstasis* refererer til "en sindstilstand, at være ude

af sig selv”, mens *polyphōnos* refererer til ”et mangfoldigt udtryk og polyfoni” og *discordia*e refererer til ”helhed gennem at kombinere modstridende elementer”.

Af praktiske grunde er kvartetten på denne indspilning ind delt i fem sætser, men partituret er skrevet som en enkelt sæt og bør opføres og høres som en sådan. Helheden bliver punkteret af en følelse af skæv stemning, der skyldes en instruks om at stemme to strenge på hvert instrument en ottendedel tone ned, mens de resterende to strenge forbliver normalt stemt. Traditionelle buestrøg med fuld kontakt til strengene bliver kun brugt sparsomt i løbet værket. Ofte anvendes buestrøg snarere til at fremmane overtoner end til at spille grundtonen.

Isoleret set kan elementerne i Christens kvartet synes at ligne selve indbegrebet af ”musique concrète” – musik som en genstand, som en lyd i et rum. Men alligevel gennemløber *EKSTASIS* i løbet af sine 45 minutters spilletid også en form for rejse. Musikken ændrer perspektiv i forskellige afsnit, undersøger gestisk materiale både på nært hold og på afstand. Den stramme samtale mellem de fire instrumenter kan synes i konstant udvikling hen mod nye gennembrud eller horisonter – altid på sporet af en akkord, der vil vise sig at være portal til det næste mulige lydlandskab.

Processen bæres af en rytmisk fremdrift, som både kan være let og blid eller streng og motorisk. I begge tilstande bliver den jævnlige hvirvlet gennem sekvenser af ”toler” – pludselige hop (eller store spring) ud i kvintoler, sekstoler eller septoler. Disse forvrængninger af pulsen giver indtryk af, at musikken momentant går op i et højere tempo eller bliver tynget ned i et lavere – dens metrum bliver skiftevis presset sammen og udvidet – og dermed ændrer vores oplevelse af rytmisk udvikling og tiden som sådan. På samme

måder giver gentagelser indtryk af sagte ændringer i betydningen eller budskabet i det hørte.

Kvartettens tilsyneladende kontinuerede, men også gradvise proces med rytmisk og materialemæssig adskillelse og samling fører den ud i forskellige terræner, fra let svajende danse og indadvendte, statiske akkorder til det, komponisten selv kalder ”nervøst støjende sektioner” bestående af brutale, knivlignende gestus fra strøgne strenge. Helt fra værkets begyndelse har vi muligvis takket være bratschen og celloen haft fornemmelsen af en melodi dybt nede (et ekko af *Towards Nothingness*), og heri muligvis kunnet skelne intervallet en faldende ”komprimeret” kvint – et karakteristisk træk i Christensens musik, hvor en ottendedel tone mangler. Alt materialet er bundet sammen, som om det først er blevet slået i stykker og derefter resolut genopbygget – melodier, hvis vi ellers overhovedet opfatter dem som sådanne, bliver fordelt i ensemblet, som om intet instrument er i stand til at tale for sig selv uden hjælp fra de andre.

Hele vejen igennem er kvartettens fire musikere intenst afhængige af hinanden og bevarer samtidig også på en eller anden måde deres selvstændighed. Når man ser ud over alle de nøjeregnende detaljer – i auditiv forstand – bliver fornemmelsen af et større musikalsk tæppe mærkbar. Det er dette klare billede ud af en masse af detaljer, på samme tid meditativt og vildt, som kendetegner den nye klanglige dimension, Christensen har fundet i strygekvartetten og så stærkt trækker os ind i.

Andrew Mellor er forfatter til The Northern Silence – Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture (Yale University Press)

NeoQuartet har etableret sig som et af de mest dynamiske og fremsynede ensembler for samtidsmusik i Europa og er stærkt engageret i at udvide strygekvartettraditionens grænser. Med en ubetinget passion for nytænkning og kunstneriske eksperimenter har den polske kvartet høstet international anerkendelse for sine gnistrende koncerter og dristige kunstneriske projekter.

NeoQuartet består af Karolina Piątkowska-Nowicka (førsteviolin), Paweł Kapica (andenviolin), Michał Markiewicz (bratsch) og Krzysztof Pawłowski (cello). Sammen er de drivkraften bag NeoArte Synthesizer of Arts Festival, der siden 2012 er blevet afholdt årligt i Gdańsk i Polen, hvilket vidner om deres engagement i at udvikle et levende kunstnerisk miljø på tværs af genrer og kunstformer.

Centralt i NeoQuartetets identitet ligger en umættelig nysgerrighed efter nye kunstneriske horisonter. Dens virke er kendetegnet ved ekstraordinær høj energi, udtryksmæssig frihed og en frygtløs vilje til at udfordre konventioner. Kvartetten prioriterer samarbejde højt, søger inspiration gennem partnerskaber med forskellige kunstnere og en tæt kontakt til publikum.

Som kvartet er de kendt for at invitere lytterne til at udforske alternative dimensioner af lyd og perspektiver, tilbyder en ny linse at opleve samtidsmusikken gennem.

NeoQuartet har modtaget den fornemme Pomorskiej Nagrody Artystycznej, den pommerske kunstnerpris, været nomineret til priser som Fryderyk-prisen og *Sztorm Roku* samt udgivet hele 12 indspilninger på anerkendte selskaber i Polen, Tyskland, Grækenland og USA. Deres repertoire omfatter hele spektret af samtidsmusik, ligesom de siden 2017 har været pionerer inden for brugen af elektriske

MIDI-strygere, synthesizere og loopgeneratorer. Albummet *String Theory* fra 2022 er helliget deres egne kompositioner og viser nye veje for strygekvartetens udvikling i det 21. århundrede.

Med foreløbig over 500 koncerter i 21 lande har NeoQuartet optrådt i nogle af verdens mest ikoniske koncertsale, herunder Carnegie Hall i New York og koncertsalen i Den Forbudte By i Beijing.

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Engineering: Marcin Kowalczyk

Mixing and mastering: Simon Christensen

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