

# **EXPANSE**

**Tom Morrison (b. 1992): *Sea Change* (2018) (10 mins)**

**Eleanor Alberga (b. 1949): *String Quartet No. 1* (1993) (21 mins)**

I. Détaché et martellato e zehr lebhaft und swing it man.

II. Espressivo, with wonder and yearning.

III. Frantically driven yet playful

*Intermission*

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): *String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Op. 127* (1825) (38 mins)**

I. Maestoso - Allegro

II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile

III. Scherzando vivace - Presto

IV. Finale

The Aizuri Quartet's program "Expanse" features Tom Morrison's *Sea Change*, Eleanor Alberga's *String Quartet No. 1*, and Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Op. 127*. Within each of these works is a feeling of expanse, an opening up of the music, as if the composer were standing on the edge of a cliff looking out over a broad new terrain. This image calls to mind [\*Wanderer above the Sea Fog\*](#) by the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich, painted just seven years before Beethoven composed his *Op. 127*. Perched atop a dark craggy formation of rocks, Friedrich's subject stares into the silvery blue mist stretching out almost infinitely into the distance, pensively surveying the marvel of nature that surrounds him. Morrison, Alberga, and Beethoven confront life's greatest existential questions, and like Friedrich's misty landscape, these questions are monumental in their philosophical size. Each composer zooms out of the personal, the local, and the quotidian, and instead wrestles with climate change, with astrophysics and outer space, and with the meaning of life. Though there is much existential pondering in these works, there is also profound beauty and wisdom.

Morrison's *Sea Change*, a work premiered by the Aizuri Quartet in 2018, draws inspiration from the vastness of the arctic tundra and the perils of climate change. Morrison writes, "*Sea Change* was inspired by three images in Liza Ryan's 'Antarctica' series. Ryan's photos, taken in 2016 and then slightly altered for two years, 'summon the terrible beauty of Antarctica' [...]. The photos confront my own personal climate change anxieties and make my day-to-day world seem

so banal. Ryan's images provoke a certain awe from the juxtaposition of surface stillness and underlying force, which I tried to engage with in the music. The first movement is slow and sparse, setting up the surface placidness. The second movement is fast and aggressive, with a certain sense of anxiety and urgency. The third movement has surface motion but is stuck and unresolved."

To create this atmosphere of stasis at the start of the first movement, Morrison employs harmonics in all four parts, and truncates his phrases with asymmetrical silences. The movement builds towards a climax of trills, which then fades into a prolonged silent pause before the second movement. This middle movement features an undulating and unrelenting motor of sixteenth notes throughout almost its entire length. The motor dovetails between the four parts, creating a constant and driving groove. Morrison transforms the timbre throughout the movement from normal to *sul ponticello* (played on the bridge), giving an edgy sheen to his musical textures. The second and third movements are played *attacca* (without pause), with the start of the last movement marked by a return of the trills and harmonics from the first movement. We're brought back to the surface stillness of the beginning, and the music eventually evaporates into nothingness.

Following Morrison's musical reflection of our delicate planet, Eleanor Alberga's *String Quartet No. 1* launches into outer space and explores the galaxy with a sense of wonder and bright energy. Alberga writes about the quartet, "I was propelled into an intense burst of creativity by a lecture on physics. The details of this lecture — who gave it, where it was given, and so on — are now lost to my memory, but what grabbed me was the realization that all matter — including our physical bodies — is made of the same stuff: star dust. So the first movement might be called 'a fugue without a subject,' as particles of this stardust swirl around each other, go their separate ways, collide, or merge. The second movement might be described as 'stargazing from outer space,' while the finale re-establishes gravity and earthbound energy."

A British, Jamaican-born composer, Alberga draws from a rich musical background, including her studies as a classical pianist, growing up singing Jamaican folk music, and her experience as an improviser during her years working with the London Contemporary Dance Theater. Her *String Quartet No. 1* is full of swirling and evocative textures and harmonies that call to mind the sounds of Messiaen, Debussy, Bartok, and Stravinsky. The first movement of her quartet makes use of jaunty and jagged rhythms and melodic lines, described by the multi-lingual score indication, "Détaché et martellato e zehr lebhaft und swing it man" (Broad, separate, and hammered bow strokes, very lively, and swing it man). Alberga's second movement paints an image of a starry night sky in broad, smooth strokes, full of warmth and moments of contemplation. Her final movement pulls us back down to earth with grounded rhythms brimming with explosive energy.

After the frenzy and virtuosity of Alberg's exploration of the universe, Beethoven's *String Quartet Op. 127* is full of warmth, tenderness, and acceptance as he examines the breadth and complexity of the human condition. This is the first of his late quartets, representing the beginning of a profound musical shift in his work. It's a door to the innovative and expansive style of his late compositions, and there is an emotional openness that pervades the entire length of the piece. The quartet's first movement begins with the instruments playing a striking announcement of chords, which then transforms into a warm and flowing melody, marked *teneramente* (to be played tenderly). These *Maestoso* (majestic) chords return twice more, and the movement ends in the same tender and intimate character as the main melodic theme. Beethoven's second movement is almost a self-contained journey within the scope of the quartet. We like to think of this expansive set of Theme and variations as a miniature opera. With its singing melodic lines -- many of them written as conversations between the first violin and cello, we are reminded of operatic love duets. The Scherzo movement features Beethoven's classic use of humor, and rustic or *pesante* (peasant-like) themes. The finale of the quartet brings us back to the original warmth, bubbling melodic lines, and celebratory nature of E-flat Major, but takes a turn at the last minute to a magical, other-worldly coda.

- *Emma Frucht and Karen Ouzounian*