

# Noah MAX

## STRING QUARTETS

NO. 1, OP. 25, THE MAN WHO PLANTED TREES

NO. 2, OP. 37

NO. 3, OP. 41

NO. 4, OP. 45

The Tippett Quartet  
Sir Michael Morpurgo, narrator

## NOAH MAX, ALL-ROUND ARTIST

by Martin Anderson

Time was when composers were all-round musicians as a matter of course. Telemann is probably the most dazzling example: perhaps the most prolific composer of all time, he was also a conductor, music director of churches (six at a time) and opera houses, teacher, engraver and publisher of his own music – and he still had time for hobbies, one of which was horticulture. Mozart wrote his piano concertos with himself in mind as performer. Beethoven was the prince of Viennese pianists until deafness put an end to life on the stage. Berlioz was a virtuoso flautist and perhaps the first truly modern conductor. Liszt was the most dazzling piano virtuoso of his day, and a conductor, organist and teacher, as well as being a composer with an ear for the radical. Bruckner's reputation in his own day was as much as an organist of international repute and a highly regarded and influential teacher, of composition, music theory and organ, as a creator of symphonies. What was true of the major men of music was also true of the minor ones: a court or city composer, whether a celebrity or a provincial *Kapellmeister*, would be expected to make music, as well as create it, and organise public and private performances. The change began with Wagner: though he was an important conductor in the early part of his career, composition later became a specialism, and he put down his baton. Since then, composers who only compose have become the norm; they have often still taught, usually because they have to make a living, but those who were also executant musicians have gradually become fewer and fewer in number.

Noah Max will doubtless blush to see his name mentioned in such company, but in these days of narrow specialisation, he is very much an exception to prove the modern rule: he began his musical life as a cellist and is now active as both composer and conductor. Either activity would be enough for most young musicians

in their mid-twenties, but Max doesn't stop there: he is also a poet, a film-maker and a remarkably accomplished artist, as the paintings online on his website – [www.noahmax.net/artist](http://www.noahmax.net/artist) – make clear. They are explosions of colour and energy; though they range from the representational to the abstract, they are linked by their sense of spontaneity – and my guess is that it is spontaneity that allows the multiplicity of all these talents to blossom, that they must be as natural to him as they are impressive to everyone else, and that this spontaneity allows his creativity to function without the inhibitions one might otherwise expect. His relentless productivity – in its various categories – would seem to require an explanation along these lines.

Max was born in 1998 and grew up in a household of musicians in North London: his parents are the cellist Robert Max and pianist Zoë Solomon. He took lessons with Felix Schmidt, Professor of Cello at the Royal Academy of Music – who, himself a student of Maurice Gendron, William Pleeth and Mstislav Rostropovich, brought the teenage Max into a long line of distinguished cellists. Concurrently, he studied at the Purcell School for Young Musicians (in Bushey, to the north-west of London), where the composer Simon Speare taught him composition and inspired him to pursue a career as a composer in his own right.

It was there, too, that he began conducting, setting up his Echo Ensemble to give him an outlet for another of his enthusiasms. It took its name from Max's *Three Echoes* (2016) for chamber orchestra (his Op. 3), the first piece it performed, and was a vital outlet for Max's music in the eight years of its existence, though it served other composers as well: in 2021, for example, pandemic notwithstanding, it gave more than 50 world premieres across four series of online and live distanced concerts. He has also championed contemporary repertoire with the Endymion Ensemble at the Wigmore Hall and toured with the Divertimento Ensemble through northern Italy. He was a Britten-Pears Young Artist mentored by Marin Alsop, a London Sinfonietta Academy participant, Assistant Conductor to Jonathan Cohen and Arcangelo for their production of Handel's *Theodora* at the BBC Proms in 2018 and Associate Conductor of Sir Matthew Bourne's *The Red Shoes* in 2019–20.

Even allowing for his early start, his output as a composer has been substantial: he has written music for symphony and string orchestras, chamber ensembles large and small, operas, choral pieces and educational works for young musicians. His compositions have been premiered at the Royal Festival Hall, the Wigmore Hall and the Elgar Room of the Royal Albert Hall in London, as well as the Musikverein in Vienna, the Uilenburgersjoel Synagogue in Amsterdam and the Ignacy Jan Paderewski Academy of Music in Poznań. He has worked with the London Mozart Players, the Brompton, Piatti and Tippett Quartets, the Ebor Singers, Marryat Players, Roadrunner Trio and Echo Ensemble, of which he remained Creative Director until summer 2024, when the group gave its farewell concerts. His pieces have featured in concerts curated by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Riot Ensemble. Commissions include *Eulogy for an Imagined Pitch*, Op. 15 (2019), for the Moonlight Ensemble, *...to the world without Time...*, Op. 31 (2021), for the pianist Thomas Kelly, and *Hymn to the Chasm*, Op. 36 (2022), a work for violin and fixed-media electronics, to accompany an exhibition of sculptures by the artist Marie-Thérèse Ross. In 2017 his choral work *Ave, Regina Caelorum*, Op. 6, was selected for the finals of the National Centre for Early Music Composition Award, and *Three Echoes* was shortlisted for the BBC Proms 'Inspire' Competition. In 2021 his string trio *Sojourn*, Op. 4, won The Clements Prize for Composers at Conway Hall, *Musical Opinion* describing it as 'an engaging new work for an exacting medium',<sup>1</sup> and the online Arts Desk finding it 'mercurial in character, detailed in scoring and with echoes of Barber in its fragile slow movement'.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the 2020 flute concerto *Radical Severance*, Op. 23, was first performed by Anna Kondrashina (its dedicatee) and the Echo Ensemble conducted by Max in St James', Islington, North London, on 14 May 2023. *Rapture*, Op. 47, an extensive song-cycle for soprano, clarinet and piano (2022–2023), sets poems by Carol Ann Duffy and was first performed – by Susanna MacRae, soprano, Raymond Brien, clarinet, and Pavel Timofeyevsky, piano – on 19 June 2024, during the Essex Book Festival. *Rain*, Op. 48,

<sup>1</sup> Paul Conway, *Musical Opinion*, July–September 2018, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Hughes, The Arts Desk, 18 October 2021: <https://www.theartsdesk.com/classical-music/clements-prize-conway-hall-review-newly-written-string-trios-competition>.

an Edward Thomas setting, was commissioned by the London Song Festival and premiered by James Atkinson, baritone, and Nigel Foster, piano, on 6 November 2023. *Axiom*, Op. 46, a concerto for cello and chamber orchestra, proved a family affair: it is dedicated to the memory of his uncle, Edward Max, and at the premiere, at the Proms at St Jude's Festival, London, on 26 June 2024, the soloist was Robert Max, and Max's Echo Ensemble was conducted by the composer. Another recent *concertante* work is *Chiasmus*, Op. 40, a 'Symphonic Metamorphosis' for piano and orchestra (2022).

His artwork has been displayed at the National Portrait Gallery in London and other major venues. Ronald Corp, Zeo Fawcett and Sarah Frances Jenkins have set his poems to music. As with Telemann and his gardening, Noah Max finds time in this crowded life for hobbies, among them skiing, reading and listening to a wide range of non-classical music. He resides digitally at [www.noahmax.net](http://www.noahmax.net) and his 'Living Portfolio' can be found at [www.vimeo.com/noahmax](http://www.vimeo.com/noahmax).

In spring 2022 Toccata Classics released a first album of Max's compositions: *Songs of Loneliness: Solo, Duo and Trios* – instrumental and chamber music, as the subtitle makes clear.<sup>3</sup> The works were unified by the sense of loss pervading almost all of them; where the music does not seem to be grieving, it is angry. That awareness of innocence forgone is characteristic of the music of many English composers in the first half of the twentieth century – Elgar, Finzi, Howells and Vaughan Williams come immediately to mind – and there is perhaps something of Satie in the elliptical elegance of some of the more delicate pieces. But the works of these men that embody the notion of the transience of beauty were generally products of their middle and old age; that a composer just entering his twenties should tap into the same vein of sadness and elegy a century later is downright startling.

Max had another surprise up his sleeve in his choice of the subject for his first opera: an adaption of John Boyne's 2006 novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which tells of the friendship that grows up – initially across a barbed-wire divide – between Shmuel, a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz, and Bruno, the son of the camp commandant, both

<sup>3</sup> TOCC 0638.

too young to grasp the enormity of what is going on around them. The two decide to look for Shmuel's father, who has disappeared, and so Shmuel obtains a set of 'striped pyjamas' (prisoner's clothes) for his friend, who sneaks under the barbed wire. They are arrested and gassed, with Bruno's death acting almost as Old Testament vengeance on his parents for their facilitation of such evil. Max's access to this grim but touching parable would normally have taken the form of discussion with John Boyne's agent and a contract to allow him to go ahead. But it seemed that he was too late: Miramax Films had bought up the rights – everything, down to the last full stop – for their 2008 film of the same name (almost: *Pyjamas* became *Pajamas* in North America). Undeterred, Max took on Hollywood and, after extended negotiations that made the national headlines, he emerged with his opera plans salvaged and spent the larger part of 2021 composing the music. *A Child in Striped Pyjamas*, Max's Op. 34, in two acts and scored for chamber forces, was duly premiered in London in January 2023, to universally laudatory reviews.

His Jewish background naturally forms an important part of his outlook, and an 'Auschwitz' opera could hardly make it more explicit. He wrote to me as the negotiations with Miramax were progressing:

I had four sets of great grandparents in four different parts of the world who all faced tangible threats to their lives and livelihoods because they were Jewish. [...] I see the Holocaust as the loss of humanity's innocence as it was revealed to every future generation the pure evil we are capable of if we are not careful.<sup>4</sup>

He underlined the association more recently by responding to a commission for a piece for choir and orchestra with a *Kaddish*.

His First Symphony, which occupied him throughout 2023, was a milestone in several regards: first, in the obvious sense that any composer's first symphony is a statement of intent; second, it bears the opus number 50, symbolic in its own right; third, it was the last of his pieces to be published by United Music Publishing. In late 2023 he signed a management agreement with HarrisonParrott, to promote him across the

<sup>4</sup> E-mail dated 7 January 2022.

multiplicity of his activities, as composer, conductor, cellist, artist and poet. If the state of Max's in-tray is any guide, the partnership is working well: he has commissions for a new opera (a one-man version of Orwell's *1984*), song-cycles for several major singers and more; and his music is now available through Birdsong, the publishing wing (sorry) of HarrisonParrott.

He now looks back on that early explosion of creative activity as a kind of apprenticeship, the work of a younger self, and is settling down to a composing life with the sense that he has established its basic parameters. But, as he confessed in conversation with me in December 2024, he can nonetheless find himself surprised by his compositional choices – that *Kaddish*, for example, was not something he initially had in mind. There's little doubt that he will continue to surprise the rest of us as well.

*Martin Anderson founded Toccata Classics in 2005 and publishes books on classical music as Toccata Press; he also writes on music for various publications in Britain and abroad. His degree (from the University of St Andrews, in 1977) was in mediaeval French and German, and thereafter he worked in economics for twenty years, in London and in Paris.*

## THE SIGN OF THE FOUR: THOUGHTS ON MY STRING QUARTETS

by Noah Max

Music was my first love, and chamber music was the process of courtship and seduction by which I fell in love with music. I took up the cello at the age of three and within a few years I was devouring Haydn quartets. Before reaching my twenties, I had played all 68 of them, as well as masterpieces by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Janáček, Berg and more.

The string quartet is a paradox, at once both epic and intimate. Usually, it is here that composers share their deepest thoughts and most personal insights. I was nervous about beginning a cycle of my own, but it had always been my aspiration to make a significant contribution to the genre which has given me so much.

These first four quartets are something of an odyssey. Quartets Nos. 1 and 2 are both triptychs, whereas Nos. 3 and 4 are single-movement streams of consciousness. No. 1 is broadly tonal, and No. 2 bitonal; No. 3 is formed of delicate micropolyphony, No. 4 driven by muscular passages of rhythmic unison. Each piece was written at a turning-point in my life, and they capture the heightened emotions of such moments.

String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25 (2020), is based on Jean Giono's fable *The Man Who Planted Trees*, narrated here by Sir Michael Morpurgo. Having read Sir Michael's novels as I was growing up, I was delighted to learn that Giono is among his favourite writers and so I wrote to his agent and was thrilled to get a warm and enthusiastic response: he was eager to bring this tale to life with us. The lush, rapturous soundworld of the music was influenced by my intense relationship with an artist at around this time. The romance ended abruptly when she painted over one of my paintings – hardly surprising, then, that my future quartets took a darker turn.

This first quartet has a relatively traditional structure: a sonata-form opener followed by an introspective slow movement and an effervescent scherzo. The



first movement, *Andante desolato* [1], opens with a sparse, cold *pizzicato* texture and a plaintive melody on the cello. It winds towards an impassioned climax during the development before relaxing into a yearning, hopeful coda. The narration leads into the second movement, marked '*Maestoso; expansivo*' [2]. Long, held harmonies flicker and flutter as though on the verge of transformation as a gradual healing process takes place. The concluding *Vivo* [3] brings one exultant shower of brilliance after another in celebration of the life and work of a man who, though fictional, symbolises the very best of humanity. The final moments return to the opening theme heard in a much more optimistic context.

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 37 (2021), originally bore the title *The Ladder of Escape* after a painting by Joan Miró. Sculptures by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth also play into the music's tough concrete edges and capricious swings of mood. It is dedicated to Božidar Vukotić, the cellist of the Tippett Quartet, who gave its first performance on 5 July 2022 while I was Composer in Residence at the Thaxted Festival.

The opening *Andante glaciale* [6] once again adheres to sonata form, opening with a dizzying 'see-saw' gesture before warming into a tempestuous middle section. Then follows a vast central scherzo, *Intensamente con ira* [7], which alternates flurrying *staccato* gestures with unpredictable silences. An extended viola soliloquy dominates the texture for quite some time before the music whirls into a frenzied finale: one can hear the Dionysian dance-rhythms of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony gradually sliding sideways into chaos. The 'Unearthly; mesmeric' finale [8] comes as a surprise, creeping from near-inaudibility into an overwhelming tidal-wave of sound.

String Quartet No. 3, Op. 41 (2022) [4], conjures the sobbing of a mother for her lost child. Haydn built the quartet genre around 'fours': four instruments with four strings each, playing a piece generally divided into four movements. And yet, all the musical material and structural ideas in String Quartet No. 3 coalesce around the number 'three', giving a palpable sense of instability, as though everything could collapse at any moment. This work was commissioned by the Brompton Quartet, who gave the

premiere at Conway Hall in central London, on 22 January 2023. It is dedicated to the memory of my cousin Indigo.

The work opens with a falling three-note motif which develops into a dense canon underscored by lingering harmonics. In spite of the labyrinthine quality of the music, a chorale in A minor gradually pulls into view. It is fragmentary at first and can be heard in full only at the cataclysmic climax, after which there can exist nothing more than an evocation of stunned silence.

Quartet No. 3 is unique among this group because it makes use of *scordatura*: the alteration of the tuning of the strings of a stringed instrument. All four players tune down their lowest string, radically darkening the resonance and widening the tessitura. As a result the timbre of the ensemble becomes intermittently unrecognisable.

My chamber opera *A Child in Striped Pyjamas*, which was premiered in London on 11 and 12 January 2023, concludes with a G major triad. That is the jumping-off point for String Quartet No. 4, Op. 45 [5], which reflects on the process of creating that opera. The work is dedicated to John Boyne (the author of the novel on which my opera is based), who is both a friend and an inspiration.

The opening segment of music is inspired by the scurrying, neo-Mendelssohnian sound which pervades so much of the opening scene of the opera. The bedrock of the quartet stems from harmonic and melodic material from throughout *Striped Pyjamas*; but the compositional process differed so radically that the relationship may not be apparent to the listener – except, perhaps, in the angst-ridden finale where Jewish liturgical music bursts to the fore. Condensed into these fifteen minutes are five years of anguish and turmoil; nonetheless, the work concludes with two tantalising chords, undulating gently, begging the question of whether there might be still one more tranche of this unlikely trilogy to come.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO STRING QUARTET NO. 1

by Sir Michael Morpurgo

Of all the books I love, *The Man Who Planted Trees* is the one I most wish I had written. Jean Giono got there before me. It has the depth and breadth of a great novel, and is hardly long enough to be thought of even as a novella. It is for me a poem, a unique narrative poem: unique in its intensity and beauty, and unique too in that it is more relevant today than any other story I know. It was written almost a hundred years ago.

Here is a story that tells us that each of us can make a difference, can restore the natural world we have so despoiled and exploited. The man who planted trees shows us the way. Elzéard Bouffier is no prophet. He is no ecologist. He is a shepherd, who knows the land intimately, lives on the land, works on the land with his sheep, understands what the land is lacking, what his sheep are lacking, and what it needs if it is to recover. Trees. He makes it his life's work to plant a hundred acorns every day on the parched hillsides. He creates over the decades a great forest that covers the hills for miles around and revives the entire landscape, bringing back birds and wildness and water. Whilst the world busies itself in destruction and war, he stays where he is with his sheep and restores that which is around him.

And now, inspired by Jean Giono's iconic tale, we have Noah's glorious music that weaves its way around his words, through the trees Elzéard Bouffier has planted for us: trees that whisper a song of renewal, of hope for us all.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO STRING QUARTET NO. 4

by John Boyne

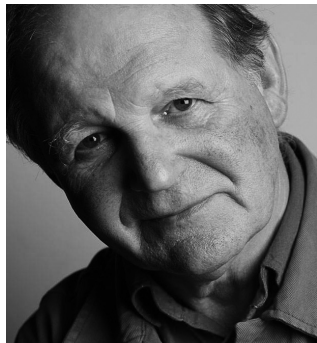
When I sat down in April 2004 to write *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, I did not know that it would change my life or that twenty years later it would still be read, discussed, loved – and yes, criticised. Every artist hopes to produce work that lasts, and I am grateful that the novel continues to find new audiences while laying the foundation for all the books I have published since.

This book has been adapted for cinema, theatre and ballet but Noah Max's opera is particularly dear to my heart: not only because I have got to know this extraordinary composer over recent years and recognise in him the same passion for his craft that I felt when I was his age, but because, as a Jewish composer with his own personal relationship to the Holocaust, he felt moved to take on this task.

In 2025 it takes courage and determination to be a true artist. One who works from gut instinct. Fighting to get one's work produced in the face of obstacles. Never giving in to naysayers. Noah Max has proved to me, time and again, that he is a true artist.

I was deeply honoured when he dedicated his String Quartet No. 4 to me, particularly because it draws on his experiences both of reading and adapting *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. I am grateful to him and to the Tippett Quartet for recording it. I hope it gives you as much pleasure as it gives me.

**Sir Michael Morpurgo** has been writing stories since the 1970s and is one of Britain's best-loved authors. He has written over 130 books, including *The Butterfly Lion*, *Kensuke's Kingdom*, *The Mozart Question* and *War Horse*, which was adapted for the stage by the National Theatre and then, in 2011, for a film by Steven Spielberg. Many of his other books have been adapted for the stage including *Private Peaceful*, *An Elephant in the Garden*, *Toro Toro!*, *The Mozart Question*, *The Butterfly Lion*, *I Believe in Unicorns*, *Why the Whales Came* and *Kensuke's Kingdom*. In 1976, with his wife, Clare, he started the charity Farms for City Children. He was appointed Children's Laureate in 2003 and awarded an OBE for his writing in 2006.  
[michaelmorpurgo.com](http://michaelmorpurgo.com)



**The Tippett Quartet** has performed and broadcast throughout the UK, Europe, Canada and Mexico. Their broad repertoire highlights the versatility of the ensemble. They have made over 50 recordings and given numerous world and UK premieres.

Their recording of the complete Penderecki Quartets was described as 'life-enhancing' by *The Times*; it was named recording of the month by *BBC Music Magazine* and nominated for an International Classical Music Award. They were awarded *Gramophone* Record of the Month for their recording of Gorécki Quartets: 'I cannot recommend this recording highly enough and have run out of superlatives' (*Gramophone*).

The Tippett Quartet pursues a keen interest in educational work with both schools and universities. It was Ensemble-in-Residence at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, in 2012–13 and at Royal Holloway, University of London, from 2014 to 2024.

In 2011 the Quartet celebrated the centenary of the film composer Bernard Herrmann with a series of concerts and radio broadcasts. It can be heard on Nathan Johnson's film scores for the Netflix thrillers *Knives Out* and *Glass Onion*. In 2023 the Quartet celebrated its 25th Anniversary with the release of the complete Korngold Quartets, which was Chamber CD of the Month in *BBC Music Magazine* and featured in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* Top 10 Classical Recordings of the Year.



This is the sixth Toccata Classics recording to involve the Tippett Quartet. The first (TOCC 0149) featured music by David Braid, and the second (TOCC 0357, with Emma Abbate, piano, and Susan Monks, cello) three quintets by Stephen Dodgson. The next Tippett/Toccata album presented six song-cycles for baritone and chamber ensemble by Derek B. Scott (TOCC 0619), with the participation of James Atkinson, baritone, and Lynn Arnold, piano, a frequent partner of the Quartet. This championship of British composers continued with the next two albums, with the string-quartet output to date by Steve Elcock (TOCC 0700) and a rediscovered early string quartet by Robert Simpson (TOCC 0701).



## More Noah Max on Toccata Classics



TOCC 0638

“This is a great selection of music written by the young, up and coming composer, Noah Max, who clearly has a very bright future ahead of him. Highly recommend.”

—Amazon.co.UK, customer review  
\*\*\*\*\* March 2022



Recorded on 16 August 2023 in St Silas' Church, Kentish Town, London (Sir Michael Morpurgo), and on 29–31 January 2024 at SJE Arts, Oxford (Tippett Quartet)

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Producer: Andrew Keener

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String Quartets Nos. 1–4 are published by United Music Publishing, and performance materials can be bought from their website (<https://ump.co.uk/composer/noah-max/>).

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## NOAH MAX String Quartets

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**String Quartet No. 1, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, Op. 25 (2020) 24:26**

- ① I *Andante desolato* 10:10  
② II *Maestoso*; expansive 8:04  
③ III *Vivo* 6:12

④ **String Quartet No. 3, Op. 41 (2022) 10:44**

⑤ **String Quartet No. 4, Op. 45 (2022–23) 15:37**

**String Quartet No. 2, Op. 37 (2021–22) 17:57**

- ⑥ I *Andante glaciale* 6:02  
⑦ II *Intensamente con ira* 8:11  
⑧ III *Unearthly*; mesmeric 3:44

**TT 68:46**

FIRST RECORDINGS

**Sir Michael Morpurgo, narrator** ①–③

**The Tippett Quartet**

John Mills and Jeremy Isaac, violins

Lydia Lowndes-Northcott, viola

Božidar Vukotić, cello