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Sabin Pautza (b. 1943) String Quartet No. 4, Ludus Modalis (1998)

Fantasia

Elegia

Toccata

Sabin Pautza is an eclectic Romanian composer and conductor. He has composed art music in the European tradition, jazz and pop music in America, and also liturgical music. His compositional techniques have ranged from youthful chromatic modalism and serial 12-tone, to minimalism and the new consonance, but always maintaining links with Romanian folk music.

He trained at the Bucharest Conservatory, later brushing up his modernist credentials with a graduate year in Siena under Franco Donatoni and Bruno Maderna. He taught composition at the Iași Conservatoire in Moldavia where he also earned a fine reputation for his orchestral and choral conducting. In 1984 a cultural exchange allowed him to visit the USA where he defected from the Ceaușescu regime, settled in New Jersey, lectured at the Altan Institute of NYU and conducted the Plainfield Symphony. Retiring in 2008, he returned to Romania and continued both to conduct and to compose.

An addition to his many serious awards is a 1995 honorary doctorate in music from the 'London Institute for Advanced Research'. Its acronym gives the lie to this institution, which sold degrees. But its activities were a protest against respectable institutions prostituting themselves to wealthy patrons. Several thousand pounds of proceeds from selling the garishly ornate LIAR degree certificates went to the Yehudi Menuhin-supported British Association for Gifted Children (known since 2013 as Potential Plus UK).

Pautza's first three string quartets were written in the 1970s while he was still in Romania, and he did not return to string quartet writing until 1998 with tonight's '*Ludus Modalis*' (Modal Game). The work's title is derived from Paul Hindemith's extensive piano work '*Ludus Tonalis*' which was itself inspired by Bach's tonal *tour de force* the 48 Preludes and Fugues. Pautza's work takes as an *idée fixe* the letters of Bach's name in German musical nomenclature sounding B flat, A, C, B natural (illustrated). He uses these four letters as a sort of micro-mode. Just as different church modes used all the ways that the seven consecutive white keys could play a scale depending on which they started on, so Pautza explores the modal possibilities of the four notes of Bach's name.



The Arcadia's second violin Răsvan Dumitru writes: "The material used in this work not only ranges from the simplest pre-pentatonic mode used in the BACH motif to the most complex acoustic modes that underlie our Romanian Christmas carols, but also is underpinned by various rhythmic and metric structures typical of our folk music. The work incorporates carols and laments from Bela Bartók's and Ilarion Cocisui's collections, as well as dance songs from Transylvania and Banat, etched in the composer's childhood memory."

The first movement, *Fantasia*, is an improvisation in which the four instruments in turn assume the leading role with a different ordering of B-A-C-H. Contrasting with these motifs are rapidly scurrying semi-tonal textures. The closeness of the four semitones that make up the notes of the BACH motif have a particularly poignant impact in the second movement, *Elegia*. It is like a slow motion baroque fugue (reminiscent of Tippett's 2nd Quartet), in which the BACH micro-modes are presented in all possible variants along with

other modal structures. The third movement, *Toccata*, is the most robust of the three, with two Romanian folk tunes presented in various contrasting rhythmic forms.

A recurring device that Pautza uses throughout this quartet is the Romanian folk-music contrast between *tempo giusto* and *tempo rubato*. That is between two rhythmic states one where there is always a clear dynamic (dancing) rhythm and another where the melodic line is free, improvisatory, with no clear rhythm and in a slow tempo. The BACH motif, for example, is explored in *rubato* contrasting with dance-like rhythmical passages.