Acis

Greg Sandow

Three Quartets

Terra String Quartet

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Harriet Langley, Amelia Dietrich, Chih-Ta Chen, Audrey Chen

1	Quartet for Anne (2001)	4:52
2	The Remembered Song (2018)	8:07

Commissioned by Classical Movements for the Prague Summer Nights Young Artists Music Festival as part of the Eric Daniel Helms New Music Program

Mahler Variations (2004) 26:05

3	*Theme*	1:41
4	*Variation 1*	0:22
5	*Variation 2*	0:58
6	*Variation 3*	0:32
7	*Variation 4 (Beethoven)*	0:36
8	*Variation 5 (Elvis)*	1:07
9	*Variation 6 (Mozart)*	0:42
10	*Variation 7 (Eric Rohmer)*	0:27
11	*Variation 8 (Bach)*	0:57
12	*Variation 9 (Schoenberg)*	0:29
13	*Variation 10 (Webern)*	0:43
14	*Variation 11 (Goldberg Variations)*	0:46
15	*Variation 12*	1:06
16	*Variation 13 (Bellini)*	0:49
17	*Variation 14 (Antonioni)*	0:57
18	*Variation 15 (Fugue)*	0:57
19	*Variation 16 (The Minor Third Bird)*	0:28
20	*Variation 17 (Chorale Prelude)*	1:19
21	*Variation 18 (The* Lulu *Dance: Berg)*	0:17
22	*Variation 19 (Proust)*	7:05
23	*Variation 20 (Sheep on the Hillside)*	0:54
24	*Variation 21 (John Cage)*	0:20
25	*Variation 22 (Mahler)*	1:47
26	*Coda*	0:44

Total 39:04

With this recording, three things in my life blossom.

First is my composing, which for years I neglected, while making my career as a critic, as a consultant and speaker on the future of classical music, and as a teacher, above all at Juilliard, but also at Eastman and Peabody.

Also blossoming are these three string quartets, written at different times and for different reasons, but which come together as if they were meant to be heard in a single flow.

And finally there's the warm collaboration that brought me together with the Terra String Quartet, who, while we edited this recording, won the Naumburg Chamber Music Competition, one of the highest competitive honors for young chamber ensembles. I also collaborated with my friend Neeta Helms, who'd commissioned *The Remembered Song*, and who before the recording sessions hosted live performances of the quartets, on the Secret Garden concert series her Classical Movements company runs.

Through Neeta I met Geoffrey Silver, who produced this recording and released it on his label, Acis, also becoming a close collaborator and friend.

And at the deepest level of connection there's my wife, Anne Midgette, for whom I wrote *Quartet for Anne* as a surprise birthday gift, bringing musicians to our home to play it for her.

When I asked the Terra quartet about our time together, they touched my heart with their reply:

> The Terra String Quartet's relationship with Greg Sandow can be traced back to 2017 when Amelia and Harriet took his class at Juilliard, Speaking of Music. Each week, students had to present music reviews and we realized quickly what an open-minded and genre-bending musician he was when he encouraged us to look anywhere from that week's *New York Times* critiques to *Rolling Stone* reviews of rock bands.
>
> When we reconnected several years later at one of our concerts, Greg approached us about the idea of recording all three of his string quartets. We were excited about the prospect of bringing his musical voice to life. We were delighted to find that all three quartets sounded incredibly different — with unique sound worlds, textures and even extended techniques.
>
> Throughout this process, Greg went from a beloved professor to respected colleague and friend and allowed us glimpses into his inner world, both musical and personal, when he and his wife Anne welcomed us into their home.
>
> It is no wonder that his music is so poignant and can speak to so many, given the incredibly rich life he has lived.

I feel blessed with their collaboration and friendship.

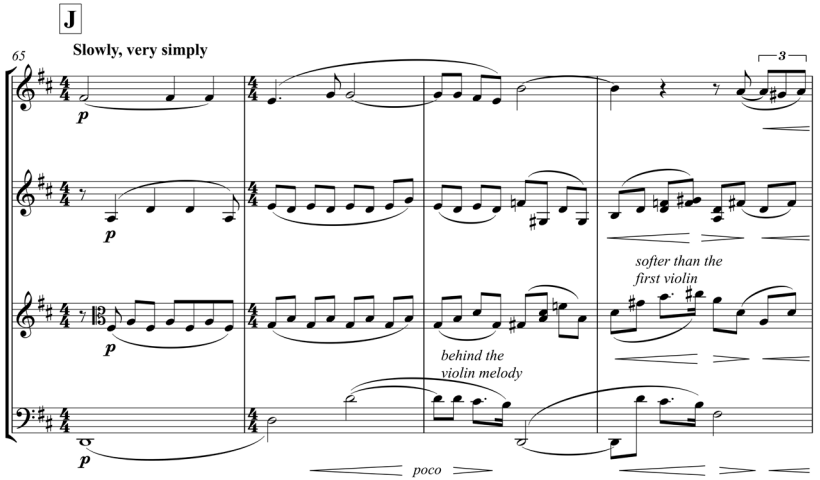
About these pieces:

To say that Anne was surprised when musicians came to our home to play her quartet — that would be an understatement.

The music, though, would have been familiar, since I put it together from other pieces of mine that Anne knew, including a song based on a Rilke poem, which I wrote for her when we got together.

From that song comes the quiet melody at the end of the quartet (see the score on the facing page). Earlier there's a lyrical tune at the beginning and then something dancelike, both taken from an opera I was writing (still in progress), based on Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. And briefly at the end there's a nonsense song I'd made up.

How this all fits together seems like musical alchemy, of a kind composers shouldn't try to explain. But this little piece — just five minutes long, with the instruments crossing over each other, switching between melody and accompaniment — seems to me like a seamless whole, and has proved to be my greatest hit. I smile when I think of the Fine Arts Quartet playing it, and not just because I loved how they did it. They wanted, understandably, to say they were giving the world premiere. But for me, the world premiere was for Anne, in our living room. So the quartet and I agreed to call their premiere the first professional performance.



Quartet for Anne:
The closing melody

You can hear the opera excerpts and the Rilke song at **www.gregsandow.com/qfa**, *from video of a performance I presented at the Strathmore performing arts center, where I used this music to lead into the quartet.*

About the instruments crossing over each other — that, for me, is one of the great pleasures in writing string quartets. The instruments all can have their own life, emerging as individuals, shifting roles throughout a piece, so the music subtly changes color as it flows.

The second piece on this recording, *The Remembered Song*, is the most recent. Like the *Quartet for Anne* it's close to my heart, but in a different way. It meditates on a passage from a spiritual book that's meant a lot to me, *A Course in Miracles:*

> Listen — perhaps you catch a hint of an ancient state not quite forgotten; dim, perhaps, and yet not altogether unfamiliar, like a song whose name is long forgotten, and the circumstances in which you heard completely unremembered. Not the whole song has stayed with you, but just a little wisp of melody, attached not to a person or a place or anything particular. But you remember, from just this little part, how lovely was the song, how wonderful the setting where you heard it, and how you loved those who were there and listened with you.

You could take that as a vision of a heaven we all come from, and where we'll all return. Or it could just be a dream, of a paradise we long for.

My hardest task, in writing this, was to compose the melody, which, in its sound and feeling, has to sustain the meaning of the piece. At the start, we hear it just in fragments, as if we're asleep, dreaming of something we can't quite remember.

Something new then sounds in the music, and we wake up. We stretch, we walk. Gaining energy, we run, and we dance. The musicians tap on their instruments, giving the music a beat, a rhythmic spark.

Next come violent episodes, evoking war and mourning. When we recover, banishing the darkness, we take a walk in a park. We come home. We grow drowsy. We fall asleep, and, as if in another dream, we hear the song complete.

The musicians tap lightly, dancing while the melody sings. A quiet descant floats above. And then we vanish in the dream.

The last quartet on this recording, *Mahler Variations* (which I wrote just for pleasure), is the longest and most complex. Though the theme is something purely beautiful, the opening melody of the last movement of Mahler's Third Symphony. I take this theme through many changes, sometimes sticking close to its melody or harmony, or to both, and sometimes treating it freely, just letting it inspire me, maybe quoting moments from it, or using things in its internal structure.

What emerges is a narrative — a journey in many episodes, which I think is easy to follow, whether or not you know how each variation works. It's a journey whose meaning isn't clear until the quiet final chord.

Many of the variations are tributes to things I've loved, especially in music, film, and literature. They go through many musical styles, which you can hear contrasting with each other early in the piece, in the fourth and fifth variations. The fourth is a tribute to Beethoven, while the fifth — entering, if you like, another world — is a tribute to Elvis.

The Beethoven variation quotes the second movement of his Op. 111 piano sonata, which is itself a set of variations. I take off from the third one, with its leaping rhythm.

You can hear the Beethoven excerpt at **www.gregsandow.com/mvs**, *where you'll also find the sources for my other tributes in the piece.*

The Elvis variation, by contrast, is a melody over a rock & roll beat, evoking some of the songs Elvis sang in the 1950s. It's built on Mahler's harmony, which has a longer chord progression than we'd find in any '50s rock song. My trick, then, was to make each phrase sound like something Elvis might have sung, even if the full variation doesn't.

And so it goes throughout the quartet. There's a Mozart variation — a miniature movement in sonata form, quoting Mozart's D minor piano concerto, and with a phrase from the Mahler theme appearing as the second subject.

There's a fugue, and also a chorale prelude, in which I challenge myself to follow Bach in his chorale preludes, where he gave chorale melodies accompaniments that work as independent pieces. Could I do that with the Mahler theme? I could!

I evoke two film directors I've loved, Eric Rohmer and Michelangelo Antonioni. For Rohmer I imitated a French rock song his characters uneasily dance to, in his film *Les nuits de la pleine lune* (in English called *Full Moon in Paris*). For Antonioni, I paraphrased a tune heard on the radio in his film *La notte*, then shifted to another *La notte* moment, when a woman looks lost on a street in Milan, among buildings that seem to press in on her.

You can see these film scenes at **www.gregsandow.com/mvs**.

I also wrote tributes to Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, the 12-tone composers of the Second Viennese School. Which might seem surprising, since most of the music in my quartets is thoroughly tonal. But atonal music also is alive in my heart, and if I have any ideology as a composer, it's that all music, past and present, from everywhere in the world, is alive around us, and we can draw on any of it.

In the Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern variations, I wrote 12-tone music in each composer's style, quoting in the Schoenberg variation his Fourth String Quartet, and in the Berg variation a melody from his opera *Lulu*.

In the Webern variation (to open a window into my composer's workshop), I wrote a double canon in four parts, in which two of the voices are inversions of the other two. I was thinking of the first movement of Webern's Symphony, Op. 21, which is built from 12-tone canons.

But such technicalities are just my private game. I don't think my Webern variation is complex to hear. To me it seems limpid, and even transparent. You can hear the voices imitate each other, especially at the end. It's one of my favorite moments in this quartet.

The longest variation, and the quiet climax of the piece, is a tribute to Proust, which I wrote with the sound of French music in my mind, especially Fauré's songs.

And the Proust variation really is a song, a dreamlike setting of the first sentences of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (in English, *In Search of Lost Time*), Proust's great novel, one of the masterworks of 20th-century literature, and a deep favorite of mine. My variation of course isn't sung, but the words are in the score, and the musicians should ideally play as if they were singing them.

I've put the Proust text at the end of these notes, in my own translation. It ends in quiet darkness, as my music for it does, and I needed to follow it with something else that's quiet. As it happens, I wrote this piece in a place Anne and I go to in England, where I'd see sheep across a valley, visible only as tiny white dots. So I followed Proust with a "Sheep on the Hillside" variation, with the sheep evoked as quiet pizzicatos. At the end, they speed up, as the sheep stampede (as I once saw), herded by a sheepdog.

Then there's true silence, where for a long time the quartet doesn't play. In the score, I ask for this to be at least a minute long, but on a recording — without the musicians on stage keeping time alive — it wants to be shorter.

Where I wrote *Mahler Variations*.
In the distance, though you can't see them:
sheep on the hillside.

This I call my John Cage variation, though that's an affectionate joke, since there's more to Cage than his famous silent piece. But Cage did teach us that silence has many qualities, that it can make us receptive, open us to anything that happens.

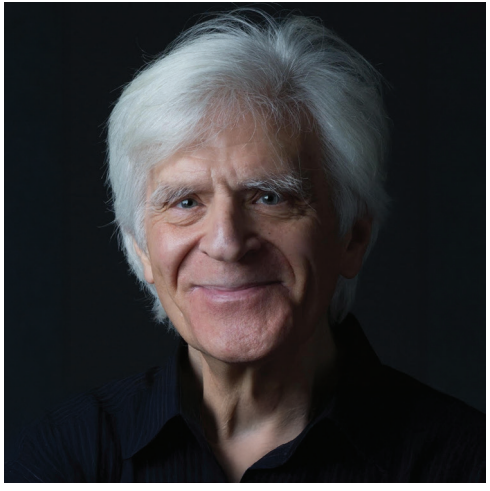
So out of this silence, emerging softly, comes the conclusion of this quartet, a final variation, a tribute to Mahler himself, which I tried to write in his own style, using, one last time, the harmony of his Third Symphony theme.

As it dissolves into a coda, the journey of this piece — a journey through parts of my life — comes to an end. With the final chord, I put down my burdens, my thoughts and memories, and settle, with just a little sadness, into rest.

— Greg Sandow

The Proust text:

> For a long time, I went to bed early. Sometimes, with my candle barely out, my eyes would close so quickly that I didn't have time to say to myself: "I'm asleep." And, half an hour later, the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I'd want to put down the book that I'd think I still held in my hands and blow out my light; even while asleep I hadn't stopped thinking about what I'd just read, but these thoughts had taken a very particular turn; it seemed to me that I myself had become whatever the book was talking about: a church, a quartet *[here in the music I quote the beginning of my own quartet]*, the rivalry of François the First and Charles the Fifth. This belief would persist for a few seconds after I awoke; it didn't come as any kind of shock to my mind, but would weigh like scales on my eyes and would stop me from seeing that the candle was no longer lit. Then everything would begin to become unintelligible to me, just as after a reincarnation the thoughts of a previous life would; the subject of the book would detach itself from me, I'd be free to link it to myself or not; all at once I'd recover my sight and I'd be astonished to find darkness all around me, sweet and restful to my eyes, but perhaps even more for my mind, to which it seemed like something without any cause, incomprehensible, like something truly dark.



Greg Sandow

Greg Sandow is focused now on composing, but in his long career he's done many things. He's been a critic, one of the few with a national reputation for writing about both classical music and pop. He's taught graduate courses at Juilliard, the Eastman School of Music, and the Peabody Conservatory; and he's done extensive work on the future of classical music, writing about it, doing public speaking in the U.S. and abroad, and serving as a consultant, among other things doing projects with major symphony orchestras.

His life in music started very early, in his New York City childhood, when from the age of 10 he sang opera and composed. Then followed voice study, in high school, in his college days at Harvard, and after college, when he got a diploma in voice from the Longy School of Music.

Deciding to compose again, he got a master's degree in composition from the Yale School of Music, studying with Yehudi Wyner, Mario Davidovsky, and Robert Morris. He didn't, while at Yale, write much of the atonal music favored there and throughout the American composing establishment. Instead he wrote theater music, and — influenced by the downtown music scene in New York that produced Steve Reich and Philip Glass — also what the world called experimental pieces, in one work using a large ensemble of speaking voices.

He also kept singing, appearing at Yale in the leading roles of Captain Balstrode in *Peter Grimes* and Alberich in a concert performance of *Das Rheingold*. The handwriting, though, was on the wall, about his future as a singer. A review said his strength was his acting.

Moving back to New York, he worked in the music program of the New York State Council on the Arts, while conducting and at times producing opera performances, among other things working with the late theater critic Michael Feingold on productions of delightful small Offenbach works.

And still he composed, writing four operas, all of them successful, especially his setting of *A Christmas Carol*, which was widely performed. One of these works still awaits its professional premiere, though it was triumphant twice in workshop performances, one of them at the New York City Opera. This is his treatment of *Frankenstein*, in which — with a libretto by the science fiction writer and poet Thomas M. Disch — he imagined the story as Bellini or Verdi might have treated it.

In 1980, he began writing as a music critic for *The Village Voice*, then an important weekly newspaper in New York. He covered the downtown music scene that had earlier inspired him, and also wrote about mainstream classical music, for the *Voice*, *The Wall Street Journal* and many other publications, including *Vanity Fair*, for which in its early days he was classical music critic.

But he began to be frustrated with the mainstream classical scene, finding it rigid in its orthodoxies, and sadly out of touch both with contemporary life and with the idomatic power the great masterworks once had, both when they were written and in performances in past generations.

And so in 1986 he defected to pop music, becoming chief pop music critic of *The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (a daily paper, now defunct, that then coexisted with *The Los Angeles Times*), and later becoming music critic and senior music editor of *Entertainment Weekly*. His start there was good, but finding himself not suited to mass-market journalism, and having personal difficulties as well, he faded at *EW*, and in the 1990s returned to classical music writing, finding that the field had changed and now was open to his thinking.

The change, put simply, was that the classical music industry now feared for its survival. Ticket and record sales were down, and classical music in all its forms was growing less relevant, in a culture now focused on other things.

This led Greg in two new directions. He gave a talk at Juilliard on classical music's problems, and was invited to give a graduate course there, launching it in 1997 under the name Breaking Barriers: Classical Music in an Age of Pop. He then was asked to teach an existing graduate course on music criticism, and when after some years students seemed less interested in that, changed its name to Speaking of Music. Now it covered many ways in which students might talk and write about music, including things useful for their careers, like writing bios and program notes.

This tied into Greg's other new direction, which was to work on many things involved with classical music's future. He did research, finding, for instance, forgotten studies from past generations, which unmistakably show that the audience for classical music used to be much younger than it is now.

He did extensive writing on classical music issues, made suggestions for change in the field, and was in demand as a public speaker, giving keynote talks at

conferences in the U.S. and abroad, and also speaking at conservatories, among other things giving commencement talks at Eastman and at the Longy School of Music.

Throughout all this, his teaching continued. He was at Juilliard for 26 years, while also teaching for three years at Eastman. In 2023 he was invited to move his courses to the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, which was closer to his home in Washington, D.C.

And then in 2025 came a great change. Throughout his career, Greg had composed and had his music performed, always with success. He'd produced a concert of his music at the Strathmore performing arts center, and been included in Min Kwon's *America/Beautiful* project, in which many composers wrote variations on "America the Beautiful."

But in 2025 — at age 82, unafraid to follow a new path in his life — he decided composing should be his focus. He resigned from teaching, and now spends his time immersed in composition. While he still writes about larger classical music issues — you can find his current thoughts on his website, **www.gregsandow.com** — they don't concern him while he's composing. He writes classical music with a kind of nostalgic love, and is happy when he works with musicians to have it performed.

And so he launched the project that led to this recording, and more recently wrote a playful and intricate piece called *Cooperation* for the Cret String Trio. Now he's writing an entire recital program for soprano and piano, in which he'll imitate the music vocal recitalists traditionally have sung, including old Italian songs and arias, German lieder, and French and contemporary American art songs. Plus — for encores — a dramatic verismo opera aria, and a Broadway-style show tune. You can find this, too, on his website, at **www.gregsandow.com/recital.** It's such fun to write.

He moved to Washington, D.C. with his wife, Anne Midgette, when, after years as a freelance critic for *The New York Times*, she became chief classical music critic for *The Washington Post*. They have a son, 14 years old as this is being written, a smart and funny kid who has no interest in classical music. Which is his inalienable right.

Winners of the 2025 Naumburg Chamber Music Competition and recent prizewinners at the 2025 Bordeaux and Wigmore Hall International Quartet Competitions, the Terra String Quartet is a vibrant young international ensemble based in New York City. They are composed of graduates of The Juilliard School, The New England Conservatory, Harvard University, and the Curtis Institute of Music. Known for their sincere storytelling, commitment to artistic excellence, and versatile approach to repertoire, TSQ strives to foster conversation and genuine human connection through their performances and pedagogy.

TSQ is the 2024-26 Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music, where they coach undergraduate chamber music ensembles. They were also the 2024–25 Ernst Stiefel String Quartet-in-Residence at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, where they embarked on a project to curate unique programs centered around Benjamin Britten's string quartets, including a commission by composer Juri Seo. TSQ is also invested in education and community work, having been the '23-24 Project Music Heals Us Arts Leadership Ensemble. Their mentors and coaches include the members of the Brentano Quartet, Ara Gregorian, and Marcy Rosen.

TSQ has also won top prizes at the 2023 Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition, the 2023 Osaka International Chamber Music Competition, and the 2022 Fischoff National Chamber Music Competition. In their spare time, they enjoy playing Mahjong together and learning about instruments and bows.

Chih-Ta Chen, Harriet Langley, Amelia Dietrich, Audrey Chen

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