



Four Quartets

World premiere recording charts the oceanic depths and profound expressive concentration central to the string quartets of Noah Max

**Sir Michael Morpurgo joins the Tippett Quartet in composer's String Quartet No.1
*The Man Who Planted Trees***

Tippett Quartet's landmark album captures the haunting power of Max's music

'As for the piece, it is a remarkable achievement for a young composer.... I am sure ... he is in the first stages of a notable career,' review of *A Child in Striped Pyjamas*, *The Arts Desk*, 13 January 2023

British composers have been notable champions of the string quartet for more than a century. Noah Max, recently described by *The Sunday Times* as 'a fizzing creative fuse', is among the latest to enrich the genre. Listeners have the chance to explore his four compelling works thanks to their world premiere recording by the Tippett Quartet. The album, set for release in March 2025 on Toccata Classics, also features Sir Michael Morpurgo as narrator in Max's String Quartet No.1, Op.25 (2020) *The Man Who Planted Trees*. Its contents span an enormous gamut of intense emotions, expressive gestures, textures and timbres, and musical ideas, qualities that run through the composer's already substantial catalogue of strikingly individual, profoundly eloquent scores.

"Each one of these quartets is different from the others," notes Noah Max. "Some require a lyrical mode of expression, and some are much more abrasive and rhythmically complex. Although only a few years stand between the moment I began work on the First Quartet and ruling the double bar at the end of the Fourth, their soundworlds are completely different. The First is tonal, the Second is bitonal, the Third filled with micropolyphony and complicated metric shifts, and the Fourth is all in the same time signature from beginning to end but with a sinewy, muscular rhythmic unison. The First Quartet, which I composed during the initial Covid lockdown, has an uplifting and positive outlook on the best of the human animal, whereas the Fourth is a reflection on exactly the opposite, on all the worst that we're capable of inflicting on others. They are yin and yang, and so the album goes full circle in that sense."

Extramusical connections, present in many of Max's compositions, surface in several works on his latest recording. String Quartet No.1, Op.25 (2020) includes spoken quotes drawn from Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*, an allegorical tale about one man's selfless devotion to the restoration of a desolate French valley and the healing effects it has on the natural world and on the story's narrator. String Quartet No.2, Op.37 (2021-22), draws its inspiration from visual art, specifically the paintings of Juan Miró and the sculptures of Barbara Hepworth. String Quartet No.4, Op.45 (2022-23), meanwhile, lies rooted in John Boyne's fable *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*, wherein the author confronts the barbarity of Auschwitz-Birkenau through the story of two boys united in friendship and in death together in one of the concentration camp's gas chambers. Max integrated material from his critically acclaimed Holocaust opera *A Child in Striped Pyjamas*, based on Boyne's book, into the most recent of his quartets.

Each of the three movements of the String Quartet No.2, Op.37 (2021-22) probes contrasting states of mind, often impassioned, always absorbing. The work's intense moods and dramatic outbursts appear to take over where words so often fail. String Quartet No.3, Op.41 (2022), cast in a single movement, creates a vast and complex universe of sound from just three adjacent notes. The breadth of invention and imagination shared by Max's four quartets reflects their composer's burning desire to bring new work into existence, a desire that also drives his output as painter and poet, the latter created as a private act, the former for public exhibition.

“Of course, it’s for others to judge these quartets,” Noah Max comments. “But I strongly believe that they are four of my best pieces. I think Brahms threw away more than twenty drafts of his First String Quartet, a work that’s so close to my heart. I didn’t quite reach that level, but I rewrote the start of my Third Quartet sixteen times before I found the right sound. The Third is like a table with a missing leg: quartets are all about ‘fours’, but this one is based on a three-note descending motif that becomes a micropolyphonic canon. It took almost a year to find its opening section and build the rest of the piece from there. This recording, for me, marks the start of these works having a life of their own.”

The Tippett Quartet, adds the composer, showed great insight into his music. Since its foundation in 1998, the ensemble has championed works by, among others, William Alwyn, Doreen Carwithen, Robert Simpson, Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. “They brought their game faces to this project and were wonderful throughout the sessions,” Max recalls. “And it was a joy to have Michael Morpurgo narrate the First Quartet. I wrote to him, as I felt that he would be the ideal narrator, and he wrote back to say that *The Man Who Planted Trees* was his favourite story. In the note he wrote for the album, he says that it’s the story he most wishes he’d written. I first discovered Giono’s book when somebody put it into my hand at school and said, ‘Read this!’. Having a narrative structure made me more confident about writing my First String quartet. From there, the piece quite quickly spilled out.”

Max has been busy since completing the fourth of his quartets in 2023. Recent highlights include the song cycle *Rapture*, based on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, and *AXIOM*, a concerto for cello and chamber orchestra. He conducted the latter’s premiere last summer as part of Proms at St Jude’s, with his father, Robert Max, as soloist. Max’s setting for choir and strings of the ancient Kaddish prayer, part of the mourning rituals of Judaism, is on course to receive its premiere in 2026. Other forthcoming commissions include a monodrama based on George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, and an adaptation of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a dramatic score for Ian Bostridge. Both works will explore inner monologues, respectively of Orwell’s hero, Winston Smith, tortured and imprisoned in solitary confinement by the omnipotent Party, and Coleridge’s cursed Mariner, tormented by guilt-stricken emotions.

Narrative, drama, opera and Jewish themes have emerged as central strands in the art of Noah Max. The 26-year-old composer’s four string quartets collectively contain echoes of each. “Despite the chronology of it all, I do not see my quartets as early works,” he observes. “I waited until I was ready to tackle a genre that means everything to me. I fell in love with music because of string quartets and grew up playing them as a cellist. At some point between the ages of 13 and 18, I played all the Haydn quartets, most of those by Mozart and Beethoven, and all the way through the distinctive offerings of Brahms, Janáček and Michael Tippett. I see my string quartets as a body of work in their own right and would like them to become a backbone to my larger output that can grow over the years. These quartets represent the first stage in that process of development.”

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Noah Max String Quartets is scheduled for release on Toccata Classics on 7 March 2025

Noah Max composer | **Tippett Quartet** | **Sir Michael Morpurgo** narrator

String Quartet No.1, Op.25 *The Man Who Planted Trees*
String Quartet No.2, Op.37
String Quartet No.3, Op.41
String Quartet No.4, Op.45

NOTES TO EDITORS

About Noah Max

British-Austrian composer Noah Max's output spans opera, orchestral and chamber music. His works have been performed at the Royal Festival Hall, Wigmore Hall and the Royal Albert Hall's Elgar Room in London, as well as Vienna's Musikverein, Altalena Festival in Budapest, Uilenburgersjoel Synagogue in Amsterdam and the Paderewski Academy in Poland. His string trio *Sojourn* won the 2021 Clements Prize and was performed by members of the Piatti Quartet at Conway Hall.

As Composer-in-Residence at Thaxted Festival from 2023–2024, Max saw his String Quartet No.2 premiered by the Tippett Quartet in July 2023. The festival subsequently commissioned Symphony No.1, which premiered with London Mozart Players in June 2024, followed by the Echo Ensemble performing Max's *Phantasy Quintet* later that month. Other highlights of the 2023/24 season included Max's song cycle *Rapture*, based on the 2005 poetry collection by Carol Ann Duffy, which premiered at Wild Arts' Summer Opera Festival, in partnership with the Essex Book Festival. Max also conducted his new Cello Concerto *AXIOM* with Robert Max and Echo Ensemble as part of Proms at St. Jude's. For his upcoming projects, Max is collaborating with artists such as Ian Bostridge, Jeremy Huw Williams, Alexandra Balog and Imogen Whitehead.

Max spent five years bringing his debut opera *A Child In Striped Pyjamas* to the stage by special arrangement with Miramax, culminating in a sold-out premiere production at London's Cockpit Theatre in January 2023. The opera was lauded by critics as "emotionally ambitious and vocally eloquent" (*The Telegraph*) and "marvelously scored... A remarkable achievement for a young composer" (*The Arts Desk*). Max was interviewed about the opera by *The Sunday Times* and BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, with excerpts from the piece also broadcast on RTÉ Radio. The opera was revived at Brundibár Arts Festival in January 2024 for Holocaust Memorial Day.

Max's debut album *Songs of Loneliness* was released on Toccata Classics in 2022. His String Quartets No.1–4 with the Tippett Quartet will be released in late 2024, featuring narration from Sir Michael Morpurgo.

With a creative life that embraces music, painting, poetry and cinema, Max enjoys illuminating the relationships between different mediums. As a conductor, he has assisted Jonathan Cohen and Arcangelo at the BBC Proms and conducted *Endymion* at Wigmore Hall. Max's artworks have been displayed at the National Portrait Gallery. His columns have been printed in *The Irish Times*, *The Strad* and *The Jewish Chronicle*; he has contributed to *BBC Music Magazine* and has been interviewed for *Classical Music*, *Opera Today* and BBC Radio 3's *In Tune*.