

*Imprimatur*  
String Quartet No. 2  
Kati Agócs (b. 1975)

**LISTING FOR PROGRAM:**

*Imprimatur*

Recitative

I. Ostinato

II. Enraptured Troping

III. Meditation—Crystal Chains

IV. Wild Dance

V. Quodlibet

Coda

*Performed without interruption.*

**PROGRAM NOTE:**

A graduate of the Juilliard School, Canadian/American composer Kati Agócs writes music that has been characterized as bold, dramatic, and intense. But to that she adds a beauty and lyricism that communicates clearly and deeply with the audience. Foremost is her comprehensive craftsmanship, an assured compositional technique that allows her to engage vividly with an extraordinary range of expressive modes. These are the qualities that have earned her, among other major awards and commissions, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a lifetime achievement award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In addition to her composing, Agócs teaches at the New England Conservatory in Boston, where she has served on the composition faculty since 2008.

Agócs wrote her first string quartet, *Tantric Variations*, in 2016, but she is no newcomer to chamber music. Numerous earlier works—in fact, most of her chamber compositions to date—include a core timbre of soloistic string writing, from her early string trio, *All the Ends of the World*, to the 2014 work *Devotion*, for string quartet plus horn, harp, and double bass.

In that first string quartet, Agócs took the Sanskrit-based word “*tantric*” (or “weaving together”) literally, creating a seamless series of increasingly individualized and intimate variations on a simple turning motif. In her second quartet, *Imprimatur*, Agócs explores a more outgoing, festal transformation process in which a single musical idea “imprints itself upon the memory through rapturous re-imagination” in a seamless flow of movements. She continues, “My piece is a meditation on spiritual lightness, expressing rapturous joy and affirmation that is celebratory in tone, via a collective (i.e., shared) energy.”

As with her first quartet, the title is represented both literally and musically in the score. The Latin word *imprimatur* is referenced in its Roman Catholic context, signifying religious approval or affirmation, but also a mark of distinction, or an imprint. Throughout the score, Agócs also draws on other terminologies outside of instrumental music to augment this para-religious narrative, which she plans to continue in her third and fourth string quartets. When completed, the four quartets will form a cycle, integrated in a larger discourse on spiritual themes.

The quartet opens with an instrumental “recitative” as introduction, a noble fanfare-like series of chords, answered by a rhapsodic melody. This elides into the first movement, a rhythmically driving collective of urgent ostinati that surround the asymmetrical melody, first heard in the viola. All instruments then take their turn at reimagining the melody as the driving accompaniment swirls around it.

That drive broadens into the second movement, “Enraptured Troping.” In current usage, a “trope” can be simply a figure of speech, but here it also references the medieval and early renaissance practice of adding musical and literary commentary on the liturgy. In this context, the main musical idea is transformed through these zealously “troped” incarnations.

Agócs appends the subtitle “Shards of Light” to the “Meditation” third movement, where the theme is fragmented prismatically, the descending canonic entries and points of imitation turning the horizontal melody into vertical gestures. These culminate in a rapturous hymn (“Crystal Chains”) that leads directly into a “Wild Dance,” with Bartók-like shifting meters and vigorous, propulsive rhythms. Again, all instruments take their turn with the melodic ideas in this fiery, percussive movement. Then, in the calm “Quodlibet” that follows, the tropes are reprised, culminating in an ecstatic “Prayer of Gratitude” as coda.

*Imprimatur* was commissioned jointly by the Aspen Music Festival and School, Robert Spano, Music Director; the Harvard Musical Association; and the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts/University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

- Luke Howard