

Balourdet Quartet

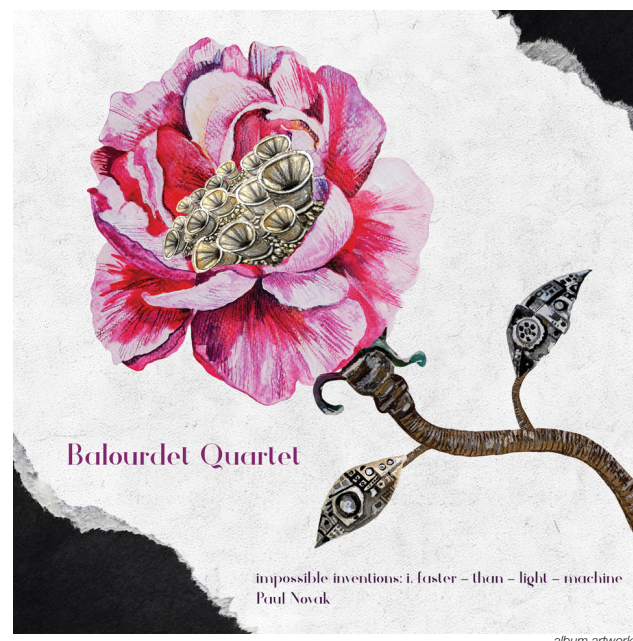
Strange Machines

For centuries, music has been shaped by technology and the string quartet has been a machine of extraordinary precision: four voices moving independently yet bound together in constant conversation. Unlike the inventions that populate our modern imagination—engines, computers, algorithms, artificial intelligence—the quartet is powered not by electricity or code, but by breath, gesture, memory, and human connection.

Yet every age remakes its machines. The cathedral inspired Guillaume Dufay. The printing press transformed the circulation of music. Industrialization reshaped the imagination of the Romantics. Recording technology preserved voices long after they fell silent. Today, artificial intelligence presents a new frontier—one filled with possibility, uncertainty, fascination, and fear.

For the Balourdet Quartet, technology was not an abstract subject. The members found themselves coming of age as musicians during the first public wave of generative AI, watching tools like ChatGPT move almost overnight from curiosity to cultural force. At the same moment, they were beginning work on what would become their debut album. Questions that seemed speculative only months earlier suddenly felt immediate: what happens when machines begin generating text, images, and even music? What role does human creativity play in a world increasingly shaped by algorithms? And how should artists participate in that conversation rather than simply react to it?

The quartet's initial interest was not necessarily optimistic. Like many musicians, they were encountering both excitement and anxiety around artificial intelligence. They attended the AlgoRhythms conference, met researchers and composers working in the field, and explored the possibility of incorporating AI directly into the project. "We wanted to see how far we could push the boundaries," said violist Ben Zannoni. "Where is AI at? How are composers



interacting with these technologies? What are the possibilities—and what are the limitations?" The album began as an attempt to wrestle with those questions.

Yet as the repertoire expanded, something unexpected happened. The deeper they ventured into the world of technology, the more often they found themselves returning to profoundly human stories. A galaxy named for a loved one. A grandfather's preserved voice. A Renaissance composer marveling at an engineering wonder. A machine falling in love. Again and again, the music redirected their attention away from the technology itself and toward the people using it.

With *Strange Machines*, the Balourdet Quartet examines music spanning nearly six centuries. Yet what emerged surprised them.

"We thought we were making an album about technology," reflects violinist Justin DeFilippis. "What we discovered was that every composer was really writing about the human experience." Machines became mirrors for love, memory, mortality, curiosity, and wonder.

The project began with Karim Al-Zand's *Strange Machines*, commissioned through Chamber Music America. "We started with this fantastic piece that was already dealing with these complex topics," recalls Zannoni. "It made us wonder and pushed us to discover where we could take the idea next."

Through commissioning new works and exploring older repertoire, another revolution was unfolding around them. Indiana University, where the quartet held a residency, became an unexpected laboratory where they attended AI and Music summits, met researchers and composers working with emerging technologies, and began asking larger questions about the future of music.

"What we kept hearing," says Zannoni, "was that nobody really wanted music written by AI. The exciting question wasn't whether machines could replace artists. It was how these tools could help us express ourselves better."

That discovery became the album's guiding principle.

Across six centuries of music, *Strange Machines* reveals that every technological leap ultimately returns us to the same questions. Who are we? What do we value? How do we remember? How do we love?

As cellist Russell Houston puts it: "There was a lot of fear around AI when we started. What surprised me was how optimistic this album became."

***impossible inventions* (2024)**

At the album's opening, Paul Novak's *impossible inventions* imagines a series of machines that could never exist. A faster-than-light machine. A quantum clockwork device. An anti-gravity machine. And finally, a cyborg falling in love.

Drawing inspiration from Bach's *Two-Part Inventions*, Novak creates a dazzling network of musical conversations. Ideas flash between instruments like electrical currents, constantly transforming as they move through the quartet.

The work evolved through an unusually collaborative process. During workshops with the composer, the quartet helped experiment with sounds and textures as Novak developed the piece.

The final movement, *cyborg — falling — in — love*, shifts away from spectacle toward vulnerability. Rather than asking whether machines can think, Novak asks whether they can feel.

"Paul realized that the cyborg movement contained some of the strongest music he'd written," says Zannoni. "He'd accomplished one of the hardest things in music—slowly lowering the energy level while somehow keeping the audience completely captivated."

The result is a surprisingly tender conclusion. Beneath the futuristic imagery lies a deeply human question: if technology continues to evolve beyond imagination, what remains uniquely ours?

***Sonatina Death of the Machines* (1923)**

Long before artificial intelligence entered public discourse, George Antheil was already wrestling with the promises and dangers of mechanization. One of the great provocateurs of musical modernism, Antheil embraced machines as symbols of energy and progress. Yet he also worried about their influence on society.

While preparing the arrangement themselves, the Balourdet Quartet discovered an observation by Antheil that felt remarkably contemporary. "He warned that humans were becoming too much like the machines they built," says DeFilippis. "Reading that a hundred years later felt eerily familiar."

The piece traces the life cycle of a machine—from activation to relentless operation, from overheating to collapse. In transforming the work for string quartet, the ensemble leaned into both its humor and its theatricality.

"We kept changing things in the studio," recalls Zannoni. "New effects, new textures, different tempos. We wanted every mechanical sound to really pop." The result is equal parts parody and cautionary tale: a machine that comes startlingly alive before sputtering into silence.

***Galaxy Back to You* (2024)**

The inspiration for Nicky Sohn's *Galaxy Back to You* arrived as an act of love.

After her future husband named a galaxy in her honor—NGC 4258—Sohn transformed the gesture into music. Across seven interconnected movements, astronomical phenomena become emotional landscapes. Gravitational waves, celestial motion, and black holes are rendered not as scientific abstractions but as expressions of longing and connection.

At the work's core lies a recurring musical code derived from the numbers 4-2-5-8, translated into pitches that guide the listener through the galaxy.

For the quartet, the piece became even more personal as its story continued to unfold.

"Between the first and second performances, Nicky got married," remembers DeFilippis. "We like to think the piece had a little gravity in helping shape that story."

The result is a cosmic love letter—one that reminds us that the desire to look toward the stars is often inseparable from the desire to find one another.

Strange Machines (String Quartet No. 4) (2022)

If *impossible inventions* imagines technologies of the future, Karim Al-Zand's *Strange Machines* looks to the past.

Commissioned through Chamber Music America's Classical Commissioning Program, the work imagines a workshop filled with improbable devices built from the raw materials of eighteenth-century music. Familiar gestures from Mozart and Bach are transformed into elaborate contraptions that churn, sputter, malfunction, and occasionally spiral out of control.

The *Alberti Machine* begins with one of classical music's most recognizable accompaniment figures, generating endless permutations until the mechanism seems to overwhelm itself. The *Goldberg Machine* transforms Bach's variations into a musical Rube Goldberg device, where every event triggers another in increasingly improbable ways. Finally, the *Mannheim Machine* powers itself through the famous orchestral effects of the Mannheim school, accelerating toward a gleefully chaotic conclusion.

For the quartet, Al-Zand's work became the spark that ignited the entire project.

"We had no idea where the album would ultimately go," recalls Zannoni. "But Karim's piece already contained so many of the questions we were interested in—generation, repetition, systems, things breaking down and rebuilding themselves. It opened a door."

Yet beneath the humor lies something more profound. Al-Zand reminds us that every composer inherits systems from the past. Innovation rarely emerges from nothing; it grows out of existing materials transformed by imagination.

Memento Mori (2013)

While much of *Strange Machines* looks toward the future, Nina C. Young's *Memento Mori* expands outward into deep time.

Inspired by an inscription on a historic Parisian sundial, the work contemplates the phrase *memento mori*—"remember that you will die"—on a cosmic scale. Young takes material derived from Bach's *Art of Fugue* and stretches it almost beyond recognition, transforming familiar musical gestures into vast, slowly shifting landscapes.

For the quartet, the piece became a meditation not only on mortality but on perspective.

"When we were writing about the piece, the image that stayed with me was being on a giant spaceship," says DeFilippis. "Maybe this is actually the work on the album that looks furthest into the future."

Time behaves differently here. Musical events seem suspended between motion and stillness. Individual voices emerge briefly before dissolving into larger currents.

The recording process reflected that sense of expansiveness. Unlike some of the more intricately assembled works on the album, *Memento Mori* was recorded almost entirely in complete takes.

"What you hear is essentially a live performance," says DeFilippis. "We wanted it to feel like this enormous space opening around the quartet."

The resulting sound world feels simultaneously ancient and futuristic—as though Bach's voice has been carried across centuries into an unknown future.

Blossoming Like Crazy (2020)

At the emotional center of *Blossoming Like Crazy* lies a voice.

The voice belongs to Frank Messina, composer Kyle Brenn's late grandfather. Preserved on an answering machine recording, it captures him singing a personalized version of a favorite crooner tune. What began as a family keepsake became the foundation for one of the album's most moving works.

The quartet first encountered *Blossoming Like Crazy* in a live performance.

"It was a barrier-breaking moment," recalls DeFilippis. "I realized that a contemporary piece with electronics could affect a room the same way a great Beethoven slow movement can."

Fragments of the recording emerge through distortion and echoes. Gradually, a personality begins to take shape. A voice once confined to an answering machine seems to return to life.

"The piece begins as a specter," says Zannoni. "It's like Kyle's grandfather is slowly coming back into focus to sing one last song."

The recording proved one of the most technically challenging projects on the album. Balancing the live quartet with electronics required countless hours of experimentation, editing, and refinement.

Yet those technical challenges always served a larger emotional purpose.

Technology often appears in public conversations as something that distances people from one another. Brenn's work offers another possibility. Here, technology becomes an act of preservation—a way for love, memory, and personality to continue resonating long after a voice has fallen silent.

***Nuper rosarum flores* (1436)**

At first glance, Guillaume Dufay might seem like an unlikely participant in an album about artificial intelligence.

Yet the quartet discovered in his music one of the earliest examples of artistic wonder inspired by technological achievement.

Composed for the consecration of Florence Cathedral in 1436, *Nuper rosarum flores* celebrates Brunelleschi's revolutionary dome, one of the great engineering accomplishments of the Renaissance. Scholars have long noted possible relationships between the structure's architecture and the musical proportions of Dufay's motet.

For the Balourdet Quartet, the piece became a vital historical anchor.

"None of us are early music specialists," says DeFilippis. "Finding Dufay felt like discovering a missing piece of the puzzle."

The quartet ultimately created a condensed arrangement designed to serve as a bridge into Isaac Smith's companion work.

"We kept refining it," recalls Zannoni. "We wanted it to connect naturally with Isaac's piece without overwhelming what came after."

Across nearly six centuries, Dufay's music reminds us that technology and wonder have always been intertwined.

***Canetis Cathedrali* (2025)**

The journey that begins in Renaissance Florence concludes inside an imagined cathedral of the future.

The quartet met composer Isaac Smith through Indiana University's AI and Music Summit while searching for new ways to engage with emerging technology. What they found was not a composer interested in replacing musicians with machines, but one interested in creating conversations between them.

For *Canetis Cathedrali*, Smith fed the quartet's recording of *Nuper rosarum flores* into a predictive AI system of his own design. The technology analyzed, transformed, and reimagined Dufay's material into an evolving electronic soundscape.

"We originally thought we wanted a piece written by AI," admits Zannoni. "But everyone we met kept saying the same thing: that's not the interesting question."

Smith proposed something far more compelling.

"He created this experience where it feels like a cathedral is talking back to you," says Zannoni.

Each performance unfolds differently. The electronics

respond to the quartet's dynamics, pacing, and articulation in real time. Human and machine become collaborators, listening and responding to one another.

For the performers, the experience can feel almost spiritual.

"There are moments when it genuinely feels like you're having a conversation with something larger than yourself," says Zannoni.

Rather than offering answers about artificial intelligence, *Canetis Cathedrali* invites listeners into a dialogue—one shaped equally by centuries of musical history and possibilities yet to come.

When the Balourdet Quartet first began imagining *Strange Machines*, they expected to make an album about technology.

What emerged was something deeply more personal.

Across six centuries of music, the composers on this recording continually return to the same human concerns: love, memory, grief, hope, curiosity, and wonder. The machines change. The questions remain.

Looking back, the quartet sees the project not as a statement but as an invitation.

"It's a conversation starter," says Zannoni.

Violinist Angela Bae explained that the track order of the album is carefully designed to take the listener through the process, "the front half is very exciting and vibrant, and then something happens in the middle where the narrative shifts to be more meditative, more reflective. And the full musical experience actually makes all the pieces shine more than we could have ever imagined."

Houston adds, in the end, the album's ultimate message is one of optimism fully realized.

"I think we all expected technology to be the main story," he reflects. "What surprised us was how every composer found a way to use it to bring people together."

Strange Machines traces a continuous thread through human history: our enduring desire to build tools that help us better understand ourselves.

In the end, the strangest machine on this album may not be artificial intelligence at all.

It may be the string quartet itself—four individuals becoming something greater than the sum of their parts, transforming wood, wire, and human imagination into meaning.

And the conversation, as the quartet discovered, is only beginning. ●

Balourdet Quartet

Strange Machines

Credits

impossible inventions

(2024) (13:14) Paul Novak (b. 1998)*

- i. faster – than – light – machine
- ii. quantum – clockwork
- iii. anti – gravity – machine
- iv. cyborg – falling – in – love

Sonatina Death of the Machines

(1923) (2:21) George Antheil (1900 - 1959)†

Galaxy Back to You

(2024) (13:58) Nicky Sohn (b. 1992)*

Active Nucleus

- I. Celestial Motion
- II. Cosmic Dance
- III. Mystical Depths
- IV. Water Masers
- V. Supermassive Black Hole
- VI. Gravitational Waves

Strange Machines (String Quartet No. 4)

(2022) (12:47) Karim Al-Zand (b. 1970)*

Alberti Machine

- I. Goldberg Machine
- II. Mannheim Machine

Memento Mori

(2013) (8:53) Nina C. Young (b. 1984)

Blossoming Like Crazy

(2020) (11:59) Kyle Brenn (b. 1997)

ft. *Bergamot Quartet*

Nuper rosarum flores

(1436) (2:02) Guillaume Dufay (c. 1397–1474)†

Canetis Cathedrali

(2025) (6:03) Isaac Smith (b. 1991)*

*Commissioned for Balourdet Quartet, see liner notes for details

†Arranged by Balourdet Quartet

Artists

Balourdet Quartet:

Angela Bae, violin

Justin DeFilippis, violin
Benjamin Zannoni, viola
Russell Houston, cello

Guest Artists on Blossoming Like Crazy

Bergamot Quartet:

Ledah Finck, Violin
Sarah Thomas, Violin
Amy Tan, Viola
Irène Han, Cello

Recording Location and Date: Guarneri Hall, Chicago, IL | April 7 to 10, 2025

Stephen Prutsman Producer and Editor
Andreas Meyer Recording, Mixing, Mastering Engineer
Alex Sopp Artwork
Christopher Kornmann for Spit + Image Art Direction & Graphic Design

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Liner Notes:

About *Strange Machines* - *Voices of a new generation, powered by dreams of the future.*

In a world where it feels like technology is tearing us apart, the Balourdet Quartet illustrates how it can bring us together. After commissioning *Strange Machines* through the Chamber Music America's Classical Commissioning Grant, and concurrently witnessing the exponential rise of AI (Artificial Intelligence), the Balourdet began to take on

the intermingling of modern technology and the future of the string quartet. This recording spans nearly 600 years of music, ranging from the Renaissance to the present in new commissions, some of which utilize generative and predictive AI. If the string quartet itself is the ultimate superhuman device, this album explores extending this device beyond its traditional limitations through new dimensions of language and emotion.

Paul Novak: *impossible inventions* (2024)

Barlow Endowment Commission for
Balourdet Quartet 2024

Drawing upon physics-defying inventions from science fiction, Paul Novak's driving and futuristic palette scintillates with kinetic fervor. The music progresses through a series of wondrous sci-fi machines until its haunting last movement questions if maybe one day a cyborg can not just think, speak, and feel, but also love. In part inspired by the magical counterpoint of Bach's *Two-Part Inventions*, Novak's virtuosically conversational textures help make the impossible come to life.

George Antheil: *Sonatina Death of the Machines* (1923)

Arranged by Balourdet Quartet 2025

George Antheil described his mechanical aesthetic as double-edged: a celebration of beauty in machines but also a warning against the "unconscious mechanistic philosophy" of the age, the creeping sense that humans were becoming like the machines they built – soulless cogs in the engine of society. This brief sonatina follows a machine's life cycle from initial startup to continuous revving, overheating, and death followed by eerie silence. Originally written for piano and arranged here by the Balourdet for string quartet, the piece gains new subtext: absurdity through wild textures, unbridled energy, and the sense that perhaps a heartbeat has stirred life into the machine.

Nicky Sohn: *Galaxy Back to You* (2024)

Balourdet Quartet Commission 2024
Galaxy NGC 4258 is the "Nicky Sohn" Galaxy

After her future husband gifted Nicky a galaxy named after her, she returns the favor in a sweeping and beautifully imaginative soundscape. The Balourdet Quartet challenged Sohn at the beginning of her work to bounce ideas off of an AI chatbot to help inspire the form of the piece. This structure uses seven continuous movements portraying different aspects of the galaxy, each featuring the numbers "4-2-5-8" translated into pitches as a musical motive. A romantic space opera ensues, the evocative score charting a path forward into the beyond!

Karim Al-Zand: *Strange Machines* (String Quartet No. 4) (2022)

Chamber Music America Commission for Balourdet Quartet 2022

Karim Al-Zand's quartet is a comedy of musical machines, each movement imagining a fantastical device built from clichés of 18th-century style. Alberti Machine imagines a whimsical AI bot that churns out endless Alberti bass, a ubiquitous Mozartian accompaniment figure, until it eventually spirals out of control. Goldberg Machine reworks Bach's monumental keyboard variations as a Rube Goldberg machine: maniacally complex and thrillingly chain-reactive. Mannheim Machine portrays a steampunk device that is powered by the Mannheim Roller and other dawn-of-the-symphony tropes. As the last of these wacky machines, it whirls its way to a fittingly humorous end.

Nina C. Young: *Memento Mori* (2013)

Inspired by an inscription on a historic sundial in Paris, Nina C. Young takes the phrase *memento mori* ("remember that you will die") at cosmic scale, time stretching so far that our entire existence becomes a glimpse. Working from the opening subject of Bach's *Art of Fugue*, Young reimagines and extends the material to its absolute limit, blending the musical motive into her meditation on time itself. This recording presents Phase 1: *ut cuspis sic vita fluit dum stare videtur* ("life flies on like an arrow, while it seems to stand still"), intended as the first movement of an ongoing larger work.

Kyle Brenn: *Blossoming Like Crazy* (2020)

Kyle Brenn reworks an answering machine recording of his late grandfather, Frank Messina, singing a classic crooner song with personalized lyrics, crafting a highly moving living tribute for quartet and electronics. The piece begins with a specter of his grandfather, emerging through echoes and distortion as if a fragile memory is coming to life. A full song dedicated to Kyle is eventually unveiled: "You're My Man," to the tune of Pat Boone's "Be My Love." As the piece blossoms towards its end, complete with swooning background strings and jazz band, technology establishes itself as a means by which human bonds refuse to disappear.

Guillaume Dufay: *Nuper rosarum flores* (1436)

Arranged by Balourdet Quartet 2024

Guillaume Dufay's most celebrated motet predates the printing press and even the modern violin family, yet it carries timeless beauty and ingenious craft that is hardly antiquated. Written to consecrate Brunelleschi's dome for the Florence Cathedral, one of the great engineering feats of the Renaissance, this piece is believed to parallel

the dome's architecture in music. The Balourdet's new arrangement, here excerpted as an introduction to *Canetis Cathedrali*, honors this music in which the scientific and the spiritual reach toward each other.

Isaac Smith: *Canetis Cathedrali* (2025)
Balourdet Quartet Commission 2025

Isaac Smith fed the Balourdet's recording of *Nuper rosarum flores* into a predictive AI algorithm of his own design, which analyzed and reassembled Dufay's sonic material into the electronic resonance of an imagined, futuristic cathedral. The live Quartet then plays Smith's original composition against this reconstruction in real time, their sound affecting the electronics as the electronics shape theirs. The result is an antiphonal conversation across six centuries, building a cathedral of sound where the musical experience is completely redefined. The piece ends with a poignant reflection of how technology at once is created to serve our own wonder while reflecting our deepest and most human desire to find meaning in our own existence.

About Balourdet Quartet

Balourdet Quartet has been acclaimed for its vibrant energy and emotional depth — described as creating “a

world where memory and transformation coexist ... one in which clarity of line and finely judged color matter as much as expressive warmth” (Seen and Heard International). As “an ensemble unafraid to show its personality” (The Strad), Balourdet was awarded the 2024 Avery Fisher Career Grant, as well as Chamber Music America's 2024 Cleveland Quartet Award. The Quartet engages communities in ways that “inspire their creativity” (*The Seattle Times*) a core part of Balourdet's mission, through residencies with the Seattle Chamber Music Society and the Chamber Orchestra of the Triangle. Founded in 2018, in the spirit of friendship and mutual love of food, Balourdet Quartet is named after Antoine Balourdet, former chef at the Hotel St. Bernard in Taos, New Mexico, where the Quartet first came together. To learn more, visit balourdetquartet.com.

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