Miya Masaoka

Botanical Life

The Complete String Quartets



Mivos Quartet



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1	**Botanical Life #1** (2026)	10:00
2	**Botanical Life #2** (2026)	10:23
3	**Partial Eclipse** (2019)	14:41
4	**Survival** (2013)	10:33
5	**The Horizon Leans Forward** (2023)	17:15
6	**Tilt** (2015)	14:58

Total Time: 77:55

Mivos Quartet

Olivia De Prato, violin • William Overcash, violin
Victor Lowrie Tafoya, viola • Nathan Watts, cello



Sympathetic Resonances

By Donna Lee Davidson

As an adolescent, Miya Masaoka remembers waking up to her morning glory plant having grown its tendril around a pencil, several times, overnight. It not only shocked her, but she was scared, too. Plant time was supposed to be slow and invisible. Growth was supposed to be indiscernible to the naked eye—a secret, albeit an open one.

The timing of this album spans over a decade, letting each string quartet, in Masaoka's words, "breathe in its own time." The breathing is the important part—or the ability to—because the intention for these string quartets is the materiality of the wood being used to play them. "The plant, the bark, the wood, the branch—the source of the materials is a living thing. It continues even though the tree is dead. There are living aspects to it even though the tree itself is dead," Miya says.

This is our relationship to living things, and what the string quartets on this album embody. In fact, Miya gestures the string quartet—two violins, viola, and cello—as one body, as "an entity in itself, like an animal." Together as a whole, the string quartets and the music are chock full of species, along with the elements that sustain them.

Written for JACK Quartet, *Partial Eclipse* (2019) uses harmonics only. Fingers never touch the fingerboard. The sound hovers like mist, like fog, like sunlight—nutrient-dense elements only hovering, yet penetrating and nourishing, nonetheless. The intangible elements that contract and expand wood become tangible in *Botanical Life #1* and *#2* (2026) through a different sonic interaction, one of density and texture, age and grade, not only sonority of pitch. Sounds that click, tick, and stretch also wither, writhe, and evolve—metamorphose—touching the ethereality of trees and plant life where the intangible and tangible collide.

The Horizon Leans Forward (2023) is a quote from the poet Maya Angelou's *On the Pulse of Morning* and harnesses that collision both with urgency and without. The quartet carries the sonority of flattened emergency sirens, distilled to a harmonic horizon and held there. It resonates with the sonic concept of *Survival* (2013): in unison, the stakes are high. The resonances that activate the wood across instruments are sympathetic to one another, melding sound into the one body of which they already were.

What you have to hold—in your body—is the sound. Because trees talk to each other, and we can't hear them. Trees speak in short, rhythmic clicks at frequencies above 20 kilohertz and scientists don't treat it like science, Miya warns us. What laboratories capture on special recording equipment isn't preserved as data, it's edited to make clusters of fun rhythms and then passed along without a note that it's been changed, she discovered when recording and researching tree speak herself.

When the musicians prickle their strings in *Tilt* (2015), written for Del Sol Quartet, listen with your skin, not your ears—*that's* science. "There's a sense of being able to feel the body, feel the gesture of the hands and the intention of the player." Listening with the body means movement, or being moved, which is what a plant will do when its growth depends on it. "Trees and plants have some ways of being, ways of living and communicating that's, perhaps, superior to human beings."



Recital at Universität für Musik
und darstellende Kunst, Vienna



Recording Session at 4Tune, Vienna, Austria

Botanical Life: The Complete String Quartets consists of six string quartets composed from 2013 to 2026. These works span a wide range of approaches, from episodic and meditative forms to motivic structures, highly experimental, and other compositional strategies. Among the classical instrumental configurations, the string quartet seems the closest to nature, or at least the most organic. The instruments are constructed predominantly from wood—the material of a living tree—and this natural substance forms the basis of their physical bodies and resulting sound production. The resonance of wood, shaped by human craftsmanship yet retaining traces of its vegetal origin, gives the string quartet a unique capacity to evoke both intimacy and vitality. The tree and the string quartet have a unity, and this dialectic inspired *Botanical Life #1* and *#2* (2026). In referencing the poet Gary Snyder, the writer Brandon LaBelle writes:

> Such modes of work echo Snyder's practice of the wild, in terms of finding ways of attuning to the "living mind" of a planetary consciousness, where one's sense of self is felt as environmentally shaped, as touched by and participant within a greater weave of natural intelligence. By way of an expanded perspective such sound is posited as a vitalist force that lends to an ecological position; from the vibrational to the resonant, the rhythmic to the echoic, sound opens onto ways of honoring existing ecologies as well as generating new paths of connection.
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> *(Brandon LaBelle, Poetics of Listening, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 174.)*



Survival (2013) was written for my parents, who suffered in the Japanese American prison camps during WWII and is part of a multi-media performance work that premiered at Roulette entitled *Triangle of Resistance* (innova 945, 2016, innova.mu/album/triangle-of-resistance).

— Miya Masaoka

Miya Masaoka is a Rome Prize Fellow of the American Academy of Rome (2023), a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow (2021), a Fulbright Fellow to Japan (2016), and has received the EMPAC Residency (2022) and a Doris Duke Artist Award (2013). Other honors include a Civitella Ranieri Artist Residency (2021), an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship to Japan (2007), and a Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. Masaoka's works include spatial pieces for hundreds of loudspeakers, performance art, installation sculptures and interactive work with plants and insects. Masaoka's music compositions, sound installations, custom electronic instruments works and improvisational forms have been recorded on over 35 CDs. Commissions include the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Glasgow Chamber Choir, JACK Quartet, Bang on a Can, Del Sol Quartet, and the S.E.M. Ensemble. Masaoka is Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at Columbia University, where she directs the Sound Art MFA program.



Mivos Quartet

Recorded at 4Tune Audio Productions, Vienna, Austria on March 2-3, 2026
Producer: Miya Masaoka
Recording and mixing engineer: Martin Klebahn, *4tune.at*
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