

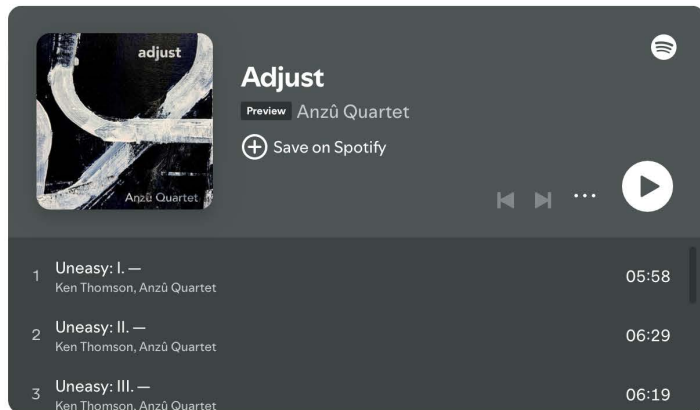
The New York Times

5 Classical Music Albums You Can Listen to Right Now

Brooklyn Rider's exploration of the four elements, miniatures by Kurtág and the Anzû Quartet's debut recording are among the highlights.

'Adjust'

Anzû Quartet (Cantaloupe)



Each project from the composer and multi-reed player Ken Thomson has been good news, whether he's writing [for chamber players](#) or [groups that bridge](#) jazz improvisation and contemporary composition.

His streak continues on the Anzû Quartet's [debut album](#), with

Thomson on clarinet, Ashley Bathgate on cello, Olivia De Prato on violin and Karl Larson on piano. Thomson's three-movement "Uneasy" is first on the program and uses some minimalist strategies at its outset, unfurling melodic ideas through a series of not-quite repetitions. But, by the end of the first movement, you'll encounter a flurry of motifs, not far removed from the fluidity of bebop. Brief pauses for plucked string activity prepare the listener for the austere, songful middle movement, before enjoyable group tumult returns in the finale.

Anna Webber's five-movement "Adjust" follows. Like Thomson — with whom [she has collaborated](#) in the past — she's a jazz-informed multi-instrumentalist, as well as a modern-composition enthusiast. Yet her tastes trend slightly more confrontational: The first two movements of "Adjust" have frequent recourse to striated ensemble exclamations. But in the fourth movement, when Thomson takes up Webber's invitation to improvise over some mournful accompanying material, this composer's range also seems well suited for inclusion in the lineage suggested by Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time," which first brought these players together. SETH COLTER WALLS

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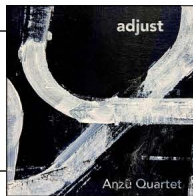
By [Peter Margasak](#) · May 08, 2025

Anzû Quartet
adjust



Anzû Quartet
New York, New York

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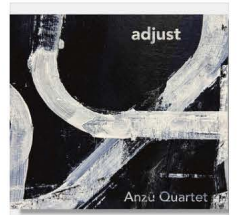
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By dint of its unusual instrumentation—piano, clarinet, cello, and violin—[Olivier Messiaen's iconic *Quartet for the End of Time*](#) is usually performed by musicians gathered specifically for the task, rather than working ensembles. That conundrum became the *raison d'être* for Anzû Quartet, which formed in order to play that classic, and also to commission new work for the format. The group's debut features two works from composers closely aligned with jazz and improvised music: bandleader and reedist [Anna Webber](#) and Anzû clarinetist [Ken Thomson](#). Thomson's "Uneasy," the title reflecting both its turbulence and its technical challenges, is fully notated; but its intricate matrix of rhythm and harmony reveals a clear connection to jazz, particularly the breathless complexity and pace of music composed by [Anthony Braxton](#). The complexion of the music shifts from bar to bar, with pianist [Karl Larson](#) unleashing almost schizophrenic frameworks for the dizzying unison lines played by Thomson, cellist [Ashley Bathgate](#), and violinist [Olivia De Prato](#). Over three action-packed movements, rigorous interplay propels the music forward, with a melancholy respite arriving in the middle section. Webber's five-moment title piece is her first composition for an ensemble that she doesn't perform in, but it recalls the intense set of pieces she wrote for her brilliant 2019 album [Clockwise](#), which drew inspiration from ultra-specific ideas embedded in avant-garde gems by the likes of Xenakis and Cage, among others. It puts the ensemble through its paces with demanding yet exhilaratingly off-kilter sequences of rhythmic variation, jagged counterpoint, and visceral extended techniques. The music may share instrumentation with Messiaen, but the material itself exists in a different universe.



The Anzû Quartet, comprising violinist Olivia De Prato, cellist Ashley Bathgate, clarinetist Ken Thomson and pianist Karl Larson, performs Thomson's composition *Uneasy*.

The work features on the ensemble's upcoming debut album release *adjust* on Cantaloupe Music, on 25 April 2025.

Playing in a mixed-instrument quartet poses unique challenges from playing in a conventional string quartet. Notably, the opening of *Uneasy* features an extended unison passage between the violin and clarinet.

How do the two instruments blend timbres with each other? Violinist De Prato elaborates:

'Playing in Anzû requires specific technical considerations related to tuning, sonic blending and ensemble togetherness. Since we have a woodwind, two string instruments, and one keyboard, we each need to be aware of and apply our creativity to blending, matching and complementing each other's musical lines within a piece.

'With this violin and clarinet unison passage, I use a few things to fuse my sound with Ken's - little to no vibrato, slurs and articulation that match the breath patterns in the clarinet, and slight adjustments in bow contact point placement to match timbral changes (in this passage, mostly between *ordinario* and *sul tasto* playing, with subtle variations in *flautando* bow pressure at the beginning and end of phrases).

'Most of this is done intuitively and/or found in rehearsal. Ken and I have also known each other for many years and know our styles of playing very well - that's a major reason why we're in a group!

'I think the key technical point for string players here is vibrato. It's vital to have complete control of vibrato in order to use it well - from using none at all, from slow to fast and everything in between. Also, just focusing on the bow as the equal to the breath in the clarinet and the strike of the key in the piano. The higher levels of subtlety and phrasing are all in the bow.'

Thomson shares the unsettling inspiration behind *Uneasy*: 'This piece was written during the first Trump era in New York, and completed just before the pandemic began. The atmosphere was tense and charged, the ground unstable, with half of the country and the world in shock, still at the beginning of the West's rightward turn. Interaction, not only in New York but in my travels, was grim if not yet resigned.

'But there's a second side of the title — the piece is, quite literally, un-easy. Especially the first movement is really tricky and requires virtuosic playing and tight coordination from all four of us.

adjust featuring works by Thomson and jazz composer Anna Webber will be released on Cantaloupe Music on 25 April 2025 on all streaming and downloading services.

Photo credit: Markus Sepperer

The Wire

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Intakt CD/DL

Anzû Quartet
Adjust

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Will Mason Quartet
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New Focus DL

Webber brings her fireworks to the titular piece of *Adjust*, a five part suite composed for new music ensemble Anzû Quartet (violinist Olivia De Prato, clarinettist Ken Thomson, cellist Ashley Bathgate, pianist Karl Larson). The key materials are laid out in the tense and jarring opening section, with a morse code piano motif over jagged violin and cello rhythms. This form is punctuated at irregular points by dramatic chords, the dark piano and dissonant strings strafed with clarinet multiphonics. The structured improvisation and violin and piano preparations of “part iii” create an eerie soundworld of creaks and wisps, before De Prato flashes her teeth with gutsy double stops. Stately piano chords clear the air, before a thrilling reprise of those heavy chords for the finale. Webber’s composition is well paired with Thomson’s “Uneasy”, an evocative piece full of assertive rhythms and reflective turns underscored by increasingly tense harmonies.

Stewart Smith



Live Log 2025: Ensembles Assembled

Live music in March was defined by three stellar performances featuring the Anzû Quartet, the JACK Quartet, and Wild Up

JEREMY SHATAN
MAY 20



March 9th: Anzû Quartet, Roulette, Brooklyn

The debut album, *Adjust*, by this distinguished group of some of New York's finest musicians, came out several weeks after this performance, and I've already trumpeted its excellence. Olivia de Prato (violin), Ken Thomson (clarinet), Ashley Bathgate (cello), and Karl Larson (piano) have each decorated my archives with many mentions for their performances, compositions, or recordings—or all three—so I was excited to see them coming together. *Anzû* was formed in homage to Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time, carrying forward the forces he drew on from the musicians in the prison of war camp in which he was imprisoned. It could be said that Anzû's existence and its role as a commissioner of new works is yet a further triumph over the forces of darkness that put him there.

The first piece we heard at Roulette was *Frictionless Objects* (2023) by Ryan Carter, a composer and educator known for leveraging new technology, such as iPhone motion detection, while questioning its long-term effects. However, there was nothing high-tech about this dramatic and dynamic piece, which opened with a thundering piano and an effective dialogue between the strings and clarinet. About two-thirds of the way through, it gradually slowed down; the piano began to sparkle, and things started to fragment, growing ever eerier until it abruptly stopped. I was unfamiliar with Carter, but I now know that needs to change, and I'll start with this 2022 portrait album.

Next was the world premiere of Mario Diaz de Leon's *Tree of Life*, which presented a new mode for this composer of great power. Diaz de Leon often marshals dark sounds, as in 2023's *Spark and Earth*, which combined electronics with heavy guitar. In this case, he gave us something lyrical, almost pastoral, with a delicate opening led by Larson and Bathgate. Soon, de Prato contributed swirling violin and Thomson unfurled long woody lines developing into a gorgeous flowering of melodic conversation. Even as things grew more staccato, there was a sense that Diaz de Leon offered consolation, a healing force for whatever ails you.



Anzû in performance: De Prato, Larson, Bathgate, and Thomson

It's no surprise that *Tree of Life* and the related electronic piece *River of Life*, which was recorded live at Roulette in 2023 but has only now been released, are both based on a beautiful passage from Revelations, 22:1-2: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." One need not be a believer to long for those leaves to grow in great quantities. Until then, we have Diaz de Leon's wonderful music.

The final piece was Anna Webber's *Adjust* (2022), which is on the album and received a smashing performance at Roulette. From the dense, angry opening and the hard rocking second movement, with unison riffage galore, to the slinky, barbed third movement, filled with wild pizzicato and witty finger tapping leading to a comical, bravura ending, that sounded like nothing so much as Raymond Scott's cat chasing Carl Stalling's mouse up the chimney, the band was on fire.

For the fourth movement, the lights dimmed to black, except for a spotlight on Larson, who played a series of searching chords that were eventually joined by trills from the clarinet and meditative lines from the strings. The busy, clockwork conclusion of the movement transitioned into a brief finale, which alternates between silence and tumult, growing increasingly unhinged until it fades into one extended note. *Adjust* is Webber's first piece for chamber ensemble, and while the use of rhythm might belie her background in jazz, she has certainly "adjusted" well!



Stand together: Webber, De Leon, and Carter with the Anzû