

Christopher's Classics - Series XXVIX 2024

NZ String Quartet



Helene Pohl (violin), Monique Lapins (violin), Rolf Gjelsten (cello) and Gillian Ansell (viola)

Performing: Holmes, Haydn,
Shostakovich and Brahms

Presented by
Sunday Classics Inc

Elizabeth Ball Trust



Tuesday, May 7th, 2024, 7:00 PM
The Piano, 156 Armagh St, Christchurch

The busiest lives deserve beautiful music.

Programme

Leonie Holmes (1962-) – *Fragments II*

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) – *String Quartet in E flat major “Apponyi”, Op. 71, No. 3*

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) – *String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp, Op. 142*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) – *String Quartet No. 3 in B flat major, Op. 67*

Programme Notes

Holmes *Fragments II* (2016)

The original *Fragment*, also composed for String Quartet, was a kind of fantasia on a small, repeating pattern. This work, *Fragment II*, continues the idea of a response to a very small idea. The ‘fragment’ in this case is a rocking three-note passage, introduced by the cello. Opening softly and slowly, using the ascending intervals of a minor 6th then augmented 5th, the searching quality of the three notes prompts an introspective and whimsical exploration. The tension grows as the music speeds up into a twirling semiquaver interlude and the occasional use of ricochet bowing adds moments of subtle humour. The use of wide intervals and augmented harmonies create an atmosphere of beauty and poignancy.

Haydn String Quartet in E flat major “Apponyi”, Op. 71, No. 3 (1793)

- I. *Vivace*
- II. *Andante con moto*
- III. *Minuet and Trio*
- IV. *Finale. Vivace*

Haydn is affectionately known as the “Father of the String Quartet”. He wrote an astounding sixty-seven quartets - shining a strong light on the power and potential of the combination of this type of ensemble. He had received recognition and success for his music, during his first trip to London in 1791. In an inspired state, Haydn returned to Vienna and created a brand new set of string quartets in preparation for his second visit to London. Initially, string quartets were seen more as an intimate chamber music experience for smaller audiences in chambers or private venues. In a groundbreaking move, Haydn changed this - writing the opus 71 set specifically for public performance.

Dedicated to the Hungarian Count, Apponyi, Op. 71 No. 3 stands as a testament to the composer's enduring legacy, showcasing his unparalleled mastery of form, melody, and expression. In the first movement, he employs the use of a *coup de théâtre*, with a loud and abrupt chord to command the attention of the audience and announce the start of the performance. What ensues are a series of witty exchanges that have a three note “stutter” which recurs throughout the movement in many guises. The movement features tuttis of symphonic proportion, extreme dynamic contrast, and playful changes to phrase lengths. This keeps us on the edge of our seats with wonder for where the music will take us.

The *Andante con moto* is - in its essence - a set of theme and variations. The first violin shines here, much like a soprano gracing the stage with an orchestra accompanying and commenting. The theme itself already has a multitude of characters, from innocence and grace to concern and anxiety. How Haydn develops this is tantalising with moments of darkness to almost bird-like iterations in the higher registers of the quartet.

The dancing lines of the *Minuet and Trio* are full of cheek! Although the movement is graceful - it is tinged with wit and suspense, with unexpected harmonic shifts that are constantly changing. The trio is momentarily ominous with the use of unisons and octaves. Haydn throws this away as though to say “just kidding”, and sends the first violin humorously up into the stratosphere.

The *Finale. Vivace* takes us into a rambunctious quick-waltz. Sometimes there appears to be a nod to Bach, with moments that resemble the contours of the last movement of Brandenburg Concerto No. 3. This Finale is full of brilliance, and contrapuntal interplay between all four voices of the quartet, sending us off to a vibrant close that ends the entire work as it began - with flourishing chords.

Shostakovich String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp, Op. 142 (1972-73)

- I. *Allegretto*
- II. *Adagio (attacca)*
- III. *Allegretto*

Shostakovich's Quartets 11 through 14 are dedicated to each member of the Beethoven Quartet, who worked through and premiered all except the first and the last of his 15 quartets. The members made up the inner circle of Shostakovich's most intimate and trusted friends. Having paid homage to the violinists and violist in Quartets 11-13, the composer began this work, his dedication to the cellist, Sergei Shirinsky, in 1972, taking 9 months to complete. The work is in three movements, in the traditional fast-slow-fast with a slow coda to end, but as in

each of his quartets, the form and content unfold in their own ways. In each of these four quartets dedicated to members of the Beethoven Quartet one has to wonder, with so many idiosyncratic references to the dedicatees in the music, to what degree has the composer painted a personal portrait, and how much the character and emotional content of the work plays out as a reflection of the personal traits of each member? Shostakovich told the group that he wrote specifically with their playing in mind.

In the Fourteenth Quartet, the unusually jovial and playful character first introduced by the cello takes on a quirky effect with seemingly random dissonances in the accompanying material, becoming more blaring as the cello line dominates much of the movement. A reflection of the dynamic of the personalities working within the Quartet perhaps? In contrast, the second movement tells a dark and emotionally wrought narrative through sparse textures with variations and embellishments. The last movement contains several musical references to its dedicatee, spelling out Shirinsky's nickname Seryosha in the violin 1 pizzicato opening theme, as well as a quote of the beautiful "Seryosha" aria from 'Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District' in the deep cello line. In both the second and third movements there is also a beautiful duet line with the cello riding above the first violin, accompanied by heavy pizzicatos in Mahlerian fashion, which Shostakovich referred to as his 'Italian' bit. Is there some hidden reference to Shirinsky's tastes here? The last movement is a wild ride of contrasting textures and emotions, culminating in an apotheosis which, like many of Shostakovich's quartets, leaves the listener transfixed in deep contemplation.

Brahms String Quartet No. 3 in B flat major, Op. 67 (1875)

- I. *Vivace*
- II. *Andante*
- III. *Agitato (Allegretto non troppo) — trio — coda*
- IV. *Poco Allegretto con Variazioni*

Brahms made a significant contribution to chamber music repertoire. In 1875, during his summer holidays at Ziegelhausen, near Heidelberg, he completed his *Piano Quartet, Op. 60*, and worked on his last string quartet, the *Quartet in B flat major, Op. 67*, published the following year with a dedication to Professor Theodor Wilhelm Engelmann, his host in Utrecht during a concert tour of Holland in January 1876.

The first movement of the quartet starts with a cheerful theme that soon allows the intrusion of crossrhythms. The second subject, appearing after a transition that touches on the minor, is a happy dance tune, and these elements form the substance of the central development and subsequent recapitulation. The F major slow movement introduces a moving and extended melody for the first violin, followed by a middle section that brings moments of drama and changes of metre, with the return of the first theme prefigured in an apparent variation of what is to come. The muted D minor third movement, marked *Agitato*, in which the viola alone remains unmuted, offers thematic material of some intensity for that instrument, which plays a leading part also in the A minor *Trio*, to join in the gentle D major conclusion with the other instruments. The last movement brings a simple melody, followed by eight variations. The first of these is dominated by the viola, which starts the second variation. The third brings triplet figuration, the fourth a sombre opening for first violin and cello two octaves apart, the fifth a change of key to D flat major and the sixth a *molto dolce* G flat major. The seventh variation, in doubled speed, brings back the key and principal theme of the first movement, followed by a final variation that recalls the transitional material of the first movement, in B flat minor. The movement, the longest of the four, ends with a coda that combines elements of the seventh variation, and therefore the first movement, with the theme of the finale, a statement of perfect unity.

NZ String Quartet

Helene Pohl was born in Ithaca, New York to German parents. She joined the New Zealand String Quartet as first violinist in February 1994. In 2001 she became Artistic Director, with fellow quartet member Gillian Ansell, of the Adam Chamber Music Festival. In 2014 she was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for her outstanding services to music in New Zealand. Helene plays a Pietro Guarnerius violin made in Venice in 1730.

Monique Lapins began her violin studies at the age of six. She joined the NZSQ in May 2016. Monique plays a 1784 Lorenzo Storioni violin, kindly loaned by Mr David Duncan Craig, as trustee of the Lily Duncan Trust.

Gillian Ansell was born in Auckland and made her concerto debut at the age of 16. She became a founding member of the NZ String Quartet in 1987. In 1992, she co-founded the Adam Chamber Music Festival. In 2008 she was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for her outstanding services to music in New Zealand. Gillian plays on a 1619 Nicolò Amati viola, generously loaned by the Adam Foundation.

Rolf Gjelsten began cello studies in his native city Victoria, Canada, with James Hunter and Janos Starker at the age of 15. He joined the New Zealand String Quartet in May 1994 and in 2014 he was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for his outstanding services to music in New Zealand. Rolf plays a Francesco Gofriller cello made in Venice in 1705.

Christopher's Classics Next Concert:

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Tuesday 14th May 2024, 7:00 PM

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