

Christopher's Classics - Series XXVI 2021

presents

NZ String Quartet



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

Presented by
Sunday Classics Inc

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Tuesday, 9th November, 2021

The Piano, 156 Armagh St, Christchurch

The busiest lives deserve beautiful music.

Programme:

Purcell - *Three Fantasias*

Britten - *String Quartet No. 2 in C*

Interval: 15 minutes

Gao Ping - *Prayer Songs*

Smetana - *String Quartet No. 2 in D minor*

New Zealand String Quartet

Celebrating its 35th season in 2022, the New Zealand String Quartet has an established international reputation for its insightful interpretations, compelling communication, and dynamic performing style. The Quartet is known for its imaginative programming and for its powerful connection with audiences of all kinds.

Over the decades the Quartet has cultivated a rich repertoire and discography to match, including a wide variety of New Zealand music, composers' cycles from Beethoven to Bartok, Mozart to Berg, in addition to theatrical presentations encompassing spoken word and dance, from Haydn's *Seven Last Words* to Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*. The Quartet have proudly championed New Zealand music since their inception, commissioning over 150 New Zealand works, alongside collaborations with taonga pūoro players Rob Thorne, Alastair Fraser, and the late Richard Nunns.

Acclaimed performances in London's Wigmore Hall and the City of London Festival, in New York at the Frick Collection, and in Washington's Library of Congress Coolidge Auditorium have led to regular touring in the UK, Europe and North America. Much-loved by audiences in New Zealand, the NZSQ collaborates with an eclectic array of artists from classical, jazz, dance and folk genres, alongside mentoring and education projects with Sistema programmes all over the country each year.

Devoted teachers as well as performers, all members of the NZSQ teach at the New Zealand School of Music – Te Kōkī where the NZSQ is Quartet-in-Residence, as well as running the Adam Chamber Music School in Nelson and the NZSM Queen's Birthday Chamber Music Weekend in Wellington for up-and-coming chamber musicians.

The New Zealand String Quartet Trust gratefully acknowledges the use of a Storioni violin, kindly loaned by Mr David Duncan Craig, as trustee of the Lily Duncan Trust, and the use of an Amati viola, kindly loaned by the Adam Foundation.

Henry Purcell (1659 – 1695)

Three Fantasias (1680)

Fantasia no. 7, Z.738

Fantasia no. 8, Z.742

Fantasia no. 11, Z.742

During his life, Henry Purcell became recognised as one of the greatest English composers, but after his young death, his reputation faded until his bicentenary in 1895, when the Purcell Society and composers Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams helped restore his status. Benjamin Britten admired the “clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness” of Purcell’s music – aesthetic qualities which we can so clearly hear in Britten’s musical voice. He paid Purcell the compliment of imitation, while also re-introducing many of his works to the concert hall.

With the 20th-century revival of early music and authentic performance, audiences could again enjoy Purcell’s inventive brilliance, dramatic sensibilities, and the ‘common touch’, which had endeared him to his contemporaries and gave his music a freshness and immediacy.

“The Fantasias of Purcell stun us with originality, daring, and, as the name suggests, fantasy. Poignant dissonances cry out amidst beautifully flowing lyricism. It’s no wonder that Britten was moved by Purcell’s music and based a good part of his Second String Quartet on one of these Fantasias.” – Rolf Gjelsten

Purcell’s superb Fantasias for Strings were composed at great speed during the summer of 1680, and written for his own private enjoyment rather than for royal consumption and performance by The King’s Violins. Essentially a series of freeform movements, these Fantasias were originally written for varying sized consorts of viols and are considered an astonishing contrapuntal achievement that has been compared to Bach’s Art of Fugue. Their beauty and inventiveness lies in the equal exchange of voices rather than pure virtuosity, perfectly capturing the image of intimate conversation that chamber music has become so well loved for over the centuries. Prominent music historian, George Grove states that they are “masterpieces of contrapuntal writing but also passionate revelations of the composer’s most secret thoughts... they are appealing to the ear but might even be termed romantic in expression”.

Duration: 14’

Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976)

String Quartet No. 2 in C (1945)

- I. *Allegro calmo, senza rigore*
- II. *Vivace*
- III. *Chacony: sostenuto*

While still basking in the triumph of his second opera, *Peter Grimes*, which premiered in 1945 at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre, Britten set to work on several compositions of varying nature: a set of orchestral variations, a song cycle, his first chamber opera (*The Rape of Lucretia*), and his *String Quartet No. 2*. Although seemingly unrelated, all were inspired in some way by the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the death of the composer Britten revered above all others - Henry Purcell.

As with many composers of the mid-20th century, a form of nationalism still coloured Britten's search for his own unique compositional voice. As he wanted to distance himself from the "pastoral" school of composers such as Vaughan Williams, who based their musical language on the harmonies of traditional English folk songs and works of composers from the Elizabethan era, Britten found his solution to expressing nationalism by delving into the works of Purcell for inspiration.

"To my mind it is the greatest advance I have yet made and altho' it is far from perfect, it has given me encouragement to continue on new lines" Britten writes in a letter to friend Mary Behrend, referring to his second string quartet. Perhaps this is a subtle declaration of pride from Britten as he discovered a new compositional direction in successfully incorporating aspects of Purcell's music into his own.

String Quartet No. 2 was written upon return from a tour of Germany, where he accompanied famed violinist Yehudi Menuhin in a series of concerts for the survivors of Herman concentration camps. Britten must have been affected by this, as we hear the tension and occasional malevolence through this astonishing work. Two symphonic-scale outer movements flank the somewhat unsettling middle movement; all referencing Purcell in either subtle musical material or overt dance forms.

Duration: 29'

Gao Ping (1970 -)

Prayer Songs – Four Pieces for String Quartet (2019)

Written at the invitation from the New Zealand String Quartet, *Prayer Songs* explore the different ways of conversing with each other within a group of individuals. Gao Ping explains "I imagine these short pieces as a variety of chants, or prayers, which are shared by the four reciters who take turns in the chanting. They follow and comment each other and, sometimes, they join into a larger stream, and then separate again, slide into smaller active units. All the time, though, they are bound by the same focus and direction, trying to stay together, moving towards a peaceful and harmonious union."

Gao Ping is a composer-pianist, born in Chengdu, Sichuan province of China. After studies in the USA in the 1990s, he has received commissions and performances from musicians around the world. In recent years, works such as *Four Not-Alike* —concerto for multifunction pianist and Chamber Orchestra pointed to Gao's new direction of combining Western and Chinese instruments. Gao is currently a Professor and the Head of Composition at the Conservatory of Music-Capital Normal University in Beijing. He previously taught at the University of Canterbury and the New Zealand School of

Music – Te Kōkī. Gao Ping is the composer-in-residence for the “Forbidden City Chamber Orchestra”, a prominent Chinese instrumental ensemble in Beijing.

He was appointed as the 2018 Composer-in-residence of Orchestra Wellington. His two albums released on the Naxos label were critically acclaimed for the ‘many beautiful subtleties to be discovered ... A strong ability to build musical images from a text or a simple sentiment and memory, are the qualities that make Gao Ping one of China’s most important composers of recent years...’ (PERCORSIMUSICALI). His newest albums *Outside the Window* (piano music) and *Pure Wind* (Chinese ensemble) were released by China Records Corp. and People’s Music in 2017.

Duration: 12’

Bedřich Smetana (1824 – 1884)

String Quartet No. 2 in D minor (1882/83)

- I. *Allegro*
- II. *Allegro moderato*
- III. *Allegro non più moderato, ma agitato e con fuoco*
- IV. *Presto*

The last ten years of Bedřich Smetana’s life tragically saw the gradual and total breakdown of his health, and the composition of some of his greatest music. All six symphonic poems in his cycle *Má vlast*, or ‘My country’, come from this time; so do several operas, and both of his string quartets. He had evolved a musical language that could lock into currents of national feeling beyond the reach of other Czech composers, most famously in his opera *The Bartered Bride*. He was a successful conductor and theatre administrator and had become a central figure in the musical life of Prague. Yet the first signs of illness were followed rapidly by the onset of deafness, which became complete within a few months. Although he was able to stay active as a musician, having the instincts and skills to continue performing with other players and the capacity to follow performances of music he knew by ‘reading’ the conductor’s beat, his last years became a struggle to keep mind as well as body together.

Smetana himself said that the second quartet takes up from where the first finished: “...after the catastrophe, it represents the turbulence of music in a person who had lost his hearing”. A work of great beauty tinged with nostalgia and sadness, the second quartet is perhaps an allusion to the composer’s declining mental health. The first movement oscillates between strife and tenderness; the second a polka-come-lament; the third and fourth equal parts fury and hope.

Duration: 19’

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2022 Season

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Acknowledgements:
Elizabeth Ball Trust, Rata Foundation, The Piano, Antonio Strings, Gloria Street,
Chamber Music New Zealand and private donors — thank you all