

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION – SPRING SEASON 2024

ORA QUARTET

Siun Milne and Molly O'Shea, violins - Ali Comerford, viola - Yseult Cooper-Stockdale, cello

LISTOWEL - Wednesday 14th February at 8pm - St John's Theatre and Arts Centre

SKIBBEREEN - Thursday 15th February at 8pm - Abbeystrewry Church – *presented by Barrahan Music*

KENMARE - Friday 16th February at 8pm - Buttermarket

CORK - Saturday 17th February at 1pm - Triskel Christchurch

DUBLIN - Sunday 18th February at 12pm - Hugh Lane Gallery

Joseph Haydn [1732-1809]

String Quartet in A major Op.20 No.6 [1772]

1. *Allegro di molto e scherzando*
2. *Adagio, cantabile*
3. *Minuetto: Allegretto*
4. *Fuga a tre soggetti: Allegro*

Emma O'Halloran [b. 1985]

Dying is a Wild Night [2017]

Benjamin Britten [1913-1976]

String Quartet No.2 in C major Op.36 [1945]

1. *Allegro calmo senza rigore*
2. *Vivace*
3. *Chacony. Sostenuto*



ORA QUARTET

The four members of the Ora Quartet play extensively in a wide range of ensembles including the National Symphony Orchestra, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Ficino Ensemble, Irish National Opera, Crash Ensemble, Kirkos, The Vanbrugh and many others. They came together as a string quartet in 2023 and made their debut at Fuddlefest in August of that year. Projects in 2024 include a series of collaborative concerts in the Everyman, Cork, as well as this tour.

Siún Milne, violin

Siún studied the violin with Ruxandra Colan-Petcu at CIT Cork School of Music before completing her BMus degree on scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music in London with Maurice Hasson and Mateja Marinkovic.

Siún is a member of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and has performed with a variety of ensembles throughout her career including the Irish Chamber Orchestra, The Vanbrugh and Callino String Quartet, Aurora Orchestra, Hebrides Ensemble and Scottish Ensemble. She recently performed Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Siun has participated in masterclasses with Gerhard Schulz at IMS Prussia Cove, Pavlo Beznosiuk, Sylvia Rosenberg and Rachel Podger. As a part of Ólafur Arnald's string quartet, Siún performed at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Cross-Linx Festival, Volksbühne Berlin and has toured the UK with Arnald's soundtrack for "Broadchurch". She has performed with a diverse range of artists including Mícheál O' Suilleabháin, Sam Amidon, Frankie Gavin, singer-songwriter Rumer on BBC's *Later with Jools Holland*, Loah at the National Concert Hall and Efterklang.

Molly O'Shea, violin

Molly O'Shea is a violinist, currently based in Dublin. She completed her BMus in the Cork School of Music in June of 2019 under the guidance of Ruxandra Petcu-Colan and Liz Charleson, graduating with First Class Honours. She had spent the previous 3 years studying under Marc Danel at l'Institut de la Musique et de Pedagogie in Namur, Belgium and graduated with Distinction from a Violin Performance Masters June of 2018.

During her studies, Molly has been a prizewinner in multiple competitions both locally and nationally. In October 2019 she received 2nd prize in the Irish Freemasons Young Musician of the Year competition and was also the recipient of the Florian Leonhard Fine Instrument Grant and the John Vallery Prize for the Highest Placed String Player. In 2021, Molly was chosen as one of 5 young musicians to take part in the University Concert Hall's Rising Stars Concert in Limerick. She has been a member of the First Violin section of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland since March 2020 while also maintaining a varied freelance career.

Molly is an avid chamber musician. With the Inis quartet, Molly was invited to participate in the West Cork Chamber Music Festival masterclasses in summer 2023, taking masterclasses with the Armida Quartet, the Pacifica Quarter and the Ardeo Quartet. She was selected to participate in the Chamber Music Gathering 2019 in the National Concert Hall. In November 2018, Molly was selected to perform at the Philharmonie de Liege as part of a Young Chamber Musicians Programme.

Ali Comerford, viola

Ali Comerford is an Irish musician, born and raised in Kilkenny. She completed her Masters in Viola Performance at the Manhattan School of Music in New York after gaining a full scholarship to study with Patinka Kopec. During her time there, she won the Fuchs Chamber Music Prize, and the Hindemith Viola Competition, and also played as principal violist under the baton of Leonard Slatkin. After graduating in 2017, Ali performed as a freelance musician in New York and played as principal violist with The New York Chamber Music Players, The Handel Festival Orchestra and TENYC, with whom she premiered works at Carnegie Hall, all while holding a Fellowship at the International House NY. Ali then won a position with Lincoln Center Stage and spent time traveling the world as a chamber musician and soloist, most notably to Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Alaska. In 2023 Ali was awarded the Resonate Residency for the National Opera House. She performs consistently with the National Symphony Orchestra and enjoys a varied freelance career. Ali also holds a Masters in Violin Performance from the Royal College of Music in London and a Bachelor of Music from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Yseult Cooper-Stockdale, cello

Yseult enjoys a varied career, performing with every professional orchestra in the ROI, while also specializing in experimental performance. Favouring more intimate ensembles, she is highly regarded as a chamber musician and collaborator. '22 / '23 projects included the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (Crash and Kirkos), and tours with Spero Quartet, Vanbrugh, Evlana, Ficino Ensemble, The Quiet Music Ensemble, BelIX1, and the Irish Chamber Orchestra. She was also Arts Council funded to co-write and perform a large-scale cross-disciplinary work, and received an Agility Award to expand her knowledge of historically-informed performance. Improvisation collaborators include Lina Andonovska, Nick Roth and Andy Ingamells.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Joseph Haydn [1732-1809]

String Quartet in A major Op.20 No.6 [1772]

This is the shortest of the Opus 20 quartets. Nevertheless it is a considerable as well as a delightful work. Haydn did not place it last of the group. In his listing it came second after the F minor quartet (now no. 5). In the published versions of these quartets, there were as many different orderings as there were publishers. The order we have now we owe to a publisher in Amsterdam called J.J. Hummel.

Hummel also put a picture of the sun on the frontispiece, so these quartets have ever since been known as the “Sun Quartets”. We do not know why Hummel did this. It is possible that he understood that these quartets represented the dawn of the serious quartet. This seems doubtful. It was probably a simple marketing ploy, which may have worked. The Sun Quartets quickly became successful throughout Europe. They helped to establish Haydn’s international reputation.

The first movement is headed with “e scherzando” indicating that this movement will contain a good deal of humour. But Haydn is always quick to mix the humorous with serious elements and he does so here. The movement opens with a jaunty tune. In a few bars this is repeated quietly. This is followed by a sudden loud passage which leads into a long linking section to the second main idea. This is in a minor key and is based on a falling chromatic scale which introduces a cloudier moment. This is soon dispelled as more brilliant material completes the opening statement. The throbbing development is based on yet more new material which leads to a dramatic climax. This is followed by a pianissimo passage which, after a bar of silence, leads to the recapitulation.

The slow movement is a sumptuous aria for the first violin. There are two calm and beautiful main themes. The rocking accompaniment contains considerable variety; syncopation, triplets and some contrapuntal material as well. The minuet is robust and charming specially in the second half. One of the violins is dropped for the trio. The other three instruments play on only one string (*una corda*), and the result is sad and delicate.

The fugal finale provides a contrast to the earlier movements, which were dominated by the first violin. Here all four instruments are treated (more or less) equally. Each of the three subjects (*soggetti*) is short. The first opens with a typical fugal idea; three repeated notes which can be heard throughout the movement as each instrument returns to this opening theme. In the second bar the second violin introduces the second subject. After it has finished, it goes back to the first subject while the first violin is playing the third subject. If this seems complicated, it is. However, Haydn is equal to weaving an amazing tapestry of contrapuntal quartet music of increasing complexity. As a relief, the four instruments play in unison for the last six bars of the movement concluding this delightful final quartet of Opus 20.

The well-known music critic, Donald Tovey wrote: with opus 20 the historical development of Haydn’s quartets reaches its goal; and further progress is no longer progress in any historical sense but simply the difference between one masterpiece and the next... no later set of six quartets, not even Opus 76 is, on its own plane so uniformly weighty and so varied in substance as Opus 20. *David Winter*

Emma O'Halloran (b. 1985)

Dying is a Wild Night [2017]

The title comes from an Emily Dickinson quote “Dying is a wild night and a new road”...and in a way, the piece is a reflection on mortality. I wrote this piece almost a year after my sister, Lisa, took critically ill, and had to undergo emergency surgery to save her life. The road to recovery was a long and challenging one, both mentally and physically, and we spoke on the phone almost every day, discussing the highs and lows of her journey. Every member of my family was changed by this event, and it made me appreciate the simple joy of just being alive. I tried to capture that for Lisa.

This work began to take form in 2017 as part of the West Cork Chamber Music Composition Competition. It subsequently underwent substantial revision and became something entirely different. I’m delighted that it gets to return to Bantry for its Irish premiere as part of the 2019 Festival.

Emma O'Halloran is an Irish composer who is crafting a career centered around representation: creating music that makes any listener feel seen. Freely intertwining acoustic and electronic music, she has written for folk musicians, chamber ensembles, turntables, laptop orchestra, symphony orchestra, film, and theatre. For her efforts, O'Halloran has been praised by I Care If You Listen editor-in-chief Amanda Cook for writing 'some of the most unencumbered, authentic, and joyful music that I have heard in recent years', and has won numerous competitions, including National Sawdust's inaugural Hildegard competition and the Next Generation award from Beth Morrison Projects. O'Halloran is a founding member of the Kinds of Kings collective, a group of six female composers described by The New Yorker as distinguished young creators who work in diverse styles. As part of Kinds of Kings, she not only produces immersive and inclusive work, but is developing a mentorship infrastructure for composers in under-heard and under-represented demographics. Raised in Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Emma currently spends her time between New Jersey and New York City.

Benjamin Britten [1913-1976]

String Quartet No.2 in C major Op.36 [1945]

The English composer Benjamin Britten has proven to be one of the most original and enduring composers of the 20th century. Celebrated for his vocal music, particularly his songs, several successful operas and the War Requiem, Britten was an equally brilliant instrumental composer with a number of outstanding chamber pieces and at least two very popular orchestral scores: Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Henry Purcell (also known as A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra) and Variations on the Theme of Frank Bridge. The common element between both works is a marvelous specialty of Britten's: a theme and variations concluding with a fugue. Both his admiration for Purcell and his skillful penchant for contrapuntal variations come together again in his String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, a work of startling originality, surely one of the most important string quartets of the 20th century.

The opening movement is immediately tantalizing with its spacious, atmospheric thematic material. A prominent element is a large intervallic leap of a tenth, upward from the tonic to the major third an octave higher. Against this euphony, Britten weaves a few short melodic fragments using more exotic intervals with a sound that is modern and ancient at the same time. A robust, rhythmic propulsion soon establishes a vector of forward momentum that supports a number of "sections" exploring the essential thematic materials across a well-shaped dramatic narrative with a climax that combines the various themes into a rich complex simultaneity. Britten is a master of scoring for strings. The range of dynamics, textures and sonorities is startling, exploiting both delicate polyphony as well as mighty unisons with a nearly orchestral force.

The middle movement is a driving scherzo with a certain kind of unsettling mania one associates with Shostakovich, a friend and greatly admired composer to Britten. Again, the music ranges between mighty unities and delicate contrapuntal textures with special sonorities. The trio section finds the first violin boldly leering in loud double-stops over the subdued "accompaniment" of the other three instruments as a kind of instrumental singer / guitar duo. The migration back into the main scherzo and onward to the conclusion showcases a tensile electricity that might be described as synaptic.

The explicit tribute to Purcell is the epic finale, an expansive theme and variations that Britten titled "Chacony", the old English word Purcell used to designate a particular kind of variation movement more broadly known by the Italian word *chaconne*. A chaconne is a set of variations based on a short, recurring harmonic progression, that is, a set of chords and a supporting baseline. With this as a ^[1]_{SEP}constant, the music spins out any number of variations through changes in melody, rhythm, instrumentation and contrapuntal elaboration. Britten's Chacony features ^[1]_{SEP}21 variations organized into four sets demarcated by solo cadenzas from the cello, viola and first violin respectively. As Britten explained in a short program note for the première, each of the four sets explores a particular mode of variation: harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, and "formal aspects." James Keller suggests that herein one finds ^[1]_{SEP}a sort of four-movement inner quartet all on its own. For an equally epic conclusion, the last variation features 21 C Major chords as a kind of "drone" against which the original theme's harmonic motion becomes particularly vivid. The overall effect of the second quartet is representative of nearly all of Britten's work: the music is modern yet accessible, original yet compellingly "recognizable", ingeniously constructed yet emotionally communicative. It is music that simply works and it is destined to prevail. © Kai Christiansen