

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION - AUTUMN SEASON 2023

FICINO QUARTET

Elaine Clark and Hugh Murray, violins - Nathan Sherman, viola - Ailbhe McDonagh, cello

LISTOWEL - Wednesday 6th December at 8pm - St John's Theatre and Arts Centre

UNION HALL - Thursday 7th December at 8pm - Myross Church of Ireland - *presented by Barrahane Music*

KILKENNY - Friday 8th December at 8pm - Parade Tower, Kilkenny Castle - *presented by Music in Kilkenny*

CORK - Saturday 9th December at 1pm - Triskel Arts Centre (*Golijov, McDonagh, Brahms*)

DUBLIN - Sunday 10th December at 3pm - National Concert Hall

Oswaldo Golijov [b.1960]

Tenebrae [2000]

Ailbhe McDonagh [1982]

String Quartet No. 2, The Lore Quartet [2023]

Commissioned by the National String Quartet Foundation with funds from the Arts Council

i. *Dolmen*

ii. *Fairies*

iii. *Púca*

Dmitri Shostakovich [1906-1975]

Quartet No 7 in F sharp minor Op.108 [1960]

1. *Allegretto*

2. *Lento*

3. *Allegro - Allegretto*

Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

Quartet No 2 in A minor Op.51/2 [1873]

1. *Allegro non troppo*

2. *Andante moderato*

3. *Quasi Minuetto - moderato*

4. *Allegro non assai*



Music in Kilkenny



FICINO QUARTET

Formed in 2013, the Ficino Ensemble has been committed to exploring the vast chamber music repertoire and presenting thoughtfully programmed concerts. The group regularly perform as a string quartet, and the addition of winds and percussion gives the possibility of playing large-scale chamber works. The members share a dedicated approach to contemporary music and have premiered many works. In 2018 they performed a concert with Olwen Fouéré as part of MusicTown in Dublin, which included a performance of Thomas Adès' Four Quarters and Ludwig van Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 132. The group have recorded two acclaimed albums, *Winter* and *Folk Songs* which are regularly broadcasted on WNYC, BBC3, Radio France and RTÉ Lyric Fm. The individual members of Ficino Ensemble are curious and fearless performers, and are at the forefront of the contemporary music scene and members of the National Symphony Orchestra and RTE Concert Orchestra. Ficino Ensemble takes the name from Marsilio Ficino, the Renaissance philosopher who regarded music as a "contemplation of the divine". ficinoensemble.com

PROGRAMME NOTES

Oswaldo Golijov [b.1960]

Tenebrae [2000]

I wrote *Tenebrae* as a consequence of witnessing two contrasting realities in a short period of time in September 2000. I was in Israel at the start of the new wave of violence that is still continuing today, and a week later I took my son to the new planetarium in New York, where we could see the Earth as a beautiful blue dot in space. I wanted to write a piece that could be listened to from different perspectives. That is, if one chooses to listen to it "from afar", the music would probably offer a "beautiful" surface but, from a metaphorically closer distance, one could hear that, beneath that surface, the music is full of pain. I lifted some of the haunting melismas from Couperin's Troisième Leçon de Tenebrae, using them as sources for loops, and wrote new interludes between them, always within a pulsating, vibrating, aerial texture. The compositional challenge was to write music that would sound as an orbiting spaceship that never touches ground. After finishing the composition, I realized that *Tenebrae* could be heard as the slow, quiet reading of an illuminated medieval manuscript in which the appearances of the voice singing the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet (from Yod to Nun, as in Couperin) signal the beginning of new chapters, leading to the ending section, built around a single, repeated word: Jerusalem. © **Oswaldo Golijov**.

Ailbhe McDonagh [1982]

String Quartet No. 2, *The Lore Quartet* [2023]

Commissioned by the National String Quartet Foundation with funds from the Arts Council

Ailbhe McDonagh is an established composer with over 250 published works and commissions to her name. Her debut orchestral work 'Irish Isles Suite' was recorded and released by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra in 2023. Her much-anticipated violin concerto the 'Irish Four Seasons' is due to be released in 2024. Some other notable commissions include her String Quartet No.1 for the Appalachian Chamber Music Festival, USA, an eight-hand piano work for the opening of the Whyte Recital Hall at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, Dublin, a piano trio for the Via Columbiani, a piano duet for the Dublin International Chamber Music Festival, and a solo cello suite supported by the Arts Council of Ireland. ailbhemcdonagh.com

The Lore Quartet is a journey through some of Ireland's most treasured myths and legends. This piece was commissioned by the National String Quartet Foundation of Ireland and funded by the Arts Council of Ireland. It is a work in three movements - each depicting a different aspect of Irish folklore.

i. Dolmen

The word "dolmen" evokes images of ancient burial tombs with their grand megalithic stones standing as a testament to the ages. These historic structures are scattered across the Irish landscape, holding within them the stories and secrets of a time long past. McDonagh's "Dolmen" begins with four chords signifying a Dolmen with four magnificent stones, echoing the whispers of ancient spirits. Throughout this movement, there is a beautiful interplay between the ethereal and the grounded, mirroring the dichotomy between the earthly stones and the eternal souls they shelter.

ii. Fairies

Ireland's lore brims with tales of fairies - magical creatures that embody the whims and mysteries of the natural world. In "Fairies," McDonagh paints a vivid picture of these enigmatic beings. Beginning with delicate harmonics, the music soon

AUDIENCE SURVEY

Across all its concerts this autumn, the National String Quartet Foundation is asking for feedback from audiences in the form of an online survey.

We would be so grateful if you could take a couple of minutes to answer a few questions to help us plan and raise funding for future concert seasons. If you are attending more than one NSQF concert this autumn, please feel free to complete the survey for each one.

If you point your phone's camera at this QR code and tap the suggested link you will be taken straight to the survey. This programme is available for download at www.nsqf.ie



blossoms into vibrant, playful melodies. The interweaving lines of the violins capture the capricious nature of these mythological entities, dancing one moment and disappearing the next. In the midst of this frolicsome music, however, there are moments of melancholy reflection, perhaps a nod to the darker aspects of fairy lore.

iii. Púca

The Púca is a complex figure in Irish mythology, a shapeshifter known to both aid and hinder humans in their endeavors. McDonagh's final movement is a fitting homage to this creature of duality. Dramatic shifts in dynamics and harmonies keep listeners on their toes, just as the unpredictable Púca might. One can almost visualise the Púca's transformation through the shifting moods and textures of the music - sometimes helpful and harmonious, at other times disruptive and discordant. McDonagh imagines the Púca in the shape of a horse which can be heard rhythmically throughout this movement.

Dmitri Shostakovich [1906-1975]

Quartet No 7 in F sharp minor Op.108 [1960]

1. *Allegretto*
2. *Lento*
3. *Allegro - Allegretto*

Written in memory of Nina Vasilyevna Shostakovich.

There are many contemporary eye-witness reports of Shostakovich at his desk. He preferred to use an old steel nib pen and an inkwell. He would place a large sheet of manuscript paper in front of him and with scarcely a hesitation and practically no corrections, he would create his new scores. It looked to observers as if he was just copying down sounds heard in his innermost self, he would even write out the orchestral parts himself saying that everyone should do his work from beginning to end. He could not bear not to be working. The composer, Edison Denison, once found him writing furiously and was asked to wait. When he had the score completed, he tore it into tiny pieces and threw it away. Denison was horrified and remonstrated. Shostakovich replied that he was having trouble composing but could not sit around without working; so he was orchestrating a complete volume of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Songs* one by one and tearing them up as soon as he finished each one.

Nina, his first wife, would have been fifty in 1960 and the fifth decade is concealed in the germ cell that opens the work. The three-bar phrase that remains within the span of a single octave is repeated five times. In this movement he seems to have determined to remember her as she was alive rather than write a dramatic elegy, for though this movement is highly charged it is neither sad nor emotional. There is a delightful episode where the first violin and cello, female and male voices, converse with each other, mostly pizzicato in the key of E flat and reminiscent of the lovers in *Die Zauberflöte*. One suspects many other private musical references. One of the excitements of this work, in particular this movement, is its extreme brevity. On the whole he tends to spread himself but this work shows his gift for concision, where he packs a huge amount of material into a small space without seeming to constrain himself.

After the return of the first theme, the *Allegretto* soon slows down, drifts to a brief pause and the music flows into the *Lento*, where self-restraint is again the talisman. With the exception of six bars the entire movement is written in two or three parts only. The theme has a quiet and reflective beauty, little wonder that the composer often referred to it as his favourite quartet. It is accompanied by a semiquaver figure that recalls Pimen's writing music in Act I of *Boris Godunov* or maybe even *Der Einsame*

in Herbst from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. After an eternity of only three and a half minutes the Finale comes barging in and after initial hesitation embarks on a terrifyingly wild fugue. Brevity is again the password and suddenly it is over to be replaced by a very strange waltz-like Allegretto, whose melody is a transformation of the fugue subject but whose mood is nearer to the slow movement with exchanges between individual instruments. The pizzicato conversation from the first movement is recalled and suddenly it is all over. *Francis Humphrys*

Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

Quartet No 2 in A minor Op.51/2 [1873]

I have often reflected on the subject of what happiness is for humanity. Well, today in listening to your music, that was happiness. Theodor Billroth, dedicatee of this Quartet, to Brahms in 1890. It was Billroth who observed to the dedicatee of the Third Quartet; *I'm afraid these dedications will keep our names known longer than our best work.*

The two Opus 51 quartets were composed on the brink of Brahms' sustained attack on the symphony. Their publication represented a pivotal moment in his development as a composer. He often claimed that he had written as many as twenty quartets before 1873, all of which he destroyed. Only three quartets composed by Brahms survive, whereas Haydn published sixty-eight, Mozart twenty-three and Beethoven sixteen. The spectre of the past, in particular Beethoven, haunted Brahms until he finally overcame his intense self-criticism with these quartets and the First Symphony three years later.

Brahms was not only a composer but also a dedicated music scholar at the forefront of the musicological developments of his day. He had a vast music library and owned such treasures as the autograph of Mozart's G minor Symphony K.550, Haydn's opus 20 string quartets, a Beethoven sketch book including the sketches of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, songs and piano pieces by Schubert and Schumann's D minor Symphony. He was close friends with the leading musicological scholar of the day, Gustav Nottebohm, who pioneered the study of Beethoven's sketchbooks. Inevitably this acute awareness of the shadow cast by history exacerbated Brahms' natural self-consciousness, thus the terrible rate of attrition on his first attempts to write string quartets.

However in the superb A minor Quartet Brahms manages to leaven this deadly serious business of confronting history with his innate and irresistible lyricism. The first movement contrasts these conflicting states of mind in the two subjects, the close-woven texture of the motto-like opening figure followed by the suavely Viennese *grazioso* second subject. The substantial exposition, which is repeated in classical fashion, has a wealth of ideas that is perhaps more Schubert than Beethoven, though the development has a Beethoven-like grittiness about it. The Andante moderato moves to the major key with an intricate and sophisticated theme of dark beauty, whose smallest phrases mirror and dovetail into each other. The central section is a brief passionate duet for violin and cello set against dramatic tremolandi. The main theme eventually returns in F major and has to be eased back to A major by the cello before a peaceful coda. The *Quasi Minuetto* is an incorporeal dance, seemingly removed from all physical concerns, which alternates with an all-too-physical Allegretto, a distant, contrapuntal variation of itself. The Finale opens in a burst of energy. It retains the 3/4 time of the minuet but sets out as a Hungarian dance, doubtless in honour of his violinist friend Joachim, whose quartet premiered the work. The virtuoso main theme keeps returning as in a rondo but it is also subjected to remarkable developments through a dazzling array of cross-rhythms. The coda brings the work to a brilliant conclusion. *Francis Humphrys*

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