

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*

**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*



## 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](http://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 Columbani, a piano duet for the Dublin International Chamber Music Festival, and a solo cello suite supported by the Arts Council of Ireland. [ailbhemcdonagh.com](http://ailbhemcdonagh.com)

## 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](http://www.nsqf.ie)



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*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 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.

**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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