

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION - SPRING SEASON 2023

# SOLAS QUARTET

*Katherine Hunka and Marja Gaynor, violins - Cian Ó Dúill, viola - Aoife Nic Athlaoich, cello*

**BALLINA** - Wednesday 8th March at 8pm - Ballina Arts Centre

**TRALEE** - Thursday 9th March at 7pm - Kerry School of Music

**WATERFORD** - Friday 10th March at 7.30pm - The Large Room, Waterford City Hall - *presented by Waterford Music*

**CORK** - Saturday 11th March at 1pm - Triskel Christchurch

**DUBLIN** - Sunday 12th March at 12pm - Hugh Lane Gallery

**Rohan Harron**

*Psychotia* [2020]

**Henry Purcell** [1659-1695]

**Two Fantasies Z.737 and Z.738** [1680]

**Jessie Montgomery** [1981]

*Strum* [2006 rev. 2012]

**Antonín Dvořák** [1841-1904]

**String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat major, Op. 105** [1895]

1. *Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro appassionato*
2. *Molto vivace*
3. *Lento e molto cantabile*
4. *Allegro non tanto*



## THE SOLAS QUARTET

Born in London, **Katherine Hunka** has been the leader of the Irish Chamber Orchestra since 2002 and regularly directs from the leader's chair. She has toured extensively with the orchestra as soloist and director and in 2020 her solo album with the ICO of Piazzolla and Schubert received glowing reviews. As a guest leader she has visited the Manchester Camerata, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Katherine plays a lot of chamber music and is Artistic Director of the Killaloe Music Festival which sees international artists gather in her home village each June. Her group "The Far Flung Trio" with accordionist Dermot Dunne and bassist Malachy Robinson play across Ireland and the UK, music from Bach to Klezmer. In January she will tour Ireland with duo partner pianist Sophia Rahman. She is a Lecturer at the MTU Cork School of Music and Artistic Director of ConCorda, a course for young chamber musicians.

Originally from Finland, **Marja Gaynor** is a Cork-based violinist and viola player. She specialises in Baroque music and is a member of Irish Baroque Orchestra and Camerata Kilkenny, recording and touring with both groups regularly. She has also performed with Irish Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Marsyas, Dunedin Consort, London Handel Players, King's Consort and Helsinki Baroque Orchestra, and plays contemporary music with Dublin Sound Lab. Marja is known as a versatile musician at home in many different styles, a fluent improviser, as well as arranger and curator. Her string arranging credits include Oscar-winning song "Falling Slowly" from the movie Once, and Marja is also a long time member of the cult band Interference. Upcoming projects include chamber music tours with the Vanbrugh and performing and arranging as a trio with uilleann piper David Power and flamenco guitarist John Walsh. She teaches violin and chamber music in MTU Cork School of Music

Cork born viola player **Cian Ó Dúill** has performed with the Vanbrugh, Carducci and Calino String Quartets, the Fidelio Trio, the Avalon Ensemble, Chroma and the Crash Ensemble. He has played in chamber music recitals with Anthony Marwood, Finghin Collins, Jorg Widmann, Hugh Tinney, Natalie Clein, Howard Shelley, Kirill Troussov, and Patricia Rozario as well as appearing at West Cork, Killaloe, Ortús, Sligo Spring, Kilkenny Arts, Cheltenham, Warwick Arts, Chichester, Aldeburgh, Wye Valley and Kings Lynn Chamber Music Festivals. Cian is a member of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, was co-principal viola of the London Mozart Players and works regularly with the London Symphony Orchestra, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the Britten Sinfonia. Cian teaches viola at both the CIT Cork School of Music and the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

**Aoife Nic Athlaoich** began her cello studies in the RIAM with Olwen Lewis and later with Nora Gilleece. In 2001 she moved to London to study with Prof. David Strange at RAM and completed her studies under Prof Melissa Phelps at the RCM, London where she graduated with a 1st class Hons degree and was awarded the Stanley Picker Scholarship for her Post Graduate Studies. She was invited to take masterclasses with such eminent cellists as Natalia Gutman, Ralph Kirshbaum, Bernard Greenhouse, Johannes Goritzki and Frans Helmerson. In 2014 Aoife joined the Irish Chamber Orchestra, with whom she has toured extensively both in Europe and America. Within the ICO she has performed as soloist and chamber musician. She is widely in demand as a baroque cellist and performs regularly with the Irish Baroque Orchestra, Camerata Kilkenny and Sir. John Elliot Gardiner's acclaimed Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique. She has given solo recitals at East Cork, Galway and Sligo early music festivals.

Aoife has recorded with the ICO on the Ordeo label and broadcast live from Carnegie Hall, BBC Proms and Wigmore Hall. She currently teaches cello at RIAM, CIT Cork School of music and University of Limerick and specializes in baroque cello and chamber music.

## PROGRAMME NOTES

### **Rohan Harron**

#### **Psychotia [2020]**

Psychotia was first written for a project led by the Ligeti Quartet and the first version of the piece was recorded by them during the March 2020 Lockdown. However, it has continued to develop since then. The piece stemmed from the very first idea that is heard, the tritone quavers in the cello. I was fascinated by how tritones and

diminished 7th chords could be used to imply a range of different harmonies and have explored that throughout the piece. The piece has a tense and atmospheric opening; as I was writing I imagined an intensity across the room as the first eight tritones are played; the audience on the edge of their seats. The cello part is the heartbeat of this piece and I have played around a lot with how the expectation of how the listener begins to hear the continuity of the heartbeat beneath the other parts. I wanted the whole piece to sound alive, as if it was a wild beast and you were trying to predict its next move, you cannot guess what will come next in the piece. **Rohan Harron**

**Henry Purcell** [1659-1695]

**Two Fantasies Z.737 and Z.738** [1680]

Most of Purcell's sixteen remarkable *Fantasies* date from the summer of 1680, when he was just 20 years of age. A certain amount of mystery is attached to the pieces: they exist only as a manuscript score – it would appear that Purcell didn't intend to publish them, and indeed they did not appear in print until the 20th century. In addition, there are no instruments specified, although the style is that of a viol consort, a form that had gone out of fashion some decades before, with the advent of the virtuoso violin works of the Italian School, and of the Trio Sonata. The *Fantasies* may have been intended for his own private use – for playing with friends for pleasure, as was the norm with viol consort repertoire (it was a form most often performed by amateur music-lovers).

As the name suggests, "Fantasia" as a genre suggests a freedom of form. A polyphonic style popular all over Europe from about 1530, the Fantasia, like the viol consort, would have been considered about thirty years out of date when Purcell wrote his dense little masterpieces. And masterpieces they are, in spite of, or perhaps because of their old-fashioned quality. For such musical miniatures, there's a lot going on: not just the technical matters of incredibly skilful counterpoint, and often astonishingly *out-there* harmonies, but also, somehow, the atmosphere of a swansong, that of a genre and style, perhaps even the spirit, of a bygone era.

Whatever their attraction, there have been numerous recordings of the *Fantasies* since their discovery, and together with his *Trio Sonatas* they are now considered a central part of Purcell's chamber music output. **Marja Gaynor**

**Jessie Montgomery** [1981]

**Strum** [2006 rev. 2012]

*Strum* is the culminating result of several versions of a string quintet I wrote in 2006. It was originally written for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, then arranged for string quartet in 2008 with several small revisions. In 2012, the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within *Strum* I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming pizzicato serves as a texture motive and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration. **Jessie Montgomery**

**Antonín Dvořák** [1841-1904]

**String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat major, Op. 105** [1895]

Most chamber music lovers know Dvořák's *American Quartet* (No. 12) but are less aware that it is only one of five superb works completing a total of fourteen many regard as the finest cycle of 19th century string quartets after Schubert. Like Schubert, whom he greatly admired, Dvořák had an instinctive sense of chamber music and a natural gift for melody. Dvořák composed his last two string quartets together, one "inside" the other. He began the *String Quartet in A-flat major, Op. 105* in New York just before returning to Prague from his three-year stint as director of the National Conservatory of Music from 1892 to 1895. After completing only a portion of the first movement, Dvořák traveled home and began afresh with a new string quartet, Op. 106. Only after finishing this

"next" quartet, did he resume Op. 105, completing both in 1895. Despite its lower opus number, Op. 105 became Dvořák's fourteenth and final string quartet, in fact, his last piece of instrumental chamber music in a vast oeuvre of more than thirty-one outstanding works. Though sometimes characterized as "less ambitious" than its companion, Op. 105 is a masterwork of superb construction and undeniable inspiration that, with Op. 106, is considered to reflect Dvořák's joyous homecoming. Characteristic of Dvořák, the music works so well "on the surface" that one may not immediately notice the ingenuity of detail including the relationships that make it this highly integrated work of art.

The quartet opens with a brooding adagio introduction, a ponderous contrapuntal labor portending a probing journey. But, after an impressive intensification, the tense motif explodes into the bright theme of an exuberant allegro. Like many great quartets that start with such a feint, the introduction is not merely a fleeting preface easily forgotten; its mood and musical substance return several times in different guises, an alter-ego that sharpens the main identity of the music like a shadow on a sunny day. Dvořák's main theme (of only four bars) contains three key motifs from which he derives most of the sonata's material. In terms of motif development, he learned well from his classical predecessors including an organic thematic transformation related to Brahms, another important influence on Dvořák. There are two additional themes, the last frequently described as a "hunting call." Without repeating, the exposition launches into a wildly dramatic development. The movement concludes with a new synthetic theme cleverly devised through a call and response of motifs from the first two themes.

Dvořák had a special flair for the scherzo. It is not only that he had a rich stock of lively folk dances to draw from. His melodic gift coupled with his imagination for sonorous textures enabled Dvořák to create brilliant contrasts between scherzo and trio while, at the same time, linking them through shared but ingeniously transformed music and joining the sectional design with fluid transitions. The spicy F minor *molto vivace* is a great example. The vivacious dance with pronounced syncopation and cross rhythms has been related to the Czech stomping dance called the *furiant*, a folk element Dvořák used many times. The first reprise of the scherzo begins with a leaping melody and ends with a heavy falling four-bar tag in thick unison with a strong Slavic flavor. The second reprise joins the four-bar tag (now as main melody) with the leaping dance as counterpoint. The trio alights with a magical sweetness, the new key of A-flat major and an apparently fresh theme that turns out to be a rising inversion of the four-bar tag, closely related yet cleverly transformed. The trio expands, as, slowly, the dotted rhythms of the scherzo slowly creep back in and, without showing a seam, blends right back into the *da capo* scherzo.

Dvořák's slow movement is a beautiful song based on a theme that is closely related to the main theme from the quartet's moody introduction. Most noteworthy is the rich interplay between violins that creates a fresh variation of the theme with each restatement. The form follows a characteristic slow-movement three-part design with its contrasting central section, in this case, restless with agitated pulsations and sighing chromatic lines that shift throughout the voices like a ghost. The violin duo returns with lively, loquacious play made especially buoyant by soft pizzicato in the lower strings. A souvenir of the three-part journey lingers in a brief recall of the darker interlude, the echo of memory in the penultimate bars before the violins softly disappear aloft.

Dvořák finishes his very last chamber work with the longest movement of the four, an exuberant, rhapsodic allegro that begins with nearly cryptic suspense and ends with high-powered revelry of an almost orchestral bigness. The opening appears to be yet another reference to the suspenseful motif from the beginning of the quartet but is soon absorbed into lively dance with hints of polka. Throughout the finale there is play, humor, a variety of textural colors, and a characteristic wealth of lyrical melody that one swears one has heard before. This immediate appeal with its warmth of familiarity is perhaps Dvořák's great calling card; it can be recognized even in his early works. But it is worth reiterating that nearly all his music rests on impeccable craftsmanship with details to entertain the mind as well as charm the heart. © Kai Christiansen / [www.earsense.org](http://www.earsense.org)

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