

Edinburgh Quartet

Emily Dellit & Gordon Bragg, violins
Morag Robertson, viola – Mark Bailey, cello

King's College Chapel, University of Aberdeen

Thursday 27th October 2016, 7.30pm

Programme

Edward Harper	<i>Three Folk Settings for String Quartet</i>
Alasdair Nicolson	<i>String Quartet No.3 (Slanting Rain)</i>
John de Simone	<i>Intimacy</i>
James MacMillan	<i>Memento</i>

Programme notes

Edward Harper *Three Folk Settings for String Quartet*

Each of Edward Harper's Three Folk Settings places a familiar tune - one English, one Welsh, one Scottish - in the context of music for string quartet which enhances or in some way amplifies the folk-tune's expressive content. "The Lowlands of Holland" is based on a sad ballad sung by a girl who is disowned by her family for marrying a sailor. The sailor drowns at sea, and she is left alone. The rocking figuration of the opening suggests both the movement of waves and the girl's love. The tune, when it arrives, is heard in a condensed form in the middle of the texture, and repeated in stark block chords against which a chromatic rising line in viola and cello represents the girl's anguish.

The second piece, "The Ash Grove", is in a sense two settings in one. The fragmented textures of the opening gradually coalesce to introduce a falling pentatonic motif which sounds as if it could be the incipit of a folk-tune. But in fact this music is an instrumental version of Harper's setting of a poem by Edward Thomas, from his song-cycle *Lights Out* (1993) for soprano, recorder, cello and harpsichord. The folk melody of the same name arrives later, introduced as though in response to the words of the poem ('...I heard a girl

sing / The song of the Ash Grove soft as love uncrossed'). In the quartet version, of course, we do not hear the works sung, but the sense remains of the folk-song quotation as separate, set apart from the prevailing texture in cello harmonics and muted high violin and viola. Ghostly transcription of what was already a ghostly moment in the song, this music is twice haunted. 'Mairi's Wedding' is the brief, rousing conclusion to the set: 'Step it gaily, off we go / Heel for heel and toe for toe'.

John Fallas

Alasdair Nicolson *String Quartet No.3 (Slanting Rain)*

1. *a false moon shines*
2. *the shadow ends without having been*
3. *waving trees, rising sea, eerie stillness*
4. *impossibly distant tree-lined paths*
5. *I come to the window to see who's singing*
6. *into an abyss made of time*

Like my previous quartet, some of the inspiration for this work came from a favourite writer's poetry, namely the Portuguese author Ferdinand Pessoa; the title of the quartet is also the title of a collection of Pessoa's poetry. The epigrammatic titles that appear for each short movement are lines from within this writer's poetry and, though not intended to be programmatic, are evocations of mood and hints of atmospheres without a particular narrative thread.

In constructing this quartet I was drawn to another source common to my music, that of the Gaelic song tradition and in particular here the old song *O, 's tu, 's gura tu th'air m'aire* (*Oh, it's you who are on my mind*) - a song of loss whose sentiments are close to those of the Pessoa. Much of the musical material for the work is taken from this Gaelic melody and on a few occasions it comes to the surface with its rising upturned triadic shape.

The quartet is dedicated to the memory of my mother who passed away in late 2014 and who was no stranger to slanting rain.

Alasdair Nicolson

John de Simone *Intimacy*

In 2009 I was very honoured to be the recipient of the McEwen bequest from the University of Glasgow to write this piece for the Edinburgh Quartet. The university holds a special place for me; my late uncles Iain and Neil studied there and my grandfather, John MacCormick was Lord Rector from 1950-53.

I have fond memories from my childhood home of an engraving of the university tower hanging in our living room, next to a picture of my granddad in his grand university regalia.

The most appealing (and daunting) aspect of writing for a string quartet, is the opportunity to have a work performed by a group of players who have been working together closely over perhaps several years, with an ensemble that is so finely balanced it requires a special intimacy of sound and mind.

Tonight's piece explores the relationships between the instruments, the strength and fragility of the quartet, with a piece that evolves through several permutations of solos, duets, tutti, rhythmic unisons and instabilities. It is also imbued with a sense of wistful nostalgia that I associate with the university and the memories it invokes of my childhood home.

John de Simone

James MacMillan *Memento*

A brief movement for string quartet, *Memento* was written in memory of a friend, David Huntley, the representative of Boosey & Hawkes in the USA, who died in 1994. It was premiered at his memorial concert in New York by the Kronos Quartet. The music is slow, delicate and tentative and is based on the modality of Gaelic lament music and the Gaelic heterophony of psalm-singing in the Hebrides.

James MacMillan

Biography

The **Edinburgh Quartet** has long been celebrated as one of Britain's foremost chamber ensembles, having appeared regularly at prestigious venues across the UK and toured extensively across Europe, the Far and Middle East, and North and South America.

In recent years Creative Scotland funding has enabled the Edinburgh Quartet to revitalise the chamber music scene in Scotland with new concert formats, imaginative programmes, multimedia, opportunities for young people and innovative outreach activities.

The Quartet has always been a champion of new music and has worked with many important and prolific composers including its patron, Sir James MacMillan, CBE.

In addition to giving around fifty concerts per year the Edinburgh Quartet is frequently featured in radio broadcasts on the BBC and other stations and has an extensive discography.

The Edinburgh Quartet is committed to nurturing talent and the players fulfil an education programme at four Scottish universities where they work with composition students, instrumentalists and student teachers. The Quartet's education and outreach programme also encompasses coaching for the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland, schools workshops and tutoring amateur musicians on annual residential courses.

www.edinburghquartet.com

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