
FLINDERS QUARTET

NATSUKO YOSHIMOTO *guest violin*

WILMA SMITH *violin*

HELEN IRELAND *viola*

ZOE KNIGHTON *cello*

MID-WINTER AT MONTSALVAT

Sunday 23 July 2023

Montsalvat Upper Gallery

with Piccolo String Quartet

Flinders Quartet acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work, live and learn, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

ELIZABETH MACONCHY 1907-1994

String Quartet No. 5 (composed 1948)

I. Molto lento - Allegro molto

II. Presto

III. Lento espressivo

IV. Allegro

Elizabeth Maconchy (known affectionately as Betty) was born in 1907 and is considered one of Great Britain and Ireland's greatest composers of the twentieth century. Growing up in a family that was not focussed on the arts in any way, it is extraordinary that she declared her intention to become a composer in her mid-teens, even before hearing a symphony orchestra for the first time. After being accepted into the Royal College of Music, she studied with Ralph Vaughan Williams who was incredibly supportive; but the head of the school refused to award her the prestigious Mendelssohn scholarship saying, according to the *Times* of London, "If we give you the scholarship you will only get married and never write another note." She went on to have children *and* write many more notes, and her daughter, Nicola LeFanu, is a very successful composer herself.

Maconchy owes a great deal of her unique musical voice to her period of study in Prague, where Vaughan Williams advised her to extend her musical knowledge rather than delve into the twelve-tone system of composition sweeping Austria and other parts of Europe at the time. She was introduced to Bartok and Berg, and it is this influence that we hear in her thirteen string quartets.

Each of the thirteen quartets is accessible, containing more than compositional cleverness and intellect. Indeed, one only needs to scrape the surface of her body of work to realise she explores the whole range of the human experience: from her beautifully crafted and very cheeky opera "The Sofa", to her ballets and symphonic works. Maconchy's thirteen quartets were written over a span of fifty years, with the first composed in 1932 and the thirteenth completed in 1984 as the set piece for the 1985 Portsmouth International String Quartet Competition (in which our very own Wilma Smith competed, placing third with her then quartet, the Lydian Quartet).

Maconchy's fifth quartet won the Edwin Evans Memorial prize of £25 in 1948, and in 1955, a program on the BBC was dedicated to her six quartets to date, testament to their cultural importance of the time. Accolades continued throughout her lifetime with her being joint recipient of the Radcliffe Music Award in 1969 for her ninth string quartet; one of the other recipients was Peter Sculthorpe for one of his string quartets. Endorsed as a composer of the highest stature with prizes, commissions and numerous performances, her career was certainly successful and yet she was still financially dependent on her husband. She did not work as a performer or teacher, instead choosing to focus solely on her compositional output.

Premiered by the Hurwitz Quartet in 1949, the fifth string quartet begins with an interval of a semi-tone as the starting point of a long lyrical line in the cello, and it is this interval that is exploited throughout the entire piece. You will hear each instrument play the opening theme in turn, with a second theme introduced as a counter melody before the tempo is changed abruptly to Allegro molto and a rollicking dance featuring an interplay between 3/4 and 6/8. After the viola brings us back to the Lento material, we are immediately back in Allegro molto mode and if you listen closely, you will hear the opening theme restated in the faster tempo, again in a canon. The movement ends in a satisfying C major.

The second movement is a playful scherzando, stepping up by a semitone to C# from the previous C major. There are so many ways of exploring the interval of a semitone but perhaps one of the most inventive is the opening of the third movement. By having all the instruments fall by a major seventh (the inverse interval of a semitone) it gives the illusion of an expansive breadth, rather than a simple shift between G flat major and G major. It is in this movement that we hear Maconchy's obvious affinity with vocal music, having the instruments play in a *parlando* (speaking) style, conversing with great interest with one another. The sinister insistence of the cello pizzicatos in the middle of this movement do remind us of the intensity of WWII, ever fresh in her mind.

These words by Maconchy are very apt in describing the final movement: "I use a counterpoint of rhythms as well as melodic lines – so you may have two or more independent rhythms working together simultaneously. And the object of all this is to achieve a more concentrated expression of the emotion implicit in the musical ideas themselves." You will hear incredible interplay alongside a delightfully playful pizzicato section with canons that are so fast they're easy to miss, but the overall effect is a whirlwind rich with counterpoint before we are brought very firmly back to C major.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

String Quartet No. 7 in F major, Op. 59, No. 1 (composed 1806)

I. Allegro

II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando

III. Adagio molto e mesto – attacca

IV. "Thème Russe": Allegro

There are many connections between Maconchy's fifth quartet and Beethoven's seventh. Both written on the heels of war and upheaval at times when the creation of music can make sense of the chaos; not to mention the similarities between the two composers forging their own paths and uncompromising in their artistic ideals. Both were fascinated with how much can be developed from a small idea, both have an innate sense of structure, and both began their works on the dominant (fifth scale degree) of the home key. The last point may be coincidence rather than design, but it does well in the connection of these two works.

Written in 1806, at the age of 36 in a year that his brother married and his infamous nephew was born, as well as a year that Napoleon was wreaking havoc in Europe, the three Razumovsky Quartets (Beethoven's Op. 59 set) were met with a great deal of irritation. Czerny, one of Beethoven's most famous pupils, told of how at the first play through, the players simply laughed and thought Beethoven was making a huge joke on them. When the Italian musician, Felix Radicati (to whom Beethoven sent the manuscript for fingerings) asked Beethoven if he actually considered these works to be music, Beethoven gave the now infamous reply, "Oh, they are not for you but for a later age."

A Haydn enthusiast, Razumovsky played second violin in various quartets. The Count seems to have been a real forward-thinking man, and these works did not frighten or disappoint him. He knew Beethoven was a genius and asked for lessons to understand quartet composition. Beethoven refused. Perhaps genius defies explanation.

This quartet, the first in the set of three, is the most monumental and is often likened to Beethoven's third symphony, 'Eroica', in scale. The first movement is in clear sonata form, we hear two gorgeous melodies (first introduced by the cello) rollick along, develop and return. Rather than repeat the exposition, Beethoven gives a false repeat: you will be expecting the opening tune, but at the last minute, Beethoven turns a corner and whisks us away straight to the development. The inner motor in this movement gives a delightful energy and a positivity. The second movement begins with the cello in a snare drum type motif calling the rest of the quartet to dance. Apparently, the celebrated cellist Bernard Romberg stomped his foot on the manuscript in disgust because his "tune" only had one note! How dare he be given a tune you could simply tap out on a pencil - a cellist of his stature! Incidentally, Romberg declined the offer of a concerto from Beethoven stating that he preferred to play his own compositions.

The slow movement - *mesto* ("mournful") in its label *Adagio molto e mesto* - is the longest and most complex slow movement that Beethoven had written since the slow movement of the 'Eroica'. After a violin cadenza which links the third and fourth movements, the cellist embarks on the 'Russian Theme'. In its 'Russian' version, this theme is in a minor key, is marked *Molto Andante*, and is a soldier's lament on his return from the wars. In the exuberant finale, Beethoven turns the theme on its head, placing it in a major key and with a great sense of joy so as to hardly resemble the original.

| INTERVAL |

FELIX MENDELSSOHN 1809-1847

String Octet in E-flat major, Op. 20 (composed 1825)

- I. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo
- IV. Presto

It is ironic that Elizabeth Maconchy never won the Royal College of Music's Mendelssohn prize as one gets the sense that

Mendelssohn would have appreciated her wit, intellect, and craft. Written at the tender age of 16, this octet was written for a family soiree at which Mendelssohn would have most likely been playing one of the violin parts. "He never touched a string instrument the whole year round," the composer Ferdinand Hiller once said, "but, when he wanted to play, as with most things in life, he could do it." The Mendelssohn family used to give musical performances on alternate Sunday mornings in their dining room, with a small orchestra and conducted by Felix from a very young age with a stool handy for him to stand on in case the players could not see him. He would often produce a new work for these house concerts, playing his own compositions or entrusting them to his beloved sister Fanny with his sister Rebecka singing and brother Paul playing the cello.

Ignaz Moscheles was invited to give the Mendelssohn siblings lessons in Berlin, and he wrote in his diary: "This is a family the likes of which I have never known. Felix, a boy of fifteen is a phenomenon. What are all prodigies compared with him? ... He is already a mature artist. His elder sister Fanny is also extraordinarily gifted." Shortly afterwards he wrote: "This afternoon... I gave Felix Mendelssohn his first lesson, without losing sight for a moment of the fact that I was sitting next to a master, not a pupil."

It is worth noting that neither Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart or indeed Brahms or Dvorak wrote a string octet, let alone one with such independence of parts. Later in his life Mendelssohn wrote that this octet was, "my favorite of all my compositions" and added, "I had a most wonderful time in the writing of it!" His advice to performers was that they should play in what he termed "symphonic orchestral style," by which he seemed to mean with close attention to the dynamic markings, so as to allow the various layers in the music to remain clear.

Mendelssohn went on to champion the works of J.S.Bach and became infatuated with Beethoven's string quartets. He died at a tragically young age after the death of his beloved sister, Fanny.

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PICCOLO STRING QUARTET

Established in 2019, the Piccolo Quartet performed for the Galston Concert, Bendigo Chamber Music Festival and ANAM in 2022.

Under the tutelage of Fox Chan, the group has been given opportunity to work with amazing musicians such as Wilma Smith, Amir Farid, David Elton, Sophie Rowell, Tim Young, David Thomas, David Dalseno and Susan Blake.

All members are students from the Rising Stars Program of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Not only are the members devoted chamber musicians but also accomplished soloists, scholarship recipients, prize winners of local & international competitions.

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