

The University of Chicago Presents | Logan Center

November 10, 2013, 3:00 pm

SPEKTRAL QUARTET

Aurelien Fort Pederzoli, violin
Austin Wulliman, violin
Doyle Armbrust, viola
Russell Rolén, cello

BRITTEN Three Divertimenti (1933)
 March
 Waltz
 Burlesque

THOMAS ADÈS String Quartet No. 12, “*Arcadiana*” (1994)
 Venezia notturna
 Das klinget so herrlich, das klinget so schon
 Auf dem Wasser zu singen
 Et... (tango mortale)
 L’Embarquement
 O Albion
 Lethe

Intermission

BRITTEN Alla Marcia

FERNEYHOUGH Adagissimo

BARTÓK Quartet No. 4
 Allegro
 Prestissimo, con sordino
 Non troppo lento
 Allegretto pizzicato
 Allegro molto

Presented by the UChicago Department of Music

Keep Calm and Albion

What is this fascination with Wunderkind in classical music? It's perverse. Seriously. We're one, lateral step away from Toddlers in Tiaras with this insatiable appetite for newborns playing Mendelssohn Concerto.

Righteous indignation aside, it is nearly impossible to reflect on the preternatural talents

of Benjamin Britten and Thomas Adès without considering the expedient ascendance of each. Britten knocks out an immersive, psychedelic nightmare-scape in his *Phantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings, Op. 2* at age nineteen that would make William S. Burroughs blush. Adès comes out swinging with a riveting, concert-hall-ready first opus, *Five Eliot Landscapes*, at eighteen, and becomes the youngest-ever Grawemeyer Award (aka \$200,000) winner for his kaleidoscopic symphony, *Asyla*, at twenty-six.

You, dear listener, are not here to compare the pubescent triumphs of British luminaries to your own teenage exploits decapitating mailboxes from the open window of a Corolla, though. You are here to witness four singular voices of the art music canon, and you will not be left wanting.

Resurrected from a work the composer abandoned in 1933, titled *Alla Quartetto Serioso*, Britten's *Three Divertimenti for String Quartet (1936)* is effusive in its charm. The "March" which opens the proceedings plays like the drill music for the world's most festive, and least intimidating, army. The highlighted glissandi here place the work solidly in the modern era and are the result of Britten's re-tinkering of the original. The pizzicato chords and primary theme that usher in the "Waltz" movement could be lifted, verbatim, and inserted into a film score or folk-pop ballad in 2013 and sound equally enchanting and fresh. Finally, "Burlesque" bounds breathlessly out of the silence, racing forward before caroming tiny, virtuosic gestures between each of the four voices. The exuberance is inescapable.

Britten considered his *Alla Marcia (1933)* to be a possible first movement for the discarded *Alla Quartetto Serioso*. Similarities to the *Divertimenti* abound, especially in the harmonic language and compositional verve. Largely tonal chord progressions are offset by a single, dissonant note in the violin melody, simultaneously landing boisterously – and elegantly – in this buoyant number.

Adès's *Arcadiana* contains such a plethora of self-referential material that it is not uncommon for a player to discover brilliant new bits of compositional minutiae with each performance. The curtains draw back on a bleary night in Venice (the city in which Britten penned his third quartet), and like all the odd-numbered movements of the work, the setting is an aquatic one. Through the wobbling waltz of the viola line and smeared, lyric duet of the violins, a grappa-induced haze is almost within olfactory reach. Each of the seven movements of this quartet explores the Greek construct of Arcadia, or paradise: imagined, vanishing or vanished. A snippet of an unmistakable Mozart aria signals mystical happiness in the second movement while water-inspired, Schubertian lieder showers the third. A brutal "tango mortale" comprising the fourth movement drums up visions of a lethal duet in which only one dancer will survive before Adès moves to the idyllic shores of the fifth movement, "L'Embarquement," where an unwitting boating party awaits its ill-fated journey to Cythera.

Movement six, "O Albion," finds Adès at his most tonal, and so it will come as no surprise that the "Nimrod" movement of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* is the point of departure for this heart-rending ode to Britain. The timbral color palette of *Arcadiana* is vast despite the composer's conservative use of extended techniques throughout. Instead

Adès employs the familiar, such as pizzicato glissandi, fortiss-iss-issimo four-note chord whips and barely audible flautando whispers to conjure these images of a fleeting utopia. In the final movement, "Lethe," a sublime cello solo floats above twittering harmonics in the lower three voices, disappearing back into the mist from which *Arcadiana* emerged.

The scores may have been inked while in their forties, but Brian Ferneyhough and Béla Bartók aren't lacking any of the *wunder* part of the equation. *Adagissimo* was written for new-music-heavyweights the Arditti Quartet, and for the Ferneyhough newbie, this miniature is a perfect introduction. Viewing the score can be an eyebrow-raising experience, with its labyrinthine notation and baffling rhythms. The listening experience is something else altogether as the viola and cello create a languid, even romantic duet beneath ecstatic violin swaggers and bursts.

Bartók's 4th shares a penchant for symmetry with *Arcadiana* in its structural arc of fast-scherzo-slow-scherzo-fast. A bold, sonically geometric Allegro launches the piece, followed by a fleeting, hushed Prestissimo before giving way to the emotional crux of the score, the Lento. Chords emerge glacially beneath a rapturous solo cello. Amidst the fast-paced movement that bookend it, the experience is one of being suspended, wordlessly, just above the tree line. An exclusively pizzicato, incisive fourth movement returns the action to the present and aims it toward the final, brutal Allegro molto. It is here that Bartók makes his only misstep. The movement would have been more appropriately titled: *Pillaging Music*.

- Doyle Armbrust