CELEBRATING CANADIAN COMPOSERS

Imant Raminsh Celebration

Monday • September 17, 2018 • 7:00pm
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★

Program Editor • Stefan Hintersteiner
Program Designer • Tom Hudock
Paper generously provided by C-PAC
The Murray Adaskin Piano is maintained by Scott Harker of Harker Piano Services
I will never forget the first time I heard the music of Imant Raminsh. It was August 10, 2008, soon after I moved back to Vancouver from New York. That day, the Borealis String Quartet performed Imant’s second string quartet and it absolutely mesmerized me.

There is a luminous and inspirational quality to Imant’s music. It is profound — there is no other word to describe it. His music touches something lasting and deep and real inside us. This is as true of his choral work as the three string quartets we will hear tonight.

Best known for his choral compositions, Imant studied with the great Elmer Iseler and went on to win the prize for Outstanding Choral Work at the Canadian National Choral Awards not once, but twice. What many don’t realize, though, is that Imant began his musical life first as a violinist.

To play the violin is inevitably to find oneself simultaneously aspiring to and trembling before the altar of the great quartets. It is, after all, one of the great archetypes — some would argue, the great archetype — of the Classical tradition.

Lee Pilich writes: “Given just four parts to play with, a composer has enough lines to fashion a full argument, but none to spare for padding. Where the composer of symphonies commands the means for textural enrichment beyond the call of his harmonic discourse, and where the concerto medium offers the further resource of personal characterization and drama in the individual-pitted-against-the-mass vein, the writer of string quartets must perforce concentrate on the bare bones of musical logic. Thus, in many ways the string quartet is pre-eminently the dialectical form of instrumental music, the one most naturally suited to the activity of logical disputation and philosophical enquiry.”

It’s also worth noting that composers writing for string quartet employ sixteen vibrating strings of varying lengths utilizing scientific principles first codified by Pythagoras more than 2200 years ago. Music for string quartet connects us back to our earliest understandings of what music (and harmony itself) is.

All of this history and complexity, enriched with folk melodies and expressed with sublime beauty, is encompassed in the works you will hear this evening. I hope you enjoy them as much as I enjoyed hearing Imant’s second quartet that very first time ten years ago.

Sean Bickerton, BC Director
Canadian Music Centre / Centre de musique canadienne
While I am probably best known as a composer of vocal and choral music, and, while it is true that singing is a large part of my cultural genetic birthright, it is also a fact that the instrument I have held longer in my hands than any other has been the violin. In my mind there has always been a strong and undeniable connection between the voice of the violin and that of the singer. So it is that I came to writing early on for strings, and more recently for string quartet, that perfect grouping that encompasses all the human voice ranges.

It has been noted that the writing of string quartets is something that many composers approach with some trepidation and not at all until their mature years. Is it because of the intensely personal and revealing nature of the genre? Is it because of fear of comparison with so many exalted predecessors? Whatever the reason, one can take solace in the fact that one is not required to recreate the quartets of Beethoven, Brahms, and Bartók. One needs only to put into one’s creation the best one has.
Program

**String Quartet #1**  
“A Falcon, a Storm, or a Great Song”  
*Introduction.* Andante  
I. Con brio  
II. Elegy  
III. Animato

**String Quartet #2**  
“The Waking”  
*Introduction.* “I wake to sleep and take my waking slow”  
I. “I hear my being dance from ear to ear…”  
II. “Of those so close beside me, which are you?”  
III. Andante

INTERMISSION

**FEATURED EMERGING COMPOSER**  
**The Engine Room**  
Composed by Thomas Beckman

**String Quartet #3**  
I. Recitative and Arioso  
II. Dance  
III. Legend  
IV. Recitative  
V. Celebration

*Performed by the Borealis String Quartet*
**String Quartet #1, “A Falcon, a Storm, or a Great Song”**

I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I will give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.  
I’ve been circling for thousands of years  
and still I don’t know: am I a falcon,  
a storm, or a great song?

— from R.M. Rilke, Stundenbuch

The subtitle of *String Quartet #1* comes from one of the poems of Rilke’s remarkable *Stundenbuch* (*Book of Hours*). It is intended as a tribute to the life of David Mardon, violist, musician, musical entrepreneur. David was the guiding spirit behind the first BC Interior String Festival which took place in Vernon in 2002, and attracted hundreds of string players of all ages from BC, Alberta, and northwestern USA. This string extravaganza was to have been the first of a series of annual such events, but before the second festival could begin, David was tragically shot and killed while trying to mediate a labour stand-off. The idea of a new string quartet was taken up by the Chamber Music Kelowna Society and commissioned for the Borealis Quartet who have championed it and performed it in various countries around the world.

The quartet begins with an introduction based upon a chant-like Himalayan folk tune, followed seamlessly by a vigorous first movement. The second moment, *Elegy*, features the viola as the leading voice. The third movement, *Animato*, is propelled by driving motoric irregular rhythms (11/16 alternating with 3/4) and, at the end, reintroduces a variant of the original introductory melody.

**String Quartet #2, “The Waking”**

**The Waking**

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?  
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?  
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do  
To you and me; so take the lively air,  
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?  
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
And learn by going where I have to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.  
What falls away is always. And is near.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

— Theodore Roethke
Commissioned for the Borealis String Quartet by friends of the late Dr. Sylvia Russell, this quartet was written in 2008 and dedicated to her memory. The work takes its inspiration and architectural form from the poem *The Waking* by Theodore Roethke, one of Dr. Russell's favourite poets, and each of the movements derives its subtitle from two lines in the poem.

The introduction initiates a repeated note figure that oscillates between chromatic semitones, a motive that is elemental to the entire quartet. The introduction grows in intensity before leading into the more lively allegretto first movement. The second movement is a love song based upon material from an earlier trio for violin, cello, and piano, *Earth Chants*. The final movement begins with a restatement of the introductory material before evolving into a folk-dance-like andante and with an energetic and jubilant conclusion.

**The Engine Room**

**By Featured Emerging Composer: Thomas Beckman**

Thomas Beckman's *The Engine Room* received its world premiere performances this past summer as part of the Jean Coulthard String Quartet Readings. This year, the Coulthard Readings included a special partnership with the Vancouver Maritime Museum, centered around the celebrated RCMP schooner, the St. Roch. Built in North Vancouver in 1928, the St. Roch was the first vessel to sail the Northwest Passage from West to East (1940–1942), and the first to completely circumnavigate North America.

*The Engine Room* is an abstract depiction of the Unified Diesel Engine that powered the St. Roch through the ice floes of the Northwest Passage, making it the first vessel in maritime history to complete this treacherous route from both directions. Although clumsy and problematic in design, with Captain Larsen describing the schooner as the “most uncomfortable ship he had ever been on,” the St. Roch was nonetheless able to accomplish a series of historical feats, all of which were much enabled by its use of the diesel engine. In order to simulate the sound and workings of an engine, *The Engine Room* uses various articulations, such as strumming, col legno, pizzicato, and even tapping with a spoon. Both violins are also placed directly opposite one another as a gesture of symmetry akin to the design of an engine, with the heavier counterparts, the viola and cello, kept in the middle of the quartet. In this way, the violins bounce and reflect musical passages off one another as if in mechanical concert.

**String Quartet #3**

The only one of the three quartets not based upon a poetic ‘programme’, *String Quartet #3* began life as a series of Dialogues for violin and viola, but took on texture and complexity in its present form. The work is a set of five contrasting movements.

Movement 1, *Recitative and Arioso* begins, like *String Quartet #1*, with a viola recitative, gradually expanded by the addition of answering voices, and elaboration of the material into an expanded arioso section. Movement 2 is a light joyful dance of a scherzo-like character. Movement 3, *Legend*, is a fairy-tale in song. Programmatic elements are present but unspecified. Movement 4 is a recitative with ponderous homophonic chordal sections alternating with somewhat nervous sixteenth-note passages. This leads into Movement 5, a joyful rhythmic *Celebration.*
Imant Raminsh Composer

Imant Raminsh was born in 1943 in Ventspils, Latvia, and arrived in Canada with his family in 1948. His musical studies were pursued at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, the University of Toronto, the Akademie “Mozarteum” in Salzburg, and the University of British Columbia.

Raminsh has written in most musical genres, including solo voice, chamber music, choral, symphonic, concerto, and opera. His works have been performed frequently on six continents in such renowned venues as Roy Thomson Hall (Toronto), the Orpheum (Vancouver), Carnegie Hall (New York), Tchaikovsky Hall (Moscow), Glinka Capella (St. Petersburg), Dom Cathedral (Riga), and the Forbidden City (Beijing). He is the founding conductor of the Prince George Symphony, the Youth Symphony of the Okanagan, NOVA Children’s Choir, and AURA Chamber Choir. His Carnegie Hall conducting debut took place in 2006. He has served on the juries of international choral competitions in Yeosu and Busan, South Korea.

Raminsh is an Associate Composer of the Canadian Music Centre, and a member of the Canadian League of Composers. His principal publishers are Boosey & Hawkes, Colla Voce Music, Alliance Music, Walton Music, and Plangere. For many summers, he was employed as a seasonal park naturalist / interpreter in various BC provincial parks, and his love of the natural world informs many of his compositions.

Imant Raminsh is married to poet and frequent artistic collaborator, Becky Strube, and they have one lovely, bright, talented daughter, Lisa Alexandra Soleil.

Thomas Beckman Composer

Composer and violist, Thomas Beckman writes and performs in collaboration with a number of organizations across Vancouver. As festival composer for the Artists for Conservation, in-house composer for the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, and creative director of production company Sons of Granville, Thomas has now expanded his musical operations to write and perform for the Macmillan Space Centre, the Vancouver Maritime Museum in a collaborative project with the Canadian Music Centre in BC, and the Prince George Symphony Orchestra with his upcoming multi-media performance of the St. Roch Suite. As an orchestral violist, Thomas serves as principal of the Postmodern Camerata and the Vancouver Pops Symphony Orchestra.
Borealis String Quartet

Patricia Shih and Yuel Yawney, violins
Nikita Pogrebnoy, viola
Sungyong Lim, cello

Praised for their “superb musicality and impressive technique,” the Borealis String Quartet is internationally renowned for fiery performances, their passionate style, and refined, musical interpretation. Founded at the turn of the millennium in Vancouver, Canada, the Borealis has toured extensively in North America, Europe, and Asia, performing to sold-out audiences in New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Rome, Shanghai, Taipei, Beijing, Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Vancouver. Strong champions of Canadian music, they regularly perform music of R. Murray Schafer, Omar Daniels, John Stetch, and Peter Tiefenbach, and have commissioned music from Bramwell Tovey, Imant Raminsh, Kelly-Marie Murphy, and John Oliver to name a few.

The Borealis is on faculty and acts as the Quartet in Residence at the Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) and at the Langley Community Music School (LCMS). For more information, visit www.borealisstringquartet.com.
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