

Douglas
LILBURN

String Quartet in E minor
Phantasy Quartet • Canzonettas
Duos for Two Violins • String Trio
New Zealand String Quartet



Douglas Lilburn (1915–2001)

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Lilburn's string chamber music adheres to the dictum he liked to quote from painter Toss Woollaston: 'International influences may give our work manner, but environment should give it character'. In each of these works there are signs of cunning adaptation, while hitting their own stride and taking their own road.

Douglas Lilburn grew up on 'Drysdale', a hill-country farm bordering the mountainous centre of New Zealand's North Island. He often described his boyhood home as 'paradise' and the source of his 'imaginative awareness of sounds'. Lilburn recalled as a small boy 'singing from high branches of trees a wordless song, intuitive, affirming'. While a student under the aegis of Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music in London, Lilburn wrote his first major orchestral works, including a cantata *Prodigal Country* (1939), which expressed national pride. His *Phantasy for String Quartet* was another product of his student years. Returning to Christchurch, Lilburn banded together with an innovative group of painters and poets who were to prove influential. The 1940s saw the composition of several important works, including an orchestral tone poem *A Song of Islands* [Naxos 8.557697], the *Chaconne* for piano, the *String Trio*, and the *String Quartet*. In 1947 Lilburn joined the staff at Victoria University College in Wellington and completed several works to high acclaim, including two symphonies [Naxos 8.555862], two piano sonatas, two song cycles, and the *Duos for Two Violins*. Lilburn composed *Symphony No. 3* (1961) [Naxos 8.555862], in response to a stimulating period of sabbatical leave and from that point until his retirement, chose to take on the new territory of electroacoustic composition. Lilburn's final years were spent quietly at home in Wellington, tending his garden and, until the onset of arthritis, playing his beloved piano. He received the Order of New Zealand in 1988.

Lilburn's *String Quartet in E minor*, completed in 1946 and first performed in 1950, is notable for its pliant lyric power. We need look no further than the opening pages to apprehend the spaciousness of the movement, where the upper strings seem to waft upwards from the cello theme in a gesture analogous to a hawk rising above the mountain

escarpment. The second theme extends the analogy with its sleight of wing pulsations giving the music an elegiac edge. What follows is a physical push downward, as if the hawk is swooping for its prey. But then, with an idea in minims (heard over fluttering rhythms) and repeated notes that formulates a bird's metallic cry, comes an expansive passage that glides as if on motionless wings. The second half of the movement intensifies these processes in a wonderful, supple, re-presentation. The upward waft of the opening material is less stable tonally and interrupted by a stormy outburst that catapults the first violin higher into the ether. The second idea is now compressed, so that the swooping gesture prematurely plunges like a beaked lance. The metallic bird cry ushers in the final paragraphs which, now much extended, serve to clear the emotional air and to rise infinitely, over a whispering viola melody, with slow and effortless beats. The second movement is a folk dance, moving animatedly over 3/8 and 12/8 patterns that betoken an occasion of joy. The finale signals the same upward waft as the first movement but is inflected with acerbic rhythmic punches that create as much tension as anticipation, as if to apprehend fleetingly a bleak balance against the emphasis on rhapsodic or vernal folk elements.

Duos for Two Violins were composed in 1954 and dedicated to Ruth Pearl and Jean McCartney, who gave the first public performance and broadcast. The *Duos* represent the 'modernist' style Lilburn found in the music of Bartók and Copland and developed in his song cycle *Sings Harry* for baritone and piano (1953), a setting of six poems from Denis Glover's sequence (1951). In these songs, Lilburn, relishing the dry enchantment of Harry's voice, invites us to perceive connections between the archetypal man alone and the austere wilderness setting. The *Duos* likewise convey the new sense of aesthetic expression breathing energy and clarity into Lilburn's music via striking harmonic and rhythmic inflections, spare contrapuntal lines and a freely treated modality. Furthermore, these pieces express what Copland was achieving in his 'Appalachian' music (Lilburn sent Copland the score of *Duos* and he quite liked it), and Bartók in his exploration of folk idioms. Lilburn's

preoccupation seems to be with the landscape of his youth and rural lore: *No. 2*, for example, is a rousing 'hoe-down', while *Nos. 3* and *5* seem to recall Harry's meditations looking into the still depths of a mountain tarn; *No. 4* evokes Bartók's gypsy music and *No. 6* suggests the presence of the river from Harry's boyhood farm.

Lilburn's *String Trio*, composed in 1945, was the first chamber work by a New Zealand composer to be published abroad (by Hinrichsen in London). Margaret Sicely (violin), Vera Robinson (viola) and Valmai Moffett (cello) gave the première of the trio in Christchurch, followed by a performance in Dunedin. Lilburn says that the first two movements reflect 'a phase of Schubert-worship that [the Hungarian pianist] Lili Kraus brought to Christchurch in the mid-1940s'. Schubert's voice can be heard in the *Quartettsatz*-like shiver of the opening bars, the bittersweet march of the second subject, and the passionate sensibilities of the central movement. Schubert's influence reveals itself in a number of Lilburn works at this time, for example in the 1949 *Sonata* that takes its cue from the *A minor Sonata D784*. Lilburn made a perceptive comment in 1946 when he spoke of the influence of composers like Schubert as 'a deliberate process of selection, of sorting out from the world's music those ways of expression that come closest to meeting one's own needs'. The tone of the finale is of a springing resilience.

The three canzonettas for violin and viola were composed as separate short works in 1942, 1943 and 1958. *Canzonetta No. 1* and *Canzonetta No. 2*, quasi-Elizabethan in tone, are the fruits of Lilburn's preoccupation with composing incidental music for Ngaio Marsh's productions

of Shakespeare's plays in Christchurch at this time. The lute-like *Canzonetta No. 1* originally underscored the Players' mime scene in Marsh's 1943 production of *Hamlet* (he later transcribed it for piano solo, tenor recorder and for string orchestra). *Canzonetta No. 3* has the atmosphere of a dream-like reflection and reminiscence.

Phantasy for String Quartet (1939) is a product of Lilburn's student years at the Royal College of Music. He composed it as an entry for the annual Cobbett Prize (which he won) that aspired to revive the Jacobean 'Fancy', 'Fancie', or 'Phantasy' by requiring competitors to write a single-movement rhapsodic work consisting of different sections varying in tempo and metre. Lilburn based his piece on the Jacobean ballad '*Westron Wynde*', which he inscribed on the front page of the manuscript:

Westron Wynde when wilt thou blow
The small rain down doth rain
Christ, that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again.

The pizzicatos of the Sibelian opening may well depict the falling rain and the first full entry might be the poet's taut cry to the Almighty; quicker tempi suggest breeziness. This is intensely lyrical rather than dramatic music, creating an expression of quiet sorrow. Students at the Royal College of Music gave the première of the *Phantasy Quartet* and this was followed by a performance in New Zealand. Since neglected, it warrants a timely revival.

Robert Hoskins

New Zealand String Quartet

Celebrating its 28th season in 2015, the New Zealand String Quartet has established an international reputation with a discography that includes all the quartets by Mendelssohn, Bartók and Berg, many New Zealand compositions, works by Ravel, Debussy, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Dvořák, Wolf, Székely, Takemitsu, Tan Dun, Zhou Long and, currently for Naxos, the complete Brahms *String Quartets* and *Quintets* as well as the *Clarinet Quintet*. Acclaimed débuts in London's Wigmore Hall and at the City of London Festival, in New York at the Frick Collection, and in Washington's Library of Congress Coolidge Auditorium have led to regular touring in Britain, Europe and North America. The ensemble has also toured in Mexico, Japan, Korea, and China, with regular visits to Australia. The Quartet has performed concertos with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and collaborated with many internationally renowned artists, including jazz performers Mike Nock, Jim Hall and Wayne Marshall, and traditional instrumentalists such as Turkey's Omar Farouk Tekbilek, New Zealand's Richard Nunns and Horomona Horo, and the Forbidden City Chamber Orchestra from China. The ensemble has been Quartet-in-Residence at the New Zealand School of Music at Victoria University since 1991, where all the members are Associate Professors. Each of the players has been awarded the MNZM honour for services to music in New Zealand.



From left to right:
Douglas Beilman,
Helene Pohl,
Rolf Gjelsten,
Gillian Ansell

Photo: David Hamilton

This recording of Douglas Lilburn's complete string chamber music celebrates the centenary of his birth, and is crowned by a world première recording of the *Phantasy Quartet* which won the Cobbett Prize at the Royal College of Music in 1939. On his return from studies in London to Christchurch in 1940 Lilburn embarked upon a prolific and varied period of creativity. This included the *String Quartet in E minor*, notable for its intense yet supple lyric power, the three *Canzonettas*, quasi-Elizabethan in tone as befits their tie to incidental music he wrote for Ngaio Marsh's productions of Shakespeare's plays in Christchurch, and the Schubert-influenced *String Trio*.

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LILBURN**
(1915–2001)

String Quartet in E minor (1946)		17:14	String Trio (1945)		16:35
1 I. Andante		6:51	10 I. Allegro non troppo		6:32
2 II. Allegretto		2:34	11 II. Allegretto		4:37
3 III. Allegro		7:47	12 III. Allegro		5:26
Duos for 2 Violins (1954)		19:23	Canzonettas for Violin and Viola (1942/1943/1958)		8:46
4 I. Andante con moto		2:58	13 I. Semplice		3:16
5 II. Allegro		2:25	14 II. Andante semplice		1:06
6 III. Andante		2:49	15 III.		4:24
7 IV. Allegro		4:15	16 Phantasy for String Quartet* (1939)		10:43
8 V. Lento		4:25			
9 VI. Allegramente		2:31			

* WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDING

New Zealand String Quartet
Helene Pohl, Violin I • Douglas Beilman, Violin II
Gillian Ansell, Viola • Rolf Gjelsten, Cello

Recorded at St Anne's Church, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 26–28 July 2012
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Playing Time
72:49



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