

# PROGRAMME NOTES

## SOUNDSCAPES THREE

Soundscapes Three is being performed at:

- St Mary of the Angels in Wellington on Wednesday 15 May 2024 at 7.30pm

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**Claire Cowan** (1983-) NZ

***Celestia >< Terralia*** (2023)

*Notes from the composer:*

'We are stardust in the highest exalted way, called by the universe, reaching out to the universe' Ann Druyan

While writing this work, I have been fascinated by the mirrored connections and parallels between Earth and space, both physically and metaphorically. A musical idea begins in the mind as a fragment, which changes through repetition or 'orbits'. In space, the fragments of past ideas (space missions, defunct satellites, space junk) drift around Earth for all time, never to be part of a whole again. Deep below in the ocean currents, the lion's mane jellyfish is on its own passive journey. Its fiery- coloured underbelly mirrors the gas- filled space imagery captured by our most powerful telescopes. The micro and the macro reflect each other endlessly at the extreme ends of the spectrum.

Utilising minimalist musical techniques, the piece takes its energetic structure from the movements between Earth and space- the countdown to a rocket launch, the release of gravity as a return to the womb, and the profound perspective shift that comes with observing Earth from a great distance.

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**Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-1975)

***String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp,  
Op. 142*** (1872-73)

*I. Allegretto*

*II. Adagio (attacca)*

*III. Allegretto*

Shostakovich's Quartets 11 through 14 are dedicated to each member of the Beethoven Quartet, who worked through and premiered all except the first and the last of his 15 quartets. The members made up the inner circle of Shostakovich's most intimate and trusted friends. Having paid homage to the violinists and violist in Quartets 11-13, the composer began this work, his dedication to the cellist,

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*Shostakovich String Quartet #14 cont. from previous page...*

Sergei Shirinsky, in 1972, taking 9 months to complete. The work is in three movements, in the traditional fast-slow-fast with a slow coda to end, but as in each of his quartets, the form and content unfold in their own ways. In each of these four quartets dedicated to members of the Beethoven Quartet one has to wonder, with so many idiosyncratic references to the dedicatees in the music, to what degree has the composer painted a personal portrait, and how much the character and emotional content of the work plays out as a reflection of the personal traits of each member? Shostakovich told the group that he wrote specifically with their playing in mind.

In the Fourteenth Quartet, the unusually jovial and playful character first introduced by the cello takes on a quirky effect with seemingly random dissonances in the accompanying material, becoming more blaring as the cello line dominates much of the movement. A reflection of the dynamic of the personalities working within the Quartet perhaps? In contrast, the second movement tells a dark and emotionally wrought narrative through sparse textures with variations and embellishments. The last movement contains several musical references to its dedicatee, spelling out Shirinsky's nickname Seryosha in the violin 1 pizzicato opening theme, as well as a quote of the beautiful "Seryosha" aria from 'Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District' in the deep cello line. In both the 2nd and 3rd movements there is also a beautiful duet line with the cello riding above the first violin, accompanied by heavy pizzicatos in Mahlerian fashion, which Shostakovich referred to as his 'Italian' bit. Is there some hidden reference to Shirinsky's tastes here? The last movement is a wild ride of contrasting textures and emotions, culminating in an apotheosis which, like many of Shostakovich's quartets, leaves the listener transfixed in deep contemplation.

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### Interval

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**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

***String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10***  
**(1893)**

*I. Animé et très décidé*

*II. Assez vif et bien rythmé*

*III. Andantino, doucement expressif*

*IV. Très modéré – En animant peu à peu – Très mouvementé et avec passion*

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*Debussy cont. from previous page...*

Written in 1893, Debussy's Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 is an important milestone on the road to his famous Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faun (1894) which not only conclusively defined Debussy's mature style but also, as Paul Griffiths states, provided the originating seed of the twentieth century's musical avant garde. In the Quartet, however, Debussy's "Debussyism" is not yet fully integrated. Touches of the influence of others – Massenet, Grieg, Wagner and even Javanese gamelan – are apparent in its corners. Cast in the traditional four movements, Debussy's Quartet has as its most distinctive feature its overarching preoccupation with timbre and sonority. The work as a whole offers a compendium of string-playing techniques. Another ingenious feature is that the quartet is less dominated by melodic or harmonic considerations than by a rhythmic flexibility which carries the potential for seemingly endless variety. Yet it remains unmistakably a work dominated by the sensuality and longueurs of French late nineteenth century Romanticism, a strong feature of this slow third movement (Andantino doucement expressif). This movement is muted and expressive; it features considerable soloistic playing, particularly from the viola and first violin.



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