



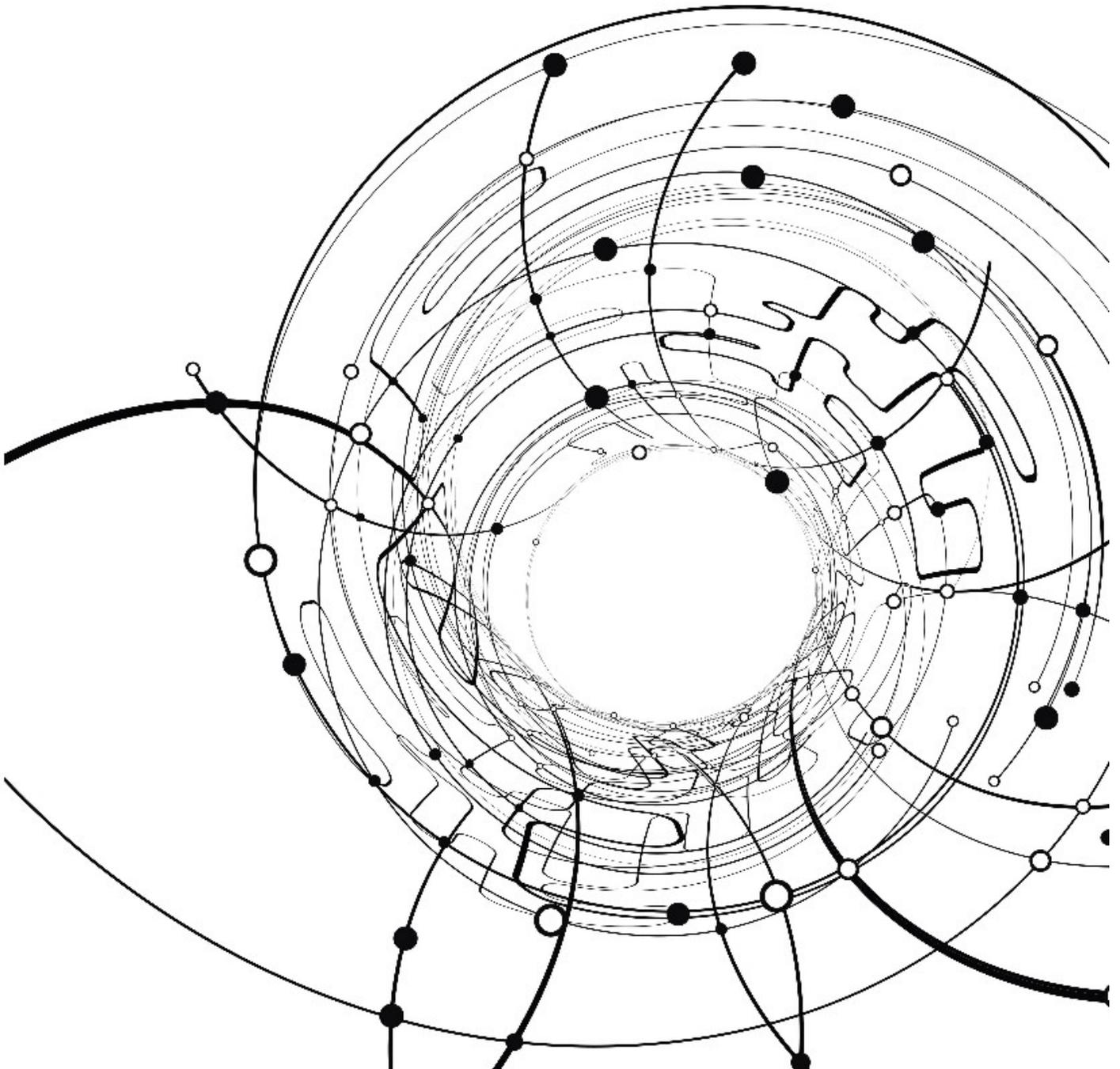
University  
of Glasgow

School of Culture  
& Creative Arts

School of Culture and Creative Arts presents

**McEwen Memorial Concert  
of Scottish Chamber Music**

Thursday, 12 November 2015





# McEwen Memorial Concert of Scottish Chamber Music

Thursday 12 November 2015  
1.10pm University Concert Hall

**Edinburgh Quartet**  
Tristan Gurney, Violin  
Gordon Bragg, Violin  
Fiona Winning, Viola  
Mark Bailey, Cello

String Quartet No. 3 (Slanting Rain)\* (15')

Alasdair Nicolson

Quartet in D minor Op 56 'Voces Intimae' (32')

Jean Sibelius

*\*Commissioned by the Court of the University of Glasgow under the terms of the McEwen Bequest. Additional funding towards today's performance has been provided by the Ferguson Bequest.*

**Today's concert is being recorded. Please remember to switch off all mobile phones.**

**Alasdair Nicolson (b. 1961)**  
**String Quartet No. 3 (*Slanting Rain*)**

1. *a false moon shines*
2. *the shadow ends without having been*
3. *waving trees, rising sea, eerie stillness*
4. *impossibly distant tree-lined paths*
5. *I come to the window to see who's singing*
6. *into an abyss made of time*

Like my previous quartet, some of the inspiration for this work came from a favourite writer's poetry, namely the Portuguese author Ferdinand Pessoa; the title of the quartet is also the title of a collection of Pessoa's poetry. The epigrammatic titles that appear for each short movement are lines from within this writer's poetry and, though not intended to be programmatic, are evocations of mood and hints of atmospheres without a particular narrative thread.

In constructing this quartet I was drawn to another source common to my music, that of the Gaelic song tradition and in particular here the old song *O, 's tu, 's gura □ut h'air m'aire* (*Oh, it's you who are on my mind*) – a song of loss whose sentiments are close to those of the Pessoa. Much of the musical material for the work is taken from this Gaelic melody and on a few occasions it comes to the surface with its rising upturned triadic shape.

The quartet is dedicated to the memory of my mother who passed away in late 2014 and who was no stranger to slanting rain.

Alasdair Nicolson, 2015

**Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**  
**Quartet in D minor Op 56 'Voces Intimae'**

*Andante – Allegro molto moderato*

*Vivace*

*Adagio di molto*

*Allegretto (ma pesante)*

*Allegro*

Sibelius wrote much chamber music as a young man, but after 1891 there is very little, until this quartet, which he began during a visit to London in 1908. The work comes between the third and fourth symphonies. The structure is not quite conventional, with an extra dance-like movement inserted before the finale. It is perhaps surprising to find the composer, as one of the most accomplished and important symphonists of the twentieth century, writing a chamber work. Anyone who knows Sibelius' seven symphonies will recognize how important orchestra colours are to the dynamic of these extended works. To write a work for four solo strings might be likened to an oil painter sketching in black and white. However, there is nothing of compromise about this Quartet which is coherent and, perhaps most obviously, concise. The fourth movement

excepted, the progress of the musical discussions proceed with very little in the way of direct repetition, making recognizable signposts to the structures quite subtle. Although we might not readily associate Wagner and Schoenberg with Sibelius, there are many links, not only with the exploration of conventional tonality, but in the concept of continual development of themes – of which all three composers were supreme masters.

The work opens with an innocent, almost inconsequential-sounding idea, first heard unaccompanied on the solo violin and answered by the cello. The melodic outline of this idea, and the interval of a rising fourth with which it ends, are to assume a developing importance throughout the work. The movement outlines the shape of a sonata, with a rhythmic contrast between the two main ideas – smoothly flowing at the opening and a rhythmically dotted second subject helping later identification. There is, however, a sense of constant development that almost obscures the formal structure.

A bright and breezy A major movement follows without a break. This is in high contrast being wonderfully light with a quicksilver character. A fully integrated ‘Trio’ section appears in a contrasting key of C major with a rustic sounding dance at its centre.

The heart of the work is the extended slow movement in the contrasting key of F major. The opening theme is closely based on the opening of the whole work, but the mood has changed into something richer and more sublime. An unprepared quiet chord of E minor, repeated three times, marks the place where the composer wrote above the score ‘Intimate voices’, though quite what is meant by this is not clear. Musically the moment appears important as the chords do not appear to have immediate relevance to the other musical material. The outline of the movement is a ternary structure, with a centrally placed climax based on the theme of the first movement.

An extraordinary scherzo follows which has a rhythmic heaviness giving it the character of a peasant dance. A contrasting theme, accompanied by scurrying triplet quavers, gradually takes over, as the music continues to develop both motivically and tonally. The final moments of this movement see the return of the opening, but right at the end, as a coda.

The finale is a *moto perpetuo* – a whirring movement in perpetual motion. The material is taken from earlier in the work, but now played much faster – with instructions to get faster and faster. The two basic ideas, both subjected to considerable development, give a symphonic character to this movement in its breadth and scope – ‘forceful chords but irresistible energy’ as described by John Henken.

Sibelius had hopes of a career as a professional violinist and even auditioned for the Vienna Philharmonic. It therefore comes as no surprise that the writing for strings, though demanding, is highly sympathetic. The extended structure of five symmetrically arranged movements has sometimes misled commentators to regard the composition as

more like a Suite than a closely argued Quartet. But there is a cogency about the whole work, with common ideas linking the various movements. The opening phrase of the first violin and its answering phrase by the cello, give the impression of a piece written in the dorian mode – despite the prominent C sharps on the cello. The interval of a fourth, which is sometimes opened out into a fifth, especially in the fourth movement, is used as a frequently recurring element. The various movements are structured along conventional lines at their outset, but a sense of development, both of motifs and harmonies, is such that there is a sense of growth across the whole work. ‘I feel I have passed a qualifying examination with the quartet’ – the composer wrote – ‘It turned out as something wonderful.’

Dr Roger Williams, July 2015

## **Alasdair Nicolson**

Born in Inverness and brought up on the Isle of Skye and the Black Isle, Nicolson's first musical experiences were in traditional music before going on to study at Edinburgh University. After winning the IBM Composer Award in 1992 his music came to a wider audience and has now been performed all over the world. He has written works for the LSO, the Nash Ensemble, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Trondheim Soloists, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, English National Opera and performers such as Joanna MacGregor, Catherine Wyn Rogers, Oystein Birkeland and Kathryn Tickell. From 1997 until 2005 Nicolson was Composer in Association with the City of London Sinfonia and was involved with both the orchestra's concert work and education programmes.

Recent works have been commissioned by Pure Brass *The Vanishing*, the Nash Ensemble *The Stamping Ground*, the Fidelio Trio *Half-Told Tales*, BBC New Generation Artists *The Humble Petition of Bruar Water*, the Edinburgh Festival *The Twittering Machine*, St Mary's Music School *Two Lorca Songs* and *Songs and Drones for the Harp Tree* for Joanna MacGregor and Kathryn Tickell, *Shadows on the Wall* for mezzo soprano and orchestra commissioned by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, *NOD* for harpist Gabriella dall'Olio, a String Quartet No 2 (The Keeper of Sheep) for Live Music Now, *Magnus I* for the Trondheim Soloists and *Magnus II* for the guitarist Sean Shibe.

His abundance of interests and talents has allowed him to work across many genres and art-forms and he has combined the role of practical performing musician with that of the composer. He has worked in theatre, dance, opera and the concert platform as well as music for television and film and has collaborated with some well known literary figures of today. He has also led and directed many projects and festivals as Artistic Director and Creative Consultant, amongst them Platform Festival with Joanna MacGregor, Northlands Festival a multiarts event in Caithness and Sound Inventors a national project for engaging young people with composition. He is currently Artistic Director of St Magnus International Festival and was also director of Bath International Music Festival between 2012-14. More recently he has created the new ensemble and production company The Assembly Project.

Nicolson has a strong commitment to promoting new music and engaging new audiences and younger musicians and composers. He has led many education projects with orchestras and festivals throughout the UK and has made a television programme about composition for BBC TV schools. In 1996 he co-hosted the composition summer school held by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies on Hoy. He also created the materials and methodology as Creative Director for *Sound Inventors*, an award-winning, national project for composition with young people between 2001 and 2005 and has written two books on composing called *Composition Kit 1 and 2*. In the summer of 2002 he joined the Faculty of the Britten-Pears summer school working with young professional composers and he initiated and is Director of the St Magnus Composers' Course for young, professional composers that runs concurrently with the St Magnus International Festival.

He has worked extensively in the theatre in the UK and written scores for many companies and has created scores for several theatre works around the country and in London's West End. He is also a pianist and conductor and was for a time on the music staff at the Opera de Monte Carlo. As conductor, he has worked with the BBC

Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the City of London Sinfonia, the Scottish Masking Company, Paragon Ensemble, the Chamber Group of Scotland, Sound Inventors Ensemble, the LSO and The Assembly Project.

### **The Edinburgh Quartet**

Patron: Sir James MacMillan, CBE

Tristan Gurney, Violin; Gordon Bragg, Violin; Fiona Winning, Viola; Mark Bailey, Cello

As Scotland's flagship chamber music ensemble the Edinburgh Quartet exists to enrich Scottish cultural life by providing intimate, vivid experiences of some of the world's greatest music, connecting with audiences through the quality and expression of its performances and via diverse and imaginative programming.

The Edinburgh Quartet has an international reputation as one of Britain's foremost chamber ensembles, having appeared regularly at prestigious venues across the UK and toured extensively across Europe, the Far and Middle East, and North and South America.

The Quartet has always been a champion of new music and has worked with many important and prolific composers including its patron, James MacMillan, CBE. In addition to giving over fifty concerts per year the Edinburgh Quartet is frequently featured in radio broadcasts on the BBC and other stations and has an extensive discography available on various labels.

The Edinburgh Quartet is committed to nurturing talent and is resident at four Scottish universities where the players work with composition students, instrumentalists and student teachers. The Quartet is the resident coaching ensemble for the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland senior orchestra and their education and outreach programme also encompasses schools workshops and tutoring adults on annual residential courses.

*"These players have worked to produce the precise sound to transmit the emotional import of each phrase"*  
Gramophone Magazine

*"The evening's performances were vivid and fresh, and the programme bold, full of contrasts, and expertly delivered" ... "brimming over with energy and intensity"*  
The Scotsman

# The McEwen Bequest

Sir John Blackwood McEwen (1868-1948) bequeathed the residue of his estate to the University of Glasgow to help promote performance of chamber music by composers of Scottish birth and descent. Other composers resident in Scotland for a substantial period have also benefited from the fund. In fulfilment of the terms of the bequest the University Court commissions annually a piece of chamber music for not more than five players and every three years a work for larger forces.

1955	String Quartet No 3	Ian Whyte
1956	<i>Directions for a Map</i>	Cedric Thorpe Davie
1956	*Sonata No 2 for viola and piano	Ronald G Duncan
1956	Octet for Strings	Iain Hamilton
1957	String Quartet No 2	Robert Crawford
1958	String Quartet No 1	Thea Musgrave
1959	Sonata for cello and piano	Iain Hamilton
1959	*String Quartet No 3	Thomas Wilson
1960	String Quartet	David Gwilt
1961	Sonata for violin and piano	Thomas Wilson
1962	Chamber Concerto No 1	Thea Musgrave
1962	*Theme and Variations for clarinet quintet	Sebastian Forbes
1963	Canzona for tenor, clarinet and string trio	Buxton Orr
1964	Piano Trio	Sebastian Forbes
1966	String Quartet No 3	David Dorwarad
1967	Piano Trio	Martin Dalby
1968	String Trio op 21	John Purser
1968	*String Trio	David Gow
1968	Sinfonia for seven instruments	Thomas Wilson
1969	String Quartet	Rita McAllister
1970	<i>Quaderno a Quattro</i>	John Maxwell Geddes
1971	<i>Journeys and Places</i>	Robin Orr
1971	Piano Quintet	Frank Spedding
1972	Fantasy String Quartet	Isobel Dunlop
1973	Clarinet Quintet	John McLeod
1974	<i>Histoire</i>	David Dorward
1975	<i>Liberation</i>	Edward McGuire
1976	<i>Three Poems of Li Ch'ing-Chao</i>	Wilma Paterson
1977	<i>Almost a Madrigal</i>	Martin Dalby
1978	<i>The Ancient Pattern</i>	Morris Pert
1979	<i>Channel Firing</i>	John Hearne
1980	Wind Octet	Edward McGuire
1981	String Quartet	William Sweeney
1982	<i>Scotch Minstrelsy</i>	Judith Weir
1983	<i>Diversions</i>	John Maxwell Geddes
1984	Sonata for cello and piano	Peter Nelson
1985	<i>Strange Fruit</i>	John Lunn

1986	String Quartet	John McLeod
1987	Ricercare	Robert Crawford
1988	<i>Visions of a November Spring</i>	James MacMillan
1989	<i>El Pueblo</i>	William Sweeney
1990	<i>Dead Roses</i>	Gordon McPherson
2009	<i>Intimacy</i> for string quartet	John De Simone
2010	Piano Trio ( <i>Music for the pauses in a conversation between John Cage and Morton Feldman</i> )	David Fennessy
2011	<i>Luna</i>	Helen Grime
2012	<i>Tenebrae</i>	Martin Suckling
2013	<i>Tristia II</i>	Hafliði Hallgrímsson
2014	<i>Ixion</i>	Stuart MacRae
2015	String Quartet No. 3 ( <i>Slanting Rain</i> )	Alasdair Nicolson

The McEwen Memorial Concert of Scottish Chamber Music is curated by Dr. Jane Stanley (jane.stanley@glasgow.ac.uk)

A website dedicated to the McEwen concerts, including information about its history, associated composers, commissioned pieces, and sound clips, may be accessed here: **[www.glasgow.ac.uk/mcewen](http://www.glasgow.ac.uk/mcewen)**

The commissioned composer for 2016 is Lyell Cresswell (new work for violin and cello).

With thanks to Anne Cumberland, Music in the University, Neil McDermott, and Steve Reid.