

scottish ensemble

Re-defining the string orchestra

The rustic charm of Nordic folk tunes; affectionate nostalgia for the music of the past; a healthy dose of the bracingly new. Following Sibelius' *Andante festivo*, tonight's concert combines all three of these ingredients by bringing together and mixing up the movements of three pieces: Grieg's *From Holberg's Time*, Rautavaara's *The Fiddlers*, and a new Scottish Ensemble commission from contemporary Danish composer Christian Winther Christensen, receiving its first performances.

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) *Andante festivo* (1922)

There can't be many pieces of music that owe their origins to sawmills. But Sibelius's *Andante festivo* does: he produced it in 1922 for the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Säynätsalo establishment in his native Finland. Sawmill director Walter Parviainen wanted a festive cantata, but significantly, Sibelius chose instead to produce a small-scale work for string quartet (which he rescored for string orchestra in 1938). And instead of anything overtly celebratory or industrial-sounding, he created a simple, sincere, heartfelt piece that focuses with awe-struck solemnity on the wonders of nature. As its slowly unfolding melodies develop across the broad range of the strings, the music seems to vacillate between major and minor modes – you're never quite sure whether it's uplifting or melancholy. It's for this quality that the *Andante festivo* is often played at solemn occasions in Finland, including Sibelius's own funeral in 1957. It's also the only piece that Sibelius allowed to be recorded with himself conducting, in a radio broadcast from January 1939. One memorable instruction the composer gave to the Helsinki Radio musicians during rehearsals was: 'Play with more humanity.'

Edvard Grieg (1843–1907) *From Holberg's Time* (1884)

1. *Praeludium*
2. *Sarabande*
3. *Gavotte*
4. *Air*
5. *Rigaudon*

Ludvig Holberg was a remarkable figure – a Danish-Norwegian historian, scientist, philosopher and violinist, he was even called the 'Molière of the north' because of the popular success of his stage comedies. Like Grieg, Holberg was born in Bergen, and when the Norwegian city launched its plans to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the great man's birth in 1884, Grieg was one of several

Scandinavian composers commissioned to write music for the event. Ironically, the main piece he was asked to compose – a male-voice Holberg Cantata – has fallen into almost total obscurity. But a set of short, Holberg-inspired piano pieces that Grieg wrote as a distraction from the hard work of the cantata took off immediately, proving such a success that the composer later rescored them for string orchestra.

Better known simply as the Holberg Suite, the movements of *From Holberg's Time* look back to the music of Bach, Handel and Scarlatti – Holberg's contemporaries – and combine the graceful elegance of Baroque dance forms with the unmistakable folk-inspired twang of Grieg's own musical language. After the sprightly, energetic *Praeludium*, the *Sarabande* has folksy melodies for violins and a solo cello. The stomping dance of the perky *Gavotte* has a distinctive central *musette* over a bagpipe-like drone, and following the stately, solemn *Air*, the boisterous *Rigaudon* has a duet for violin and viola that sounds like Bach trying out some traditional Norwegian fiddling.

With interludes from

Einojuhani Rautavaara (b.1928) *The Fiddlers* (1952) (Selection)

1. *The Narbö Villages in Fine Fettle*
2. *Mr Jonas Kopsin*
5. *Jumps*

Finnish composer Rautavaara, also took inspiration from his country's folk tunes in his suite *The Fiddlers*. It's his Op.1, a student work – though you'd never know that from its assured writing – and it came about following a visit the young man made to the Ostrobothnia region of Finland, where his family originally came from. The music he found there, Rautavaara said, was 'reckless and impetuous, certainly archaic and primeval'. And those are all qualities he emulates in this set of short pieces, each based on a different fiddle tune he found in an old

collection by Samuel Rinda–Nickola. The music is essentially diatonic and clear in texture, but despite its folksy vigour and earthiness, its proto–minimalist glittering textures and its striking, acidic dissonances mark it out clearly as the work of a contemporary composer.

Christian Winther Christensen (b.1977)
Pre–Air (2013)

“a suite in the older style from the good old days”

The suite is a tribute to bad taste. It isn't an expression about a condescending relationship to bad taste but a kind of love statement to the cliché. The work is in many ways based on material from Holberg Suite. Especially from the Prelude and the Air.

The piece is written for the Scottish Ensemble

Christian Winther Christensen

INTERVAL

Edvard Grieg (1843–1907)
String Quartet No.1 in G minor, Op.27 (1878)
(arr. Morton)

- 1. Un poco andante – Allegro molto ed agitato*
- 2. Romanze (Andantino)*
- 3. Intermezzo (Allegro molto marcato – Più vivo e scherzando)*
- 4. Finale (Lento – Presto al saltarello)*

It makes perfect sense that Scottish Ensemble Artistic Director Jonathan Morton has chosen to arrange Grieg's G minor String Quartet for a larger group: the piece's ambitious scale and rich textures already sound almost orchestral in its original quartet version. Grieg clearly had grand ambitions when composing the piece in 1877–8 – upon completion, he wrote to a friend: 'I have recently finished a string quartet which I still haven't heard. It's in G minor and is not intended to bring trivialities to market. It strives towards breadth, soaring flight and above all resonance for the instruments for which it is written.'

And it's that ambition that caused problems with Grieg's publisher, CF Peters, who initially rejected the work because they considered its textures too rich and too demanding on players – although they were quick to take it back once the piece had achieved its remarkable international success. On hearing the quartet for the first

time, Franz Liszt declared: 'It is a long time since I have encountered a new composition, especially a string quartet, which has intrigued me as greatly as this distinctive and admirable work by Grieg.'

Most distinctive is the piece's musical language, which seems to lie halfway between late Beethoven and Debussy (indeed, it's even been suggested that the French composer modelled his 1893 String Quartet closely on Grieg's G minor work), and brings in some distinctively raw sounds and the rhythmic vitality of the folk music of the composer's homeland.

The stormy opening movement begins with an impassioned chordal section, before breaking into a scurrying, restless theme whose sudden changes of key lend it a folk–like character. The second movement starts as a gently swaying waltz before accelerating into a manic dance, and there's more dance music in the third–movement Intermezzo – albeit of a rather heavy–footed kind. The last–movement saltarello, a leaping dance, builds up devilish energy before a return of the first movement's chordal introduction heralds a resolute ending.

Programme notes: David Kettle

Christian Winther Christensen

Christian Winther Christensen studied composition at the Royal Danish Academy of Music with Bent Sørensen, Hans Abrahamsen and Niels Rosing–Schow and at Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris with Frédéric Durieux.

Christensen is a member of the artists' collectives Dygong and Pliiing, artistic co–director of the festival KLANG and artistic advisor with Ahelas Sinfonietta. He is a composer with his own unmistakable style relating to music history through quotations and intimations and at the same time pushing the boundaries.