



home and abroad, the Orford String Quartet became one of Canada's best-known and most illustrious musical ensembles. After 26 years and more than 2000 concerts on six continents, the Quartet disbanded, giving its last concert on July 28, 1991.

In July 2009 the New Orford String Quartet arose from the fame and tradition of its glorious predecessor, giving its first concert for a sold-out audience at the Orford Arts Centre. In the short time since its creation the New Orford Quartet has seen astonishing success, giving annual concerts at the Orford Arts Centre for national CBC broadcast and receiving unanimous critical acclaim, including two Opus Awards for Concert of the Year.

Reviews of the New Orford String Quartet debut concert in the *Montreal Gazette* applauded a concert performance that was "sweet, balanced and technically unassailable less than a week after their members met for the first time.... Lustily applauded in the Orford Arts Centre, the concert was true to the Orford name in its beauty and refinement. Indeed, there was no trace of roughness anywhere." *Le Devoir* described the musical result as "stupefying." Recent performances in Montreal and Quebec were met

with immediate invitations for return engagements.

Hailed for their "ravishingly beautiful tone" as well as their "extraordinary technical skills and musicianship," the members of the New Orford String Quartet are all principal players in the Montreal and Toronto Symphony Orchestras. In 2009, these like-minded musicians came together with a plan to revolutionize the concept of string quartet playing in Canada, bringing together four stars of the classical music field for a limited touring schedule on a project-by-project basis inspired by the success of modern chamber orchestras such as the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Mahler Chamber Orchestra.

Rather than committing to a year-round schedule, the members of the quartet meet for residencies in various centres for short periods of time, providing a fresh perspective on interpretations of standard string quartet repertoire.

The New Orford String Quartet is also dedicated to promoting Canadian works, both new commissions and neglected repertoire from the previous century. Each New Orford String Quartet project has included performances of a major Canadian string quartet from the 20th century



or a premiere of a newly composed work, and programs have included repertoire from a period that spans over 225 years, from Haydn and Beethoven to Sir Ernest MacMillan and Denis Gougeon.

In 2011 the New Orford String Quartet released its debut album of the final quartets of Schubert and Beethoven on Bridge Records to international acclaim. It was hailed as one of the top CDs of 2011 by *La Presse* and CBC In Concert and nominated for a JUNO

Award in 2012. Critics have described the recording as a "performance of true greatness and compelling intensity... stunning!" (Audio Video Club of Atlanta), "flawless... a match made in heaven!" (Classical Music Sentinel), "a performance of rare intensity," (*Audiophile Audition*) and "nothing short of electrifying... listen and weep." (*The Toronto Star*). ■

Additional information about the Orford String Quartet is available at en.neworford.com/about.php.

Program Notes

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

VIOLIN SONATA NO. 2

World War I brought about turning points for many composers, including Ravel. His earlier musical language of refined Impressionism, as heard in *Daphnis et Chloé*, had largely faded to the background. He embraced bitonality (two different keys at the same time), harsh dissonance, and jazz sonorities. This sonata was written for his friend Hélène Jourdan-Morhange; he wrote to her, promising, "It won't be very difficult and it won't sprain your wrist." His promise was unfulfilled, however – there is no doubt of the sonata's difficulty.

The opening Allegretto starts with a brief introduction on the piano before the violin presents the first of several theme fragments. The violin part seems at odds with the music of the piano. Ravel considered the violin and the piano to be "essentially incompatible" and sought to emphasize this



incompatibility rather than balance it. The second movement is heavily influenced by jazz, as can be inferred from its title, “Blues.” The melodic figures prominent in 1920s blues imitate sliding saxophone lines. The last movement is a brilliant test of the violin’s virtuosity. Ideas from the first movement propel the work to a blazing end.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR, OP. 10

This string quartet, written in 1893, was the only one Debussy wrote. Debussy had always been a rebel, pushing the boundaries of music. At the Paris Conservatory, his experiments with chords that broke the textbook rules shocked his professors. He felt that “music, by its very nature, is something that cannot be cast into a traditional and fixed form. The music [he desired] must be supple enough to adapt itself to the lyrical effusions of the soul and the fantasy of dreams.” His compositions pushed beyond the boundaries of conventional forms and organization, as well as traditional chord structures and tonality. He is now acknowledged as the founder of musical Impressionism.

The quartet appears to be in the form of a traditional string quartet with four movements: a sonata, a scherzo, a slow lyrical movement, and an energetic finale. However, the sounds were completely new for their time, utilizing unconventional chords, progressions, key changes, and exotic scales. The quartet is also notable for its cyclical design: the opening theme of the first movement appears in each of the four movements. The motif is in a minor key with a flattened second step, termed the Phrygian mode, a scale often heard in Russian folk music. A recognizable feature of this motif is the quick ornamental triplet in the middle of the motif. The majority of the material in the quartet is drawn from this initial idea, using transformations of harmony, rhythm, melody, and texture. Debussy wrote very little additional chamber music, returning to the genre only at the end of his life to complete three of six planned sonatas.



ERNEST CHAUSSON (1855–1899)

CONCERTO IN D MAJOR FOR VIOLIN, PIANO, AND STRING QUARTET, OP. 21

This concerto is certainly an unusual composition in its scoring and its form. It is evocative of an eighteenth century concerto grosso, with several solo instruments (a violin and piano) and a string quartet. However, it is a hybrid between chamber music and a double concerto for violin and piano, with the two solo instruments acting, in Chausson’s words, as “projections against the quartet background.” The piece was dedicated to the Belgian virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe, who premiered it in Brussels in 1892.

The concerto begins with an arresting 3-note motif, introduced by the piano and then repeated with the viola and the cello. The quartet quietly expands on this motif. After further buildup, the solo violin brings out the main theme dramatically from the motif. The second movement is a sicilienne, a reference to the Baroque movement type with dotted rhythms. Chausson’s biographer Ralph Grover praises the concerto’s third movement as “a tremendous outpouring of despair and pessimism, one of the really remarkable slow movements in all chamber music.” The final movement pushes aside the bleakness of the third movement, recalls themes from the third and first movements, and brings the piece to an exuberant finish. ■

– NOTES BY ISIS TSE, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE –