

Argus Quartet

The Argus Quartet is dedicated to celebrating the artistic landscape of our time by drawing unexpected connections across styles and centuries in order to foster community amongst performers, audiences, and composers alike. Praised for playing with “supreme melodic control and total authority” and “decided dramatic impact” (Calgary Herald), the Quartet has quickly emerged as one of today’s most dynamic and versatile ensembles, winning First Prize at both the 2017 M-Prize Chamber Arts Competition and the 2017 Concert Artists Guild Victor Elmaleh Competition.

Since then, increasingly busy concert seasons have taken Argus to some of the country’s most prestigious venues and festivals, including Carnegie’s Weill and Zankel Halls, Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall, Chamber Music Society of Detroit, the Ravinia Festival, the Albany Symphony’s American Music Festival, and Music Academy of the West. Highlights of the 2019-20 season include debut performances for Washington Performing Arts at the Kennedy Center and Lincoln Center’s Great Performers series, along with a return engagement in New York for the Schneider Concerts at the New School.

Argus has worked with many of today’s leading musical voices, including Martin Bresnick, Chris Cerrone, Ted Hearne, Garth Knox, Andrew Norman, Christopher Theofanidis, and Augusta Read Thomas. Recent commissions include new quartets by Katherine Balch, Donald Crockett, GRAMMY nominee Eric Guinivan, Hermitage Prize winner Thomas Kotcheff, and Guggenheim Fellowship recipient Juri Seo. Argus’s recording of Seo’s works for string quartet was released in May 2019 on Innova Recordings. The Quartet has received grants from the Koussevitsky Foundation, Chamber Music America, and the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts in support of their commissioning efforts.

From 2015-17, the Quartet served as the Fellowship Quartet in Residence at the Yale School of Music under the guidance of the Brentano Quartet, and from 2017-19 held the position of Graduate Resident String Quartet at the Juilliard School, where they worked closely with the Juilliard String Quartet. They have also held residencies at New Music on the Point, working with the JACK Quartet, and at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts as the Ernst Stiefel Quartet in Residence.

Education and outreach are an important part of the Argus Quartet’s mission. The Quartet has worked with students through residencies and masterclasses at Yale and Princeton, James Madison University, Rockport Music, the Milken School, the Young Musicians Foundation, California State University Long Beach, and Los Angeles City College.

Based in New York City, the Quartet was founded in Los Angeles in 2013, where its members shared many meals at their favorite taco truck on Argus Drive.

THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS (2018) BY CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS

The Conference of the Birds is a 12th Century Sufi allegorical poem by the Persian poet, Attar of Nishapur, and tells the story of the seeker's journey toward God. In the allegory, all the birds of the world convene and determine that they need a ruler. Such a leader is known in the form of the mythic and divine bird, Simorgh, who resides in a distant land, and the journey to it passes through seven valleys of understanding, the first of which requires the birds to cast off all the preconceived ideas and dogma in their thinking, and the final of which requires annihilation of the self in order to attain complete communion with the divine. The valleys are:

The Valley of Quest

The Valley of Love

The Valley of Unity

The Valley of Knowledge

The Valley of Detachment

The Valley of Wonderment

The Valley of Poverty and Annihilation

My piece traces this metaphoric journey in seven short character pieces, each lasting between 1 and 3 minutes, and each focusing on a highly defined musical personality evoked by the corresponding valley. Much of the string writing is inspired by the flocking movement of birds; that is, there is a 'group logic' - a kind of unity of movement and purpose in which all the parts are highly interdependent.

The Conference of the Birds was commissioned by the Howard Hanson Institute for American Music of the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester for the Ying Quartet.

—Christopher Theofanidis

CAN'T AND WON'T (2017) BY CHRISTOPHER CERRONE

Can't and Won't began its life as a song cycle based on texts by one of my favorite authors, Lydia Davis. The idea for the project would be that I would set a few of her very short pieces into songs that keep using a recurring melody. In between these short songs, I would compose a long and intense setting of Davis's story called—appropriately—"Story", broken into three parts. But try as I might, I could never quite make the piece I wanted to out of her words. It didn't help that so many composers I admire had already made fantastic settings of her work. Perhaps her work is just complete in it of itself. But rather than throw aside these musical ideas, I decided to make a new string quartet out of them, a series of little "songs without words" interspersed with one long violent and dramatic movement.

The quartet begins with the faintest of sounds: the violinist gently tapping on their fingerboard to elicit a quiet ringing of open strings. Little by little, the quartet bow their strings, revealing a delicate texture of swirling harmonics. A long, stretched-out melody emerges from the cello. Suddenly, as the song begins to form, it is cut off sharply, and a violent round of D's is fired like bullets from the entire quartet. These two elements form the main drama, the "can't" and "won't", of the form. As the work progresses, the

songs without words move higher and higher, forming into a proper melody, while the violent and rhythmic music descends to the lowest range of the instruments.

As I was writing this quartet, it became clear that something else was occupying my subconscious. A lot of this past year has been about trying to find some sense of repose in a deeply chaotic time, amid constant and often terrifying distractions. Can't and Won't seems to both acknowledge this sense of disturbance, yet also optimistically point towards the hope for a place of composure, even if it's a temporary one.

—Christopher Cerrone