

# Hinterland and metropolis are arenas for Purcell String Quartet

by Michael Quigley

Four prominent string players from the Vancouver Symphony left that orchestra towards the end of the 1972-73 season, not because of dissent but because of a dream. The four included the concertmaster, principal viola and principal cello.

They were the Purcell String Quartet, formed in 1969. Its present members, who have been together since the beginning of 1971, are Norman Nelson, first violin, Frederick Nelson, second violin, Philippe Etter, viola, and Ian Hampton, cello. The quartet left the orchestra to devote themselves exclusively to the study and performance of chamber music. With their appointment in September, 1973, as full-time quartet in residence at Simon Fraser University, their wish was finally fulfilled. The quartet has given concerts extensively in the Vancouver area as well as Eastern Canada, England and the U.S.

Under contract to the university for three years, their salaries supplemented by Canada Council, foundation and private grants, the PSQ found themselves able to pursue a wide variety of activities, including "outreach residencies," or extended visits to far-flung areas of British Columbia. Above all, it gave them the opportunity to further their interests in contemporary Canadian chamber music.

The PSQ regards itself as a Canadian quartet (though three of the four are from the British Isles) and "a Canadian resource." Works by Canadian composers in the group's repertoire include pieces by **JEAN COULMARD**, **S.C. Eckhardt-Gramatte**, **Clermont**, **HARRY SOMERS**, **ROBERT TURNER** and **John Weinzweig**. As well, they have participated in Elliot Weisgaber's "Night" and **BARBARA PENTLAND**'s "Interplay" (for quartet and free bass accordion).

One of the highlights of the quartet's career as a disseminator of Canadian music came in July, 1973, when five of the they had commissioned were performed at a special Canada Day concert at Canada House in London, England: **MURRAY SCHAFFER**'s "String Quartet No. 1" (1970), **Barbara Pentland**'s "Quartet No. 3" (1969), **ANDRE PREVOST**'s "Quartet No. 2, Ad Pacem" (1972), **Harry Freedman**'s "Graphic II" (1972) and **BRUCE DAVIS**' "Quartet No. 1" (1972).

Two of the quartet's major Canadian commissions is the Schaffer work, first performed at the Vancouver Art Gallery in July, 1970, and well over a hundred times since. It was termed "a persuasive addition to an already established genre" by *New York Times* critic John Rockwell when performed by the quartet in its U.S. premiere February 17 at Carnegie Hall.

The Schaffer quartet was recorded twice by the PSQ—once for the CBC, which has released it as part of its Canadian Collection; and for a recording on Melbourne Records, backed by the composer's "Requiem for the Party Girl." It

was also broadcast five times by the BBC in England.

Schafer, currently a professor in the Communications Department at Simon Fraser University and director of the World Soundscape Project, a sonic ecology study, recalls: "Working with the Purcell Quartet was very good. I could get them to try out bits of my quartet, or perhaps describe an effect, and they could suggest another way of doing things, which was a real luxury."

Composer Bruce Davis, a research assistant on the SFU Soundscape Project, whose quartet won him a \$3,000 CBC Radio/Canada Council Award for Young Composers, had a similar experience with his work: "I was able to go over it with the Purcell, and certain changes worked themselves into the final project."

On the whole, commissioning works has not been an easy task for the PSQ, the possibility of performances after the premiere being of primary importance in selection. "The point of a new piece, after all, is to play it as many times as possible," says violist Etter. "We also have to take into consideration how many hours it will take to learn it."

Since taking up residence at the university, the quartet has performed several concerts there, most notably those with pianists Robert Silverman and Anton Kuerti and violist Raphael Hillyer. They have also held informal workshops and rehearsals, both open to the public.

They are not closeted in the university by any means, however. As cellist Hampton says, "Our most important job is to go out into the province and to turn B.C. into a generally cultural place."

Each of the quartet members is an instructor at Vancouver's Community Music School. As well, they have performed school and formal concerts in many areas, ranging from Vancouver colleges to B.C. cities like Prince George, Kitimat, Kelowna and Trail. Last April the quartet went on an extended tour of northern Vancouver Island and the B.C.

North Coast.

The response to the group in these outlying areas has been surprisingly good, often lacking the stiltedness and formality of large city concerts. Audience members have occasionally come up after the performances to discuss the works, ranging in style from classic to modern, and, of course, including Canadian compositions.

In June, the quartet was in residence at the Banff School of Fine Arts for a week. In July they are scheduled to take part in the Naramata Okanagan Summer School of the Arts, with August appearances at the Courtenay, B.C., Youth Music Camp, Stratford, Ontario, and Spokane's Expo '74.

A return appearance at Carnegie Hall in New York and a Boston concert are slated for December. The quartet hopes to include a Canadian work in each of the American concerts. ♦

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