

Concert Review
Flinders Quartet for Tauranga Musica
Wednesday, July 2, 2025
Wesley Methodist Church

Not even the stormy winter weather could keep a large and enthusiastic audience away from a truly memorable evening of music-making delivered by the visiting Flinders Quartet of Melbourne who teamed up with New Zealand's very own musical taonga, Michael Houstoun.

The Flinders Quartet is comprised of four remarkable, passionate and accomplished Australian women: Elizabeth Sellars (violin), Wilma Smith (violin), Helen Ireland (viola) and Zoe Knighton (cello). The ensemble takes its name from Captain Matthew Flinders, the first European seafarer to circumnavigate mainland Australia in 1802 - 1803.

The first half of the concert opened with Beethoven's *F Minor String Quartet, Op. 98* - a piece originally composed for a small group of musical connoisseurs and never intended for public performances.

The first movement opened with an energetic flourish and immediately revealed the immense emotional range which the quartet pour into their music making. Beethoven's clever use of silence and somewhat abrupt ending reveal just what a quirky little quartet this is.

The second movement, startling for beginning in D Major (quite foreign to the F Minor tonality of the first movement), prominently features a repeating descending theme by the cello and was highlighted by intensely beautiful piano responses from the other players. A wandering fugue built dramatically and the players maintained the tension gloriously throughout. The movement closed with the same D Major theme as at the start but an octave higher for a delightfully satisfactory ending.

The third movement, more of a march than a scherzo (as indicated by the composer) featured enthusiastic dotted themes. The central trio was exquisitely beautiful and really showcased the incredible ensembleship of the four players, developed over the course of the past 25 years playing together. The original scherzo theme returned once more, only quicker, and was played with intense energy and enthusiasm by the quartet.

After a slow opening, the final movement moved to dark and stormy *allegretto agitato*. This led to a light and bouncy ending which seemed out of place by comparison.

This, the shortest of Beethoven's quartets, almost certainly left the appreciative audience hungry for more from this incredible ensemble of players who were clearly just getting started.

The second half of the first half saw the quartet premiere a 2020-commissioned work by Australian Aboriginal composer, Deborah Cheetham, *Bungaree*. The work honours Bungaree, a Kuringgai man who assisted Flinders in his circumnavigation of Australia.

The opening movement, named for the day Bungaree died - November 24 - begins with the solo cello spelling out his name. A profound movement, Cheetham's music teems with moments of both tension and optimism, and features some wonderfully modern effects for the stringed instruments. This movement was remarkable for showcasing in particular the tremendous skill and talents of the quartet's cellist, Knighton, who played with intense focus and clear affection for the music.

The central movement, named for Bungaree's wife, Kaaroo, opened beautifully. Cheetham's luscious modern harmonies were only at times tinged with a hint of sadness. The movement eventually shifted into a quicker more energetic and chaotic section.

The third and final movement "Navigating the Truth", is named for the ongoing Australian struggle to forge a path forward for its indigenous and settler populations. Appropriately, it is a movement which upon hear-

ing seems to search for something. It is filled with a sense of the unresolved. Nevertheless, the music built magnificently as the quartet drove it forward with a sense of urgency and convincing passion.

This composition was received extremely warmly by the audience who sat stunned in silence for moments afterward taking in the music's drama and message before finally erupting into a deservedly-lengthy applause.

The second half of the concert was dominated by Dvorak's gargantuan *Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 81*, for which the Flinders Quartet warmly welcomed New Zealand pianist, Michael Houston to the stage.

The first movement opened with a beautiful statement from Knighton's cello. Almost immediately, one was struck by the incredible sense of ensembleship between the five players - as if Houston was but a long-lost member of the team. Together, the five delivered an extremely impassioned performance, each one taking turns sharing Dvorak's lovely theme and building to a terrifically and exuberant climax.

The second movement opens with a sad theme first introduced sublimely by Houston that alternated with a happier and more optimistic melody. The balance between the players was pure perfection and flawlessly cohesive throughout, the players each reacting to one another as they took turns caring and cradling the music in the moment.

The third movement - a fast Bohemian folk dance - featured a beautiful melody for Sellars atop the playful pizzicati of the other string players. Central to the movement was a sumptuously exquisite trio which was a particular musical highlight of the quintet.

The final movement was lighthearted and playful, and the players more than captured the spirit of Dvorak's music. The conclusion was exhausting but only in the most satisfying of manners.

The collaborative five were demanded to take two well-deserved bows by a grateful audience to whom the ensemble had more than endeared themselves.

Tauranga Musica never fails in its mission to present high-quality performances of chamber music to an appreciative community. And how fortunate we are to be attracting outstanding musical talent from across the Tasman in the form of the Flinders Quartet. Be sure not to miss pianist John Chen performing on Sunday, July 7 at Baycourt.

Chalium Poppy
Mount Maunganui, 2025