Isidore String Quartet
Phoenix Avalon, violin | Adrian Steele, violin
Devin Moore, viola | Joshua McClendon, cello
Shai Wosner, piano

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LISA GHERARDINI
Dinuk Wijeratne (b.1978)

STRING QUARTET NO. 2, IN C MAJOR, OP. 36 (1945)
Benjamin Britten (1913–76)
Allegro calmo senza rigore
Vivace
Chacony: Sostenuto

:: INTERMISSION ::

PIANO QUINTET IN F MINOR, OP. 34 (1862–5)
Johannes Brahms (1833–97)
Allegro non troppo
Andante, un poco adagio
Scherzo. Allegro
Finale. Poco sostenuto. Allegro non troppo

Isidore String Quartet’s appearance is supported, in part, by the Career Development Program of the Banff International String Quartet Competition. www.bisqc.ca
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LISA GHERARDINI

Dinuk Wijeratne

Composer 2022; 10 minutes

“As a composer, conductor, pianist, improvisor and experimenter across various musical genres, Dinuk redefines what a classical musician is and does,” says fellow Canadian composer and former professor Christos Hatzis. Sri Lankan-born, Dubai-raised, UK/US/Canada-educated Dinuk Wijeratne initially based an international career in Halifax, more recently in Toronto, and now in Ottawa, where he has been appointed Assistant Professor and Director of Orchestral Studies at the University of Ottawa.

The Disappearance of Lisa Gherardini was commissioned for the Canadian Commission Round of the 2022 Banff International String Quartet Competition. “Be creative!” is the first thing Wijeratne says in his performance notes to the musicians. “This should be a vehicle for your personality.”

Dinuk Wijeratne writes:

“This virtuoso musical escapade for string quartet is inspired by the audacious, real-life theft of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa from the Louvre Museum in 1911. The most famous painting in the world began its life very unassumingly. In 1503, it was created by Leonardo for the Florentine silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, who commissioned the portrait of his wife, Lisa Gherardini. The most famous painting in the world began its life very unassumingly. In 1503, it was created by Leonardo for the Florentine silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, who commissioned the portrait of his wife, Lisa Gherardini. The occasion marked the birth of their second son – especially significant given the tragically high levels of maternal and infant mortality in those days.

The extraordinary true story of the theft of the Mona Lisa reads like the plot of some sensational Hollywood movie. An inconspicuous Italian handyman named Vincenzo Peruggia hid overnight in one of the Louvre closets and chose exactly the right moment to emerge and lift the painting off the wall. As a former museum employee, he was familiar with the rhythm of the guards. The whole thing was, as they say, an inside job.

The music of this piece is fueled by the knowledge that it was, in fact, a high-profile theft land a subsequent two-year disappearance that skyrocketed the Mona Lisa from a relatively unknown artwork into legend. Unfolding in three sections, the piece is built upon two main themes representing ‘Lisa’ and ‘the heist,’ respectively. In the first section, as we imagine a young lady with an enigmatic smile posing for her portrait, Lisa’s theme is introduced on the cello as the violins evoke gentle brushstrokes. The second section is announced by a restless and slightly ‘wonky’ cello pizzicato groove – the heist is underway. As the perpetrators reach their mark, Lisa’s theme makes a rushed and unsettling reappearance as her portrait is whisked away. The music reaches a chaotic climax immediately after the violins imitate police sirens, and then collapses. The third section jump-cuts to present-day Paris. Lisa is back in her rightful place at the museum, elevated in stature, status and celebrity.

We tend to forget that Lisa was a real person. As I worked on this music, I thought less about the masterly technique and artistry of the portrait than I did about Lisa herself. I imagined her as a character who moved through time – from humble obscurity, through a sudden and mysterious disappearance, to the kind of over-hyped fame that attracts 30,000 visitors daily. I can’t help but wonder whether Lisa would have wanted all this attention, not to mention from all the selfie-takers.

In the last few seconds of the piece, the heist theme makes a brief appearance. Could Lisa be taken from us again? And might she actually prefer to disappear altogether?”

STRING QUARTET NO. 2, IN C MAJOR, OP. 36

Benjamin Britten

Composer 1945; 31 minutes

Purcell and Britten, two key figures on the English musical landscape, are brought together in this string quartet. Commissioned to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of Purcell, its première was on the anniversary date, November 21, 1945, one day before Britten’s 32nd birthday. Like Mozart and Dvořák, the young Britten played the viola, an instrument whose musical line lies at the heart of the musical texture.

The first movement grows out of the opening phrase, which is presented three times in quick succession, over a drone. Three separate themes can be detected, each with a different personality and springing from the interval of a rising tenth. Britten’s inventive development of these themes culminates when they are simultaneously presented in a gloriously intense and resonant passage before the coda.

The central scherzo, in the minor key, is darker in mood, maybe resulting from Britten’s wartime experiences and a recent performing trip he had taken with violinist Yehudi Menuhin to the German concentration camps. Its eerie, rather sinister mood – not unlike Shostakovich at times – is accentuated by the mutes of the four instruments which remain in use throughout. The finale is Britten’s tribute to Purcell in the musical form of a chaconne – a series of continuously evolving variations over a recurring bass line. Britten uses the old English spelling, Chacony, for his 21 continuously flowing variations, punctuated by cadenzas for each instrument. Britten’s quartet reveals the very qualities he admired in Purcell’s music: its clarity of purpose, skill in writing, its imagination and idiosyncrasy.

PIANO QUINTET IN F MINOR, OP. 34

Johannes Brahms

Composer 1862-5; 41 minutes

Brahms was a keen collector of original musical manuscript scores. The long gestation of his only piano quintet was to bring one of his most treasured scores into his collection. Brahms was particularly pleased with a two-piano version of what would later become the quintet and played it several times for private gatherings in 1864. Clara Schumann was his duo partner when they performed it before Princess Anna of Hesse. Pleased with the Princess’s unreserved appreciation, Brahms asked her to accept the dedication. When Op. 34 first appeared in print the following year, now as a piano quintet, the royal name remained on the title page. By way of thanks, Princess Anna presented Brahms with the autographed score of Mozart’s late G minor Symphony (K. 550). After Brahms’s death it passed, along with his library, to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, where it remains to this day.

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The F minor Piano Quintet is one of the landmark chamber works of the 19th century and one of a handful of successful piano quintets from any century. Yet the mellow, sustained sonority of the string quartet, combined with the brilliance of the piano was not an obvious choice for Brahms. He first wrote the work in its entirety as a string quintet – for quartet plus an additional cello, the favored instrumentation of Boccherini and of Schubert in his great C major Quintet. Initially satisfied with the work, Brahms sent it for comment to his friends, Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim. Both had reservations about the chosen medium. Brahms responded by saying, “It will be better if the work goes to sleep.” But he did make a two-piano transcription before consigning it to the fire. When this transcription was tried out a year later, it, too, was deemed too much an arrangement (though Brahms remained satisfied with the work and the two-piano version continues to have its champions today as Op. 34b). Clara Schumann suggested that Brahms make yet another arrangement. This time she felt that a compromise version, for piano and strings, would retain both the strength of the keyboard and the mellow sonorities of the strings.

Both later versions were eventually published, the former as a Sonata for Two Pianos and the latter, in 1866, as the work we know today as the Quintet in F minor, for piano and strings, Op. 34. Except for a few minor changes, the Piano Quintet is a literal transcription of the Sonata. The characteristic piano writing is transferred bodily to the solo piano part of the Quintet and the thematic material is divided equally between piano and strings. Certain string sections such as the introduction to the finale suggest that Brahms recalled part of the original string quintet version. The stormy opening movement has all the heart-on-sleeve emotion of Brahms’s early F minor Piano Sonata. Here, however, it is on a near-symphonic scale and has a distinctive tragic rather than heroic ring. The tender slow movement brings to mind the music of Schubert. It contrasts dramatically with the rhythmically driven Scherzo, with its own echoes of the hammering scherzos of Beethoven. The finale begins poignantly but the mood soon gives way to one of dramatic fire and zest.

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