

BRADEN The Raven Conspiracy

Sticks and Bones

Waltz of King and Claw

Something Shiny

The Raven Conspiracy

Carmen Braden

(b. Whitehorse, Yukon, 1985)

Commissioned and first performed by the Penderecki String Quartet in Yellowknife, NWT in 2013.

Program note by the composer:

Ravens hold special roles in Canada's north: trickster, companion, troublemaker... The word for a group of ravens is a conspiracy - quite fitting to their mischievous and intelligent nature and social behaviour. Since I was young, they have been one of my favourite animals to listen to and watch, and even talk with! This piece follows the Raven into its daily life, and also into its mysterious history.

Movement 1 - Sticks and Bones

Where did the raven come from? Deep in the centre of the Earth there was a huge nest made of dead jackpine trees and animal bones. An egg lay in the nest, surrounded by the slow heat and fire. A crack appeared. The being inside gathered its strength and burst from the shell! The baby Raven was as white as the bones when it first emerged. It clawed its way towards the surface of the Earth. Its feathers were ripped and made ragged, and its whole body became charred and black. It burst from the old, hard rock and into the sky.

Movement 2 - Waltz of Wing and Claw

In the spring mating-dance of the Raven, the birds fly in beautiful formations. Many areas around Yellowknife's highrises and hills have fantastic updrafts where dozens of Ravens gather to play in the wind and court their mates. They hang suspended as long as they can before swooping towards the ground - wingtips and clawtips touching.

Movement 3 - Something Shiny

Ravens are always the scavenger, always the opportunist. They are constantly searching for new, exciting distractions. Their calls are quirky yet operatic; their movements when hopping on the ground are jerky yet graceful. The only predictable thing about their behaviour is its unpredictability. They remind me of humans!

Quotes from the Quartet:

"When we started playing the Raven quartet in concerts, it got such an excited response! It's clear why. The piece is very programmatic in that you can close your eyes and vividly see all these raven behaviours. So when we recorded we had a chance to add fabulous raven masks, kudos to Aiyana for making those! I felt like I really turned into a big black quirky bird.

The movements are very distinct, all very exciting, but my favourite is the mesmerizing quality of the ravens sweeping elegantly through the air in the middle movement. Enjoy."

- Laura Veeze, Violin I

"Recording this piece in 2021 was a little like ravens, quirky and unpredictable, but what a joy to bring Carmen Braden's quartet to life. Growing up in the rainforest on Vancouver Island, the call of the raven was all around me as a child. Carmen's piece really brings these majestic birds to life, but also brings us to HER home, Yellowknife. Playing it felt like travelling north and exploring new places at a time when restrictions prevented us from doing so physically.

Despite several planned and cancelled sessions due to restrictions, I was thrilled to finally join my colleagues on the Winspear stage, a setting as majestic as the birds we were representing. A special highlight for me was replacing our usual masks with Aiyana's creations especially for this project, helping us turn into birds emerging in the first movement, swooping through the air in the second movement, and being entirely unpredictable in the third. I hope you enjoy this Canadian masterpiece."

- Meran Currie-Roberts, Cello

"It was a blast being a part of a little raven conspiracy to perform and record Carmen Braden's piece. She really captures the silly, precocious yet mysterious and haunting quality of these wonderful birds and it was an honour to play alongside my ESO colleagues to bring the score off the page. With the addition of cool lighting, next-level camera work, and amazing masks, the theatrics of the piece draw us into the world of the often maligned/often revered raven. I hope you enjoy this piece as much as I do!"

- Rhonda Henshaw, Viola