

# Music Professor composes string quartet as a unique gift between Carleton sweethearts

<https://carleton.ca/fass/story/the-sound-of-love-on-the-lake/>

By Nick Ward

When Professor of Music James Wright was asked by his friend David Cray, a retired professor in the Sprott School of Business, to compose a piece of music as a gift for his wife, Ellen Cray, a former Carleton Professor of applied linguistics, Wright challenged himself to create something personal, powerful, and also universally relatable.



"I have such a deep respect, admiration, and affection for both Ellen and David, and was profoundly honoured and grateful to receive this lovely – if initially somewhat daunting – commission request from them," says Wright.

Wright agreed to take on the project after spending time with the Crays at their beloved cottage on Lac Scattergood in the Outaouais region of southwestern Québec.

Situated close to Lac McGregor and the nearby town of Val-des-Monts, less than a one-hour drive from Ottawa, Lac Scattergood is named after the British Scattergood family that first settled there in the nineteenth century.

The Crays have cherished every moment spent together at their cottage since they purchased the property in 1997.

"The bond between David and Ellen, and their love of this peaceful place, surrounded by the rugged natural beauty of the McGregor Highlands region, shone through during our visits," says Wright.



Wright would use the tangible sentiment and ambience of the serene lake and his understanding of the many moods and textures of Ellen and David's life at their cottage to inform his creative process and inspiration.

Ultimately, his work would culminate in a four-movement string quartet titled *String Quartet No. 1 ("Ellen at Scattergood")*, an intimate composition that Wright feels should be accessible to all music lovers.

"The majority of the quartet's basic thematic ideas and their development are purely musical in nature, without extra-musical associations. However, the emotional character, texture, tempi, and rhythmic animation of each movement are inspired by Lac Scattergood and David and Ellen," says Wright.

Wright has been described as an 'unrepentant melodist,' and so the quartet's themes came to him quite spontaneously with the beauty of Lac Scattergood in mind.

Compellingly, the fugato of the opening movement features a subject and counter-subject that Wright conceived as Ellen and David in conversation. Then, at the end of the fugato section, Wright offers a momentary stylistic tip of the hat to Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1826), whose 250th anniversary was celebrated internationally in 2020, when the first movement was written.

*"I have held a lifelong love and fascination with the close relationship between music, movement and dance, and I hope the quartet's various moods – including joy, romance, playfulness, celebration, energy, vigour, drama, transcendence, nostalgia, serenity, peace and tranquillity – might be suggestive of choreographic interpretation at some point." – Dr. James Wright*

In the fourth movement, the opening motives of the Canadian and American national anthems can be heard subtly intertwining in the Rondo's second theme – a clever nod to David and Ellen, who would pursue their careers and raise their family in Canada but were both born and educated in America.

Wright was eager to fulfil David's lofty wish of creating art that rightly captured both Ellen's essence and the spirit of the Crays' cottage life together, and so he was rather apprehensive about receiving their response to *Ellen at Scattergood*. He gave the Carleton couple a sneak preview of the quartet, and they were delighted.



Lake Scattergood at dusk

"The good news is they have given me all four thumbs up, which has been deeply gratifying. I can only say that I hope they feel that I have captured, musically, at least some aspects of their serene yet exciting and intellectually-energized life together at Lake Scattergood," says Wright.

"The piece was the best birthday present ever, particularly wonderful because it was presented to me on the dock at Scattergood on a perfectly beautiful day, my birthday," recounts Ellen, who listens to the piece often.

"During the winter, it reminds me of being at the cottage and evokes all the pleasure of being in such a beautiful and peaceful place. I play it at the cottage and appreciate how perfectly James has captured the experience of being there."

*Ellen at Scattergood* was just as meaningful to David. "This quartet means a great deal to me for three reasons," he explains. "First, this is the only piece of art that I have commissioned, so seeing how it was accomplished has been fascinating. Second, James has produced such a lovely composition that has a life of its own. Again, being a part, even a small part, of that evolution provides a real sense of satisfaction. Third, and most importantly, James has beautifully captured the peace and tranquillity that we enjoy at our cottage on Lake Scattergood. Every time I listen to the piece, I am transported back there."



3rd movement – Scherzo-tarantella

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsSmNBIEV0>

The Crays are not the only ones who have been enchanted by the quartet. Various people across the music world have also offered their affirmations, which speaks to the work's universal accessibility.

For example, distinguished American composer John Cornelius II, Professor of Music at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, recently said of *Ellen at Scattergood*:

"James Wright's *Ellen at Scattergood* is a decisive string quartet with attitude! The pacing of the movements allows the listener to get inside the piece, and it takes traditional forms and genres (Tarantella, Waltz, Rondo) and turns them on their ear. This brilliantly sophisticated work has nothing to prove except its composer's audacity."

Wright's *String Quartet No. 1 ("Ellen at Scattergood")* will be featured on a new CD which was recorded entirely at Carleton Dominion-Chalmers Centre and will be released on the Halifax *Leaf Music* label in October of 2022.

The premiere performance of the quartet will be given by the extraordinary Andara Quartet of Montreal – Marie-Claire Vaillancourt (violin), Jeanne Côté (violin), Vincent Delorme (viola), and Dominique Beauséjour-Ostiguy (cello) – at the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival (a.k.a. “Chamberfest”) on Thursday, July 28, 2022, at 11:00 a.m., at the Carleton Dominion-Chalmers Centre.



The Andara String Quartet

"I'm really looking forward to the Andara Quartet's world premiere performance that will be given at our acoustically and architecturally gorgeous Carleton Dominion-Chalmers Centre," says Wright.

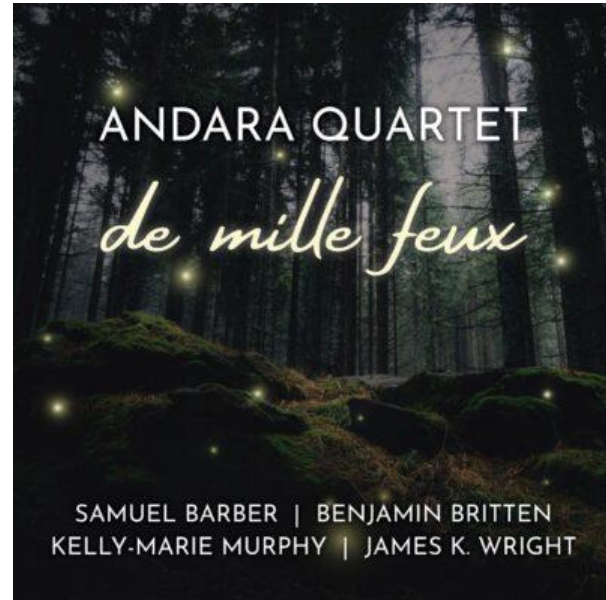
"I'm also looking forward to the October release of Andara's exciting new CD, "De mille feux," on the *Leaf Music* label."

*"The CD will feature my quartet together with works by another Canadian composer, my friend Kelly-Marie Murphy, and quartets by Samuel Barber and Benjamin Britten. There's nothing like the presence and spontaneity of live performance, and the Chamberfest premiere performance promises to be a very special event for the Andara Quartet, for me, for David and Ellen, and we hope for the .."*

## Introduction to the CD

"To shine with a thousand lights!"

Despite the innumerable traumas and nihilisms of the twentieth century, and the recently discovered perpetual expansion of interstellar voids, myriad forms of terrestrial energy continue to burst forth with light, passion, and life! Benjamin Britten, James Wright, Samuel Barber and Kelly-Marie Murphy have chosen to turn their gaze toward that which sparkles, toward those forces that move us and tear us away from an all too tempting apathy and defeatism. With this disc, the Andara Quartet celebrates this remarkable posture, this contemplation both lucid and phantasmagorical of the earth and the cosmos, and the beauty, sensuality and ultimately – again all odds, perhaps – the dizzyingly ironic yet undeniably fascinating fact of existence.



### **WORKS:**

1. String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25 — Benjamin Britten
2. Adagio for Strings (*Adagio molto* from the String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11) — Samuel Barber
3. Dark Energy — Kelly-Marie Murphy
4. String Quartet No. 1 ("Ellen at Scattergood") — James K. Wright