

Montage. Performers: The Saint John String Quartet. Saint John, NB: Leaf Music 73875992505, 2014. 1 compact disc (61:09). Contents: *String Quartet No. 2* / Anthony Genge (14:59) – *Subway Thoughts* / Eldon Rathburn (5:10) – *Selections from “Watercolours for Ten Fingers”* / Martin Kutnowski (10:52) – *Peter Emberley’s Dream* / Martin Kutnowski (3:04) – *Five Argentinean Folk Pieces* / Martin Kutnowski (8:15) – *Little Suite for String Quartet* / Talivaldis Kenins (7:24) – *Fantasy on Themes by Beethoven* / Michael R. Miller (8:35) – *Pastorale* / Richard Kidd (3:03).

Based in Saint John, New Brunswick, the Saint John String Quartet has become a widely recognized ensemble over the past twenty years. The performance schedule on their website identifies approximately 125 concerts a year in venues throughout Canada as well as the United States, Europe, and East Asia. Released in 2014, *Montage* represents their fifth recording.

According to Andrew Schartmann’s program notes, Canadian culture is challenging to define—a point of irony, given that our country’s diversity is often celebrated as one of the nation’s strengths. It is this broad range of geographical and cultural influences that the quartet has captured in *Montage*. The recording contains eight varied and fascinating works by six Canadian composers.

The disc opens with Anthony Genge’s three-movement String Quartet No. 2. Minimalist textures emphasizing non-functional intervals of thirds, fourths, and fifths pervade all three movements. Particularly effective are the many short sections made distinctive by the rapid contrasts in tempi and musical energy, engendering a mosaic of musical materials.

Eldon Rathburn’s *Subway Thoughts* is a programmatic interpretation not so much of the actual sound of a subway train, rather the physical experience one would have of a subway train approaching and leaving a station. The piece is an arch design, where the calm opening—the experience of waiting for a train—gradually increases in rhythmic and dynamic energy as the train approaches the subway station, only to return to the calmness as the train leaves.

The next work on the disc is the first of three by the Argentinian-born composer Martin Kutnowski. *Watercolours for Ten Fingers*, a transcription of pedagogical piano pieces for children, consists of six short movements, each of which represents a distant memory of the composer’s homeland. The vignettes are tonal in flavour, with clear ternary formal designs. One effective feature is the frequent interplay of melodic material between the viola/cello and the two violins. Despite the ubiquitous use of the minor mode, there is ebullience to the light-hearted character of these pieces.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Kutnowski's *Peter Emberley's Dream* builds on the New Brunswick folk song, "The Ballad of Peter Amberley." The ternary-designed movement is full of exuberance, perfectly capturing the lively character portrayed in the poem.

Kutnowski's third work, *Five Argentinian Folk Pieces*, draws its inspiration from traditional folk dances, incorporating their characteristic rhythms in a tonal framework, with overt formal designs (ternary design predominates the set) and expressive melodic gestures.

The next work on the recording is the Latvian-born composer Talivaldis Kenins' three-movement *Little Suite for String Quartet*. Neoclassical in style, each of the movements is evocative of Béla Bartók's harmonic language and approach to string writing. The outer fast movements, ternary in design, surround an expressive slow middle movement that is also ternary in design, although the opening material is abridged substantially.

Michael Miller's *Fantasy on Themes by Beethoven* is a reflection on the past, effectively integrating both tonal and atonal harmonic languages—at times juxtaposed almost simultaneously. The work is in four sections. The opening is an allusion to the Fifth Symphony's "fate knocking" motive; section two is a series of nine variations on the "Ode to Joy" theme; section three contains a kaleidoscope of various themes, including an overt reference to the Fifth Symphony's motive; the final section contains vague allusions to the Fifth and Ninth Symphony's themes, bringing the work to a calm repose.

The final composition on *Montage* is Richard Kidd's brief, three-minute *Pastorale*. The composer identifies the work as a response to the landscape overlooking his home in Darlings Island, New Brunswick. This slow, meditative piece is the most overtly tonal work on the recording, with occasional dissonances and subtle metric shifts generating interest. The soft opening of this arch-designed work gradually increases in rhythmic and textural complexity, only to return to the opening material, creating the calm repose that ends the work.

To sum up, this is a stimulating release that celebrates our cultural diversity through the music of six Canadian composers with very different musical influences. Along with the top-notch performances by the Saint John String Quartet, full marks are given to the producer and recording engineer, Jeremy VanSlyke: there is an immediacy and clarity to the recording that serve both the ensemble and the music well. The recording contains serviceable program notes by Andrew Schartmann, with translations in both French and Chinese.

Edward Jurkowski
University of Lethbridge