

Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

13 April 2013 – 4pm

THE VILLIERS QUARTET

Violin - James Dickenson | Violin - Tamaki Higashi | Viola - Carmen Flores | Cello - Nick Stringfellow

PROGRAMME NOTES *by John Woollard*

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976) – Three Divertimenti

1. March
2. Waltz
3. Burlesque

As a young man, Britten was a prolific composer, with over 100 compositions completed before the age of 18. Whilst the mature composer is perhaps best known for his stage and choral works such as Peter Grimes and the War Requiem, his early output contains many examples of very skilful compositions for small ensembles and solo instruments.

Apart from three numbered string quartets, Britten wrote these Divertimenti in 1933 when he was in his early twenties. They were extensively revised a few years later in 1936.

Perhaps Divertimento can best be “translated” as “pleasing entertainment” without necessarily any serious meaning, and without the formal structure and considerations of a multi movement string quartet. The

March contains spiky rhythms, sliding notes and colourful harmonics typical of music from the first half of the 20th century, with clear influences from Stravinsky, Bartók and Britten’s teacher Bridge. At the same time the music is tonal, accessible and appealing, as with most of Britten’s works throughout his career.

The Second movement Waltz nods towards the pastoral character of earlier English composers such as Vaughan Williams, with compelling textures and dialogue between the players, and the third movement returns to the rhythms, techniques and sonorities of the 20th century. The whole work demonstrates that Britten promised great things in his maturity; a composer of great skill, imagination and originality.

Britten also showed that he was dedicated to the mission of writing music for the public, without needing to retreat into an isolated intellectual world.

FREDERICK DELIUS (1862 – 1934) - String Quartet No. 2 in E minor, RT viii/8, ‘Late Swallows’

1. With animation - rather quieter
2. Quick and lightly - rather broader
3. Late Swallows - slow and wistfully
4. Very quick and vigorously - with bright and elastic movement

The first quartet was an early work (1888) that remained unplayed during Delius's lifetime of which only the last two movements and a fragment of the second now survive. This piece represents Delius’s only mature work for string quartet.

Delius' music is often described as 'romantic impressionism', and that is an apt way to think of this piece. It is a sumptuous work, and you will hear the lasting influence of his friend Grieg, tinged with the sensuality of Wagner and Richard Strauss. The absence of English models is no accident; though born English, his parents had emigrated from Germany, and Delius had his earliest successes in Germany and Norway, living most of his life in France.

The quartet is in four movements and was at least partly written in Norway. Delius originally wrote it in 3

movements and it was premiered in that form in England by the London String Quartet. Then in 1917 he added a Scherzo movement, and the 4-movement version was premiered in 1919 by the same ensemble.

The third movement, called "Late Swallows" is marginally better known from an orchestral version made by Eric Fenby, who acted as Delius’s assistant in his later life and was necessary because a syphilis infection made Delius increasingly disabled, including losing his eyesight.

Fenby’s description of the "Late Swallows" movement is worth quoting:

"The third movement... is a beautiful autumnal soliloquy in sound conjured up from thoughts of the swallows darting to and fro from the caves of the studios at Grez-sur-Loing, now that Delius and his wife have had to abandon their homes to the military authorities and flee from France in the 1st World War. ‘When we were away from home, Fred missed the swallows most’, Mrs Delius told, and I well remember his ‘Tell me, lad, are the swallows late this year?’"

----- Interval -----

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934) – String Quartet in E minor, Op. 83

1. Allegro moderato
2. Piacevole (poco andante)
3. Allegro molto

This was one of three major chamber music works composed by Sir Edward Elgar in 1918. The others were the Violin Sonata in E minor, Op. 82, and the Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84. Along with the Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85 of 1919, these were to be his last major works prior to his death in 1934.

Elgar had written a string quartet much earlier in his career, to which he assigned the opus number 8, but destroyed it. He made several other attempts, which all came to nothing. This quartet originated from a request by Carl Fuchs, cellist of the Brodsky Quartet and professor at the Royal Manchester College of Music. In February 1900, Elgar and his wife attended a performance of his Enigma Variations in Manchester, conducted by Hans Richter. At supper after the concert Richter introduced Elgar to Adolph Brodsky and his wife, and to Carl Fuchs. Fuchs then asked Elgar to compose a quartet for them. He agreed, but it was to be 18 years before the promise was kept.

In 1917, Elgar was ill and depressed by war-time London. Lady Elgar found "Brinkwells", a cottage surrounded by woods near Fittleworth in Sussex, in which he could work in seclusion away from the cares of the world. He began work on the String Quartet on 25 March 1918, while recovering in a nursing home after having his tonsils removed. He finished only the first subject of the first

movement at that time and then turned his focus to the Violin Sonata in E minor, completing it on 15 September. He then immediately set to work on the Piano Quintet in A minor. He interrupted work on that piece on 8 October to return to the Quartet; he completed the middle movement on 26 November, and the final movement on 11 December, and so the composition of the quartet straddles the Armistice at the end of World War 1.

The Quartet was first performed privately at the London home of his friend Frank Schuster, on 22 April 1919, and Elgar was assisted in the violin writing, as he had been in the writing of the Violin Concerto in B minor in 1909–10, by his great friend W. H. "Billy" Reed, leader of the LSO.

Lady Elgar was particularly fond of the C major slow movement, which was played at her funeral. She described it as 'captured sunshine'. The beautiful, simple (and simply beautiful) opening melody is one of those apparently artless Elgarian tunes which enshrine a world of lost innocence.

The String Quartet in E minor was dedicated to the Brodsky Quartet, led by Adolph Brodsky, in honour of the promise Elgar had made years earlier to write a work for them. However, the members of the Brodsky Quartet were now around 70 years of age, and the Quartet's public premiere was given by Albert Sammons and W. H. Reed, violins; Raymond Jeremy, viola; and Felix Salmond, cello, billed as the "British String Quartet". The premiere was given on 21 May 1919, at the Wigmore Hall, London.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

James Dickenson studied both in the UK and the USA and lists Lydia Mordkvitch, Danny Phillips, Jerry Horner, Wen Zhou Li, and Christopher Rowland as some of his many teachers and mentors. After graduating from the Royal Northern College of Music, James left the UK to lead the Degas Quartet in the USA. With this quartet James gave concerts all over the USA, in Carnegie Hall and at the Aspen Music Festival, and held various residencies in over ten universities. Since leaving the quartet in 2007, James returned to the UK to continue his teaching, performing, and chamber music career. An advocate of new music, James has worked closely with many American composers, including Jeffrey Mumford, Andrew Waggoner, and he is currently commissioning a new piece for violin from Shafer Mahoney.

Japanese-born violinist Tamaki Higashi started violin at the age of seven and was a multiple winner of the South Japan Music Competition in her hometown of Kagoshima. She was invited to study with Lewis Kaplan in New York City, and she received both her bachelors and masters degrees from the Mannes College of Music. After graduating in 2002 she founded the Degas Quartet. Together with her husband James, the Degas Quartet held residencies at Syracuse University and with the Western Piedmont Symphony, working closely with the Cassatt Quartet and Earl Carlyss of the Juilliard Quartet. The Degas Quartet toured frequently within the United States and was featured live on NPR broadcasts, appearing in many prestigious venues and festivals including Carnegie Hall, Aspen Music Festival, and the Library of Congress. She plays on a fine Italian violin by Antonio Ungarini of Fabriano, 1740.

Carmen Flores attended Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and studied viola at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, Canada. Her principal teachers were Yizhak Schotten and Steven Dann. In 2007 she was appointed Principal Viola of the Royal Ballet Sinfonia, the orchestra of the Birmingham Royal Ballet. She has also performed as guest principal viola with the orchestras of the Canadian Opera Company and the English National Opera. Nick Stringfellow began his musical education at Chetham's School of Music, performing in masterclasses at an early age with Heinrich Schiff and Janos Starker. After further study at the Royal Northern College of Music with Clive Greensmith, he completed his training at the Royal College of Music, studying jointly with Anna Shuttleworth and Anthony Pleeth.

Nick cut his chamber music teeth as cellist with the London Mozart Ensemble alongside violinist David le Page. He is Principal Cellist with the Orchestra of the Swan, often appearing as soloist with the orchestra and taking part in its extensive education and outreach programmes. Nick has performed with many ensembles including the Fitzwilliam String Quartet and the Brook Street Band, and he has recorded for EMI, Naxos, Somm and Orfeo labels. He is the featured cellist on Schott's Baroque around the World series and his trio Spirituoso is resident ensemble at Handel House.

Our next concert is Ritorica on Sunday 18 May at 4pm.

For more information on the artists and on future concerts, please visit www.wethersfieldchamberconcerts.org.uk