

Meridian

Edward Elgar
Anthony Payne
Josef Holbrooke
York Bowen

Primrose Piano Quartet

Susanne Stanzeleit - Violin

Dorothea Vogel - Viola

Andrew Fuller - Cello

John Thwaites - Piano

with

Ronald Woodley - Clarinet

Daniel Roberts - Violin



Edward Elgar (1857 - 1934)
Piano Quintet, Op. 84

Elgar's Piano Quintet, along with his Violin Sonata, String Quartet and Cello Concerto, is commonly described as belonging to an Indian Summer in the composer's output, and just as this meteorological phenomenon typically occurs after a sharp frost, its composition was preceded in the composer's life by a period of acute depression. From 1912 to 1917 Elgar had increasingly withdrawn into himself and was plagued by ill health, both mentally and physically. Following the cool reception of his Second Symphony in 1911, audiences seemed increasingly ambivalent toward his music and the arrival of war in 1914, despite an initial flurry of activity, did nothing but darken his depression. He did no 'real' work, as he put it, while the war dragged on, penning patriotic pièces d'occasion and charming, but slight, theatre music. His letters from this time constantly express a desire to be back in the countryside, away from noisy urban environments. In 1917, while touring the country with his patriotic cantata *The Fringes of the Fleet*, he lamented in typical fashion: 'Terrible gun-firing, raid, etc. ... I am not well and [Chatham] is so noisy and I do not sleep. The guns are the quietest things here. I long for the country ... I think all the time of it ... Everything good and nice and clean and fresh and sweet is far away – never to return.'

In May 1917, in a bid to assuage Elgar's need for peace and solitude, his wife, Alice, discovered a thatched, oak-beamed cottage just north of Fittleworth, Sussex. The cottage, called Brinkwells, included a studio in which he could compose undisturbed and was near to woods where he could walk for hours. Once installed Elgar settled into a peaceful routine, as he outlined to a friend: 'I rise about seven, work till 8.15 – then dress, breakfast – pipe, work till 12.30, lunch (pipe) – rest an hour – work till tea (pipe) – then work till 7.30 – change, dinner at 8. Bed at 10 – every day practically

goes thus ... We go for lovely walks ... the woods are full of flowers, wonderful ... it really is lovely here – food good and plentiful – much beer!' Such a routine and environment permitted Elgar's creativity to return and the composition of 'real' music.



The Piano Quintet is the most ambitious of the three chamber works he composed at Brinkwells and its genesis is an intriguing one since it is clear that external factors had an influence on the music. A sketch for the opening idea is noted on a sheet of manuscript dated 8 September 1918, but Alice's diary clearly indicates that work began in earnest on 15 September. Her ever-perceptive description of her husband's music gives several clues about the Quintet's inspiration: 'Wonderful weird beginning – evidently reminiscence of sinister trees and impression of Flexham Park ... Sad "dispossessed" trees and their dance and unstilled regret for their evil fate – or rather curse – wh. brought it on ... The sinister trees and their strange dance in it – then a wail for their sin – wonderful.' The arboreal references here relate to a group of dead trees with gnarled and twisted branches, 'a ghastly sight in the evening' as a visitor recalled. The trees were said to have inspired a local legend that they are the mortal remains of a group of



Spanish monks struck dead by lightning for carrying out unspecified impious rites. Scholars have not been able to find any local knowledge of such a legend, rather it appears that it was fabricated by the ghost-story writer, Algernon Blackwood, who visited Elgar two months before work began on the Quintet. Elgar had taken Blackwood on walks through the woods and the group of trees, later removed to allow for road development, probably stood in Bedham Copse, adjacent to Flexham Park. There is no record of a settlement of Spanish monks in the area, instead Blackwood appears to have imaginatively conflated some rather more prosaic facts: a community of Augustinian Canons living at nearby Hardham Priory and the presence of Spanish Chestnut trees (*Castanea sativa*) in the area.

Alice Elgar's diary entry also records that Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *A Strange Story* 'seemed to sound through [the Quintet], too' (the book had arrived at Brinkwells on 3 September at Elgar's request). Whether this was a shrewd insight on Alice's part or more simply a product of her own imagining is not clear, but on the basis of the former, at least one scholar has attempted to read the first movement of the Quintet as a depiction of certain events in the novel, which include supernatural elements (a character's youth is renewed at the expense of his soul) and a description of a gnarled, fantastic tree. But while the theory is interesting, one cannot help but feel it overcomplicates rather than clarifies, and that Elgar's music is more about atmosphere than narrative.

But what of the criticism of the swaggering theme? Did Elgar's invention fail him? The sheer incongruousness of the style, redolent of music hall or salon music (after much beer?), and the abrupt way in which it emerges out of the 'Spanish' music suggests it was a deliberate and calculated move, rather than a lapse of taste or creativity on Elgar's part (even if we may ultimately feel the move was misjudged). The

swaggering theme is actually a development of the 'Spanish' melody, rather than a distinct theme – both are related in terms of contour and rhythm – so it appears they represent two facets of the same object (the monks). Does Elgar's use of the music hall idiom, a decidedly secular idiom, emerging from the 'Spanish' theme point to the impious activity of the monks? Certainly one might go as far as to describe the inclusion of such 'commonplace' music as 'sinful'.

Such doubts as to the consistency of invention do not hang over the Adagio, which is vintage Elgar. It is known that he was especially pleased with this movement but there are no real clues as to what, if anything, inspired this music, written following the end of the war. Despite being deep in the countryside, the hostilities had never been out of Elgar's mind (the guns of Flanders were audible in Sussex) and so it may be that the Adagio is an early example of remembrance music. A long, beautifully lyrical melody unfolds, initially in the viola, tinged with some wistful, Fauré-esque harmonic progressions. This calm mood dominates the movement but a second section, with its recitative-like, conversational style, is increasingly harmonically unstable and when this music returns part way through the development an increasing anxiety eventually precipitates a harrowing crisis of despair. The eventual return of the opening viola melody soothes and placates the mood, and ultimately provides an apotheosis, but at the close of the movement there is a sense that a shadow still hangs over the music.

The finale begins by recalling the lamenting idea from the first movement, indeed, two further themes from this movement return during the course of the finale. This cyclic technique was common in the chamber music of Franck and Fauré, which we know Elgar admired, but there is a strong sense that the purpose of these thematic reminiscences in Elgar's quintet is for



reasons more than just structural neatness. Once the main Allegro of the finale is underway, marked con dignita, it is clear the music is aiming at some sort of heroic resolution, yet this objective is undermined at various points. The second subject's repetitive rhythmic character gives the impression of an accompaniment for a melody which is absent; the mood is merry but something seems to be missing, and the second phrase, with its sighing chromatic descent, suggests a thinly disguised despair. During the development section the music dissolves into a mysterious watery texture, the music falters and the Salve Regina theme emerges through the musical mist like some ghostly visitation. The swaggering theme follows but now quite shorn of its ebullience and presented as a delicate, almost spectral, lilting waltz. What in the first movement appeared trite, now feels acutely poignant. In his war-time letters Elgar increasingly communicated an acute nostalgia for his tranquil childhood in provincial Worcestershire and this nostalgia seems perfectly reflected in this sentimental episode yet its almost saccharine quality infers that Elgar was aware these things were 'far away – never to return.' At the reprise one might be led to believe that the heroic con dignita theme will gain the upper hand, but increasingly chromatic gestures thwart its path such that at the Grandioso coda it is the second subject which emphatically dominates, its descending chromatic line and gathering tempo presenting a vertiginous, almost nightmarish, dash to the closing bars.

Gareth Thomas

Anthony Payne (b.1936)

Piano Quartet (2015)

written for the Primrose Piano Quartet

Payne's new Piano Quartet was commissioned by the Primrose Quartet, with the help of funds from the RVW Trust and the Britten-Pears Foundation. Of the work, the composer writes: "Like many of my pieces, this Piano Quartet is laid out in one continuous movement, re-organising and re-shaping many of the devices and processes of traditional symphonic structures – but within a post-tonal context. Some of my chamber (and indeed orchestral) pieces draw their material from extra-musical sources, like *A Day in the Life of a Mayfly*, but the Piano Quartet is a piece of music pure and simple, even if its evolutionary growth can be distantly related to natural processes. This, after all, is probably true of most music. Its opening section is expository, introducing each of the four instruments in turn. The violin opens with a busy line over punctuating piano chords. Soon this thread is passed to the viola while the violin spins a calmer line, and then the cello continues with viola as well as violin in support. The section closes as the piano, released from its chordal duties, is at last able to assert its individuality with newly energetic hopping and dancing phrases above rustling strings. In the next section this material is extended, and, as each instrument is given prominence in its turn (shadowing the exposition's behaviour) a more obvious lyricism begins to emerge. The piano, for instance, can at last exploit the harmonic richness of which it is capable, and this encourages the strings to generate some richly chordal phrases of their own. The work's central span is reached as the strings unfold a long sequence of slowly shifting harmonies, with occasional pillars of sound from the piano. More development ensues, which leads to the Quartet's boldest melodic arch, where violin, and then viola and cello in octaves, sing a new song above the keyboard's sonorous accompaniment. A review of the section's opening sequence of harmonies dies away and leads to



the Coda. Here, a new world is revealed, as fleet demi-semiquavers in three octaves of strings race for the work's horizon. Tiny references to earlier events arrest the progress, and the music finally sinks to a point which is just out of sight and hearing."



Anthony Payne was born in London in 1936 and educated at Dulwich College and Durham University. An extensive list of commissions includes four major works for the BBC Proms as well as works for the BBC Philharmonic and London Sinfonietta. His discography includes three CDs of chamber music. He has published books on Schoenberg, Frank Bridge, and Elgar's Third Symphony, the completion of which, in 1997, brought him worldwide acclaim. There are now six CDs of this in the catalogue. He has been Visiting Professor at Mills College, California and Composition Tutor at the New South Wales Conservatorium, Australia, and is a frequent broadcaster for BBC Radio and Television. He holds Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Birmingham, Durham and Kingston, and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Music. He is married to the soprano Jane Manning, with whom he formed the ensemble Jane's Minstrels in 1988.

Recording Anthony Payne's Piano Quartet

The existential question of where to locate a new work becomes all the more acute when the score is relatively unencumbered with performance instructions, but the performers have unusually generous access to the composer. Anthony Payne worked with us before the premiere, attended subsequent performances and the recording sessions, and has most recently added some additional figuration to the opening twenty bars of the piano part, such that this recording is itself part of an evolving storyline. The Primrose strings, in particular, understood the musical language of this work in the context of performing earlier works by Payne; and we are all now better able to understand the work retrospectively in the context of the expanded canvas of the 2016 Proms Commission "Of Land, Sea and Sky".

Some specifics merit mention, since Anthony was so clear with his suggestions. The metronome marks may be interpreted as a little precautionary. Both dramatic dance material and slow calm passages can move forward; in the latter case long silent rests may be shortened to better sustain the line, and bars 150 to 160 are quasi senza misura. All the quiet filigree demisemiquavers and sextuplet semiquavers sound beautiful with generous pedalling, sometimes to the point of creating harmony in the pedal. Dynamics are contextual and can be used to clarify voice-leading (e.g. bar 53, where marking the piano up to mezzo forte from the second beat establishes the motivic relationship with the forte 'cello entry one bar later). Although aesthetically multifaceted, there are passages of lyric abandon which invite the full panoply of romantic expression: swirling rubato in pedalled accompanying piano figures to, for example, a richly hued treatment of the violin melody in bar 127.

The Primrose Piano Quartet would like to thank Anthony Payne both for this wonderful piece and for the pleasure of working on it with him.

John Thwaites.



York Bowen (1884–1961)
Phantasy Quintet, Op. 93

for bass clarinet and string quartet

The works of York Bowen, especially those for solo piano, various chamber groups and the symphonies, have seen a notable reappraisal in recent years, after a long period of serious neglect. His remarkable Phantasy Quintet, Op. 93 for bass clarinet and string quartet, probably dating from around 1932, was for many decades virtually unknown in the clarinet repertory, partly because it remained unpublished and difficult to obtain until the start of the present century. The première seems to have taken place around 1940, with Walter Lear as bass clarinetist, for whom the work was probably composed; a second performance is documented as part of the Bowen centenary celebrations at the Royal Academy of Music (with which Bowen had close associations) in 1984. Very little is known about the gestation of the work, or the reasons for its composition. Its title strongly suggests that it was composed in the wake of the extended ripples of influence from Walter Willson Cobbett's earlier series of chamber Phantasy competitions and commissions for single-movement, free-form works of around twelve minutes' duration, inspired ultimately by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century instrumental Fantasy. Beneficiaries of Cobbett's particular fancy for the Phantasy had included figures such as William Hurlstone, Frank Bridge, John Ireland and Vaughan Williams, as well as York Bowen himself in 1911.

This Quintet, compressing elements of a full four-movement sonata into its single-movement free arch-form, is unique for the period in its skilful integration of bass clarinet with string quartet. Notwithstanding Bowen's lack of direct models, though, the work shows an astonishingly fine sense of the lyrical and textural capabilities of the instrument, whose late romantic solo and chamber repertory, apart from the 1928 Sonata for bass clarinet and piano by Othmar Schoeck, is remarkably thin for an instrument otherwise so highly prized in the orchestral repertory.

Josef Holbrooke (1878–1958)
Ballade for bass clarinet and piano

A near-contemporary of York Bowen, Josef Holbrooke rose from relatively humble musical origins, continuing in his father's line of business in the music-hall and various touring theatrical productions. After studies at the Royal Academy of Music he gained some considerable prominence as classical pianist and composer in the early 1900s, with significant commissions, especially of large-scale orchestral, choral, and even multimedia works, from across the British festival and concert circuits. He was, at least for a period until his later neglect, championed by notable figures of the musical establishment, such as Beecham, Elgar and Henry Wood, and enjoyed very considerable financial support from Lord Howard de Walden (Thomas Evelyn Scott-Ellis), which enabled a continuity of performance and publication opportunities that might otherwise have eluded him. Among his extensive chamber output are a number of fine, elaborate works for clarinet and strings, and clarinet and piano, composed across his career from the 1890s to the 1930s. These have been comprehensively catalogued in Holbrooke's most recent biography, edited by Paul Watt and Anne-Marie Forbes (2015); but one additional, slightly perplexing work missing from his accepted work-list is this Ballade, recorded here for the first time. Published as late as 1950, there seems to be no surviving documentation in the family archives regarding its composition, no opus number attached, nor any information other than that offered on its title-page, which provides for a choice of instrumentation of 'pianoforte and cor anglais, bass clarinet in B flat, solo bassoon or solo horn in F'. The short piece contributes, however, an extremely valuable and lyrical addition to the meagre repertory of late romantic works for bass clarinet and piano. For the present recording, some editorial octave transpositions in the solo part, clearly sanctioned by the composer for the various alternative instrumentations, have been incorporated, in order to take advantage of the full expressive range of the modern bass clarinet.

Ronald Woodley

The internationally renowned **Primrose Piano Quartet** was formed in 2004 by four of the UK's leading chamber musicians (members of the Lindsay, Maggini and Allegri quartets), and is named after the great Scottish violinist, William Primrose. Their acclaimed discography includes favourites such as Brahms's G minor (recommended on Radio 3) and British repertoire featuring major commissions from Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Anthony Payne (premiered at the Cheltenham Festival, King's Place London and Sound Festival). The Quartet enjoy a busy performing schedule throughout the UK and abroad with recent tours taking them to Denmark, Germany and Bulgaria in addition to regular appearances at London's Kings Place, Wigmore and Conway Halls. Their own festival in West Meon, Hampshire is now in its sixth year, and they have been appointed ensemble-in-residence for the Battle Festival.

www.primrosepianoquartet.org.uk
www.westmeonmusic.co.uk

A founding member of the Castalian String Quartet, **Daniel Roberts** is represented by the Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) and won First Prize at the 2015 Lyon International String Quartet Competition in addition to numerous awards from the RPS, ROL and other renowned trusts.

Daniel has a busy performing career both as soloist and chamber musician, regularly appearing in London's major concert halls as well as festivals throughout the UK and in Germany, France, Italy, the U.S. and Hongkong. His chamber music partners have included Nils Mönkemeyer, Simon Rowland-Jones, Alasdair Beatson and the Chilingirian String Quartet.

In 2009 Daniel was awarded the Musicians Benevolent Fund 'Emily English' Award for 'most outstanding violinist' and in 2010 the Philharmonia Orchestra MMSF 'John E. Mortimer' Prize. Daniel teaches violin at Birmingham Conservatoire and St. Paul's Girls' School and has given masterclasses at St. Mary's Music School

and in various music schools and conservatoires in China and Australia.

He is a Yeoman of the Worshipful Company of Musicians and is extremely grateful to them for the loan of a fine violin by Joseph Guarneri filius Andrea of 1705.

Ronald Woodley enjoys a wide-ranging career in musicology and performance, as both clarinettist and chamber pianist, and has been Professor of Music at Birmingham Conservatoire since 2004. Previously he held academic positions at the RNCM in Manchester, as well as the Universities of Lancaster, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Christ Church, Oxford. As clarinettist he has commissioned or been the dedicatee of a number of new works, including a series of bass clarinet duos in the 1990s, performed in partnership with Roger Heaton. His recording of Liz Johnson's new quintet for multiple clarinets and string quartet, *Scintilla*, will be issued in 2017 on the Divine Art label, with the Fitzwilliam Quartet. Ron's academic research has focused on late medieval music theory, and on performance studies, including work on Ravel, Prokofiev, Steve Reich, and pianists in the circles of Brahms and Clara Schumann, especially Ilona Eibenschütz.

This recording was made with the support of research funding from Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University



The Primrose Piano Quartet on Meridian, available from www.meridian-records.co.uk



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The Primrose Piano Quartet and Guests
Elgar - Payne - Bowen - Holbrooke

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Recorded in
The Adrian Boult Hall,
Birmingham Conservatoire 16-18 Sept 2015
Recorded by **Richard Hughes**
Produced by **Jonathan Lyness**
Edited by **Susanne Stanzeleit**



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The Primrose Piano Quartet and Guests

Edward Elgar

Piano Quintet in A minor, Op.84

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|------------------------|-------|
| [1] Moderato - Allegro | 13:49 |
| [2] Adagio | 11:36 |
| [3] Andante - Allegro | 10:37 |

Anthony Payne

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| [4] Piano Quartet (2015) | 17:01 |
|--------------------------|-------|

York Bowen

- | | |
|--|-------|
| [5] Phantasy Quintet for
Bass Clarinet and Strings, Op.93 | 13:46 |
|--|-------|

Josef Holbrooke

- | | |
|---|------|
| [6] Ballade for Bass Clarinet and Piano | 6:42 |
|---|------|

Susanne Stanzeleit - Violin

Dorothea Vogel - Viola

Andrew Fuller - Cello

John Thwaites - Piano

with

Ronald Woodley - Clarinet

Daniel Roberts - Violin



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The Primrose Piano Quartet and Guests
Elgar - Payne - Bowen - Holbrooke

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