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**GRAHAM
FITKIN
STRING
QUARTETS
SACCONI QUARTET**

GRAHAM FITKIN STRING QUARTETS

1	Servant	[13.09]	5	String	[9.10]
2	Inside	[24.42]	6	Pawn	[20.28]
3	A Small Quartet	[2.13]			
4	Another Small Quartet	[1.59]	Total timings:		[71.43]

SACCONI QUARTET

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Ever since my painful and ultimately aborted attempts to play the violin as a teenager I have viewed composing for string quartets with a degree of wariness. But I've always enjoyed listening to them. The string quartet medium seems to me to thrive in contexts of both poignant intimacy or extrovert forceful information overload. (And indeed all those delicate shades in between.) I feel it has a strength of purpose that I relish, an honest homogeneity to it, a good wide pitch range and quite frankly the ability to play decent long sustained notes or short pizzicati. It's been all too tempting.

These quartets were written between 1992 and 2007 and over those fifteen years I would have expected a certain amount of change in their sound. After all, everything else changes at such

a rate these days that the idea of things not changing raises the spectre of potential luddism. And that surely would never do. But on listening to them recently I thought how little had changed. Of course there are differences in harmonic language, melodic stridency, architectural handling, and the quartets focus on slightly different things but at their core I feel the same desire for control and the idea of freedom versus rigour are evident in all of them. And the uncertainty too.

I am indebted to The Sacconi Quartet for their hard work, focus and lovely playing, to Raphael Mouterde for his patience and meticulous ears, and to Signum and Steve Long for their support in releasing this album. Thank you.

© Graham Fitkin

STRING QUARTETS GRAHAM FITKIN

Graham Fitkin is a prolific composer and his substantial catalogue of compositions, assembled over the last thirty years or so, ranges wide over many different mediums, including over two dozen orchestral scores, two chamber operas, numerous pieces for ensembles large and small, works for solo and multiple pianos, music for his own nine-piece band and collaborations with his partner, the Scottish harpist Ruth Wall. Fitkin has lived most of his life on the Penwith peninsula, in the far west of Cornwall. Born there in 1963, he left to study at Nottingham University and then on to the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, where he was one of the first British students of the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen. On returning to the UK he lived for a short time in London before moving back to Cornwall at the start of the 1990s.

This disc contains all the music that Fitkin has so far composed for string quartet: six works written between 1992 and 2007. It has previously been remarked upon elsewhere that he has shown a fondness for ensembles which essentially consist of a single timbre. A great many of his early works, from the mid

1980s to the early 1990s, were written for monotimbral ensembles, including *Log, Line and Loud* (1989-1991), a triptych of pieces composed for the piano sextet Piano Circus, *Stub* (1991) for saxophone quartet, *Hook* (1991) for a quartet of marimbas, *Fract* (1989) for piano duo, *Vent* (1994) for four clarinets and a number of pieces for the scoring of four players at two pianos, the earliest manifestation of Fitkin's own performing group. His use of single timbre scoring for these works allows him to focus properly and intently on structure and on matters of pitch and rhythm and to not be overly distracted by colouristic resources. To a certain extent one can relate this to the strategy of the American minimalists, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, in their early works, in which the use of groups of similar or identical instruments clearly articulates process and that this articulation of process is more important than anything else in the piece. But creative artists evolve over time and Fitkin's later compositional explorations have invariably moved the focus away from the pure monotimbral canvases of his early music. Since the mid 1990s his large orchestral output shows him embracing all the colour an orchestra can throw at him. In a fairly recent work, *Intimate Curve* (2015), the competing timbral resources of the

orchestra are central to the architecture of the piece. A rich timbral palette of another sort is also to the fore in his two collaborative albums with Ruth Wall. Performing as Fitkin Wall, the focus of this duo is the marriage of both digital electronica and analogue synthesizers with the distinctive sound of Wall's three harps.

But certain projects allow him to return now and again to single timbre ensembles and the string quartet is perhaps the ultimate monotimbral beast. It is given a large pitch range by the variety of the instruments involved and also great scope for colouristic inflection by the use of pizzicato, different uses of vibrato and by the various positions of the bow and finger on the strings and fingerboard. Despite all that it remains an ensemble made up of four instruments of the same type and therefore exists within a certain defined timbral bandwidth. This gives Fitkin ample opportunity to concentrate on a favourite technique: rhythmic unison. It's something he has used throughout his output to great effect - witness the opening of the percussion quintet *Partially Screaming* (2013) or the ensemble work *Mistaken Identity* (2006) for one of his finest deployments of rhythmic unison - and it is central to two of the works on this disc,

Servant (1992) and *Pawn* (2004). There's something very compelling about a number of players fixated on the same complex rhythmic line, all endeavouring not to fall out of step with any of the others. In *Servant*, commissioned by the Smith Quartet and also existing in the composer's own arrangement for string orchestra made in 1998, the string quartet presents the opening material in strict rhythmic unison as if it were one instrument. Gradually the texture opens out, the ensemble splitting into two parts, then three and so on. The piece traces an evolving polyphony and the individual sections are strongly defined by their relationship with the original unison material. At the end of this 13-minute single movement, the perspective of the single instrument makes a concluding return. In *Servant* Fitkin uses rhythmic unison as a jumping off point for the evolution of the piece but in *Pawn*, a BBC commission for the Duke Quartet at the Cheltenham Festival, he is bolder in his explorations; during its 20-minute span the quartet almost never deviates at all from a state of rhythmic unison.

Pawn and *Inside* (2006) are examples of a particular type of formal structure sometimes found in Graham Fitkin's more recent work. In

1993 he provided a programme note for the premiere of his ensemble piece *Ardent*. Fitkin wrote the following about the changing characterisation of his music:

Much of my music starts in a certain way and doesn't deviate from those parameters set up at the opening. For instance if the piece is loud and fast then so be it for the whole thing. Ardent was the first piece in which I decided to incorporate different parameters (maybe different emotional slants) in the same piece.

As with the gradual shift from an initial fixation on single timbre ensembles, here too Fitkin's approach has evolved over the years. Both *Pawn* and *Inside* start softly, with music that is slow and sustained, but then the music in both quartets becomes faster, louder, very rhythmic and animated and finally returns to a version of the original slow material, in more truncated form. There's a rough overall ABA structure to the two pieces but this is reached in different ways. The chordal sequences in *Pawn* break down into different types, which alternate and work in tandem with each other. The harmony and pacing of the chords is constantly evolving in small increments - there

is no exact repetition of anything - lending the music an uncertain, uneasy feeling. Defined partly by register and - unusually for Fitkin - partly by the differing amounts of vibrato deployed, the slow chord sequences in the opening section occupy a time span of nearly 10 minutes before the first loud intervention. And when this comes it really is an intervention... short, stabbing chords appearing periodically out of nowhere. The loud accented material gradually takes over - always in rhythmic unison - and evolves into something more constant, eliminating the presence of the opening material, propelled by obsessive rhythmic figures, until it is all abruptly pulled back and gives way to a reprise of the opening music. But there is no easy conclusion, this is not comforting music by any stretch of the imagination. As the composer observes in his own programme note, it is really quite bleak.

The ending of *Inside* (2006), which was commissioned by the Elysian Quartet, seems much more conclusive. In part this is due to the cadential nature of the main material in the slow sections: a three-note stepwise falling figure which seems always to be resolving. Compared to *Pawn*, the structure of *Inside* seems somewhat more conventional; the music

starts to change character about a quarter of the way through the piece after which the composer embarks upon an extended kaleidoscopic 'middle' section with sharply defined blocks of rhythmic energy rotating round each other. Fitkin controls the pacing and sequence of events in a masterly way, racking up the tension to level after level as this section progresses.

Graham Fitkin's tendency is to avoid multi-movement structures. *Servant*, *Pawn* and *Inside* are all examples of the most common structural type in his output, a single span of music lasting anything from seven or eight minutes to half an hour. Many of his works are composed as extended single movements like this. *A Small Quartet* (1993) and *Another Small Quartet* (1994), both written for the Smith Quartet, are examples of another structural type that he regularly employs, the standalone miniature. In the late 1980s he started to produce short pieces for piano, each a few minutes long, informed to a large extent by composers such as Satie and Skempton. Reflective in mood, pithy in utterance, they were often written for concerts of his work to provide contrasting moments to the predominantly hard driving rhythmic music

that he was writing at the time. His debut CD 'Flak', released in the early 1990s by Factory Classical, shows this contrast very clearly; if it had been released on vinyl there would have been a clear side one / side two dichotomy, with the first 'side' featuring his highly rhythmic and multi-layered music for multiple pianos, contrasting on the other hand with a 'side' of solo piano miniatures. The two quartets on this disc are very brief indeed, just a couple of minutes each. They are built on fleeting, uncertain gestures which are put through a number of harmonic changes or alterations. The ground covered in the short two-minute span seems huge, the music managing to demonstrate a certain degree of forward momentum while remaining essentially static.

String (2007), composed for and premiered by the Sacconi Quartet at Wigmore Hall (11th March 2008), is another single span of music but in the way it behaves it is something else altogether. It avoids the composer's usual predilection for block structures and sharply defined materials and instead concentrates on an elusive counterpoint, in which the composer loops a number of short phrases against each other. Lines and sections bleed into each other, creating a texture of blurred

polyphony that is fluid and elastic. There is a quite startling change of texture around two thirds of the way through where the predominant argument is suddenly and brutally interrupted by some climactic arpeggiation; just as suddenly it returns to where it was before that happened and the texture runs its course before drifting off. There's no evidence that Fitkin regards the Cornish landscape and culture as a tangible influence on his work. But this writer at least finds it impossible to disregard the feel of an elemental, 'English mystic' type of music in *String* and was reminded of a certain Englishness or mystic pastoralism from the mid to late 20th Century... there are moments where it's not a million miles away from Michael Tippett. There really is nothing quite like *String* in Graham Fitkin's output.

© Laurence Crane

GRAHAM FITKIN

Graham Fitkin lives and works as a composer in Cornwall.

Graham has collaborated with many performers of new music including Nederlands Blazersensemble, Yo-Yo Ma, Kathryn Stott, Smith Quartet, 10:10 Ensemble, Piano Circus, Ensemble Bash and Sacconi Quartet.

Between 1994 and 1996 Graham was resident composer with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic



© Lottie Davies

Orchestra. Since then commissions have come from the Halle, BBC Philharmonic, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, RSN0, Athens Camerata, BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Graham has worked frequently with choreographers and dance companies including Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company, Wayne McGregor's Random Dance, Pacific Northwest Ballet, New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Bi-Ma, Sidonie Rochon, Munich Ballet and National Ballet of Portugal. He won the International Grand Prix Music for Dance Award in 2000.

Over the past 20 years Graham has directed educational and community projects including 3 UK PRS Composer residencies, 9 regional community projects, university seminars, masterclasses and directed workshops in UK, Japan, Italy and Soweto.

Recent works include Circuit, a double concerto for two pianos and orchestra, Lens for Janine Jansen and Twenty Six Days for 10:10 at HCMF. From 2007 to 2009 he was Composer in Residence with London Chamber Orchestra.

2011 highlights included a Cello Concerto for Yo-Yo Ma at the Proms and a new production

'Mindset' for the Royal Ballet. 2012 saw a new commission for the London Olympics, a new opera for the ROH in collaboration with Jasmin Vardimon and work for aerial theatre company Ockham's Razor with Ruth Wall. In 2013 he composed for Les Percussions Claviers de Lyon and wrote a new orchestral work to celebrate 2014 European City of Culture, Umea in Sweden.

In 2015 Graham was commissioned by RLPO for a new concerto for orchestra 'Intimate Curve' and toured the FitkinWall album LOST in UK and Italy. The following year he composed new work for the Royal Aeronautical Society and St George's Bristol, and recorded two albums with his own band, before touring the UK.

The first performance of his new Recorder Concerto took place in May 2017 with Sophie Westbrooke and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Also in 2017 he was commissioned to compose a new orchestral and choral work for the Three Spires 40th Anniversary based on Sir Humphry Davy.

SACCONI QUARTET

Ben Hancox *violin*
Hannah Dawson *violin*
Robin Ashwell *viola*
Cara Berridge *cello*



© Emilie Bailey

Performing with style and commitment, the Sacconi Quartet is known throughout the world for its creativity and integrity of interpretation. Formed in 2001, its four founder members continue to demonstrate a shared passion for string quartet repertoire, infectiously reaching out to audiences with their energy and enthusiasm. The Quartet enjoy a highly successful international career, performing regularly throughout Europe, at London's major

venues, in recordings and on radio broadcasts. The Sacconi is Quartet in Association at the Royal College of Music and Associate Artist at the Bristol Old Vic.

The Quartet has given over twenty world premières and British premières, including works by Graham Fitkin, Jonathan Dove, John McCabe, György Kurtág, Paul Patterson, Simon Rowland-Jones, John Metcalf and Robin Holloway, and they performed as the solo string quartet on Paul McCartney's hit song *Come Home*. The Quartet has been joined on stage by countless musicians including Pekka Kuusisto, Freddy Kempf, Melvyn Tan, Simon Crawford-Phillips, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Guy Johnston, Alasdair Beatson, Tom Poster, Matthew Rose, Bellowhead's Jon Boden and actor Timothy West.

The Quartet's Sacconi Chamber Music Festival in Folkestone is an established event in the cultural calendar and is expanding year on year with challenging programming and exciting collaborations. Firm believers in the importance of bringing chamber music to the next generation, the Sacconi Quartet dedicates much passion, time and energy to education work. They regularly lead workshops and give school and family concerts as part of

the Sacconi Chamber Music Festival outreach programme and the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust.

In Damascus, their CD of music by Jonathan Dove including *In Damascus*, commissioned by the Quartet, and featuring Mark Padmore and Charles Owen, hit the Classical Top Ten and was chosen as Gramophone Magazine's Recording of the Month: "This important release cannot be recommended too highly." The Quartet's recording of Beethoven Op. 132 and Mendelssohn Op. 13, the first commercial pairing of these closely related works, was released on Sacconi Records in 2016, and received a 5-star review in Classical Music. The previous release, a disc of Czech quartets, was received with widespread critical acclaim and is regularly broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM. The Quartet's debut recording of Haydn's Op. 54 quartets was praised in the press and both their Ravel and Haydn CDs were featured in The Full Works programme on Classic FM. They have also recorded for Signum, NMC and Champs Hill Records, and their 2006 Naxos recording of Finzi's song cycle *By Footpath* and *Stile* with baritone Roderick Williams was well received in all the national broadsheets and BBC Music Magazine.

The name Sacconi Quartet comes from the outstanding twentieth-century Italian luthier and restorer Simone Sacconi, whose book *The Secrets of Stradivari* is considered an indispensable reference for violin makers. Ben Hancox plays a 1932 Sacconi violin and Robin Ashwell a 1934 Sacconi viola, both made in New York. Hannah Dawson plays a 1927 Sacconi violin made in Rome, and Cara Berridge plays a Nicolaus Gagliano cello from 1781. Ben, Hannah & Cara have all been generously loaned these instruments by the Royal Society of Musicians, a charity which helps musicians in need, for which they are extremely grateful. Robin is indebted to Ellen Solomon for the use of his viola.

www.sacconi.com

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SignumClassics, Signum Records Ltd., Suite 14, 21 Wadsworth Road, Perivale, Middx UB6 7JD, UK.
+44 (0) 20 8997 4000 E-mail: info@signumrecords.com
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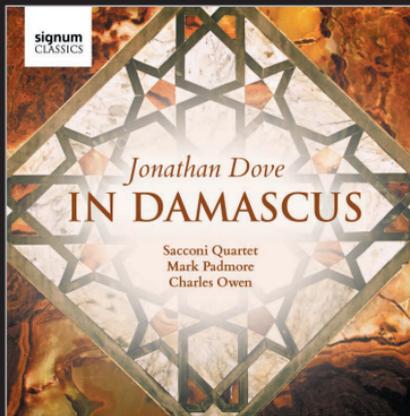


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Jonathan Dove: In Damascus

Sacconi Quartet

Mark Padmore *tenor*

SIGCD487

"The beauty of the piece, for tenor and string quartet, is its restraint. It doesn't sensationalise, get maudlin, moralise or politicise. The words are direct and the music respects that. The performance does, too: clear, focused playing from the Sacconi Quartet and lucid, unswerving narrative from tenor Mark Padmore." The Guardian