

NAXOS

Peter Racine
FRICKER
(1920–1990)

Serenade No. 5, Op. 81

James Dickenson, Violin
Nicholas Stringfellow, Cello



Peter Racine Fricker (1920–1990)

Serenade No. 5, Op. 81 for violin and cello (1980)

Born on 5 September 1920 to parents who met during their service in the Mediterranean theatre of the First World War, Peter Racine Fricker's interest in music took root while he was a student at St Paul's School. He was especially interested in organ performance, studying with Henry Wilson and Ralph Downes, and he also formed an enduring friendship with fellow student Dennis Brain. Fricker entered the Royal College of Music in 1937, continuing his study with Wilson and Ernest Bullock. This training was thoroughly conservative in outlook, with reverent and obsessive attention paid to counterpoint that would forever remain a hallmark of Fricker's musicianship, however much he may have strayed into new directions. At this time his interest in composition vied with his interest in organ performance; he continued to consider a career as a concert organist until the late 1940s.

He entered military service in 1941, maintaining his musical interests as best he could through the remainder of the war, most frequently composing piano music. An *Adagio and Scherzo* for string quartet remains the most thoroughly developed work from this time. They were written in the summer of 1943, and were probably intended as the central movements of a formal quartet.

With the end of his military service, Fricker set about resuming his career in music straight away. Determined now to be a composer, he

sought out the fervent environment at Morley College, whose music programmes had an enviable reputation for research and experiment. It was here that he met his mentor, Mátyás Seiber, whom he later called 'the greatest teacher of the 20th century'.

Among so many stimulating influences, the string quartet was very much in the air at Morley in the 1940s. Michael Tippett had spent the war years at Morley closely at work with the medium – his *Second* and *Third Quartets* were separated by a substantial revision of his *First*; he was actively contemplating a *Fourth* when Fricker arrived at the school. In 1945 Seiber published a well-known analytical guide to the six Bartók *Quartets*, and began the long gestation of his own third essay in the medium, the widely-admired *Quartetto Lirico*, in 1948. These alone would pose example enough to any young composer; that the quartet was a traditional medium for speculation, experiment, and demonstration of skill could only have made it more attractive.

After just a year at Morley, Fricker began producing publishable work. His first important success was the *Wind Quintet, Op. 5*, which took the Clements Prize of 1947; his luck was doubled when Dennis Brain – by then a well-known horn player – took the work into his repertoire with great, and lasting, enthusiasm. Fricker arrived quite readily at the string quartet in the summer of 1948 as he sought to build

a solid base for his catalogue, and successes accumulated at a breathtaking pace. It was his *Op. 8* – started on 14 July and finished on 5 November. He submitted it for the Edwin Evans Prize: though he lost to Elizabeth Maconchy, the committee made honourable mention of him. Meanwhile, he had turned immediately from his quartet to his *First Symphony, Op. 9*, completing it on 19 February 1949. In late July it was awarded the 1949 Koussevitzky Prize, and was scheduled for a premiere performance at the 1950 Cheltenham Festival. It was a career-defining win for him, setting into motion many, many opportunities to further develop his catalogue and his acumen. The timing could hardly have been more fortuitous, coming just as the mammoth festival of Britain events were being planned.

Clearly benefiting from the *Symphony's* brilliant afterglow, his *Quartet* received its premiere performance on 6 September 1949 – one day after his 29th birthday – at the Salle Erard on Great Marlborough Street, followed by the Amadeus Quartet's performance on 11 October at the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA) Galleries. Programmed with two other works mentioned by the Evans Prize committee, it was singled out by a reviewer in the *Musical Times* as 'at once the more original and the more striking. Here is a composer who neither needs nor wishes to compose "like" anyone else. He has technical fluency, plenty to say, and an inherent conviction in his ideas that allows him to present them at once effectively and in highly individual terms. The quartet is cast in

one movement, but within this casing an unusual organization of three-movement form may be felt (such as Bartók employed in his *Fourth* and *Fifth Quartets*). The music is never quite atonal; there is always a feeling of key-solidarity even if common chords are not exactly the order of the day.' The following summer brought the work to even greater notice when the Amadeus featured it in their European tour, with a well-received performance at the ISCM festival in Brussels on 24 June. Alan Frank, in reviewing the festival, felt that 'It must ... have been a heartening experience for P. Racine Fricker, whose name was new to the majority of the audience, to find musicians of many different countries and of widely differing tastes greeting his string quartet with understanding and enthusiasm. Among the chamber works this was one of the serious successes; it showed purpose, consistency of style, and skill in exposing its ideas.'

A veritable avalanche of commissions befell Fricker in the five years following the Koussevitzky Prize, and his industrious energies were at the ready to make the most of them. Most were for concerti: one for violinist Maria Lidka (*Op. 11*); a *Concertante* for oboist Leonard Brain (*Op. 13*); one for violist William Primrose (*Op. 18*); and one for pianist Harriet Cohen (*Op. 19*). There was also a *Second Symphony (Op. 14)* and a ballet, *Canterbury Prologue (Op. 16)*; both were occasioned by the festival of Britain, as was the *Violin Concerto*. By the time the festival had finished, Tippett had left Morley: Fricker succeeded him as director of music, and held that post for

twelve years. The Attlee years, trying for Britain as they were, had seen Fricker's career mature in spectacular fashion.

Christopher Husted

In 1964, Fricker accepted a one-year appointment as visiting professor at the University of California's Santa Barbara campus. He enjoyed the circumstances of his employment so much (there numbering several excellent performers amongst his working colleagues) that he accepted a full-time appointment the following year. During the next 16 years, Fricker's output

more than doubled and in 1980 he wrote his *Serenade No. 5, Op. 81 for violin and cello*. The work is typically Frickerian in its appealingly modern expression, juxtaposing atmospheric and disquieting harmonies with a vital energy. Couched in an intricate sound world, the *Serenade* is in five movements: it begins with a contemplative *Prelude*, which leads to an oscillating *Scherzino*. An opaquely harmonic *Serenata* follows, then a mournful *Elegy* brimming with lyrical melancholy, and finally an intensely refined *Postlude*. The work was premiered on the final day of Fricker's 60th birthday festival in November 1980 in Santa Barbara. Peter Racine Fricker died on 1 February 1990 in California.



The **British Music Society**, founded in 1979, brings together professional and amateur musicians, students and scholars, and music enthusiasts young and old from around the globe to promote, preserve and celebrate British music, pre-dominantly from the Twentieth century, both at home and abroad. Its extensive discography is now being re-issued by Naxos, bringing to a wider audience many highly-acclaimed performances, often world premières, of neglected British works. The Society's Historic label includes a number of famous vintage recordings by artists such as Noel Mewton-Wood and Walter Goehr.

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James Dickenson

Photo: Charles Gervais,
Both Hemispheres Photography



James Dickenson studied at the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), and lists Wen Zhou Li, Lydia Mordkovich, Christopher Rowland, Daniel Phillips and Jerry Horner amongst his teachers and mentors. After graduating from the RNCM with a Bachelor of Arts and a postgraduate diploma, Dickenson moved to the US where he led the award-winning Degas Quartet for seven years, simultaneously teaching at Syracuse University as part of the resident quartet and also violin faculty, and also at Hunter College, Appalachian State University, Wayne State University, Indiana University South Bend, Millsaps College, and the University of North Carolina Wilmington. In 2010 Dickenson started the Villiers Quartet, who are now quartet-in-residence at the University of Oxford. The Villiers Quartet are represented by Logan Arts Management, and have given concerts in the UK, Holland and the US. Their discography includes the chamber music of William Sterndale Bennett, the complete quartets of Peter

Racine Fricker, quartets by Elgar, Delius and Still, and the piano quintets of Shostakovich and David Matthews. In 2019 the quartet toured California, and released two albums featuring the complete quartets of Alexander Goehr, and the four early quartets of William Alwyn. As a soloist Dickenson has released Spohr's *Violin Duos, Op. 67* on Naxos 8.573763.

Nicholas Stringfellow



Nicholas Stringfellow began learning the cello through the Rotherham Music Service, continuing his studies at Chetham's School of Music, the Royal Northern College of Music with Clive Greensmith, and the Royal College of Music with Anna Shuttleworth and Anthony Pleeth. Soon after relocating to London for a position as a music librarian with the BBC, he joined Spirituoso, the resident ensemble at Handel House, and Mercurius Company. Stringfellow collaborated with choreographer Will Tuckett on *Archduke Variations* with members of the Royal Ballet and the Artaria Piano Trio, and an appointment as cellist in the London Mozart Ensemble saw the beginning of Stringfellow's musical relationship with violinist David Le Page. In 2004 Stringfellow was invited to become principal cellist of the Orchestra of the Swan. He has also worked as a soloist with the orchestra, and recently gave the European premiere of Douglas J. Cuomo's

Black Diamond Express Train to Hell for solo cello, sampler and orchestra. Stringfellow performed a series of concerts, presenting the unaccompanied cello suites by Bach, at Ludlow Festival in 2012. Continually in demand as an orchestral principal, he also works with many eminent artists in the rock and pop world, leading cello sections for Smokey Robinson, Dionne Warwick, and Gloria Estefan among others. He has appeared many times as a guest cellist with the Fitzwilliam String Quartet, and at the Renewal Arts Festival 2008 in Caux, Switzerland the ensemble collaborated with saxophonist Uwe Steinmetz for a performance of the jazz suite *Absolutely*. Stringfellow is the cellist of the Villiers Quartet.

Written during Peter Racine Fricker's tenure as professor of music at the University of California Santa Barbara campus, the *Serenade No. 5, Op. 81 for violin and cello* was written in 1980 and juxtaposes disquietingly atmospheric harmonies with an appealingly modern expression. James Dickenson and Nicholas Stringfellow have explored Fricker's *String Quartets* on the Naxos album 8.571374.



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| 1 | I. Prelude | 2:25 |
| 2 | II. Scherzino | 2:05 |
| 3 | III. Serenata | 2:24 |
| 4 | IV. Elegy in memoriam R.G. | 2:26 |
| 5 | V. Postlude | 4:23 |

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

James Dickenson, Violin
Nicholas Stringfellow, Cello

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