

NAXOS

Peter Racine
FRICKER

The String Quartets

Villiers Quartet



Peter Racine Fricker (1920-1990): The String Quartets

Born on 5th September 1920 to parents who met during their service in the Mediterranean theatre of World War I, 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; he also formed an enduring friendship with fellow student Dennis Brain. Fricker entered the Royal College in 1937, continuing his study with Wilson and with 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, Matyas 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 14th July and finished on 5th 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 19th February 1949. In late July it was awarded the 1949 Koussevitzky Prize, and was scheduled for a première 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 première performance on 6th September 1949 – one day after his 29th birthday – at the Salle Erard on Great Marlborough Street, followed by the Amadeus Quartet's performance on 11th October at the 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 24th 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.

By the summer of 1952 Fricker was writing another quartet at the Amadeus's behest. He definitely had his work cut out for him: he began sketching the new quartet while he sketched the concerto for Harriet Cohen through the summer; he continued when, in September, he set Cohen's commission aside so he could reconceive the concerto for Primrose, working at the latter until he finished it in February 1953; he then carried the quartet to completion on 23rd April. Organised in three movements, it remains within friendly distance of tonal reference, with an agenda that pits E flat against F sharp. An extended sonata movement opens the work; a self-contained fugue on two themes serves as its central development. A

scherzo movement follows, extended into a rondo-like A-B-A-B-A form; the final movement, an ornate adagio, features an extended counterpoint at its centre that recalls material from the fugal climax of the first movement.

Despite the warm reception the *Second Quartet* received, Fricker would not revisit the medium for twenty years. When asked about this in the late 1960s, he admitted that no one had asked for one; he was further discouraged by publishers who didn't want them, and that there was a strong current of opinion that the string quartet was "dead". Elliott Carter's *Third String Quartet* changed this view: Fricker dedicated his own *Third Quartet* to Carter "in admiration", writing without a commission. The compositional process was protracted, with several extended interruptions. The most concentrated period of work began immediately after he finished his *Trio Sonata for Organ, Op. 72*, on 28th November 1974, and evolved steadily until the commission for his *Symphony No. 5 for Organ and Orchestra* took precedent in late March. The first complete draft was finished on 26th November 1976, with a fair copy following a month later on 23rd December. Admiration in no way involved emulation: the *Third Quartet* is finely crafted in the serial strategies common to Fricker's later music. It follows a symmetrical plan of five movements, with a central slow movement flanked by fast ones, which are, in turn, flanked by substantial movements – the last one a set of nine intricate variations with an extended and impetuous coda.

Sadly enough, the *Quartet* went unplayed until he suggested it for the 1984 Cheltenham Festival. Fricker was delighted with the very successful performance by the Chilingirian Quartet on 19th July. Sadly, the *Quartet* languished while he developed new publishing relationships, and moved on to new commissions. Though he began thinking about a *Fourth Quartet* in the summer of 1989, he was, by then, stricken with terminal cancer and struggling to finish the commissions he had at work. He died in Santa Barbara on 1st February 1990, leaving behind extensive sketches for an occasional overture – *With Joyance* – that would have been his *Op. 100*.

Christopher Husted

Villiers Quartet

James Dickenson, Violin I • Tamaki Higashi, Violin II • Carmen Flores, Viola • Nicholas Stringfellow, Cello



Photo: Charles Gervais

The Villiers Quartet was the winner of the 2015 Radcliffe Chamber Music Competition, and holds the position of Quartet-in-Residence at Oxford University's Faculty of Music. Named after Villiers Street in London's colourful musical epicentre, the Villiers Quartet encompasses the grand and iconic spirit of the extraordinary music tradition in London. One of the most charismatic and "adventurous" quartets of the European chamber music scene, the Villiers Quartet has developed an international reputation for its performances of English composers including Elgar, Britten and Delius. The Quartet has been featured in numerous festivals including the North York Moors Chamber Music Festival, the Brit Jazz Fest, the Hungerford Arts Festival and the

British Music Society. Their internationally acclaimed VQ New Works Competition encourages audiences to interact with contemporary music performance online, and supports the creation of new works for string quartet. Known for championing the works of English composers, the VQ has presented master-classes at Dartmouth College, the University of Nottingham, Syracuse University, Goshen College, and the Indiana University South Bend. The VQ is also Quartet-in-Residence at Nottingham High School, where they oversee an extensive chamber music programme for young students. Their début recording for Naxos, Robert Still's *The Four String Quartets* (8.571353), won high praise from *Gramophone* and received five stars in *Classical Music Magazine*. The VQ was the featured quartet on the soundtrack to the BBC television drama *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and they have been featured extensively on BBC Radio 3 in live performance and on the programme *In Tune*.

Website: www.villiersquartet.com Facebook: www.facebook.com/thevq Twitter: www.twitter.com/villiersquartet



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Benefitting from the afterglow of the 1949 Koussevitzky Prize for his *First Symphony*, Peter Racine Fricker's original and striking *First Quartet* was premièred later that year to international acclaim. The *Second Quartet* shares a formal clarity and kinship with the tonality heard in the *First*, but evolving in range, technique and eloquence of expression. The symmetrical *Third Quartet* with its intricate variations is finely crafted in the serial style of Fricker's later music.



Peter Racine
FRICKER
(1920-90)

String Quartet No. 1, Op. 8 (1948-49)*	15:16		String Quartet No. 3 (1976)*	22:22
① Adagio appassionato – Con brio – Meno mosso – Adagio ma liberamente – Con brio – Meno mosso tranquillamente – Vivo		⑤ I. Presto – Poco meno mosso		5:12
		⑥ II. Allegro feroce		1:55
		⑦ III. Adagio		4:27
		⑧ IV. Allegro inquieto		2:10
		⑨ V. Presto – Variations 1-8 – Coda più presto		8:38
String Quartet No. 2, Op. 20 (1952-53)	23:08		Adagio and Scherzo (1943)*	9:38
② I. Inquieto allegro	10:10	⑩ I. Adagio		5:02
③ II. Molto allegro	5:26	⑪ II. Scherzo (Allegro)		4:36
④ III. Adagio	7:32			

***WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDING**

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**James Dickenson, Violin I • Tamaki Higashi, Violin II
Carmen Flores, Viola • Nicholas Stringfellow, Cello**

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