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Booklet note: John Pickard

John Pickard's website can be found at johnpickard.co.uk.

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Lay-out and design: Peter Handley, Imergent Images Ltd., Kidderminster

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

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Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com



TOCCATA
CLASSICS

John PICKARD

Chamber Music Volume Two

String Quartet No. 1 String Quartet No. 5

Brodowski Quartet

FIRST RECORDINGS

JOHN PICKARD AND HIS MUSIC

by Paul Mealor

I have known and admired the works of John Pickard, born in Burnley on 11 September 1963, for many years – indeed, he was my first composition teacher – and I count his symphonic poems, *The Flight of Icarus* (1990), *Channel Firing* (1992–93) and *Tenebrae* (2008–9), among the most impressive orchestral offerings of any living composer. In those works, Pickard demonstrates an amazing ability to capture the essence of a musical idea and, from it, create the most beautiful large-scale musical architecture that is both original and strangely inevitable.

As he comes from industrial East Lancashire, it's maybe not surprising that his music has a gritty power evoking the rugged landscape of the Pennines. It certainly possesses a no-nonsense practicality so characteristic of the down-to-earth natives of that region. In practical terms his boyhood experience playing in his local brass band gave him a familiarity with writing for brass instruments which these days is rare in composers for the concert-hall. It has resulted in a number of works that are now standard classics in the brass-band repertoire, among them *Wildfire* (1991), *Men of Stone* (1995) – both subsequently incorporated into what may be the first-ever full-scale symphony for brass, the *Gaia Symphony*, completed in 2003 – and *Eden*, composed for the 2005 National Brass Band Championships.

Pickard's music is not bound by styles or trends; instead, it engages with the past and the present through complex but recognisable tonality that pushes boundaries without alienating listeners. Perhaps this duality of approach comes initially from his training – he studied with the outstanding Welsh composer, William Mathias, and something of Mathias' love of melody and line can be found in Pickard's work, although transfused through a much deeper engagement with the harmony of the twentieth and 21st centuries. Maybe Pickard's studies as a postgraduate in Holland in 1983–84 with Louis Andriessen helped with this harmonic transformation, too.

Awarded his PhD from Bangor University in 1989, Pickard joined the staff of the University of Bristol in 1993 and has remained there ever since: he is now Professor of Composition and Applied Musicology there and regularly conducts the University's student choirs and orchestras, despite the competing demands of a senior academic position. He is also General Editor of the Elgar Complete Edition.

The Flight of Icarus was the first work to carry Pickard's music to audiences outside Britain, since when it has enjoyed performances around the globe. Significantly, it is a Swedish label, BIS, and

the common goal of achieving a stable tonal centre. A central pitch (C sharp) pushes itself forward with increasing confidence until, at the close, all four instruments finally commit to playing in unison – but only on the very last note!

My Fifth Quartet is dedicated to Dr John Grimshaw, in friendship and with sincere gratitude for the enthusiasm and support he has shown for my work over many years and not least in making possible the present recording.

Winner of the First Prize of the Royal Overseas League Competition in 2008, the **Brodowski Quartet** was described by *The Independent* as 'a group to watch out for'. A year earlier, in 2007, they had been winners of the Val Tidone International Chamber Music Competition in Italy and were also prize-winners in the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition in the Netherlands, broadcast on Radio 4 Netherlands. In 2008 they were selected as Park Lane Group Young Artists, giving a recital in The Purcell Room when *The Times* described their playing as 'open and honest'. The Quartet won the Second Prize at the 2009 Gaetano Zinetti International Chamber Music Competition in Italy, also winning the Special Award of 'Artists in Residence' for 2011. In 2010 they were awarded the Richard Carne Fellowship for Chamber Ensembles at Trinity College of Music, where they previously held the Bulldog Scholarship for String Quartet, and in 2012 they were 'String Quartet in Residence' for the Young Composer of Dyfed Competition. The members of the Quartet, though originating from Germany, Wales, Scotland and Holland, are currently based in London and are also 'Associate Artists' at the Anvil Concert Hall in Basingstoke and 'Quartet in Residence' at Bristol University.

They have performed in some of the foremost venues in the UK such as the Wigmore Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Kings Place, Barbican Hall, Purcell Room. They have appeared at the Edinburgh Festival and Brighton Festival, where they won the *Latest 7* magazine award for 'Best Classical Music Act 2009'. They have performed extensively throughout Europe, notably in the Kronberg Festival and Orlando Festival, held a residency in Anghiari, Italy, in 2007 and another in Verona in 2011. They have performed live on BBC Radio 3. They have collaborated with the virtuoso recorder-player Jill Kemp, being featured on her CD of twentieth-century British composers, and in 2012 recorded a new jazz project, *Flight*, for Edition Records, collaborating with British jazz pianist Dave Stapleton, Norwegian saxophonist Marius Neset, Irish bassist Dave Kane and Finnish jazz drummer Olavi Louhivuori.

The Brodowski Quartet is dedicated to educational work, giving workshops and concerts in association with the Philharmonia Education Department, Anvil Arts, Glyndebourne Opera and the Cavatina Chamber Music Trust whose invaluable work increases awareness of chamber music amongst young people.



personalities. The social dynamic of the string quartet is endlessly intriguing and the many hours I have spent listening to quartet rehearsals, both of my own works and those of other composers, provided some of the impetus for composing this piece. I was also aware that the work was likely to feature on this disc with my First Quartet, so I decided to revisit that work and to attempt to refract some of its harmonies, lines and shapes within the new one, though not in any predetermined or mechanistic way.

The point of departure for the piece was the observation that quite often in life, when we think we are in agreement with another person, we may suddenly find that our points of view, tastes, beliefs, even our personalities have gradually diverged without our even noticing it. When awareness strikes, we don't always admit it, which can sometimes lead to serious inter-personal conflict. The first movement of this quartet [11] dramatises such a situation in musical terms: the four musicians start in unison (or, more precisely, in octaves), playing a long melody that begins, as does each movement, with a rising whole-tone. Before long, two of the players, still playing the same melody as the other two, slip by a whole-tone, so the melody loses its unanimity and becomes a sequence of whole-tone clashes. Through the rest of the movement the players attempt various strategies to regain unanimity – ultimately without success.

The second movement [12], marked 'desolate', reacts strongly to the first. At first tentative, the music moves into a series of imitative conversations, rising to a brief moment of illumination before falling back into uncertainty.

The third movement [13] provides relief from the prevailing intensity. It is a very short, quicksilver scherzo, almost entirely *pianissimo* throughout, and not without some gentle humour. At its centre, each instrument plays a series of overlapping descending *pizzicato* phrases, whose overlapping rhythms create a metrical complexity that momentarily threatens to derail the course of the movement entirely. After a varied return to the opening, the movement vanishes in a puff of smoke.

Though still relatively brief, the fourth movement [14] is altogether more serious and weighty in intent. There is even perhaps a note of desperation in the music as every possible permutation of solo, duet and trio is attempted in an effort to achieve order and direction. Eventually, after some intense confrontations, the viola finds its true voice as a fulcrum of calm, thoughtful rationality – and the other players duly respond.

The finale [15] begins with the whole-tone clash, seemingly as unresolved as it was in the first movement. But there is a new sense of energy and purpose. A series of references to the previous movements underlines the fact that earlier experiences are being synthesised and directed toward

Swedish orchestra – the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Martyn Brabbins – which has begun a large-scale Pickard recording project, with *The Flight of Icarus*, *Channel Firing* and the trombone concerto *The Spindle of Necessity* (1997–98) released in 2008.¹ A second CD – with *Sea-Change* (1988–89), the Piano Concerto (1999–2000) and his most recent orchestral work, *Tenebrae* – was released at the beginning of 2013.²

One might argue that through Pickard's training and early works, the organic quality of Mathias' tonality meets the angularity and aggressive drive of the Dutch minimalists, and there certainly is evidence of both of these aspects in the superb chamber music presented here. But Pickard's music is much, much more: on this disc there is music of introspection, solemnity, profundity and, above all, honesty that transcends styles and mere description. Melody, harmony, structure and drama are all here but, most of all, beauty and love of the sensuality of sound shine through.

Born in St Asaph, North Wales, in 1975, Paul Mealar has taught since 2003 at the University of Aberdeen, where he is currently Professor of Composition. His motet Ubi caritas was heard by a broadcast audience of 2.5 billion people during the wedding Ceremony of HRH Prince William and Catherine Middleton at Westminster Abbey in April 2011, and his choral song Wherever You Are reached No. 1 position in the UK charts at Christmas 2011.

JOHN PICKARD ON WRITING STRING QUARTETS

Alexander Pope famously declared that 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread' and I may have been a bigger fool than most when, in 1990, I embarked on my first string quartet at 27 in the full knowledge that this age was traditionally supposed to be a moment of crisis in a composer's life. Not only did I fail to find the work particularly problematic to compose, but I allowed it to expand to the length of a late-Beethoven quartet. Two years later I again ignored the sound of the giant footsteps and wrote another quartet... and again a year after that... and again four years later.

We probably owe the idea of the first-string-quartet-as-composerly-crisis to Brahms, who struggled until the age of 40 to produce one. But Brahms' struggle in the mid-nineteenth century is not one that later composers necessarily need share. True, the medium carries a huge weight of tradition and its repertoire includes some of the greatest music ever composed, but whether composers view that weight as a burden or as a source of sustenance is a matter of individual choice. The truth of the matter is that for over 250 years vast numbers of composers have found

¹ BIS-CD-1578.

² BIS-1873.

the writing of string quartets to be highly congenial. The reasons are clear: quartet textures can be richly homogeneous and yet infinitely varied. The combination offers limitless potential for exploring musical psychology and performer relationships and it requires an almost deliberate degree of incompetence on the part of the composer to miscalculate internal balance between the four instrumental voices. With these advantages in mind, why should any composer feel daunted by a medium whose attractions are so obvious?

That said, it is apparent to me now, over two decades after writing it, that the First Quartet was indeed a key work in my development as a composer. At the time, it was by far the longest piece I had written and, since it is in one movement, the work remains one of the biggest single spans of music I have ever composed. The First Quartet also set the agenda for a particular attitude towards quartet-writing that has remained with me ever since. The approach is characterised by a focus on contrapuntal textures and a general avoidance of 'effects' that I feel distort the basic quartet sound – so there are no mutes, no playing on the bridge of the instrument, no tapping with the wood of the bow, no tremolandi (though I confess there were originally a few of these in the First Quartet; they were extirpated once I realised they were unnecessary). Above all, the players are treated as equals, each with a distinctive character. For me this is the defining condition of true chamber music.

String Quartet No. 1 was composed in 1991. It was commissioned by the philosopher Geoffrey Hunter (1925–2000) and it was dedicated to him and his wife Patience. The work was written for the Britten Quartet (for whom I later wrote my Third Quartet), who gave the premiere in Colchester on 9 December 1992.

The work is in one continuous movement, lasting some 38 minutes and presenting huge challenges to the stamina and concentration of the performers, not least because the most strenuous music comes towards the end. No attempt is made to allude to Classical structures in this work, though the music moves through a number of clearly recognisable sections and a range of speeds and moods.

The opening [1] is of fundamental importance to the whole piece; it represents both the beginning of a journey and its ultimate destination. At various points in the course of the work, the same music is glimpsed as though from a distance (always at the same pitch, but in different textures) and it therefore has something of the function of a tonic key in traditional tonal music. The harmony is built around two tetrachords (four-note chords), covering eight of the possible twelve pitches. A third tetrachord, introduced a little later, uses the remaining pitches, but it is only in the very final bars that the three tetrachords appear together in sequence. Although the music is

in no sense serial, there is often a tendency to keep all twelve notes in play in order to create a wide harmonic range.

As the opening material gradually becomes more harmonically dense, it alternates with increasingly intense solos for each player in turn: second violin, cello, first violin, viola. The culmination of this section, a lengthy unison melody for all four instruments [2], is both an outcome of what has happened so far and a foreshadowing of what is to come. The first consequence of this newly released spring of melodic material is an extended polyphonic section, cast as a Prelude [3] and two Fugues.

Based on a long and elaborate subject, Fugue 1 [4] is predominantly lyrical in character, though becoming steadily more animated until it initiates the much more energetic Fugue 2 [5]. No attempt is made to combine the very different fugue subjects contrapuntally, but this second fugue makes extensive thematic reference to the first as it develops. The accumulated tension eventually discharges into a slow central section, beginning with a much-extended development of the unison melody heard earlier [6]. It is an indication of the wide range of textures encompassed by this work that the music shifts from dense counterpoint to monody and then to simple melody-plus-accompaniment [7] in a rapt central meditation.

The stillness of this passage merges into a hushed return of the opening, now in wide-spaced chords, within which activity begins to stir. A long *Prestissimo* section emerges [8], at first light and delicate, but steadily gaining in force and momentum. The tempo is unflagging but the energy discharges in three waves of increasing power. The culmination of the final wave finds the slow opening of the work combined with the fast music (at six times the speed of the slow music, to be exact) [9], leading to a gradual application of the brakes and a *fff* return of the opening chords. From here the texture starts to splinter into fragments: altered versions of the opening solos return, now in reverse order and surrounded by halos of trills, rising higher and higher ever more quietly. A return to the opening [10] brings the long journey to a close, the music finally going to sleep on the same chord with which it began.

String Quartet No. 5 was written in 2011 and 2012 and commissioned by The Carr-Gregory Trust. The first performance was given on 11 April 2013 at the Purcell Room, London, by the Brodowski Quartet, with whom I worked closely during the period of composition. There are five movements, with two substantial fast movements framing three shorter ones.

The work was composed after a thirteen-year gap in writing string quartets. Returning to the medium after such a long absence, I found myself still fascinated by the unlimited possibilities it offers for performers to work together as an ensemble while still expressing their individual