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Engineer: Jonathan Haskell, Astounding Sounds

Musical Supervision: David Matthews

Producer: Peter Sheppard Skærved

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Booklet notes: David Matthews

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Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: [info@toccataclassics.com](mailto:info@toccataclassics.com)



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# David MATTHEWS

## Complete String Quartets Volume Three

Quartet No. 1, Op. 4

Quartet No. 2, Op. 16

Quartet No. 3, Op. 18

Mirror Canon

SCRIABIN arr. MATTHEWS

Prelude, Op. 74, No. 4

Kreutzer Quartet

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

by David Matthews

I am a Londoner, born on 9 March 1943 in Walthamstow and brought up in nearby Leytonstone. I have lived in London for most of my life. Being near to Epping Forest as a child gave me a sense of closeness to the Essex countryside, and in my early teens I developed an intense interest in natural history. Nature and landscape have since become important influences on my music, as have painting – I draw and paint in an amateur way – and literature: my main recreation is reading. Recent pieces have been based on texts by Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Edwin Muir, Homer and Shakespeare.

I began to compose when I was sixteen, at the same time as my brother Colin, and for a number of years we were each other's only teachers, as there was no music at our school. I read Classics at Nottingham University, but I was determined to become a professional composer, and after leaving university I was helped by Deryck Cooke, whom Colin and I had met through our interest in Cooke's performing version of Mahler's Tenth Symphony (we both helped with the final orchestration). I started working for Faber Music, who are now my publishers, and became an assistant to Benjamin Britten for four years. At the same time I had composition lessons with Anthony Milner, and unofficial ones with Nicholas Maw; later I was much helped by the late Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe. I have managed to pursue a freelance career without teaching full-time, though I supplement my income by editing, orchestrating film music, making arrangements, and writing programme notes and reviews. I have also written short books on Tippett and Britten.<sup>1</sup> I was artistic director of the Deal Music Festival for fifteen years, from 1989 to 2003.

As a composer I have continued along a path similar to that taken by Tippett and Britten: one rooted in the Viennese Classics – Beethoven above all – and also in Mahler, Sibelius and the early twentieth-century modernists. I have always been a tonal composer, attempting to

<sup>1</sup> *Michael Tippett: An Introductory Study*, Faber & Faber, London, 1980; *Britten*, Haus Publishing, London, 2003.



**The Kreutzer Quartet** – Peter Sheppard Skærved and Mihailo Trandafilovski (violins), Morgan Goff (viola) and Neil Heyde (cello) – has forged an enviable reputation as one of Europe's most dynamic and innovative string quartets. They are the dedicatees of numerous works, and over many years have forged creative partnerships with composers including Sir Michael Tippett, David Matthews, Judith Weir and Hafliði Hallgrímsson. They have a particularly strong relationship to a cross-section of leading American composers, having collaborated intensively with the great George Rochberg in the last few years of his life, as well as working closely with such figures as Elliott Schwartz and the prolific symphonist Gloria Coates. They are artists-in-residence at Goldsmiths College and at Wilton's Music Hall in London. In 2013 they premiered major new works by Edward Cowie, Jeremy Dale Roberts, Michael Finnissy and Michael Hersch, and upcoming premieres include new quartets by Robin Holloway, Roger Redgate, Robert Saxton and Elliott Schwartz. This is the third CD in their cycle of the complete string quartets of David Matthews; of Volume One, containing the Quartets Nos. 4, 6 and 10 and the *Adagio* for string quartet (TOCC 0058), the American critic Robert Reilly wrote that 'The Kreutzer Quartet plays this music with staggering conviction and skill'. Reviewing the first volume on their cycle of the Reicha string quartets (TOCC 0022), MusicWeb International asked: 'who better to entrust with this massive cycle than the Kreutzer Quartet, one of the UK's finest?'; on [sinfonimusic.com](http://sinfonimusic.com) Norman Lebrecht described Volume Two (TOCC 0040) as 'essential listening'.

The Quartet was the first I had written in a single movement from the start since an early, withdrawn attempt. Almost all the fast, dynamic music comes in the short opening *Allegro animato* [10]. This movement is another concentrated sonata form, fairly orthodox in shape: there is, for instance, a clear recapitulation of the opening motif at its original pitch, starting on D. A coda leads into the second section, an *Andante* in compound time [11]; its theme on high muted violin begins with a reformulation of the opening notes of the *Allegro animato*, at the same pitch. The *Andante* has two scherzo-like interruptions, both rather nightmarish, the first quiet and spectral, the second loud, with insistent *pizzicati*. Though these scherzo episodes are in a very fast tempo, they are essentially static, except for a brief development in the second one. The third section is a *Largo* [12]: the overall scheme, as is becoming clear, is a gradual slowing-down and loss of momentum. The long theme of the *Largo*, like that of the *Andante*, is a refashioning of the opening motif. Near the end there is a hushed reference to the opening of the piece, again at its original pitch, and the Quartet ends on a chord formed out of the notes of this motif, a laying to rest of its energy and potential.

The two short works included here are both early. The little Mirror Canon [13] is one of my first surviving pieces: it was composed, as a contrapuntal exercise, on 22 September 1963. I did not at that time designate any instruments, but in 2011 I arranged it for string quartet as a 75th-birthday present for my composer friend Carl Davis. I made the arrangement for string quartet of one of Scriabin's last piano preludes [14] in 1972 as a birthday gift for my brother Colin. Both of us were obsessed by Scriabin's music in our teens and much affected by the extraordinary harmony in his late works.

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integrate the musical language of the present with the past, and to explore the rich traditional forms. I retain a firm commitment to a music that is grounded in song and dance, and is connected to the vernacular.

I have now written over 150 works, in almost all musical media except opera – a genre I hope to turn to. My interest in traditional forms has led to my composing eight symphonies, five symphonic poems, five concertos and twelve string quartets. I enjoy close working relationships with a number of prominent musicians, in particular with the leader of the Kreutzer Quartet, Peter Sheppard Skærved, for whom I have written many solo pieces, including a cycle of fifteen fugues.<sup>2</sup>

## THE LURE OF THE STRING QUARTET

by David Matthews

As a composer I have always been particularly drawn to two Classical forms, the symphony and the string quartet. In my late teens I wrote two symphonies before trying to write a quartet: the *Adagio* from that initial attempt was the first music of mine to be performed, by a student quartet at Nottingham University, where I was myself a student. When I left university in 1965, I wrote another quartet which I sent to the BBC reading panel (an opportunity that sadly no longer exists for the young composer today) which, to my delight, passed it. It was eventually played and broadcast by the Dartington Quartet. I wrote two more quartets in the next few years but eventually discarded all these early attempts and in 1970 began my First Quartet proper. Since then I have written another eleven.

The main influences on these early quartets were Beethoven, whose quartets I began to hear as a teenager; the late quartets in particular obsessed me in my twenties, especially when I discovered the recordings by the Busch Quartet. Next, Bartók: I remember going to hear a complete cycle of his quartets played by the Vegh Quartet in, I think, 1966, which knocked me out, and encouraged me to be more adventurous in my writing for strings. I am not a string-player, but have learned a good deal about string technique from the many players I have worked with over the years. Tippett's Second and Third Quartets were also important to me at this time, and Berg's *Lyric Suite*,

<sup>2</sup> Recorded by Peter Sheppard Skærved on Toccata Classics tocc 0152.

but above all Schoenberg's great First Quartet, the first, I think, to have thoroughly absorbed all the innovations in the late Beethoven quartets and to have moved them on a stage further.

There is certainly some influence of Schoenberg's First Quartet on my own First Quartet, though the most significant influence was Nicholas Maw's First Quartet, which I discovered about the same time that I came to know him, in 1968. Like Schoenberg's, Maw's Quartet is in a single movement, amalgamating the separate elements of the traditional sonata – allegro, scherzo and slow movement – into a continuous whole. This several-movements-in-one form is a feature of a number of my large-scale pieces: my first three symphonies are all single movements, as is my Seventh. The First Quartet, by contrast, began as a two-movement work lasting some 35 minutes, which I composed between August 1969 and November 1970, and it was ten years later before I decided to delete the first 165 bars of the second movement and join the two movements together. Like my Second Quartet, it was not commissioned, but the first movement of the original version was played by the Dartington Quartet in 1973 and the revised version premiered by the Amphion Quartet in 1982.

The music of the First Quartet is full of canons (a composing device I learned from Maw). The first movement begins, *Adagio*, with canonic E-major rising sixths in the cello and viola against sustained E-minor chords in the violins [1]. Tonality in this Quartet is never firmly established; my musical language at this time was strongly affected by Second Viennese Expressionism. This opening meditative paragraph is interrupted by a few bars of *Molto vivace*; the *Adagio* continues and is developed; then there is another, longer *Molto vivace* interruption before a fuller extension of the *Adagio*, reaching a big climax. The *Molto vivace* interrupts again [2], and this time is developed into a sizable scherzo, before the *Adagio* returns [3], still in meditative mood, and incorporating a quotation from Beethoven's Op. 110 Piano Sonata – a tribute to my then favourite composer (as he has remained) in his bicentennial year, 1970. There follows a coda in which the various *Adagio* fragments are at last united into a long theme played by the second violin. This passage was originally the end of the first movement. In the revised version, it is immediately followed by another extensive section of fast music, beginning *Poco allegro: con tenerezza* [4] and eventually turning into another scherzo, related to the *Molto vivace*. The *Poco allegro* music returns [5] and reaches what is the climax of the Quartet, before it calms and an *Allegro* coda [6] presents a new display of energy before a *fortissimo* return of the *Adagio* material in the form of a chorale.

The Second Quartet, composed between 1974 and 1976, is much closer to the Classical model.

It began with its third movement, *Elegy*, which was originally composed as a separate piece. In March 1974 Rosalind Morley, the wife of my friend Peter Seager, was killed in the Paris air disaster.<sup>1</sup> Shortly afterwards I went to Sydney to work with Peter Sculthorpe on a score for a TV film, and while I was staying with him I wrote the *Elegy* in her memory. Two years later I decided to expand it into a full-scale Quartet. As the piece was again uncommissioned, it had to wait until 1982 for its premiere, by the Medici Quartet.

The first movement [7] is in concise sonata form: its initial rising fourth derives from the opening of the *Elegy*. A chromatic second subject soon appears, on the viola, leading to a short, energetic development and a recapitulation, with the rising fourth at its initial pitch, E–A, and the second subject slightly expanded. The brief coda varies the opening material: the rising fourth becomes a descending one, then a descending augmented fourth, finally a minor third. The scherzo [8] is influenced by rock music, which much interested me in the 1960s and '70s. I think it shows the influence of the kind of minimalism found in songs by The Velvet Underground, and aims for the energy and dynamism of The Who. Its rhythmic patterns are more sophisticated than either, though not its melodic ideas. As for tonality, it never moves away from C except when, two-thirds of the way through, the first violin introduces the theme of the last movement, before the frenetically rhythmic coda. The last movement [9] has a very simple form. Its theme appears three times, the first time on solo viola, repeated by all the strings in harmony, then an extension of the theme in canon, and finally three cadential chords. The second time, the theme is accompanied by *tremolo* strings and the canon is *tremolo* too; the third and last time the theme is presented first by all the strings in unison, and its continuation is more richly harmonised than before. In between these three statements come two passages influenced by the sound of Australian insects, my first encounter with such exotic natural sounds.

My Third Quartet followed soon after the completion of the Second, but it seems to me to inhabit a different world. It was begun in June 1977 and it was my first BBC commission: perhaps for that reason it cost me a good deal of trouble to get it right, and I did not finish composing it until July 1978. It was first performed in 1980 by the Fitzwilliam Quartet, after which I made more revisions.

<sup>1</sup> On 3 March 1974 a Turkish Airlines flight crashed in the Ermenonville Forest north of Paris, killing all 346 people on board. It was the fourth-deadliest crash in aviation history and remains the deadliest crash with no survivors. Most of the passengers were British.