



# WIRÉN

String Quartets Nos. 2–5

Wirén Quartet



# Dag WIRÉN

(1905–1986)

## String Quartets Nos. 2–5

<b>String Quartet No. 2, Op. 9 (1935)</b>	<b>18:50</b>
1 I. Theme and variations	7:44
2 II. Scherzo	6:00
3 III. Finale	5:00
<b>String Quartet No. 3, Op. 18 (1945)</b>	<b>19:27</b>
4 I. Allegro moderato	5:31
5 II. Andante – Vivace – Allegretto	5:31
6 III. Presto	2:41
7 IV. Allegro	5:33
<b>String Quartet No. 4, Op. 28 (1953)</b>	<b>18:44</b>
8 I. Calmo – Allegro molto – Calmo	4:54
9 II. Intermezzo I: Moderato	2:28
10 III. Intermezzo II: Prestissimo	2:06
11 IV. Lento	4:23
12 V. Allegro molto	4:42
<b>String Quartet No. 5, Op. 41 (1970)</b>	<b>13:08</b>
13 I. Allegro molto	3:45
14 II. Andante espressivo – Allegro capriccioso	4:50
15 III. Allegro	4:24

## Dag Wirén (1905–1986)

### String Quartets Nos. 2–5

Dag Wirén was born at Striberg (near Nora) on 15 October 1905. His father was manager of a roller blind factory, though there were numerous musical activities at home. Wirén took piano lessons, soon becoming a student at the Karolinska school in Örebro, and also played percussion with the town orchestra. He studied at the Stockholm Conservatory from 1926 to 1931, which afforded him contact with music from all periods, though he considered hearing Honegger's oratorio *Le Roi David* in 1927 to be a defining experience. In 1932 he won a state stipend and used the money to continue his studies in Paris, where he resided during 1931–34. Here he studied composition with Leonid Sabaneyev, while latterly admitting that frequent attendance at concerts was of greater benefit to his own work. He also met Stravinsky, and was exposed to his music as well as that of Prokofiev and the composers known as *Les Six*.

In 1934 Wirén moved to Stockholm with his wife, the Irish cellist Noel Franks, whom he had met in Paris (their daughter, Annika, was born in 1947) and in 1937 they set up residence in Danderyd (north of Stockholm). As well as composing, Wirén regularly played the piano on Swedish Radio in the 1930s, besides involving himself in chamber music either side of the Second World War. He was music critic at the *Svenska Morgonbladet* during 1938–46, then in 1947 became vice-chairman of the Society of Swedish Composers. From 1948, he spent many summers on the island of Björkö, in Stockholm's archipelago. He also served as a member on the board of directors for the Royal Swedish Opera during 1962–71. His TV ballet *Den elaka drottningen* ('The Evil Queen') was awarded the 1960 Prix Italia, and he also wrote the music to the Swedish entry for the 1965 Eurovision Song Contest, *Annorstädes vals* ('Absent Friend'), performed (in English) by baritone Ingvar Wixell and placed tenth out of 18 entries.

Wirén once stated that his aim as a composer was to write music which appealed directly to rather than challenging the listener, and a concern for accessibility

characterises most of his earlier works – not least the effervescently neo-Classical *Serenade for Strings* of 1937 [Naxos 8.553106], which has remained his best-known piece (and found popularity in the UK in the early 1960s when the main theme from its finale became the signature-tune for the BBC arts programme *Monitor*). His later music took on a more serious and probing manner, in which the influence of Sibelius can be felt; while his later instrumental works evince a personal take on the 'metamorphosis' principle pursued by his Danish contemporary Vagn Holmboe, Wirén's motivic technique was overtly personal in being tailored to his own creative needs.

Although he wrote two early operettas for radio, plus a handful of songs and choral pieces, Wirén was much more drawn to abstract instrumental music, as is reflected in his output for orchestra and chamber ensemble. Chief among these are his cycles of symphonies and string quartets – respectively five of each, though both the *First Symphony* and *First Quartet* were withdrawn by the composer and remain unavailable for performance. Those works he did acknowledge provide a broad conspectus across his catalogue from the early 1930s to the turn of the 1970s. His output declined drastically at this time, with nothing of consequence being written after the *Flute Concertino* of 1972 – thereby reinforcing his comment that 'One should stop in time, while one still has time to stop.' Dag Wirén died at Danderyd on 19 April 1986.

The four works recorded here (as mentioned, the *First Quartet* was withdrawn and there appear to have been two earlier quartets from the 1920s) hence afford a viable overview of Wirén's incremental evolution throughout 35 years. All of them typify his conviction that 'You can't hide anything away in a string quartet', their watchwords being concentration and economy.

The first of these works to be published, the *Second String Quartet* was written in 1935 – soon after Wirén's marriage and his return from Paris. A sense of starting

anew is evident in the relaxed and affirmative mood of this piece – not least the initial movement, a *Theme and Variations* whose warmly eloquent theme gives rise to four increasingly animated variations; followed by ones that are respectively meditative then incisive, at which point the theme itself returns to act as a reflective postlude. The *Scherzo* which follows has overtones of folk music in its modal harmonies and robust rhythmic profile, with the deftest tinge of irony as this unfolds – the *Trio* complements this with its ethereal part-writing between instruments. A reprise of the *Scherzo*, capped by a laconic coda, duly makes way for the *Finale* whose rushing impetus is maintained across the wistful second theme into a quixotic development; the themes being subtly altered in reprise prior to a coda which sees this work to an unexpectedly sudden close.

Although the *Third String Quartet* occupied Wirén during 1941–45, it reflects less the circumstances of war than of grappling with his emergent technique of metamorphosis that necessitated an extensive revision. Not that the piece is notably more serious than its predecessor – witness the purposeful course of the opening *Allegro moderato*, with its second theme of gentlest pathos and a methodical development as it reaches a rhetorical pause before a modified reprise then teasing coda. The second movement is an *Andante* whose touching elegance is offset by a repeated pizzicato gesture then a hurtling central *Vivace*, which presently subsides into an intensified resumption of the earlier music. Next comes a lively and nonchalant *Presto* whose rhythmic syncopation adds much to its appeal, then a final *Allegro* whose tender opening soon gains momentum as this ingenious *rondo* gains activity on its way towards a resolute conclusion.

**Richard Whitehouse**

Wirén's quartets parallel his symphonies and this is particularly true with the *Fourth String Quartet* – written during 1952–53, immediately after his *Fourth Symphony* which proved a defining work in many respects. There are now five movements, opening with an *Allegro molto* itself framed by a *Calmo* whose widely spaced harmonies and restive atmosphere denote sombre emotions which the energetic central section never really succeeds in dispelling. There follows a brace of intermezzos, the first a lilting *Moderato* with a nod towards Shostakovich, the second an impulsive *Prestissimo* with its scurrying passagework and furtive repeated phrases. The *Lento* brings the nature of this work into focus with its prevailing mood of ambivalent rumination, while the initial attempt of the final *Allegro molto* at more forthright dialogue becomes side-tracked into a series of disjunct episodes – to which the closing bars afford only tentative resolution.

Composed in 1970, the *Fifth String Quartet* could be heard as the beginning of the end in terms of Wirén's creativity. Of its three movements, the initial *Allegro molto* opens with glowering phrases then unadorned exchanges in which the soloistic nature of the writing evokes that sense of withdrawal in the face of often hostile gestures between the instruments. There follows an *Andante espressivo* whose searching manner is pointedly offset by the stridency of the *Allegro capriccioso* that belatedly interrupts its progress. After this, the final *Allegro* effects a synthesis of what had preceded it, but the music's more determined manner is soon channelled into a further series of rhythmically dislocated phrases that ultimately subside towards the fateful close; one borne less of hesitancy than of a feeling that human aspiration, however gratifying its intent, is ultimately bound to fail – the easy confidence of those earlier pieces now beyond recovery.

## Wirén Quartet



The Wirén Quartet was formed in 1994 with Hans Elvkull (violin) and Linn Elvkull (viola), who are still part of the ensemble. Roger Olsson (violin) and Hanna Thorell (cello) have been members since 2003. All four musicians play in the internationally renowned Swedish Chamber Orchestra. The Wirén Quartet loves being involved in all kinds of chamber music encounters, such as concerts and tours in Sweden and Europe, and recordings for Swedish Radio and the BBC. They are returning guests at various chamber music festivals and have performed their own children's show *Aunt Martha's Magic Music Machine*. The quartet also works regularly with workshops for students at Örebro Music College. The Quartet has a broad repertoire, performing the music of Beethoven, Mozart, Berwald, Debussy, Shostakovich, Philip Glass, Borodin, Schubert, Pēteris Vasks and specialising in Swedish music with a particular love for the music of Dag Wirén.

From left to right: Linn Elvkull, Roger Olsson, Hans Elvkull, Hanna Thorell  
Photo: Nikolaj Lund



The tapestry of drama, refinement and expressive lyricism in Dag Wirén's four string quartets (the *First Quartet* was withdrawn) provides a substantial overview of his musical evolution over 35 years. His earlier works are more accessible than challenging, as demonstrated by the relaxed and affirmative *Second* and *Third Quartets*. The *Fourth Quartet* is more sombre, with nods towards Sibelius and Shostakovich, and in the *Fifth*, completed not long before Wirén's retirement as a composer, the easy confidence of the earlier quartets has been replaced by a mood of pessimism and uncertainty.



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<b>8–12</b>	<b>String Quartet No. 4, Op. 28 (1953)</b>	<b>18:44</b>
<b>13–15</b>	<b>String Quartet No. 5, Op. 41 (1970)</b>	<b>13:08</b>

## Wirén Quartet

**Roger Olsson, Violin I • Hans Elvkull, Violin II**  
**Linn Elvkull, Viola • Hanna Thorell, Cello**

Recorded: 13–16 December 2016 at Hardemo Church, Örebro, Sweden  
Producer, engineer and editor: Sean Lewis • Booklet notes: Richard Whitehouse  
A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

Instruments: Violin I: Luigi Ercoli 2011, Violin II: Joseph Kantuscher 1984,  
Viola: Joseph Kantuscher 1985, Cello: Caressa & Francais 1920 • Tuning: A=442 Hz.

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