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DELIUS

String Quartet

ELGAR

String Quartet

Villiers Quartet

Frederick Delius (1862-1934): String Quartet in E minor, RT VIII/8

Edward Elgar (1857-1934): String Quartet in E minor, Op. 83

Chamber Music in the Shadow of War

For a generation of musicians who lived through the terrifying events of the First World War, responding to the seemingly incomprehensible impact of the conflict became a compelling creative challenge. Many promising younger figures, such as George Butterworth and Ernest Farrar, paid the ultimate price, killed in action on the Western front. The legacy of the war left its mark in other ways on the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams, who spent two periods of active service as an ambulance orderly in France, most eloquently in his *Pastoral Symphony* of 1922. Edward Elgar and Frederick Delius, close contemporaries but almost diametrically opposed personalities, were too old at the time of the war's outbreak to be called up for military duty (though Elgar was briefly a member of his local Hampstead Constabulary). For both men, however, the war had a profound effect upon their later work, and it is impossible to separate their two remarkable string quartets from the historical circumstances of their creation.

Elgar's initial response to the war was to engage energetically in patriotic music-making activities intended to raise the public spirit. A group of works, including his Kipling setting *Fringes of the Fleet* and the large-scale cantata *The Spirit of England* based on Laurence Binyon's poetry, outwardly extolled the virtues of duty, steadfastness, and national pride. But the strain induced by the harrowing news from the continent eventually precipitated a nervous breakdown in 1917. Elgar's wife, Alice, arranged their removal from London to Brinkwells, a rural cottage on the edge of the Sussex weald owned by the landscape painter Rex Vicat Cole. It was here that Elgar finally began to recuperate and compose once more, completing a series of three new chamber pieces (the *Violin Sonata*, *Piano Quintet*, and *String Quartet*), alongside his wistfully nostalgic *Cello Concerto*. Elgar began sketching the quartet in the latter half of 1918, just as the war ground brutally to its conclusion, and on

7 January 1919, back in London, Alice Elgar noted in her diary 'Wonderful music: 4tet – 1st movement beautiful especially – the *Piacevole* like captured sunshine'. The first performance of the work took place privately on 19 April 1919 at the home of businessman and patron Frank Schuster, and its public première was given at the Wigmore Hall on 21 May by an ensemble including violinists Albert Sammonds and W.H. Reed, violist Raymond Jeremy, and cellist Felix Salmond.

The quartet opens with a strikingly austere introduction that suggests a serious, bard-like tone. The characteristically nervy rhythmic tick at the end of the opening phrase nevertheless becomes one of the movement's defining features. The introduction returns at various strategic points throughout the *Allegro*, for instance separating the swinging first subject from the wistful and contemplative second group that follows. The development becomes a wild ride, with brilliant first violin figuration, and threatens to overheat completely until the introduction reappears to initiate the reprise. The second subject returns in a tonally remote C sharp and then appears *più lento* in Elgar's favourite key of E flat, with an intensified sense of nostalgia. The coda sounds one brief *nobilmente* version of the first subject and then recalls the archaism of opening bars.

The second movement is a moderately paced Schubertian *Andante piacevole*, suggesting an intermezzo in place of a more sustained slow movement and scherzo. The opening melody (played by the second violin while the principal sits and listens) is a walking tune that creates a miraculous sense of weightlessness, hardly ever touching a root-position tonic chord. The movement follows a double formal cycle, with a wonderfully spacious apotheosis of the opening theme at its mid-point. Elgar wrote cryptically to his friend Troyte Griffith that there was 'something in it that has never been done before ... merely an arrangement of notes'. Perhaps he was thinking of the way in which the opening theme is gently taken apart during its final iteration, or how the

movement's closing bars suspend all sense of time and space. Such ingenuity aside, the *Andante* became one of Alice Elgar's favourite works, and the music was played at her funeral in 1920, the year after its London première.

The finale is the work's most complex and demanding movement. The first subject is in two parts – a stern march-like figure followed by a brilliant fantasy-like flourish in the first violin. A more poised and rhythmically pointed second subject is followed by an energetic development suggesting a dynamic creative flux. The reprise is radically reconfigured, and Elgar dramatically holds back the return of the first theme until almost the last minute. The coda is marked *con fuoco*, and the *Quartet* eventually consumes itself in a furious white heat. There is no time left for retrospection, merely the gruff slamming of the door.

At the start of the war, Delius and his wife were living in the village of Grez-sur-Loing, just south of Paris. As the Germans advanced swiftly toward the River Marne in the conflict's opening weeks, they were forced to leave their house temporarily and evacuate to Orléans, where Delius was deeply moved by the sight of wounded servicemen and other refugees. Though they returned briefly as the German line was repelled, Thomas Beecham persuaded them to travel to England in November 1914, where the Deliuses stayed for the next 8-9 months. Here, Delius embraced the opportunity to hear music being performed both in London and elsewhere – at a Hallé Orchestra concert in Manchester, for example, he was introduced to the Harrison sisters, Beatrice and May, for whom he would later write his set of three string concertos and sonatas. The Deliuses returned to France permanently in late November 1915, and in a letter to Percy Grainger dated 11 January 1916, he wrote: 'we are so glad to be back in Grez again – our Garden was terribly neglected so we are both working in it every afternoon – No gardener is to be had – Otherwise one does not feel the war here whatever.' Delius began to write his *String Quartet* in the spring, completing the first version of the work (in three movements) in June. It received its first performance by the London String Quartet at the Aeolian Hall on 17 November (where Albert Sammonds was again the

principal violin). *The Musical Times* wrote of 'a serious contribution to musical art – the most important, in fact, that has been heard in London during the present season'. Delius was nevertheless dissatisfied with the score, and revised it the following year, reworking the outer movements, adding a scherzo (drawing on material from an earlier abandoned quartet written c. 1888), and completely recomposing the slow movement, *Late Swallows*.

In its revised (four-movement) form, the quartet begins with a deceptive ease. The opening movement ('With animation') is in two broad phrases, starting moderately and then gaining greater chromatic and textural momentum as it unfolds. The second subject is a fleetingly wistful snatch of a tune, heard in the first violin and viola and then submerged under renewed sequential work. The movement twice reaches an impressive climax, pivoting around a pair of stark third-related chords (F minor and D major in the exposition; A minor and F sharp major in the reprise), before dissipating its chromatic energy through the descent, closing with an unexpectedly sombre turn toward the minor mode.

The outer sections of the scherzo are a Mendelssohnian nocturne, whose gossamer-like threads are spun rapidly across the ensemble with an engagingly playful sense of rhythmic asymmetry. The trio, in contrast, is dominated by a swaying melodic figure that has the poise and singability of a *canto popolare*. The title of the slow movement, *Late Swallows*, is obscure: Delius referred to birds in his correspondence with Heseltine, or it may have been an opaque reference to Charles George Douglas Robert's poem *A Song of Regret*, from his collection *In Divers Tones* (1886). The movement begins with an aching sense of earnestness, growing in strength as the opening gesture is sequentially repeated with increased dynamic intensity. The middle section is dominated by the first violin's drifting ostinato, which Robert Threlfall insightfully compared with the river music from Delius's 1908 tone poem *In a Summer Garden*. But the heart of the movement quotes an older tune, which Delius had first employed in one of his very earliest works, the *Florida* suite for orchestra (1888), and then

subsequently reused in his second and third operas, *The Magic Fountain* and *Koanga*. Its magical reappearance in *Late Swallows* remains a mystery. The finale, meanwhile, has a bustling sense of *bonhomie* – after a formal introduction, the first subject is introduced on the cello and then passed through a myriad of different harmonic and textural variations. Twice the movement broadens out into a triple-time *pesante* passage, recalling the stark third-related chords from the first movement, before rushing toward its final affirmatory cadence.

Delius never destroyed the materials for the first (three-movement) version of his quartet, and the autograph score, sketches, and an incomplete set of copied parts survive in the British Library. For this recording, the original versions of the opening movement and of *Late Swallows* have been reassembled, and they present a fascinating comparison with the more familiar later version of the quartet (there are also minor differences between the two versions of the finale, but

they are less significant than those recorded here). The original version of the opening movement (marked *Allegro moderato*) was more heavily scored, and has a much richer, darker hue than the later revision. The differences between the two versions of *Late Swallows* are much more radical. Formally, the two versions follow the same basic plan, but the original version opens with an elaborate ascending arabesque in the first violin, suggesting perhaps the soaring flight of the summer migrants in the movement's title. The middle section is also recomposed: the original music has a Mahlerian sense of poignancy, and closes in D, anticipating the tonality of the finale (a key that Delius reserved only for the end of the movement in his revised score). It will never be clear exactly why Delius changed his mind about the original version of his *Quartet*, but this rare glimpse into his compositional workshop is a significant discovery.

Daniel M. Grimley

Villiers Quartet

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



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 debut 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

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The legacy of the First World War left its mark on the music of near contemporaries Edward Elgar and Frederick Delius. The powerful outer movements of Elgar's *String Quartet in E minor* frame a wistful and sombre *Andante piacevole*. Delius was dissatisfied with the first, three-movement version of his *Quartet* and revised the score. On this recording the final 1917 version is followed by the original versions of the opening movement and of the *Late Swallows* slow movement, offering a rare glimpse into Delius's compositional workshop.

**Frederick
DELIUS**
(1862-1934)

**String Quartet
in E minor (1917) 27:21**

- 1 I. With animation 7:29
- 2 II. Quick and lightly 4:02
- 3 III. Late Swallows
(Slow and wistfully) 9:31
- 4 IV. Very quick and vigorously 6:19

Two movements from original
version, reassembled by Daniel
Grimley (1916/2016)* 16:10

- 5 I. Allegro moderato /
With animation 7:30
- 6 II. Late Swallows
(With slow waving movement) 8:40

**Edward
ELGAR**
(1857-1934)

**String Quartet
in E minor (1918) 27:54**

- 7 I. Allegro moderato 9:01
- 8 II. Piacevole (Poco andante) 9:30
- 9 III. Allegro molto 9:23

*WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

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In memory of Christopher Rowland

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Booklet notes: Daniel Grimley • Cover photograph by Evgeniy Biletskiy (iStockphoto.com)