

CONCERTS

AT THE UNIVERSITY

AUTUMN—WINTER 2014

Tuesday 25 November 2014

1.10pm

Reid Concert Hall

The Edinburgh Quartet

Tristan Gurney · violin

Gordon Bragg · violin

Fiona Winning · viola

Mark Bailey · cello

Programme of works by TAKEMITSU and ELGAR.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

Landscape (1960)

Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996)

String Quartet in E minor op. 83

Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

- (i) Allegro moderato
- (ii) Piacevole (poco andante)
- (iii) Allegro molto

Written during 1918 and completed in December, Elgar's only String Quartet is the central work of a group of three chamber compositions, all written more or less at the same time. Though we learn from Lady Elgar's diary of a Quartet being composed eleven years earlier, in October 1907, according to Robert Anderson some of this music was incorporated into the First Symphony and *The Music Makers*. There is some dubiety as to whether the reference 'Elgar began a delightful Quartett' in Lady Elgar's diaries in March 1918 in fact became the Cello Concerto. There have also been suggestions that the central movement might have had its origins from an earlier period in Elgar's life and the apparently innocent mood of the opening has been likened to pieces in the *Wand of Youth* music.

Although cast in the key of E minor, a key shared with both the early String Serenade of 1892 and with the Cello Concerto of 1918, the Quartet has little in common with either. It is, however, intriguing to note that the rising motif of the opening of the earlier Serenade is recast in the first two bars of the opening of this later work. This opening, with its jagged rhythms, is very different from the lyrical and gently flowing first theme of the cello concerto. There is a fascinating shape about the opening two bars of the Quartet, with the first violin and the cello going in opposite directions, beginning on the tonic note E and landing on a D – outlining intervals of a seventh at the top and a ninth at the bottom of the texture – two intervals that are to play an important role in subsequent themes. This theme opens the first two bars of the work with something like a musical question mark which is answered by one of Elgar's characteristic descending themes on second violin, in which the interval of a fourth is prominent.

The first movement is deceptive. To a casual listener the outline of a sonata structure can be heard. But the motivic density and continual use of the two ideas of the opening, sometimes left as fragments and at other times coalescing into more extended themes (as for example, the second subject) leads to a perception of continual development. The main structure of the movement is outlined by the opening idea. But the sudden contrasts are numerous, as is the fleeting nature of

the themes, and all contribute to an almost kaleidoscopic experience. The beautifully flowing second subject – which never receives a proper close – and a development section which produces enormous excitement in its powerful dramatic writing, lend to the work a feeling of symphonic proportions.

'Captured sunshine' was Lady Elgar's description of the second movement which was played at her funeral. The opening tune is in C Major and is played by the second violin – the leader only joins in the movement at bar 23. The mood is of a serenade with an easy-on-going motion. The overall structure is clear – a song-like form with several recalls of the main tune. As in the first movement much of the material is fragmentary and is shared with all four instruments on an equal basis. All elements are subject to development, including the innocent-sounding initial tune which re-appears at the centre as a fully blown climax. The final coda in which all players use mutes, is one of Elgar's finest moments, as the music unwinds to a beautifully peaceful conclusion. Though apparently direct in outline, in fact this is a very subtle composition reminiscent of the composer's sentiments 'I am still at heart the dreamy child who used to be found in the reeds by Severn side with a sheet of paper trying to fix the sounds and longing for something very great.' (Quoted by Michael Kennedy in his Portrait).

With the Finale we return to the intensity of the first movement. The opening theme, on viola and cello is rhythmically potent and acts as a unifying theme throughout the movement. As in the first movement, there is a restlessness about the mood, and a wildness about the chromatic modulations which are frequent and extensive. The whole movement is laid out on broad symphonic lines with much writing that is powerful, stretching the limited resources of the medium of the string quartet. There is much idiomatic string writing, including many of Elgar's characteristic syncopations, and in the fast-moving semiquaver passages of repeated notes, we are reminded of the *Introduction and Allegro*. But the musical material here is tightly organized, the writing always fully directional, as the music drives on to its forceful and triumphant conclusion.

The whole work shows a new Elgar though entirely recognizable. Wagnerian tendencies are more prominent in fast and far-reaching chromatic modulations. There is a new restlessness in this music with much fragmentary thematic work. Everything is used for development and unlike earlier Elgar, such as the first symphony, where well-formed music moved to an inexorable climax, here Elgar presents us with on-going organic development, and only at the end of the movements do we arrive at the authentic version of the thematic material. Wagner, Strauss, even early Schoenberg perhaps, are called to mind in the varied techniques Elgar employs. But in the end it is Elgar, with a new and passionate vibrancy, who shares with us his doubts and insecurities, and shows us how it is possible to work through these. He speaks to us with a hard earned confidence in the magnificent conclusion of this all too rarely heard work.

(RBW Nov. 2014)

The **Edinburgh Quartet** has a long and colourful history as one of Britain's foremost chamber ensembles, having appeared regularly at prestigious venues across the UK and toured extensively across Europe, the Far and Middle East, and North and South America.

In addition to a busy concert schedule the Edinburgh Quartet is frequently featured in radio broadcasts for the BBC and other stations. Recently this has included live appearances on Classics Unwrapped (BBC Radio Scotland) and Jazz Line-Up (BBC Radio 3) as well as video recordings for Studio One Sessions, which appear on the BBC Radio Scotland website.

The Edinburgh Quartet is committed to nurturing talent and is resident at Edinburgh Napier University and the University of Aberdeen. The Quartet has recently embarked on a new residency at the University of Stirling and it continues to maintain a strong association with the University of Edinburgh. As well as giving a regular classical concert series at each of these institutions, the players work with composition students, instrumentalists and student teachers. In addition to working with university students the Edinburgh Quartet's outreach programme encompasses workshops for primary and secondary school children and tutoring adults on the Variations Summer School in Ullapool and an annual Spring Chamber Music Course in Linlithgow.

The Quartet has always been a champion of new music and has worked with many important and prolific composers of our age including James MacMillan, Michael Tippett and Howard Blake.

The Quartet has an extensive discography available on various labels such as Delphian, Linn, Meridian and RCA. Among their recordings are the complete string quartets of Hans Gál (Meridian), Kenneth Leighton (Meridian) and Mátyás Seiber (Delphian), as well as discs of Bartók, Robert Crawford, Haydn, Schubert and Thomas Wilson. New releases include a "Russian"- themed CD of Haydn, Prokofiev and Shostakovich and a James MacMillan disc, both on Delphian.

FORTHCOMING CONCERTS:

Tuesday 25 November, 7.30pm, Reid Concert Hall
Edinburgh University Chamber Orchestra
David Watkin · conductor, Roman Rabinovich · soloist
BRAHMS Haydn Variations
MENDELSSOHN Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor
BEETHOVEN Symphony No.4
Tickets are available on the door (£8/£5).

Thursday 27 November, 7.30pm, Reid Concert Hall
Edinburgh University Composers' Orchestra
Michael Graham · conductor

A concert of new music featuring students from the University of Edinburgh.
ADMISSION FREE (suggested donation £5)