

William Alwyn (1905-1985)
STRING QUARTETS Nos 10-13

TIPPETT QUARTET

John Mills, Jeremy Isaac *violins*

Lydia Lowndes-Northcott *viola*; Bozidar Vukotic *cello*

String Quartet No. 10 (En Voyage) [18:49]

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|---|---|------|
| 1 | 1. Departure (Adagio e dolente) | 5:20 |
| 2 | 2. Sea Birds (Allegro vivace) | 4:26 |
| 3 | 3. The Lonely Waters (Adagio ma non troppo) | 5:34 |
| 4 | 4. Trade Winds (Vivace) | 3:27 |

String Quartet No. 11 in B minor [18:56]

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 5 | 1. Andante ma non troppo – Allegro con brio – Andante | 10:12 |
| 6 | 2. Andante e semplice | 4:22 |
| 7 | 3. Moderato e quieto | 4:21 |

8 Fantasia (String Quartet No. 12): Allegro con alcuna licenza 12:57

String Quartet No. 13 [19:05]

- | | | |
|----|----------------------------------|-------|
| 9 | 1. Adagio e largamente e marcato | 7:13 |
| 10 | 2. Allegro molto e vivace | 11:51 |

TOTAL DURATION 69:48

Recorded at St Nicholas Parish Church, Thames Ditton, on 2nd & 3rd March 2016

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ALWYN
STRING QUARTETS
Nos 10 to 13

First recordings

TIPPETT QUARTET

WILLIAM ALWYN

String Quartets Nos 10 to 13

William Alwyn was born in Northampton on 7 November 1905 and died in Southwold, Suffolk on 11 September 1985 just a few weeks short of his 80th birthday. His musical studies (in flute, piano and composition) took place at London's Royal Academy of Music, where in 1926 at the age of twenty-one, he was appointed Professor of Composition; a position that he was to retain for almost thirty years. Alwyn's large corpus of work which is close to three hundred compositions includes music in the majority of genres, opera, ballet, orchestral, chamber, instrumental and song. His major orchestral works include five symphonies, and concertos for flute, oboe, violin, harp and piano. In addition to this there are approximately two hundred film scores which include music for both documentaries and feature films. Among the latter are several classic British films that drew from Alwyn some of his finest music for the genre: *Odd Man Out*, *The History of Mr. Polly*, *The Fallen Idol*, and *The Rocking Horse Winner*. There is also incidental music for both radio and television.

In addition to composing and teaching Alwyn held many appointments on various committees including acting as Chairman for the Composers' Guild of Great Britain for which he served three terms in 1949, 1950, and 1954. In 1948 he was elected a member of the Savile Club, thereby joining a number of other British Savilian composers who include Richard Arnell, Malcolm Arnold, Sir Arthur Bliss

and William Walton. When not composing music, Alwyn spent his time writing and painting, such was his desire to always be creative. Among his writings is a short autobiography entitled *Winged Chariot*, and perhaps most fascinating of all a diary that he kept between September 1955 and August 1956 while composing his Third Symphony that documents his daily routine composing for the cinema and concert hall. Alwyn was awarded a CBE in 1978 in recognition of his services to music.

Alwyn's music for the string quartet featured predominately throughout his composing career beginning with his earliest attempts at composition through to his final years as an active composer. He began writing for the medium in 1920, when he produced his String Quartet in G minor at just fifteen years of age. The years 1923 to 1936 produced a further twelve string quartets (four of which feature on this disc), so fascinated was the composer with this "most intimate of mediums", as he called it, and hoping to rise to the challenge of balancing the four instruments with equally interesting material to produce a satisfying whole. With each successive quartet he became more confident, also producing an *Irish Suite* (1939-40), a few shorter descriptive pieces which include the atmospherically charged *Three Winter Poems* composed in 1948, that he dedicated to his former teacher, John B McEwen (1868-1948), who was also active as a composer, producing sixteen string quartets in addition to many other works for a variety of mediums.

It was not until November 1953, however, at the age of 48 when he completed his String Quartet in D minor that Alwyn felt fully satisfied with his work for the

medium and counted it as his first real Quartet No. 1, labelling it as such, and disowning all his previous attempts. This seems somewhat harsh, as in particular the four string quartets included here that he produced between 1932 and 1936 contain some truly memorable ideas which are worthy of a revival and deserve to be heard again after receiving enthusiastic reviews at their respective premieres.

Each of these quartets inhabit quite different sound worlds. No.10 (*En voyage*) is the most pictorial and overtly romantic given that the inspiration for the piece came from a literary source. Alwyn was an avid reader throughout his life and often found inspiration for his creative work as a composer from poetry or a novel he had just read that would suddenly fire his imagination. The single movement *Fantasia* (No. 12) is the most experimental of the four with Alwyn trying his hand at being more modern and contemporary with romanticism cast to one side for the moment. However, this was not to last as quartets 11 and 13 clearly demonstrate that Alwyn was and would always remain a romantic at heart.



In the spring of 1932 Alwyn embarked on a nine-month tour of Australia as an examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. During his free time from this exacting post he found time to complete several new works of which the **String Quartet No. 10 (*En Voyage*)** is one. The work was composed shortly after Alwyn had completed his Serenade for Orchestra whilst he was on board the R.M.S. Rangitiki in the Pacific Ocean in December 1932. The score bears the dedication 'to The Ship' and is prefaced with the following lines from John

Masefield's poem *The Ship and Her Makers* featured in the *Salt Water Poems and Ballads* collection of 1902:

*I march across great waters like a queen,
I whom so many wisdoms helped to make;
Over the uncruddled billows of seas green
I blanche by the bubbled highway of my wake,
By me my wandering tenants clasp the hands
And know the thoughts of men in other lands.*

Each of the four movements bears a descriptive title and remains for much of the time in the key of A minor making much use of *ostinati* figurations throughout. The first movement *Departure* begins quietly with the principle theme announced by the first violin which is subsequently passed amongst the other instruments. After a brief climax the melody returns *mezzo piano* in the second violin and viola decorated by the first violin and cello. The movement closes peacefully with the principle idea played by the viola before finally coming to rest on a C major seventh chord.

The second movement *Sea Birds* is a scherzo in all but name and exudes a sense of flight over the ever changing moods of the waves below. The principle theme is first announced by the first violin later passing to the cello. After a slightly calmer middle section the opening idea returns and the movement works towards a *fortissimo* vigorous close ending abruptly in the key of A major.

In the third movement, *The Lonely Waters* (in which the strings remain muted throughout), a mood of elegiac desolation pervades the entire movement. The cello intones a doleful theme over which the second violin and viola and later first violin provides an undulating accompaniment. This theme is later stated more forcefully by the second violin and viola in unison culminating in an intense passionate *fortissimo* climax. This soon ebbs away and we return to the mood of the opening. Soon after, the movement concludes in a hushed tone of resignation.

The finale, *Trade Winds* remains in an ebullient mood for much of the movement save for a calmer secondary idea. The main motto idea is first stated by the viola accompanied by an ostinati figure in the violins. The theme is then passed to the first violin which ultimately leads to a slower section of a more flowing melodic nature. The tempo increases leading to a *fortissimo* restatement of the main theme this time played in unison by all four strings. The opening idea returns with the viola stating the theme accompanied by the violins. After a brief restatement of the secondary flowing melodic idea the principal theme returns in the viola before fragmenting and leading to a *pianissimo* coda ending with a single sustained note in the viola.

The String Quartet No. 10 (*En Voyage*) was premiered in a BBC broadcast on 6 May 1936 by the Birmingham Ladies' String Quartet (Muriel Tookey and Dorothy Hemming violins, Lena Wood viola, and Elsa Tookey, cello).

The **String Quartet No. 11** in B minor was composed during April and May 1933 and is comprised of three movements. The first movement, *Andante ma non*

troppo begins softly and slowly in which a short mysterious figure is announced by the cello immediately answered by the other strings. This figure/motto forms the main germ-idea on which the rest of the movement is based. The pace quickens leading to the *Allegro con brio* section in which the opening motto is announced *fortissimo* by all four strings. Repeated note patterns lead to a broad theme which gradually becomes quieter coming to rest on a hushed sustained chord. The opening motif, *Andante* returns immediately followed by an *Allegro con brio* section in which all the previous ideas are developed. As the pace slackens we move to the key of B major heralding a hushed epilogue that brings the movement to a peaceful conclusion.

The second movement, *Andante e semplice* (in which the instruments remain muted throughout), begins with a haunting theme announced by the viola accompanied by a repeated pattern in the violins. This theme is then immediately passed to the cello accompanied by a rising and falling semi-quaver pattern in the first violin and viola. After a hushed mysterious central section, the main theme returns in the first violin. The movement closes uneasily with *pianissimo* chords over a repeated falling motif in the viola.

The final movement, *Moderato e quieto*, opens with a series of rising and falling passages out of which emerges a hauntingly stratospheric theme intoned by the first violin accompanied by murmuring undulating figures in first the cello then joined by the other strings. As the pace quickens the tension and dynamics increase culminating in a ferocious *fortissimo* sustained chord. The dynamics quickly drop and the rising and falling passage from the beginning of the

movement is briefly re-called before leading to a tranquil and enigmatic close. It would seem that the work was never heard in its entirety until 12 October 2013 when it was given by the Cavaleri Quartet as part of The William Alwyn Festival. The only known previous performance on record was of the second and third movements that took place in the Duke's Hall at the Royal Academy of Music on 26 March 1936 given by Edward Silverman and William Waterhouse, violins, Douglas Thomson, viola and Peter Bevan, cello.

The single movement **Fantasia (String Quartet No. 12)** dedicated to the British composer Alan Bush (1900-1995) was completed in London during July 1935. As the title *Fantasia* implies, this work is very free with the ideas contained within its brief 10-12-minute duration. The motivic germ of the piece is stated in the hushed opening phrase by the first violin over a tremolando chord in the viola. A secondary rhythmic phrase is stated under this melody by the second violin. Shortly after, this theme is stated *fortissimo* by the viola and cello in unison. A development of this theme is followed by a calmer section in which a melody is announced in the cello which is then quickly taken up by the second violin. After a return to the opening theme (this time played by the second violin) we reach a very quiet tranquil section in which a series of *pianissimo* dissonant chords lead to a Cadenza in which fragmentary ideas are tossed around all four instruments. Following this a tranquil coda ensues concluding the work in a mysterious misty haze.

The *Fantasia* (String Quartet No. 12) was first performed in a BBC broadcast, Midlands service by the Birmingham Ladies' String Quartet on 6 May 1936. A

second performance by the Stratton Quartet (George Stratton and Carl Taylor, violins, Watson Forbes, viola, and John Moore, cello) took place on 11 January 1937 at the Mercury Theatre, London.

The two movement **String Quartet No. 13** was composed in late 1936; interestingly, the second movement was completed first in October with the first movement following in November. It would seem that the work was never performed during the composer's lifetime and had to wait until 10 October 2015 when it was performed by the Cavaleri Quartet as part of The William Alwyn Festival. Perhaps the composer was never quite satisfied with the piece, but be that as it may, there are some very strong ideas within.

The first movement, *Adagio e largamente e marcato* has an elegiac, passionate and sometimes very desolate feel to it, which is maintained throughout the movement. One has the feeling that this highly charged emotional music is struggling to reach out beyond the confines of four instruments, and Alwyn obviously felt this as in December 1936 he rescored this movement for two horns, timpani and string orchestra and gave it the title of *Tragic Interlude*.

By contrast the second movement, *Allegro molto e vivace* is full of light and air and has a 'will o' the wisp' quality to much of the emotional content. Save for a slightly slower central section, a scherzo like feel is maintained throughout. Towards the end of the movement the tempo slows to provide a contemplative and subdued coda.

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TIPPETT QUARTET

The celebrated Tippett Quartet has delighted critics and audiences alike with its animated, virtuosic performances and its inspired and attractive programming. They have performed at the BBC Proms, Cheltenham Festival, Snape Proms and numerous festivals throughout the UK and abroad, including tours of Europe, Canada and Mexico. The quartet regularly appears at Kings Place, Purcell Room, Wigmore Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Bridgewater Hall and frequently performs on BBC Radio 3. Alongside a busy touring schedule, the Tippett Quartet pursues a keen interest in educational work with both schools and universities and was Ensemble in Residence at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University for 2012-13. They are resident at Royal Holloway University, London and St. Edmund's School, Canterbury and they regularly visit the Royal Academy of Music.

Their broad and diverse repertoire highlights the Tippett Quartet's unique versatility. They are equally at home with the giants of the classical world as they are with great contemporary composers. Their impressive catalogue of over twenty releases have not only topped the classical charts but have also entered the pop charts and received universal critical acclaim.

The Tippett Quartet are the featured quartet in "In a South Downs Way" by Damian Montagu with narrations and words by Hugh Bonneville. "The Path Towards Tomorrow" was chosen by Hugh as his Desert Island disc on BBC Radio 4 after the



recording came out at the start of 2016. The Tippett Quartet also enjoys recording and touring with some of the UK's finest Jazz musicians with their 'Close To You' project – a tribute to the album that Frank Sinatra made with the Hollywood String Quartet.

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