

**SOMM**  
RECORDINGS



# CHARLES WOOD

## STRING QUARTETS

HARROGATE · HIGHGATE  
VARIATIONS ON AN IRISH FOLK TUNE

LONDON CHAMBER ENSEMBLE  
MADELEINE MITCHELL VIOLIN, DIRECTOR

Born into a large family in the city of Armagh on 15 June 1866, Charles Wood was one of several brothers who all sang in the cathedral choir along with his father and namesake, Charles Wood, a choral vicar and, later, Diocesan Registrar. Though a small, provincial city in the north of Ireland, Armagh nevertheless offered the young Wood a suitably invigorating environment of music-making both within the cathedral confines and outside where there were performances of choral works, glee entertainments, chamber music and private soirées. As he moved into adolescence, Wood, in the footsteps of his oldest brother, William, became a student organist and pupil of Thomas Osborne Marks (the cathedral's organist and director of music). Yet, though the ecclesiastical world remained important to him, his secular musical experiences as a string player, particularly as a violist, were equally significant and this aspect of his musical formation was supplemented by a profound study of the music of Beethoven, a composer he venerated above all others.

By the time he was 16, Wood had begun to write chamber music. There was a movement and some variations (on an Irish folk melody) for violin and piano, and by the time he was ready to compete for a place at the new Royal College of Music, he had completed at least one movement of a string quartet which formed the basis of further work with Charles Villiers Stanford after he entered the RCM with the Morley Scholarship in Composition. Stanford clearly encouraged the creation of chamber works, partly for practical reasons of performance, but also to develop his pupils' contrapuntal skills. This sat well with Wood's individual temperament. An ability in fugue, the principles of which he had already mastered in Armagh, fuelled a natural affinity for counterpoint and canon which, as is evident from his vocal exercises, he rapidly acquired. Such a proficiency found voice in his instrumental works, a Piano Trio, a Cello Sonata, a String Trio and further movements for violin and piano. By April 1885 he completed a new string quartet (No.1) in D minor which showed a remarkable step forward in his technique and confidence. Stanford was delighted with it and sung its praises to Joseph Joachim.

After leaving the RCM in 1888, Wood moved to Cambridge where he was first employed as organ scholar at Selwyn College before accepting an organ scholarship at Gonville and Caius in 1889. Though he travelled to London on a weekly basis to teach at the RCM, he found musical life at Cambridge particularly amenable. Stanford had done much to promote the Cambridge University Musical Society (CUMS) and the founding of the new Cambridge University Music Club by R.R. Terry focused strongly on student musical activity, especially the cultivation of chamber music. His own work in Caius Chapel, the responsibilities of his own college musical society and the productions of the Cambridge Greek Play (for which he composed two original scores) provided many distractions to his academic studies. This included the composition of two chamber works in 1889, a septet for wind and strings and a prize-winning wind quintet.



Charles Wood c.1910

Two years after acquiring his B.A. and Mus.Bac. degrees in 1890, Wood's appetite for chamber music continued with the composition of a new string quartet which he nicknamed the "Highgate". What incentivised him to write the work is unclear, but the publication of Stanford's first two quartets in 1891, and the presence of the CUMS Quartet led by Richard Gompertz (and which included Wood's old student friends, Haydn Inwards and Emil Kreuz) may have been an influential factor. It seems likely that he drew the nickname from visits to see his brother, William, the music master at Highgate Grammar School who died tragically young in 1895. The first movement is dated 6 April, the second and third 7 April and the finale October 1893; when it was performed is less certain, though it may have been given at one of Ernest Fowle's British Chamber Music Concerts during the winter season of 1895–6. Though critics such as Edward J. Dent suggested a certain

stylistic deference to Brahms in the thematic and phraseological behaviour of the material in the first movement, there is much that points to Wood's individuality such as the unusual "quasi recit." at the opening of the development and the inventive invertible counterpoint which ensues. The recapitulation, too, is imaginatively implemented as much of the expositional music is reworked, rescored and rounded off by an energetic coda. Perhaps a little reminiscent of Brahms, the second movement, a ternary structure, is a short melodious intermezzo in minuet style, slightly quirky in its irregular phrase lengths and more animated trio. Perhaps the most captivating and unusual movement of the quartet is the third. Using a seven-bar ground bass whose melodic figurations are strongly interrelated, the movement in C minor does in fact behave like a passacaglia rather than that of the traditional 17th-century model (where the repetitions are restricted to the bass line). In addition to the ground bass is an austere viola theme deploying the instrument's lowest register. Together these two components form the basis of eight variations which become increasingly more intellectual in their abstraction and which abound in contrapuntal devices of invertibility, canon, countermelody and lyrical transformation, rhetoric amplified by the rapid changes of tempo and (at the centre) a change of mode to the major. The sonata rondo structure of the lively finale, replete with a striking tangential opening, is highly engaging in its artifice. After a repeat of the rondo material, the development commences in C minor before a delightful reworking of the rondo theme in C major. The restoration of E flat for the recapitulation is, however, marked by the re-entry of the second subject, perhaps to balance the preponderance of the rondo idea in the development. The rondo does ultimately return, however, in a resolute reappearance at the end where it combines with the rhythmical dynamism of the coda.

Wood's Fourth Quartet, also in E flat, was completed in August 1912 during a visit to Harrogate (hence the nickname) where his wife was taking the waters at the famous Yorkshire spa town. It was given its first performance on 16 June 1914 at the second of Dunhill's Eighth Series of chamber concerts at the Steinway Hall by the Grimson Quartet, an ensemble which included two of Wood's former RCM pupils, Jessie Grimson (who led

the quartet) and her cellist husband Edward Mason (who later died at the disastrous Battle of Aubers Ridge in 1915). With its conventional expositional repeat, the first movement of the “Harrogate” would seem more traditionally classical, but the prevalence of the first idea’s closing material (with its characteristic flattened seventh) lends the whole movement an unusual baroque ambiance with its ritornello-like recurrences, and this ethos is intensified by the severe contrapuntal activity of the development. The scherzo in C major, somewhat Beethovenian in its vitality and idiosyncrasies, is noteworthy for its use of ascending and descending whole-tone scales (a feature picked up by the critics). This unusual characteristic (perhaps a nod on Wood’s part towards contemporary European modernism) is supplemented by an equally eccentric “trio” in A minor. The Adagio in A flat is another miniature set of variations. The theme, a synthetic Irish folk song, is first presented by the viola with sparse accompaniment from the second violin and cello then gains additional richness in the first variation. A second variation, more dramatic and declamatory in its “question and answer” gestures for cello (or viola) and first violin, concludes with a histrionic cadenza for the first violin, before A flat is restored with an adorned reprise of the viola’s theme in the tonic (as Variation 3) and restatement of the first variation (as Variation 4), even more highly embellished. The movement ends with cyclic references to two distinctive ideas from the first movement – the preponderant flattened-seventh material and the chromatic parenthesis which, together, featured at the end of the exposition and recapitulation – before the main theme reasserts itself to close off the movement. Always an enthusiast of Thomas Moore’s poetry and his famous melodies, Wood based the reel-like rondo theme of his finale on the contours of “Oh, breathe not his name” (using the air “The Brown Maid”), a tune he arranged for voices two years later. The complex sonata rondo movement is imbued throughout with this vivacious idea. Permeating the second subject, it also becomes more recognisable in the second episode in A flat prior to a resourceful developmental phase where it provides an invertible counterpoint to the whole-tone scale of the scherzo. The recapitulation of the rondo is deftly managed. In a second phase of the development in 6/8, the whole-tone scale of the scherzo and the reel material begin to fragment while the tonality shifts

from  $\underline{V}$  of F to  $\underline{V}$  of C, giving the impression that we are about to cadence in C. However, it is the harmony of  $\underline{IV}^7$  which becomes the main, protracted focus of attention as it subsequently functions pivotally as  $\underline{II}^7$  in E flat as oblique preparation for the return of the rondo. In many ways the substantial last phase of the finale – all 128 bars of it – is the most extraordinary part of Wood's structure. A more riotous restatement of the reel is in fact only a prelude to a more extensive paragraph of further development in which cells of the folk song are exuberantly reworked. This is not, however, the end of the story, for the culmination of the rondo and its compelling accelerando is marked by a final announcement of the folk song, presented in its undisguised form, as if Wood, tongue-in-cheek, was attempting to reveal the very heart of the movement's inner Irish *persona* before taking leave with a breathtaking "Prestissimo".

The *Variations on an Irish Folk Tune* date from 25 August 1916, though their first hearing in Cambridge did not take place until 8 June 1925; they were also broadcast on the BBC in that year by the Music Society Quartet (which included a very young John Barbirolli as cellist). Resembling the larger ambition of his orchestral variations based on the Irish tune "Patrick Sarsfield", the *Variations* were based on a melody (No.749) from the Pigot Collection included as a supplement in P.W. Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs*, published in 1909 (a frequent source of many of Wood's Irish arrangements), one of four airs "taken down by Pigot from Mr. Flattely of Co. Mayo". Wood's formal scheme of ten variations reflected the late 19th-century tendency to organise them into groups shared by common attributes of key, tempo and metre. This is evinced by the first three contrasting variations couched in C major. A second group, Variations 4, 5 and 6, shapes a more melancholy departure in F minor at a more urgent tempo ("Allegro con fuoco") where the darkness of Variation 4 and the turbulent Variation 5 combine to form Variation 6. A third, more differentiated set of variations serves to calm the previous sense of tumult with a "Poco allegretto" which instigates a gentler interlude of two variations in D flat major (7 and 8) and a passionate Adagio in E flat (Variation 9) which concludes on a preparatory dominant of C.

The final Allegro, a composite variation in C major of 197 bars is a dance more or less equal in length to the sum of all the previous variations. A rondo structure – each recurrence of the rondo theme is itself a variation – and each episode recalls (as a further variation) previous variations of the series. The first episode, for example, makes reference to Variation 2, and the second episode to Variation 4, adeptly inflected by its former F minor. With great perspicacity, Wood also extends this episode in the more tonally fluid manner of a development which, by degrees, builds to a climactic return of the rondo. It is not, however, until the final variation (“Allegro molto”) that the original folk tune makes its appearance, metamorphosed into an Irish reel.

A highly regarded and influential teacher of harmony, counterpoint and composition at the Royal College of Music and at Cambridge University – he had many admiring students, among them Ralph Vaughan Williams, Hugh Allen, W.C. Denis Browne, Edward Dent, Armstrong Gibbs, Arthur Bliss, Cyril Rootham, Michael Tippett and Elizabeth Maconchy – Wood warmed to the more intimate, polyphonic instrumental idiom of the string quartet, one which complemented the technical involution of his highly polished music for the Anglican liturgy. Greatly admired, yet unpublished at his death in 1926, his six completed quartets and the *Variations on an Irish Folk Tune* were published by Oxford University Press in a complete volume in 1929 as a tribute to him by his old Cambridge college, Gonville and Caius, who financed the project, and overseen by his professorial successor, Edward Dent.

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Jeremy Dibble is the author of a new biography: *The Life and Music of Charles Wood* (Boydell Press, May 2026).

Madeleine Mitchell would like to thank the Royal College of Music Library, and the English Music Heritage Series at the University of Minnesota for their help with preparing the parts.



Photo: Daniel Ross

**Madeleine Mitchell** has performed in some 50 countries as solo violinist and chamber musician in a wide repertoire, including at the Canberra International Music Festival, Lincoln Center (New York), La Folle Journée Tokyo, Seoul Arts Center, BBC Proms, Wigmore Hall and Southbank Centre (London), appearing with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Polish National Radio Symphony, Ukrainian Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Mitchell's discography, nominated for Grammy® and *BBC Music Magazine* awards and featuring works written for her by well-known composers, includes the popular *Violin Songs*, *Violin Muse* and *Violin Conversations*, *FiddleSticks*, and *British Treasures* for SOMM. She is also a professor at the Royal College of Music, London.

[madeleinemitchell.com](http://madeleinemitchell.com)

The **London Chamber Ensemble Quartet** was formed of outstanding and experienced British chamber musicians in 2019. Their album of premiere recordings *Howells & Wood Quartets* (SOMM) was widely praised, including by *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Observer*, *MusicWeb International*, *Klassik.com* and *Sonograma*. It was one of *Gramophone's* recommended recordings of 2024 and featured on BBC Radio 3.

The LCE Quartet performed late Beethoven for the composer's 250th anniversary, Schubert for the Schubert Society of Great Britain and at the Stanford and Howells festival in Cambridge. They opened Kensington and Chelsea Music Society's season in a sold-out concert with the Joseph Horovitz String Quartet No.5 and Brahms's Clarinet Quintet: "superb high-quality chamber music-making" (*Musical Opinion*).

They are increasingly in demand at major festivals and venues including Three Choirs, English Music, the international Red Violin festival (Leeds), Music in Country Churches and Pinner Music Festivals, HHH Concerts, on tour throughout the UK and at prestigious events including London's Glaziers Hall and the US Embassy/Fulbright Commission. Madeleine Mitchell won a Royal Philharmonic Society award for a film of her Anglo-Russian quartet programme with the V&A exhibition *Fabergé in London: Romance to Revolution* (YouTube). A return invitation followed, again sold out, for their quartet concert "French Impressions" with the V&A Chanel exhibition.



Photo courtesy of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers, at London Bridge

[londonchamberensemble.com](http://londonchamberensemble.com)

The London Chamber Ensemble was founded by violinist Madeleine Mitchell in 1992 at the request of the Vale of Glamorgan Festival to perform Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, a work they would play again for the BBC Proms and many other broadcast performances. Their recording of the Messiaen with Joanna MacGregor, coupled with Zygmunt Krauze's *Quatuor pour la naissance*, was the widely recommended version of the work for many years – by "an all-star group which manages to outdo all its rivals" (*Gramophone*).

Madeleine was asked by the William Alwyn Trust to put together an album for Naxos of *Alwyn Chamber Music and Songs* (2007), all first recordings. This was followed by the London Chamber Ensemble album for Naxos/BMS, *Grace Williams Chamber Music* (2019), consisting of all world-premiere recordings, which was named a *Guardian* CD of the Week and entered the Classical Charts at No.2: "Passionate and persuasive advocacy, gripping interpretations... more please" (*Gramophone*). The *Rondo for Dancing* video with violinists Mitchell, MacKay and cellist Spooner is featured on Classic FM.

The LCE were invited to appear in the Southbank Centre's International Chamber Music Season, in Mitchell's programme "A Century of Music by British Women: 1921-2021". This was live streamed from St John's Smith Square on International Women's Day, with wide media coverage on BBC Radio 4, Radio 3, Classic FM, Scala Radio, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Strad* (Premiere of the Month) and *Musical Opinion*: "very fine performances of a broad range of fresh and rewarding repertoire... the players brought energy, precision and interpretative imagination".

Howells' "In Gloucestershire" (1920) "is a stirring work, full of vitality, expertly played here by the London Chamber Ensemble"... Charles Wood: "Melodic, expansive, with hints of Irish folk song and a touch of Brahms, it's an attractive work that merits this committed and rewarding performance."  
Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer*

"Indispensable... the eloquent slow movement and the spikily energetic finale highlight how closely attuned expressively the LCEQ players are to one another... By no means all releases of 'rare' or 'neglected' repertoire are worth listening to. This one is."  
Terry Blain, *BBC Music Magazine*

"A valuable and illuminating recording of two substantial and fascinating works... committed performances, well engineered... there is music to enjoy here..."  
Nick Barnard, *MusicWeb International*



SOMMCD 0692

"This version of the ["In Gloucestershire"] quartet is gracious, mellifluous and attractive... Wood's is a delightful work – open-hearted, generous-minded... commanding, finely recorded and eloquent performances."

Jonathan Woolf, *MusicWeb International*

*Gramophone* recommended recordings 2024:

"I love the way Madeleine Mitchell and her colleagues let the music unfold in a natural manner... The high tessitura for first violin holds no bars for the leader, who alongside her players so fervently projects the ecstatic elasticity. The playing of the slow movement is perfection... the finale thrillingly realised."

Adrian Edwards, *Gramophone*

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FIRST RECORDINGS

# CHARLES WOOD

## STRING QUARTETS

LONDON CHAMBER ENSEMBLE QUARTET  
MADELEINE MITCHELL VIOLIN, DIRECTOR · GORDON MACKAY VIOLIN  
BRIDGET CAREY VIOLA · JOSEPH SPOONER CELLO

### Charles Wood (1866–1926)

#### *String Quartet No.4 in E flat "Harrogate"*

- |   |  |       |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro con moto                      | 10:16 |
| 2 | II. Prestissimo                          | 3:35  |
| 3 | III. Adagio                              | 7:39  |
| 4 | IV. Allegro molto – Presto – Prestissimo | 7:12  |

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| 5 | <i>Variations on an Irish Folk Tune</i> | 12:46 |
|---|---|-------|

#### *String Quartet No.2 in E flat "Highgate"*

- |   |  |       |
|---|--|-------|
| 6 | I. Allegro con moto  | 11:07 |
| 7 | II. Molto moderato   | 4:26  |
| 8 | III. Adagio ma non troppo – Più agitato – Tranquillo – A tempo | 6:33  |
| 9 | IV. Molto animato – Più tranquillo – (A tempo)                 | 6:20  |

Total duration: **69:58**

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