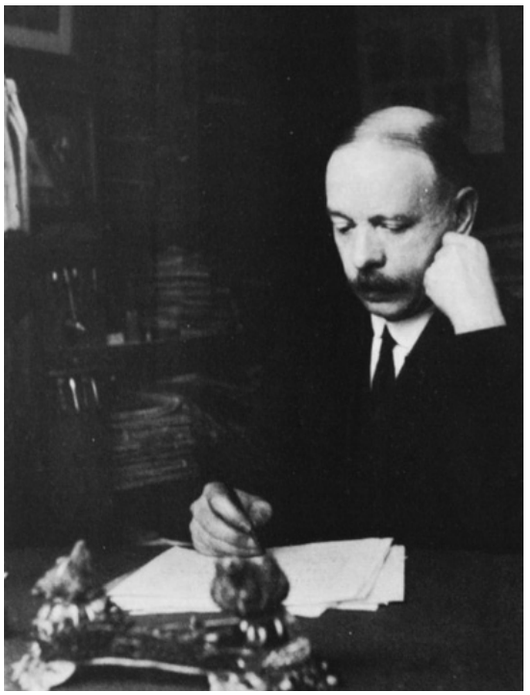

SOMM
RECORDINGS
CHARLES WOOD
STRING QUARTETS
VOL 2
NOS 1, 3, 5 & 8
LONDON CHAMBER ENSEMBLE
MADELEINE MITCHELL VIOLIN, DIRECTOR



Charles Wood *c.*1910

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 Vaughan Williams, Hugh Allen, W.C. Denis Browne, Edward J. Dent, Nicholas Gatty, Patrick Hadley, Armstrong Gibbs, Arthur Bliss, Cyril Rootham and Elizabeth Maconchy – Irish-born composer Charles Wood warmed to the more intimate, polyphonic instrumental idiom of the string quartet, a form that not only complemented the technical involution of his highly polished music for the Anglican liturgy but also embodied something of his private, shy personality. Greatly admired, yet unpublished at his death in 1926, his six completed quartets and the *Variations on an Irish Folk Tune* for string quartet were published together by Oxford University Press in a 1929 volume, a tribute to him from his old Cambridge college, Gonville & Caius, which financed the project. The edition was overseen by his professorial successor, Edward J. Dent, Wood's widow, Charlotte, and one of his last students, John Meredith Tatton. At the time of its publication this memorial edition was not fully appreciated as one of the most substantial contributions (along with Charles Villiers Stanford's eight works written between 1891 and 1919) to the repertoire of the British string quartet.

We know from early surviving manuscript material that Charles Wood had already begun to write for string quartet while he was a student organist of Thomas Osborne Marks at St Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh. During his time as a chorister at the cathedral and its affiliated choir school, Wood learned the viola (and possibly the violin and cello as well), enabling him to take part in chamber music with friends, his siblings and his father (who was a choral vicar and a proficient string player). When Wood decided to audition for the Morley Scholarship in Composition at the newly inaugurated Royal College of Music, he included movements of a String Quartet in A minor in his portfolio submission. Stanford (who had been appointed

a professor of composition at the institution and would go on to teach Wood) must have seen potential in those pages; he recommended Wood for the scholarship when the RCM opened its doors in April 1883. Certainly, by the time Wood became a student – at barely 17 – he was well aware of the core classical repertoire of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and probably knew Mendelssohn's quartets as well. Indeed, his love of Beethoven, which he retained throughout his life, was in part fostered by his knowledge of the German composer's chamber works.

As part of his first months of study with Stanford, Wood sought to finish his early Quartet in A minor, and there were other movements for a projected cello sonata, composed in 1884, a Piano Trio in D minor and a String Trio in C. During this period his technique, especially his handling of harmony and counterpoint, developed in leaps and bounds. This can be witnessed in the contrapuntal assurance of several student *a cappella* works for eight voices (including his prodigious motet "O Lord, rebuke me not") and a new **Quartet in D minor** completed at the end of April 1885. The Quartet was a major artistic achievement with which Wood, not yet 19, would cross the threshold from youth to incipient maturity as a composer. An assimilation of Beethoven – one thinks of the Op.59 "Razumovsky" works, the Op.74 "Harp" and Op.95 "Serioso" Quartets – underpins the bold first movement and the elaborate tripartite scheme of the Molto adagio in B flat major. The metrically disruptive scherzo accents of the Presto also recall similar methods in Beethoven, as does the F major key that tangentially opens the movement before cadencing into D minor at the theme's conclusion. Characterised by drones and plagal inflections, the scherzo's "trio" is a more pastoral affair in D major, dominated by gentle arabesques for the first violin. The forceful finale, its first subject full of march-like dotted rhythms, recalls the spirit of Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet D.810 (in the same key of D minor). One senses that Wood's technique was expanding even during his composition of this substantial essay, as is palpable from the impressive developmental phase of the movement, the greater intricacy of the recapitulation and the incremental acceleration of the coda. After it was performed at an RCM concert on 15 July, Stanford, unmistakably proud of his student's achievement, wrote to violinist Joseph Joachim, who had praised the work's fluency and *savoir faire*: "I'm glad you liked little Wood's 4^{tet}, it has poetry in it".

The impressive technical advance shown in the Quartet in D minor not only confirmed the significant advances Wood had made in his first two years under Stanford but also revealed his acquaintance with a broader European repertoire of chamber music. His student confrère Sidney Peine Waddington commented that, as a first-year student Wood had little or no experience of Schumann or the later 19th-century works of Brahms, Smetana, Dvořák, Sgambati or Tchaikovsky, which had by that time begun to establish themselves in London programmes. Yet within a relatively short time, a new-found familiarity with works of contemporary romanticism occasioned both an expansion in the formal scope of Wood's chamber music and its syntactical cohesion. After the composition of a Sextet for wind and strings (1889), a prize-winning Wind Quintet (1889), a Violin Sonata (1890) and the more mature "Highgate" Quartet in E flat (1892–3), all composed during his early years at Cambridge, Wood did not turn again to chamber music until 1911, when he began his **String Quartet in A minor**. The work was first performed on 16 February 1912 in the first concert of Thomas Dunhill's chamber music series at the Steinway Hall that season. The most frequently performed quartet during Wood's lifetime and after his death, it was for many years the only one of his quartets to be recorded. The first movement, a carefully controlled sonata structure full of unconventional turns, betrays Wood's special interest in modal harmony, a linguistic aspect that was increasingly dominating the music of his pupils Vaughan Williams, Holst and Howells. The scherzo Presto, a Beethovenian tour de force, is a complex sonata rondo structure (a design from which Wood evidently derived much fascination). Continuing the trend of his earlier "Highgate" Quartet, the elegiac Adagio cantabile is a set of five integrated, interlinked variations, while the finale, another sophisticated sonata rondo, is notable for its use of the Irish folk song "The Lark in the Clear Air". This melody had rapidly gained popularity through Alfred Perceval Graves's *The Irish Song Book with Original Irish Airs* (1895) and Michele Esposito's arrangement of it in his Irish Melodies, Op.41 (*c*.1898). In 1909, an article on Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810–1886) – who penned the English lyrics to fit the traditional air – and his connection with Irish music was published as an important feature in the *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society* in anticipation

of the poet's centenary celebrations in Belfast in 1910. Wood was a committee member of the Society, and his inclusion of the tune was surely a tribute to the great Ulster poet and the words he'd provided for this great Ulster melody. The lyrical juxtaposition of the folk tune with the highly contrapuntal first subject, and its tonal manipulation throughout the movement, are features which give Wood's finale a distinctive disposition, and anticipate further "Irish" expeditions in his later quartets. The tonal control of the movement, particularly the recapitulation of the folk melody, is also consummately worked.

After the premiere of his "Harrogate" Quartet – performed by the Grimson Quartet in the second of Dunhill's Eighth Series of chamber concerts at the Steinway Hall on 16 June 1914 – Wood's appetite for the string quartet had clearly not diminished. Two years later, a **Quartet in F major** was given by the Philharmonic Quartet on 7 March 1916 at the Steinway Hall, as part of another concert series organised by Dunhill who was more determined than ever to continue his venture in spite of the war and its financial pressures. Perhaps inspired by the "democratic" example of the string writing in the quartets submitted for the Cobbett Chamber Music prizes by many of his pupils, Wood indicated in his score that the two violins should be considered as entirely equal voices throughout, a feature which adds significantly to the already intense polyphonic nature of the piece. The work unusually begins with a slow movement and, taking its lead from the opening movement of Beethoven's Quartet Op.131, its fugal mindset is skilfully conflated with elements of sonata form. A fusion of slow movement and scherzo constitutes the second movement, which constantly fluctuates between D minor and F major, and the intricately organised rondo finale, like that of the A minor and "Harrogate" quartets, is based on an Irish tune (as Wood specified in the score though without giving its name): "The Devil of Dublin", a double jig. This is another engaging example of Wood's inventive formal imagination and how he was able to incorporate the material of the Irish traditional repertoire into a highly sophisticated organic entity.

The single **Movement in G minor** for string quartet, which was also included in the aforementioned memorial edition published by OUP (an incomplete second movement survives in the Wood Archive at Gonville & Caius College), intimated that Wood had, at some point, contemplated an entire work around this key. The date of composition is uncertain, but Dent conjectured that it may have been written sometime between 1916 and 1917. One of its most distinctive features is the pungent modal flavour of its primary and secondary thematic ideas – with the conspicuous presence of their flattened sevenths – both of which leave the impression of synthetic Irish melody. In the case of the secondary material in the relative major, the seventh (A flat) operates as an important agent in the modulation to G flat major at the beginning of the development and in the coda in E flat, and it is very much a feature of the final cadence. In an earlier version of the movement, the tangential harmonic progressions at the opening of the quartet (in which the flattened seventh is also an important constituent) were absent, but their important role in the transition to the recapitulation evidently persuaded Wood that they would serve well as an effective oblique gesture towards the first cadence in the tonic in bar 5. This is a fine, engrossing movement with a rich array of thematic events, captivating structural happenings and harmonic experiments, all of which evidently led Dent to think that it was worth publishing.

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

SOMM Recordings would like to express our thanks and gratitude to the Stanford Society and Professor Jeremy Dibble for their financial as well as personal support, which in recent years has enabled us to record and release world-premiere recordings of the complete Stanford quartets and two discs of song cycles, as well as a live performance of Stanford's opera *The Travelling Companion*. More recently, their support has extended to the complete Charles Wood String Quartets, ending with the present disc. Their generosity is much appreciated.

THE STANFORD SOCIETY was formed in 2007 to promote greater interest in Sir Charles Villiers Stanford's life and music and to encourage and support performances and recordings of his work. The Society holds an annual Stanford Festival Weekend in a cathedral city in the UK or Ireland, where past festivals have included performances of music by Stanford (including premieres of his Second Violin Concerto and Variations for violin and orchestra in orchestrations by Jeremy Dibble), his students and contemporaries, as well as talks, social events and cathedral services. Society members also receive regular newsletters with news and information about upcoming concerts and new recordings of Stanford's music.

Further information about the Stanford Society may be found at the Society's website at www.thestanfordsociety.org or by contacting Daniel Wilkinson-Horsfield, the Society's Honorary Secretary, at cvstanfordsociety@gmail.com

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**


Photo: Daniel Ross



Photo: Worshipful Company of Glaziers, at London Bridge

The **London Chamber Ensemble Quartet** was formed of outstanding and experienced British chamber musicians in 2019. Their album of *Howells & Wood Quartets* (SOMMCD 0692), featuring premiere recordings, 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. This led to their being invited to record all eight of Charles Wood's Quartets. The first volume, with the "Highgate" and "Harrogate" Quartets and the *Variations on an Irish Folktune*, received wide critical acclaim and was selected as album of the week on BBC Radio Ulster and RTÉ lyric fm as well as being featured on BBC Radio 3's *In Tune*.

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.

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 entirely of 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".

londonchamberensemble.com

On *HOWELLS & WOOD QUARTETS*

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*

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*

On *CHARLES WOOD STRING QUARTETS [VOL 1]*

"Led by the indefatigable Madeleine Mitchell… What a lovely album this is, showcasing performances of heartwarming dedication, shapely sensitivity and infectious spontaneity."
Andrew Achenbach, *Gramophone* 2026

"A delightful album… Wholehearted sympathy shown throughout by the London Chamber Ensemble Quartet." Geoff Brown, *BBC Music Magazine*

"There's much melodic distinction to be heard here – once again Wood proves a minor master of string quartet variation form – and he ends, with a flourish, with a vibrant Reel. The London Chamber Ensemble Quartet plays these works with expert skill, fine intonation and warm corporate tone."
Jonathan Woolf, *MusicWeb International*



SOMMCD 0692



SOMMCD 0723

"Madeleine Mitchell emerges as the great protagonist of the project: a violinist of extraordinary sensitivity and a leader capable of uniting rigour, elegance and a deep musical understanding. Thanks to the valuable work of Madeleine Mitchell and the London Chamber Ensemble Quartet, the music of Charles Wood regains the visibility and recognition it deserves within the chamber music repertoire."
Sonograma

"A centenary celebration puts a masterly composer back in the spotlight… Wood could not have wished for more persuasive advocates of his music than the London Chamber Ensemble led by Madeleine Mitchell, who bring a compelling energy and vivacity to their interpretations, supported by a clear recording."
Joanne Talbot, *The Strad*

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.

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*FIRST RECORDING

CHARLES WOOD

STRING QUARTETS VOL 2

LONDON CHAMBER ENSEMBLE QUARTET

MADELEINE MITCHELL VIOLIN, DIRECTOR · GORDON MACKAY VIOLIN
BRIDGET CAREY VIOLA · JOSEPH SPOONER CELLO

Charles Wood (1866–1926)

String Quartet No.3 in A minor

1	I.	Allegro un poco maestoso	7:38
2	II.	Presto	5:04
3	III.	Adagio cantabile	5:32
4	IV.	Allegro molto	5:38

String Quartet No.5 in F

5	I.	Poco adagio	5:32
6	II.	Allegretto – Un poco più mosso – Allegretto	3:48
7	III.	Allegro un poco vivace	5:29

String Quartet No.1 in D minor *

8	I.	Allegro	9:36
9	II.	Molto adagio	5:25
10	III.	Presto	3:17
11	IV.	Allegro vivace	10:10

String Quartet No.8 in G minor

12	[I.]		7:11

Total duration: **74:25**

This recording is made possible thanks to generous financial support from The Francis Routh Trust, The Stanford Society, Professor Jeremy & Mrs Alison Dibble, John Covell & Constance Frydenlund, and Charles Covell. Support is also acknowledged from the Master and Fellows of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge.

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Executive and Recording Producer: Siva Oke · **Recording Engineer:** Adaq Khan
Cover: *Red Sky at Night* © Sinéad Smyth
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