

Piano Quintet in A minor, op 84

A quintet in three movements for two violins, viola, cello and piano:

1 - Moderato; 2 - Adagio; 3 - Andante/Allegro.

Approximate Length: 35 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 21 May 1919

Venue:

Performed by: Albert Sammons, W H Reed - violins;
Raymond Jeremy - viola; Felix Salmond -
cello;
William Murdoch - piano

Dedicated to: Ernest Newman,
music critic of the Manchester Guardian

The *Piano Quintet* was the last of three chamber works that Elgar composed at Brinkwells, the country cottage the Elgars had rented near Fittleworth in Sussex, during the latter half of 1918, although he started work on it before completing the String Quartet and did not complete it until after his return to London early in 1919. It is also the largest work: Elgar wrote in a letter of 18 March 1919 to his friend, the organist Ivor Atkins, that it “runs gigantically and in a large mood”.

Lady Elgar hinted at a programmatic basis for the work, noting in her diary that the first movement represented a group of trees in Flexham Park near Brinkwells. According to legend, these trees comprised the remains of Spanish monks who had engaged in sacrilegious ceremonies in the park and were struck by lightning: “sad ‘dispossessed’ trees and their dance and unstilled regret for their evil fate”, as she speculated. According to Wulstan Atkins, the composer also implied that the same legend been much in Elgar’s mind during the writing of the quintet, the quartet and the Violin Sonata. In a letter of January 1919 to Ernest Newman, the Music Critic of the Manchester Guardian and the Quintet’s dedicatee, Elgar had described the first movement as “ghostly stuff”. Doubt has been cast on the legend, not least because the lack of any record whatsoever of a Spanish religious settlement in the area. But this obscures the point that, whatever the factual basis for the legend, Elgar appears again to have drawn his inspiration from the natural beauty of the area surrounding the cottage at Brinkwells.

The Quintet, Quartet and Violin Sonata were performed by Billy Reed’s ensemble, led by Albert Sammons and with Raymond Jeremy (viola), Felix Salmond (cello) and William Murdoch (piano), at a Wigmore Hall concert on 21 May, 1919, constituting the official premières of the Quintet and Quartet together with an early performance of the Sonata.

The introduction to the first movement is a stark, possibly plainsong-based phrase on the piano with the strings stabbing and muttering darkly against it and the cello soon has a rising, imploring figure. These are both used often in the movement and reappear in the middle of the last movement. The movement proper begins with a vigorous tune

immediately followed by a transformation of the imploring phrase. The second subject does sound a bit Spanish, with a violin duet accompanied by pizzicato, sounding vaguely like schmaltzy café music. All the material is reviewed and hinted at, with also a Chorale-type figure interrupted by a big fugato section started by the cello. The exciting development gives way to the recapitulation, where the “Spanish” element sounds even more Spanish. The movement stands still on a high cello note; the Chorale comes back, then the introduction, and the movement fades away. In *The Times* of 25 May, four days after the première, H.C. Colles wrote: “The first movement of the piano quintet has a breadth of view, one might almost say a manliness of expression, which has never appeared so clearly in anything he has written before ... It was this movement, rather than the two which followed it, which seemed to raise the quintet to a higher plane than either of the preceding works; and more than all else convinced us that Elgar is still a force among the many currents of the musical tide.”

The second movement, like its equivalent in the string quartet, is generally regarded as both the emotional heart of the work as well as the finest musically (pace Colles, who asked “Was there not something of ‘Nimrod’ in the sustained loftiness of the slow movement of the quintet?”) This sublime, wonderful movement starts with a ravishing viola melody giving way to imploring, recitative-like interruptions from the cello alternating with a gentle, long-limbed melody.

The third movement starts with an introduction using material from the introduction of the first movement and soon gives way to a bowling, outdoors sort of tune which is marked “with dignity”. The opening rhythm of this tune is a key part of the movement and it is sounded frequently, initially most obviously at the end of the opening section when it is marked nobilmente, the characteristic Elgar direction. The movement then breaks up with a syncopated wisp of a piano tune (which Ivor Keys described as “galumphing”) leading to a bumpy ride through a variety of keys with fragments exchanged between the piano and strings. Suddenly from the chaos emerges that initial piano, plainsong tune from the first movement, then the “chorale” and the violin duet sounding like a sad waltz. The outdoors tune comes back, followed by the “galumphing” one, then a long coda, which brings the piece to a thunderous close.