

String Quartet in E minor, op 83

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

1 - Allegro moderato; 2 - Piacevole (poco andante); 3 - Allegro molto.

Approximate Length: 30 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 21 May 1919

Venue: Wigmore Hall, London

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

Dedicated to: The Brodsky Quartet

Elgar composed two part-quartets in 1878 and a complete one in 1887 but these were set aside and/or destroyed. Years later, the violinist Adolf Brodsky had been urging Elgar to compose a string quartet since 1900 when, as leader of the Hallé Orchestra, he performed several of Elgar's works. Consequently, Elgar first set about composing a String Quartet in 1907 after enjoying a concert in Malvern by the Brodsky Quartet. However, he put it aside when he embarked with determination on his long-delayed First Symphony. It appears that the composer subsequently used themes intended for this earlier quartet in other works, including the symphony. When he eventually returned to the genre, it was to compose an entirely fresh work. It was after enjoying an evening of chamber music in London with Billy Reed's quartet, just before entering hospital for a tonsillitis operation, that Elgar decided on writing the quartet, and he began it whilst convalescing, completing the first movement by the end of March 1918. He composed that first movement at his home, Severn House, in Hampstead, depressed by the war news and debilitated from his operation. By May, he could move to the peaceful surroundings of Brinkwells, the country cottage that Lady Elgar had found for them in the depth of the Sussex countryside. The String Quartet was thus the first of three chamber works that he tackled in 1918, inspired by his Sussex surroundings.

Following the delivery of a piano to Brinkwells in mid-August of that year, however, Elgar tempted fate a second time by putting aside the quartet, firstly to compose the Violin Sonata and then to make a start on the Piano Quintet. Fortunately, he resumed work on the quartet in October 1918, beginning the second movement on his wife's birthday and producing a work she likened to "captured sunshine" and subsequently requested that it be played at her funeral. After her death on 7 April 1920, this movement was indeed played by Albert Sammons, Billy Reed, Felix Salmond Salmond and Lionel Tertis at the service in Malvern. Elgar began the third movement on 8 December and finished it on Christmas Eve.

Elgar was himself an accomplished violinist, having played in various chamber ensembles in his youth and, according to Billy Reed, "his ambition was to become a famous violinist". In this he did not succeed, subsequently earning his living as player and teacher until he could become a full-time composer. The quartet combines the skills thus acquired from those days with a high level of compositional inspiration. But this supreme choral and orchestral

composer was not naturally a chamber music composer, and it has been argued that only the *piacevole* (peaceful) movement of his string quartet has the natural flow of chamber music, whilst the other movements strive for a broader orchestral effect. That, of course, is up to each listener to decide.

Three of the four great works from this period (including the Cello Concerto) are nominally in E minor, although Elgar included the key on the title page of neither the sonata nor this quartet, and their moods and indeed themes all have resemblances. In the opening movement, two ideas make up the first subject: one is a probing, questioning figure rising in stepwise movement over a 2-bar phrase; the other is an answer of descending fourths, always in pairs. These two motifs determine the musical character: the rising semitones suggest tension, conflict; the open intervals, usually descending, suggest emotional resolution. The central section displays ever more jagged chromaticism up to the moment of climax, after which Elgar ends the movement with the question he asked at the beginning, but closing on the reassuring security of E major.

The slow movement, *piacevole*, was begun in October, when the end of the war was in sight. It was finished on 26 November, after the Armistice. As in the first movement, two motifs dominate the song-like *andante*, with a gently moving triple metre. The long sequential *cantabile* theme occurs, in full, three times, separated by subsidiary episodes which are consistent with the principal theme, and derived from it, using chromatic development.

After the probing of the first movement, and the peace of the second, the impassioned ecstasy of the third movement completes the artistic wholeness of Elgar's vision. Lady Elgar likened this movement to the "galloping of stallions". This should not be read to imply a deeper programme for the work, simply that Elgar had captured the atmosphere and spirit of the woodlands around Brinkwells that were his inspiration.

Elgar honoured his commitment to the now ageing Brodsky Quartet by dedicating the piece to them but, after a private performance at the composer's Hampstead home on 7 January 1919, all three works were given by Billy Reed's ensemble, led by Albert Sammons and with Raymond Jeremy (viola) and Felix Salmond (cello), 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 Violin Sonata. In *The Times*, four days after these performances, H.C. Colles wrote "An immediate effect of listening to Sir Edward Elgar's opp. 82, 83, and 84 in succession is to give one a new sympathy with the modern revolt against beauty of line and colour. A stab of crude ugliness would be a relief from that overwhelming sense of beauty." Nearly a century farther on, we take perhaps a more balanced view of these late flowerings of Elgar's genius.