



Piatti Quartet during a recording session for this CD in the Music Room, Champs Hill



# ALBION REFRACTED

PIATTI QUARTET



BRIDGE - BRITTEN - PHIBBS - TURNAGE

## FOREWORD

*Albion*: the oldest known name for the island of Great Britain, with written reference dating to the 4th century BC.

*Refraction*: the fact of light or sound being caused to change direction or to separate when it travels through water, glass, etc.

The inspiration for this album began with our commission of Joseph Phibbs' String Quartet No.1 in 2014. Immediately following its premiere at the Rye Arts Festival, audience members expressed a wish to hear the piece again, and the idea for a recording was born.

We knew from the start that we wanted to pair the Phibbs quartet with music by Benjamin Britten: Joe had first heard us in concert performing Britten's Quartet No.2; and we had collaborated on the commission together at Snape Maltings.

As a companion piece to Britten's *Three Divertimenti*, the *Three Idylls* by Frank Bridge seemed particularly well suited. Britten held his composition teacher in famously high regard: the second of the *Three Idylls* became the subject of Britten's *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge*, composed in 1936, a few years after the *Divertimenti*.

The finale to our British-themed compendium came about through our connection to Mark-Anthony Turnage. We first worked with Mark after winning the special prize for best performance of his piece *Contusion* at the 2015 Wigmore Hall International Competition. We are delighted to be able to feature the premiere recording of *Twisted Blues with Twisted Ballad* on this album.



## TRACK LISTING

FRANK BRIDGE (1879-1941)

**THREE IDYLLS FOR STRING QUARTET (1906)**

- |   |                                  |       |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | <i>i</i> Adagio molto espressivo | 08'10 |
| 2 | <i>ii</i> Allegretto poco lento  | 03'02 |
| 3 | <i>iii</i> Allegro con moto      | 04'03 |

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)

**THREE DIVERTIMENTI FOR STRING QUARTET (1933)**

- |   |                                   |       |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 4 | <i>i</i> March – Allegro maestoso | 03'39 |
| 5 | <i>ii</i> Waltz – Allegretto      | 03'29 |
| 6 | <i>iii</i> Burlesque – Presto     | 03'46 |

JOSEPH PHIBBS (b.1974)

**STRING QUARTET NO.1 (2014)** [World premiere recording]

- |    |   |       |
|----|---|-------|
| 7  | <i>i</i> Andante  | 03'18 |
| 8  | <i>ii</i> Canto 1 – Con forza – Duo 1                   | 07'17 |
| 9  | <i>iii</i> Allegro – Duo 2                              | 02'25 |
| 10 | <i>iv</i> Canto 2 – Più mosso – Duo 3 – Duo 4 – Canto 3 | 05'52 |
| 11 | <i>v</i> Vocalise                                       | 03'39 |

MARK-ANTHONY TURNAGE (b.1960)

**TWISTED BLUES WITH TWISTED BALLAD (2008)** [World premiere recording]

- |    |  |       |
|----|--|-------|
| 12 | <i>i</i> Twisted Blues – Variants on Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused"       | 08'37 |
| 13 | <i>ii</i> Funeral Blues  | 05'28 |
| 14 | <i>iii</i> Twisted Ballad – Reflections on Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to heaven" | 08'32 |

Total playing time: **71'22**

PIATTI QUARTET

Nathaniel Anderson-Frank *violin 1 (violin 2 in Bridge)* Michael Trainor *violin 2 (violin 1 in Bridge)*  
Tetsuumi Nagata *viola* Jessie Ann Richardson *cello*

Produced & edited by Matthew Bennett

Engineered by Dave Rowell & Robin Hawkins

Recorded 20th–22nd September 2017 & 16th–17th April 2018 in the Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex, UK

Cover image by Sam Gregory, rear booklet image by Matthew Bennett, tray image by Viktor Erik Emanuel

Executive Producer for Champs Hill Records: Alexander Van Ingen

Label Manager for Champs Hill Records: Joanna Wilson

FRANK BRIDGE **THREE IDYLLS**

Frank Bridge is now principally remembered as Benjamin Britten's first composition teacher, rather than as a composer in his own right. In the decade or so before the First World War he was known above all for his miniatures, such as the exquisitely wistful 'Rosemary' – originally written for piano in 1906 and later orchestrated – with occasional excursions into larger-scale works such as his orchestral suite *The Sea* (1910-11), the work which 'knocked sideways' the ten-year-old Britten when it was performed in Norwich in October 1924.

Like such leading English composers as Vaughan Williams and Holst, Frank Bridge trained at the Royal College of Music, taking composition lessons with Charles Villiers Stanford. Yet his sensibility was quite different: while Vaughan Williams and Holst went on to absorb influences from leading modern composers such as Ravel and Stravinsky while paradoxically cultivating a consciously national voice in their music, Bridge quietly developed his own style, absorbing less colourful influences – principally Brahms (a composer much approved by his teachers at the RCM) and Fauré; yet in time he appeared more at home with developments on the continent, his music reflecting his admiration of Alban Berg. Before the War, Bridge composed mostly for the salon, writing several songs as well as works for piano and for chamber ensembles including string quartet and piano trio. Yet we should not be misled into thinking Bridge at that time was a mere purveyor of charming yet insubstantial pieces. Like Elgar, he realised that the miniature could carry an enormous emotional load – his short movements are often as dramatic as a sonata movement two or three times their length. Even his more restrained pieces have a subtlety, like Fauré's, which become more apparent with each listening. Indeed, as the contemporary British composer Anthony Payne has confessed, 'it is the early Edwardian and "English" late-romantic, middle-period works that have yielded increasingly rewarding experiences'.

The *Three Idylls*, composed in 1906, are very much of this period. The second Idyll in particular is now well known through its use as the theme for Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*; yet all three movements are moving and affecting pieces well worth getting to know. The first, *Adagio molto espressivo*, is by far the longest and takes its listener on a poignant emotional journey, starting with the viola introducing a gently melancholic theme. Ravel's recently composed String Quartet appears a likely influence, particularly as the music reaches its first *forte* with its sweet ninth harmony. Eventually, an apparently lighter-hearted central section – *Allegretto moderato e rubato* – is introduced, which reaches an impassioned climax; but just as this appears to achieve contentment, the music abruptly fades like a dream. The melancholic theme returns, the instruments now muted, for a subdued end.

The second Idyll, *Allegretto poco lento*, has the hint of a waltz, but with elliptically bitter-sweet harmonies, anticipating the anguished lyricism of Berg to which Bridge and his pupil Britten were to be so attracted. Finally, the vigorous *Allegro con moto*, including a contrasting episode with a strong Elgarian flavour to its impassioned lyricism, brings the suite to a lively close.

© Daniel Jaffé

BENJAMIN BRITTEN **THREE DIVERTIMENTI**

Britten's *Three Divertimenti* began life as a projected five-movement suite for string quartet *Alla Quartetto Serioso*, subtitled 'Go play, Boy, play' (a line taken from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*), composed while he was a student at the Royal College of Music. Like his earlier *Three Character Pieces* for piano (1930), Britten had originally intended each movement to depict or evoke various close friends: of the original three movements he managed to complete, 'Alla Marcia' – later reworked in the song cycle *Les illuminations* – was originally subtitled 'P.T.' (Physical Training)

and dedicated to his schoolboy friend from Gresham's, David Layton; 'Ragging' (later reworked as 'Burlesque' in *Divertimenti*) was dedicated to Francis Barton, a fellow pupil at South Lodge who subsequently had a successful career in the Royal Marines, rising to the rank of Major-General. These, and 'Alla Valse' – that is, three of the projected five movements – were first played by the Macnaghten String Quartet (Vaughan Williams having alerted Anne Macnaghten to Britten's work) on 4 December 1933 at All Hallows Barking, followed by a performance at the Mercury Theatre as part of a Macnaghten-Lemare Concert on 11 December 1933. The latter performance was described by *The Times* critic as done with 'ruthless efficiency well suited to the music'; Britten was so dismayed by how the work sounded, though, that he left afterwards without thanking Anne Macnaghten and her quartet.

With the promise of a performance by the Stratton Quartet, which took place at the Wigmore Hall on 25 February 1936, Britten finally revised the suite into its present form, replacing the original 'Alla Marcia' (now published as a separate piece) with an entirely new 'March'. Despite a successful morning rehearsal, the afternoon performance according to Britten's diary was 'a dismal failure' and was received by the audience 'with sniggers & pretty cold silence'. He effectively withdrew the work, and the *Divertimenti* were only published some seven years after his death. We can now appreciate the pieces as a fine demonstration of Britten's colourful and virtuosic string writing of that period – sardonically witty for the 'March' (Prokofiev surely an influence), with swooping glissandos recalling the world of Britten's *Our Hunting Fathers* written in the same year; the 'Waltz' more suave and even tenderly lyrical; and scintillating in the exhilarating 'Burlesque'.

© Daniel Jaffé

#### JOSEPH PHIBBS **STRING QUARTET NO.1** – A note from the composer

In common with Haydn's first quartets, as well as numerous examples of the genre from the 20th century, this work is set in five main movements, the first being perhaps the most simple: soft, widely spaced chords support a series of melodic phrases in the first violin which grow in intensity as the movement unfolds, with all four instruments coming to the fore during the coda. The second movement opens with the first of three versions of a lamenting melody (or *canto*) in the viola, before a fast and abrasive scherzo begins, the middle section contrasting with more lyrical passages. A slow duo for violin and cello follows, giving way to a lively pizzicato third movement. A second duo, for viola and violin, features a folk-like melody, before the fourth movement (opening with a reprise of the viola *canto*) presents an agitated fugato which builds in intensity before dovetailing into a frenetic duo for two violins. The fourth duo, for viola and cello, follows: a soft, funereal chorale forming the final reprise of the viola's *canto*. The last movement, a vocalise, recalls the opening movement by way of its simple chordal accompaniment, each instrument now assigned a melodic phrase.

The work's structure as a whole could be seen to be interweaving three layers: five principal movements; four duos, each drawing on a different combination of players; and three short cantos, all of which present the same viola melody in a different guise.

This work was commissioned by the Piatti Quartet with the generous support of the Britten-Pears Foundation, RVW Trust, and a private benefactor. The work is jointly dedicated to The Piatti Quartet and Brian Keeble.

© Joseph Phibbs

## MARK-ANTHONY TURNAGE **TWISTED BLUES WITH TWISTED BALLAD**

'I was always intimidated by the idea of writing a string quartet,' admits Mark-Anthony Turnage. 'Everyone tells you it's difficult, and you need to be old to write a good one; and it's hard to create contrast with such a homogenous ensemble. All these things are true in a way, and that's why it took me until my fifties to write one I was reasonably happy with.'

Though now presented as Turnage's first string quartet, *Twisted Blues with Twisted Ballad* was far from his first essay for that ensemble, as he admits: 'I made a few early attempts (now withdrawn), and a few of the chamber pieces I wrote for the Nash Ensemble started life as a string quartet, but then I chickened out – I added another instrument or two. So when the Belcea Quartet asked me for a piece, I needed something to distract me from the pressure I felt. Those amazing quartets by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Bartók and Shostakovich (to name just a few) are scarily good.'

What liberated Turnage was the music of the rock band Led Zeppelin: 'I had known John Paul Jones their bass/keyboard player for 20 years but only really got to know their work at the time of their one-off O2 concert [in London, on 10 December 2007] and John was also about to play bass in my opera *Anna Nicole*. So I needed to swot up on their back catalogue. I became obsessed. For me they are the most creative and brilliant band of that era.'

Two classic Led Zeppelin songs, 'Dazed and Confused' and 'Stairway to Heaven', gave inspiration for Turnage's new work for the Belcea Quartet: 'I found working with these tunes so liberating. They made me forget how intimidating it is to write a string quartet. I just had fun.'

Completed in 2008, *Twisted Blues with Twisted Ballad* falls into three movements. In the first, subtitled 'Variants on Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused"', one may sense something of the fun Turnage had in transferring elements of that song, including a four-chord descending formula characteristic of the blues, into the medium of string

quartet. No doubt he was aided by the sonic example of Bartók's quartets in particular; yet as the movement progresses one may also hear the expressionist world of Berg's *Lyric Suite*.

The central movement, subtitled 'In memory of Fausto Moroni Henze', commemorates Fausto Moroni, long-term partner of the German composer Hans Werner Henze whom Turnage first studied under at Tanglewood in the States in 1983. Moroni suddenly died in 2007, not long after Henze himself had recovered from a coma. Turnage's movement begins 'Very slow, cold and hollow', all the instruments muted and playing without vibrato: high keening sighs on the viola are heard against the glare of a high harmonic note sustained on the first violin, with eerie percussive knocks as the cellist followed by violist and second violinist tap the bellies of their instruments with their knuckles. In the following section, marked 'Warmer' in the score, the instruments play with their usual vibrato as the first violin plays rhapsodically; the music eventually becomes more animated (recalling the flurries and rhapsodic character of the central movement of Bartók's Fourth Quartet), culminating in a brief but intense passage involving *fortissimo* tremolando on all four instruments. The keening sounds and knocking then return, the movement ending with mysterious, dusky chords.

With the third movement (its opening vibrato-less sustaining notes a subdued recollection of the start of the previous movement), Led Zeppelin is again a source of inspiration, the cello wistfully 'singing' the melody of 'Stairway to Heaven'. Viola, then second violin, takes over, rhapsodising freely. Turnage's reworking becomes increasingly hectic, even as one hears the song's melody re-emerge on the cello, and eventually becomes – as with the original song – dance-like with infectiously swinging rhythms. Yet, unlike the song, Turnage ends with a characteristically brutal final gesture, an echo – perhaps – of the 'Sacrificial Dance' which ends Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

## PIATTI QUARTET

The Piatti Quartet are one of the most distinguished quartets of their generation. Prizewinners at the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, they have performed in all the major venues and festivals around the country as well as concerts throughout the world, with national broadcasts on BBC Radio, ABC (Australia), RTÉ (Ireland) and France Musique (France).



photograph: Viktor Erik Emanuel

The Piattis are renowned for their diversity, commitment and passionate interpretations across the spectrum of quartet writing. World premieres are regularly performed alongside old masterpieces and the Piattis are particularly known for expanding the quartet genre through their collaborations with leading British composers. Current and recent premieres include new works by Mark-Anthony Turnage, Darren Bloom, Emily Howard (The Music of Proof with celebrated mathematician Marcus du Sautoy), Simon Holt, Freya Waley-Cohen and Jacques Cohen. The quartet have collaborated with artists such as Ian Bostridge, Michael Collins, Krzysztof Chorzelski, Julius Drake, Charles Owen and Guy Johnston.

The Quartet's other recordings have been released on the Linn Records, NMC and Champs Hill labels, including the Piatti's lauded contribution to the complete string quartet works of Felix Mendelssohn (Champs Hill), which was *BBC Music Magazine's* Critic's Choice (September 2014). Most recently, the Quartet was featured on a jazz concept album released by 33 Records and critical acclaim for this recording has included a 4.5\* review from *Downbeat Magazine*.

Recent seasons have included debuts in Rotterdam, Istanbul, and Barcelona, and concerts at the Aldeburgh Festival. At the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, the Piatti Quartet won overall 2nd Prize as well as the St. Lawrence SQ prize and the Sidney Griller Award for the best performance of Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Contusion*.

The Piatti Quartet takes its name from the great 19th-century cellist Alfredo Piatti, who was a leading professor and exponent of chamber music at the Royal Academy of Music.