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A “virtual” Coffee Concert recorded at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford

Sunday October 25, 2020 at 11:15

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We very much hope you enjoy this concert. If you would like to become a patron of the Oxford Coffee Concerts or make a donation to help support our “virtual” concerts, please get in touch with us via the contact page at coffeeconcerts.com.

This is the penultimate Coffee Concert of the four performances recorded in late September and streamed from our YouTube channel at 11:15 on Sunday mornings over the following weeks. (They will also be available for a limited time after release and, of course, there are more to come.)

The Piatti String Quartet

- **Beethoven: String Quartet no 1 in F major, op 18 no 1**
- **Webern: Langsamer Satz for String Quartet**
- **Bridge: Three Idylls for String Quartet, H67**

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 UK, and given concerts throughout the world, with national broadcasts on BBC Radio, ABC (Australia), RTÉ (Ireland) and France Musique (France). The Piattis are renowned for their diverse programming and for 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.

In 2020 the Piattis recorded a new disc of works by Mark-Anthony Turnage (Delphian), featuring three world premiere recordings. They were also due to perform a new string quartet by Emily Howard at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw in April 2021 (a Concertgebouw co-commission) before the Covid-19 epidemic struck. Other current commissions and recent premieres include new works by Darren Bloom, Simon Holt, Freya Waley-Cohen and Jacques Cohen.

In 2019, the Piattis continued their connection to Mark-Anthony Turnage with the world premiere of his fourth string quartet, *Winters Edge*, at the Klarafestival, Brussels. Co-commissioned by the Quartet, the Wigmore

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Hall and Flagey ASBL, they gave the UK premiere at the Wigmore Hall.

The Quartet previously commissioned Joseph Phibbs's String Quartet No 1 and a recently-released disc for the Champs Hill label features this work alongside the premiere recording of Turnage's Twisted Blues with Twisted Ballad, with classics by Britten and Bridge. Amongst glowing reviews was this quotation from BBC Music Magazine: "...from soothing pastorate to euphoric rock anthem, this excellent album traces an intriguing path through modern British works for quartet... The Piatti Quartet are on ferociously fine form..."

The quartet's other lauded recordings have been released on the Linn Records, NMC and Champs Hill labels. Recent seasons have included debuts in Rotterdam, Istanbul, and Barcelona, and at the Aldeburgh Festival. At the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String

Quartet Competition, the Piatti Quartet won 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 Piattis are keen to pass on their passion to future generations and regularly coach chamber music at the Purcell School, Trinity Laban Conservatoire and the Royal Academy of Music. The Quartet would like to thank the Britten Pears Foundation, the Ralph Vaughan Williams Trust, the Hattori Foundation, the Razumovsky Trust, the Cavatina Chamber Music Trust, and the Fidelio Trust for their support.

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.

More information: <https://piattiquartet.com/>

Three Idylls **by Frank Bridge (1879-1941)**

- 1. Adagio molto espressivo – allegretto moderato e rubato – Tempo**
2. Allegretto poco lento; 3. Allegro con moto.

For much of the early part of his career, Bridge was a professional viola player, including many years as a member of the English String Quartet, the ensemble that gave the British premiere of the String Quartet by Debussy. His extensive output of chamber music shows an instinctive feel for effective string writing, resulting in some of the most idiomatic and skilfully crafted British chamber music of the first half of the twentieth century.

His Three Idylls date from 1906 and are dedicated "to EES" – Ethel Elmore Sinclair, a fellow student with Bridge at the Royal College

of Music in London, whom he was to marry two years later. Bridge also played second violin in the Grimson Quartet, and it was this group that gave the first performance of the Idylls, in London's Bechstein (later Wigmore) Hall on 8 March, 1907.

Expressively and structurally they are modest in scope, but display the same confident handling of quartet textures and sonorities as his more ambitious scores. The first and longest of the set is tenderly elegiac in mood. Composer Anthony Payne, who has written extensively on Bridge's music, describes it as

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“a touching emotional journey.” It opens with a sombre theme, initially unaccompanied, for the viola. The slightly quicker middle section is an Elgarian blend of caprice and wistfulness. When the opening music returns, all four instruments are muted, enhancing its introspective quality.

The second piece is a slow waltz, whose opening theme Britten took as the starting-

point for his Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, for string orchestra, of 1937. Again there is a quicker central section, by turns playful and passionate. A rhythmic kick from the cello launches the final allegro, driven by a kind of brisk, nervy energy. The opening section culminates in a broad, singing melody which returns at the end, before the music accelerates towards its emphatic conclusion.

Langsamer Satz by Anton Webern (1883-1945)

Together with Webern’s much longer single-movement String Quartet (not to be confused with his later String Quartet, op 28), *Langsamer Satz* (Slow Movement) was composed in the summer of 1905. Both works remained unperformed until May 1962, when they were first played in Seattle, on consecutive days, by the University of Washington String Quartet; they were published three years later.

Webern had begun studying with Arnold Schoenberg in autumn 1904, and his teacher’s influence soon began to make itself felt. *Langsamer Satz* has a Brahmsian feel, but there are also echoes, in terms of both

expression and sonority, of Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* for string sextet, which Webern heard in the autumn of 1903.

Many of Webern’s works have direct autobiographical resonances. *Langsamer Satz* was written following an idyllic five-day walking holiday with his cousin Wilhelmine Mörtl, whom he was to marry in 1911. It is dominated by the opening theme, an aspiring idea rising in successive waves through almost three octaves. The music is generally warm and flowing, often tranquil, but twice swelling into a broad, passionate climax.

String Quartet in F, op 18 no 1 by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

**1. Allegro con brio; 2. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato;
3. Scherzo. Allegro molto; 4. Allegro.**

When Beethoven settled in Vienna in 1792 it was as a pianist that he first made his name. To build a reputation as a composer he seems to have had a deliberate plan, centring on his own performances (several piano sonatas and

two concertos), as well as carefully avoiding the string quartet and the symphony, genres particularly associated with his teacher, Haydn. His first large-scale works for string ensemble were for trio – not a limbering-up

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exercise for writing quartets as has sometimes been supposed, since the medium is actually a trickier one to handle successfully. It was not until 1798 that he began work on a group of six quartets, by which time Haydn had composed his last completed set of quartets.

In spite of the confidence shown in his earlier works, Beethoven seems to have had problems tackling the quartet medium (as did Mozart before him). He radically revised Nos 1 and 2 of the Op 18 set in the summer of 1800, and possibly No 3 also, before they reached their final form. Sending the new version of No 1 to his violinist friend Karl Amenda in 1801, he commented "...only now do I know how to write quartets properly".

The six quartets of Op 18 were commissioned by one of Beethoven's most devoted patrons, Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz. Scholars disagree on the precise order in which they were written, but No 1 seems to have been the second, early in 1799. By placing it first in the eventual published order Beethoven ensured that the collection, issued in 1801, opened with the most striking and imposing of the set.

The first movement focuses on the quietly purposeful opening motif in a remarkably concentrated way. It, or a figure derived from it, appears some one hundred and twenty or so times in the course of the movement – and this is after several other references to it had

been severely pruned in Beethoven's later revision.

This amiably vigorous movement is followed by an adagio which touches profound depths of pathos and tragedy, and reaches a climax of extraordinary desperation. Amenda's comment that it seemed to represent two lovers parting delighted the composer, who replied that he had the tomb scene of Romeo and Juliet in mind – a rare example of Beethoven admitting that one of his works had a specific non-literary origin. His written annotations on the manuscript confirm Amenda's story.

The last two movements return to the mood of the opening. The scherzo is full of Beethoven's characteristically quirky phrase-structure and textures: the stamping figure that begins the central trio section, and persists though much of it, is typical of his boisterous sense of humour.

The swirling flourish for the first violin which launches the finale, landing on a stamping three-note figure, plays a major role in propelling this energetic music forward. A song-like theme for first violin and viola provides a more relaxed, lyrical contrast, and Beethoven neatly draws the threads of the music together at the end by combining the two ideas.

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