

Robin Stevens

String Quartets & String Quintet

divine art



Behn Quartet with Timothée Botbol

Robin Stevens: String Quartets & String Quintet

	String Quintet in C minor	29:31
1	I <i>Adagio non troppo – Allegro molto moderato</i>	10:10
2	II <i>Scherzo: Allegro vivace</i>	4:47
3	III <i>Adagio non troppo</i>	7:41
4	IV <i>Finale: Allegro non troppo</i>	6:53
5	String Quartet No. 1 in one movement	31:01
	String Quartet No. 2 “Three Portraits”	15:33
6	I <i>Impulsive One</i>	4:46
7	II <i>God-Seeker</i>	5:42
8	III <i>Arguer</i>	3:36
9	IV <i>Epilogue</i>	1:29
	Total duration	76:20

Behn Quartet

Kate Oswin and Alicia Berendse (violins)

Ana Teresa de Braga e Alves (viola)

Ghislaine McMullin (violoncello)

with Timothée Botbol (2nd violoncello in Quintet)

Robin Stevens: Chamber Music for Strings

String Quintet in C minor (1980-81; revised, 2018)

I – Adagio non troppo/Allegro molto moderato; II – Scherzo (Allegro vivace);

III – Adagio non troppo; IV – Finale (Allegro non troppo).

In my early twenties, whilst completing an MA (*Cyclic Form in Romantic Instrumental Music*) at Birmingham University, I wrote the two-cello *String Quintet*, my first major composition. Revisiting the work thirty-seven years later in readiness for this recording was a fascinating exercise in learning to love my younger self – seeing the facets of my artistic make-up that had changed, and those that had remained the same, and endeavouring to be realistic about the strengths and weaknesses in my early style. While revising the Quintet I recalled the possibly apocryphal words of an American tourist who, on seeing Hamlet for the first time remarked, “Gee, I didn’t realise it was so full of quotations!”. Unconscious references to, and near-quotes from, early twentieth century music abound in this piece, but certain fingerprints of my mature style are already in evidence: Beethovenian motivic development; rhapsodic, modal lyricism; bold, dramatic gestures; tangy harmonies; intricate counterpoint; and unashamedly direct, open-hearted expression.

The Quintet is in the traditional four movements. The first movement begins with a slow introduction set in motion by a folk-like melody on the cello. The ensuing *Allegro* approximates to an extended adaptation of Sonata Form, the springy rhythms of the first subject (1’23”) being complemented by the laconic detachment of the second subject (3’05”), although the exposition also includes several subsidiary ideas. The development follows a relatively conventional course, building in intensity towards the advent of the recapitulation (5’53”),

where, for the only time, the first subject is played *fortissimo*. In the coda the cello melody from the introduction reappears on the viola with a pizzicato accompaniment (9'10"), and the movement concludes with fragmentary reminiscences of earlier themes.

The second movement is a scherzo dominated by jazzy, syncopated rhythms, right from its opening cello theme. The broken chords of the first two bars of the scherzo are later transformed into an accompaniment for the first violin's more lyrical 'Trio' theme (0'24"), a fully-fledged melody which is immediately restated on the second cello. The opening idea is then developed at some length before a *fortissimo* unison passage and a brief viola solo herald the return of the 'Trio' melody, now accompanied by a busy *ostinato* on the viola. Dramatic, recitative-like passages ensue, before a surprise: the music subsides into a very slow, *pianissimo* rendering of the start of the scherzo, leading directly into the third, slow movement (a device which I borrowed from the parallel point in Elgar's First Symphony).

The slow movement begins with a full-throated viola melody, underpinned by richly-scored triads on muted violins and cellos. The first violin restates the melody, now heard against a 'Bluesy', second-violin counter-subject, before a brief transition leads into the central fugue, based upon a variant of the first phrase of the cello theme from the very start of the Quintet (2'04"). The fugue builds to a tremendous climax: then an unaccompanied recitative on first violin leads back into a varied restatement of the slow movement's opening section (5'08"). There are quiet, wistful recollections of the fugue (6'18"), and a more passionate recall of the start of the movement, before the music recedes into silence, the first violin in its upper register alluding to the earlier, 'Bluesy', second-violin idea.

Like the first movement, the Finale is in an adapted Sonata Form. A tense, suspenseful introduction builds relentlessly towards the dramatic appearance of the first subject (0'25''), played by the violins in octaves, against staccato chords in the lower strings. A three-note motif on the cellos (0'49'') inaugurates a transitional passage in which brief, accompanied, violin recitatives are to the fore, and then the first violin sings the second subject, a high, sustained melody, accompanied by repeated semiquavers in the lower strings. After this melody is restated on the second cello, a third, syncopated idea immediately appears (2'10''), jazzy semiquaver passage-work in the first violin sounding above reminders of the very start of the Finale on second violin and viola.

A dramatic development section ensues, concluding with an extended crescendo which climaxes with the return of the first subject (4'10''), and the recapitulation follows a similar course to the exposition. In the coda, to a backdrop of relentlessly repeated semiquaver patterns in the viola, the violins are pitted against the cellos in an imitative exploration of the cellos' earlier three-note motif, and punchy reminders of the opening of the finale drive the music towards a joyful and triumphant conclusion.

String Quartet No.1 (2008)

In one movement

From 1991 to 2007 I was laid low with a debilitating illness which restricted my compositional activity to the writing of small-scale pieces. On recovering, I began a PhD in Composition at Manchester University: my style had developed considerably through my years of illness, and my PhD focussed on how to achieve coherence when writing expansive pieces in a Contemporary Classical

idiom. Unsurprisingly, then, in my *String Quartet No. 1*, written in the first year of my postgraduate studies, I took full advantage of my new-found energy to write an ambitious, single-movement work lasting just over half an hour. I sought coherence in this Quartet by restricting myself to just a handful of ideas, which are subjected to contrapuntal development of considerable complexity. This economy of material gives the work a concentrated, even obsessive quality, a characteristic which is reinforced by the unremittingly dissonant harmonic language – 2nds, 7ths and 9ths abound, though an experienced listener soon adjusts to the uncompromisingly astringent sound-world.

The first five minutes of *String Quartet No. 1* introduce almost all the thematic material, with numerous, abrupt switches from one idea to another. The expressive key to the work is a plaintive, lyrical theme, restricted to a very narrow melodic compass (in contrast to the wide intervals prevalent in all the other themes), and first heard on the second violin (2'29''): the close intervals dominating this theme give a sense of constriction, of a trapped person trying to break free.

The introductory section comes to an end, and there follows an extended, faster passage, built upon paired instruments playing fast, complex, *staccato* rhythms in contrary motion (4'33''). We are at the start of the expansive core of the composition, in which for about twenty minutes the music alternates between fast and slow sections, most of which are quite substantial in length: the fast sections are founded upon 'knotty', intricate counterpoint, whereas the slower sections are generally more straightforwardly lyrical. In the majority of the quicker passages, one or more players effectively operate in a time signature, dynamic, and articulation radically different to the remainder of the ensemble:

this device, which I first encountered when studying Elliot Carter's own *String Quartet No. 1*, creates a sense of dislocation – alienation, even, as if the four players cannot agree upon a common language of discourse.

At the start of the coda (25'33'') the plaintive viola theme reappears on the rich G string of the first violin, now much faster, and with a simplified, more rhythmic accompaniment. For the remaining five minutes of the piece, the textures continue to be simpler, and the counterpoint less dense, climaxing in a fast, quiet, unison passage (compare the finale of Chopin's B flat minor *Piano Sonata*), which ushers in the dramatic, closing bars of the composition.

String Quartet No.2, 'Three Portraits' (2011)

I Impulsive One; II God-Seeker; III Arguer; Epilogue

In the three years separating my two string quartets I composed several shorter works for slightly unusual combinations of instruments: among these was *Five Portraits for Three Bassoons*, in which each of the five movements is a brief character study of a particular personality type. I carried this idea into my *String Quartet No.2*, this time joining the three character studies into a continuous, unbroken whole, and rounding off the piece with a short Epilogue which references all three preceding character studies.

One could regard the three characters portrayed in the *String Quartet No.2* as different members of the same family: distinctive individuals, yes, but with an overarching family resemblance, expressed in musical terms by subtle thematic bonds between the three portraits. *Impulsive One* begins by dramatically juxtaposing hyperactivity and silence, and continues along a mostly fleet-footed path, capriciously switching from one mood to another: singing, recitative-like

passages sit alongside spiky, dissonant counterpoint and playful dance-music. Impulsive One climaxes with the upper two, and lower two, instruments paired against each other in an accelerating canon (3'58"), followed by simultaneous, discordant slides on all four instruments.

A lamenting cello solo leads directly into the second portrait, *God-Seeker*, which begins with an ethereal, three-phrase-long chorale (0'01"), the phrases linked by brief, lyrical, accompanied solos. *God-Seeker* then alternates between melodic episodes in which the instruments are in rhythmic unison, and variations on the three-phrase chorale. Perhaps the most striking section is the third chorale variation (4'28"), where the viola employs a floating bow stroke, not fully 'in the string', to sing its rhapsodic melodic line, thereby giving a weird, other-worldly colour to its tone: against this, the other three instruments play *fortissimo staccato* chords whilst, very unusually, not releasing their bows from the strings, producing a cramped, constricted sound: it is as if the whole ensemble were straining to find an appropriate voice to express the music within them.

The transition into the final portrait, *Arguer*, is effected by a loud *pizzicato* chord. *Arguer* is the most dance-like of the portraits, largely in quick triple-time, and recalling at times the earthiness of Eastern European folk music: it is also the most contrapuntal movement, extensively employing close imitation, with the intertwining melodic lines entering sometimes just a quaver, or even a semiquaver, apart from one another. Near the end of the movement, as at the parallel point in *Impulsive One*, the texture simplifies, the outer instruments hammering out a rhythmic accompaniment to a rambunctious theme on second violin and viola (2'57"): immediately the theme is restated, all the instruments swapping roles, after which the music subsides into the heart-rending *Epilogue*, in which all family squabbles are mercifully reconciled, with the chorale from *God-Seeker* to the fore.

The performers

BEHN QUARTET

Kate Oswin and Alicia Berendse – violin

Ana Teresa de Braga e Alves – viola

Ghislaine McMullin – violoncello

The Behn Quartet is formed of players from England, the Netherlands, Portugal and New Zealand. Winners of the Orlando International Chamber Music Competition, they are currently an Associate Ensemble at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and previously held the CAVATINA Chamber Music Fellowship at the Royal Academy of Music in London. They take their name from Aphra Behn, the seventeenth-century playwright, political activist, and philanthropist of the arts.

Since their formation in 2015 the Behn Quartet has given recitals across Europe, at venues including the Wigmore Hall and the Concertgebouw, at the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, the String Quartet Biennale Amsterdam, the Fondazione Cini Venice and at the Filarmonica Laudamo Messina in association with Le Dimore del Quartetto. They also gave a highly acclaimed tour as 2018 Encompass Artists with Chamber Music New Zealand, reviewed in the New Zealand Herald as 'a performance that left the audience silently spellbound for several seconds before bursting into enthusiastic applause, recognising the magic cast throughout the auditorium by this talented quartet.'

Contemporary music has an important place within their repertoire; they gave the world premiere of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies' final work at his Memorial Concert in St John's Smith Square and live on BBC Radio 3, and have recorded chamber works by Maxwell Davies, Stravinsky and Birtwistle for Linn Records, conducted by the late Oliver Knussen.

The Behn Quartet are generously supported by Help Musicians UK, the De Lancey & De La Hanty Foundation, and the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust. The Quartet plays instruments and bows kindly on loan by the Harrison Frank Foundation and Hurwitz Fine Instruments.



Swiss cellist **Timothée Botbol** is a Yeoman of the Worshipful Company of Musicians and a Park Lane Group Young Artist. He has given solo performances in the UK, Switzerland, Germany, France and Italy, in venues including St John's Smith Square, Royal Albert Hall, Kings Place, St James's Piccadilly, Chapel Royal, Lausanne Steinway Hall and Kultur-Rockt Festival. He has appeared as guest principal cellist with the Welsh National Opera orchestra, principal cellist of ensemble *Collegium* under direction of soloist Lawrence Power, as well as chamber musician in the 2017 Concerts in The West series, the Royal Overseas League and St Martin-in-the-Fields. In February 2017, he was awarded the Grand Prize Special from all categories at the II Augustin Aponte International Music Competition in Tenerife.

A keen orchestral musician, Timothée has performed with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne, the Orchestre de Chambre de Genève and the European Philharmonic of Switzerland in venues including Geneva's Victoria Hall, Lausanne's Salle Metropole and Palais Beaulieu, Montreux's Auditorium Stravinsky, the Opéra de Vichy under conductors including Charles Dutoit, Markus Stenz, Carlo Rizzi and Christian Zacharias, and with soloists including Martha Argerich and Leonidas Kavakos. In addition to cello, Timothée has performed regularly as a baritone soloist, singing at Geneva's Victoria Hall accompanied by the Geneva Chamber Orchestra. Timothée is supported by the Fondation F & M-F Minkoff.



Behn Quartet



Timothée
Botbol



Robin
Stevens

The composer

Robin was born in 1958 in Newport, Monmouthshire, in the south-east corner of Wales. He grew up in the beautiful city of Winchester, within an artistic family: his mother was the pianist, Gillian Butterworth, and his step-father the Welsh landscape artist, John Elwyn. At sixteen he left home to spend a rewarding couple of years at Dartington College of Arts in Devon, where his cello teacher was Michael Evans, before undertaking the Joint Course at the Music Department of Manchester University and the Royal Northern College of Music, continuing his cello studies with Raphael Sommer and Moray Welsh.

Composing, in the guise of pastiche imitations of Mendelssohn and Mozart, had been a gentle undercurrent in Robin's life since the age of eleven. However, on moving to Birmingham in 1982 to complete an MA thesis on Romantic instrumental music, composition became more centre stage, and during the next year Robin wrote his first major piece, the *String Quintet*, which here receives its debut recording. Robin's tutor at Birmingham University was the late John Joubert, whose sincerity and humility remain fond memories nearly forty years on.

Fulfilling periods of employment ensued as Music Director of St. Paul's Church, York (where he wrote a large number of solo songs and choral compositions), and as Head of Music in a West Yorkshire Comprehensive School. But in 1990 Robin was struck down with a debilitating illness which kept him out of work for the next seventeen years: during this period his creativity was largely frustrated, compositional activity being limited to the writing of experimental miniatures, which nevertheless moved his style forward and prepared the ground for his later, more expansive Modernist works.

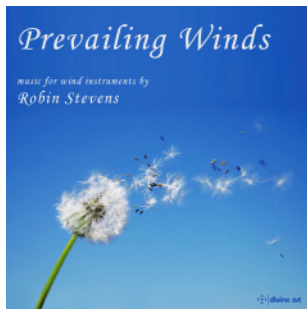
Returning to full health in 2007, Robin began a PhD in Composition at Manchester University, where his supervisors were Philip Grange and Kevin Malone. His PhD centred on the creation of large-scale structures in a contemporary idiom, and

unusually, all six compositions in his final portfolio were substantial works, constituting 'an outstanding submission', in the words of his external examiner, John Pickard. Working as a home tutor throughout this period (mainly teaching English and Maths to nine- and ten-year-olds) proved both a stimulating way of earning a living, and a welcome and necessary contrast to the undeniably intense activity of composing. A generous family bequest in 2018 has enabled Robin to begin recording his considerable catalogue of works.

Robin's major works include *Fantasy Sonata* for violin and piano and *Sonata Romantica* for cello and piano; *Five Portraits* for bassoon trio; *Romantic Fantasy* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet; a Bassoon Concerto; *Brass Odyssey* for brass band and six percussionists; *Mourning into Dancing* for symphony orchestra; and a *Te Deum* for vocal soloists, choir, organ and orchestra. Robin particularly relishes the challenge of writing for 'Cinderella' instruments and ensembles – those with a low profile that tend to have limited repertoire, such as tuba quartet, euphonium duet, solo double bass, and guitar duet. Robin has also recorded a couple of albums of his own songs (*Fire and Inspire* and *Whispers in the Wasteland*) and a disc of his compositions for solo cello, entitled *Reconciliation*. He is currently working on a Cello Concerto and a Clarinet Quintet.

Away from music, Robin has in recent years provided Maths support as a volunteer in a Manchester Primary School, and has just began working for the Barnabus homeless charity in the city centre. He enjoys current affairs, holds loquacious dinner parties, thrives on stimulating conversation, is a keen cyclist, preaches occasionally, and is currently trying to break the 23-minute barrier on his local Park Run.

www.robinstevenscomposer.co.uk



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Music for wind instruments by Robin Stevens

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Robin Stevens

Recorded at St Paul's Church, New Southgate, London in January and July 2019

Recording engineer: Michael Ponder

Editing of String Qt 1: Jennifer Howells; other works: Phil Hardman

Executive Producer: Robin Stevens

Booklet and packaging design: Stephen Sutton (Divine Art)

Front cover art: 'The Turbulents' by Iain Andrews

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