



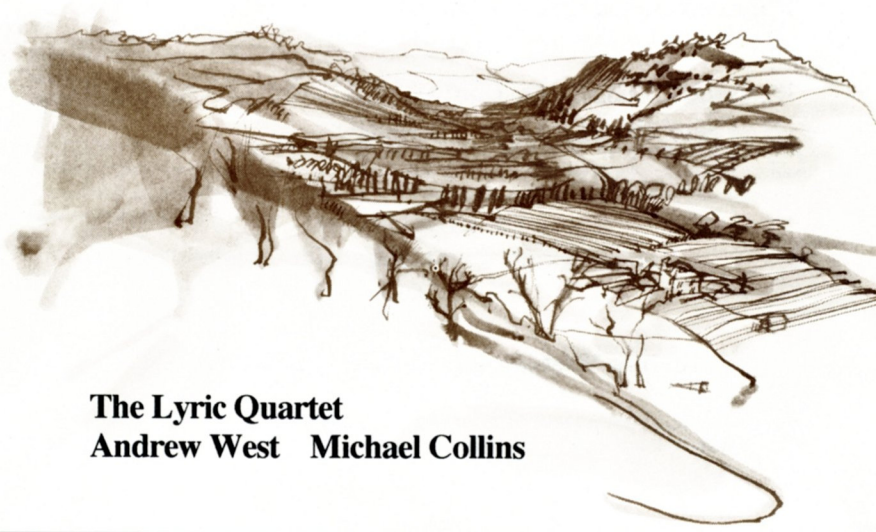
métier

Herbert Howells
To Chosen Hill...

Piano Quartet Op.21

Phantasy String Quartet Op.25

Rhapsodic Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet Op.31



The Lyric Quartet
Andrew West Michael Collins

Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

Piano Quartet in A minor, Op. 21 [26.58]

- 1 *Allegro moderato* [10.43]
- 2 *Lento* [9.22]
- 3 *Allegro molto* [6.53]

Phantasy String Quartet, Op. 25

- 4 *Moderato - Molto tranquillo e mistico - Allegro - Più lento* [13.37]

Rhapsodic Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet, Op. 31

- 5 *Lento - Allegro - Lento - Più adagio* [12.23]

Total CD duration [53.19]

The Lyric Quartet

Patricia Calman (violin) Harriet Davies (violin)

Nick Barr (viola) David Daniels ('cello)

Andrew West (piano) Michael Collins (clarinet)

It is difficult to understand why there is such a mistrust (or even positive dislike) of music inspired by deep-rooted love of the countryside. There are few, surely, who remain unmoved by the beauty of a distant view of the Malverns as seen, say, from high points in Herefordshire. Each has his own specially favoured place whether it is a grand view of mountains, a more homely view of English hills, some lovely village green or a beautiful river stretching out into the distance. We cannot deny beauty however worldly or 'streetwise' we have become. The psalmist summed up that innate felling when he sang "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help". There is something so fundamentally affecting about natural beauty that in an artistic mind able to paint or draw, to create words or music it is hardly surprising that it acts as a powerful inspiration and trigger to the imagination. It is especially not surprising that a generation which saw the horror of two world wars should have a heightened sense of the power of such beauty. Arthur Bliss, indeed, wrote as much about the almost supernaturally heightened feelings he had for simple things like leaves or flowers having been so close to death for so long. Have we become so dulled in our responses that our composers, poets and artists can no longer thrill to the stimulus of nature? I doubt it. What is certain, however, is that fashion tends to dictate and celebration of nature in music has long been out of fashion.

Herbert Howells belongs to that generation of composers which was immortally dubbed 'cowpat' by Elisabeth Lutyens. An epithet which has stuck like a limpet and which has been used gleefully by succeeding generations of detractors. Happily, time has gone by and we have arrived at more equable times when there is reason in the air and a positive desire to rediscover these English composers and try to come to a more rational assessment of their attainments. Time is a great healer.

Howells was born in Lydney in Gloucestershire in 1892. The Three Choirs country has always seemed to exert a particularly strong influence on susceptible minds and Howells was no exception. The river Severn which connects Howells' Gloucestershire with Housman's Shropshire and which Howells immortalised in his *Missa Sabrinensis* (Mass of the Severn), the Malverns, the Cotswolds and, in particular, Gloucester Cathedral, all exerted a powerful influence and the works recorded here reflect this deep-rooted love.

All three works date from the teens of the 20th century and were written within a period of three years. This was one of Howells' most productive periods and a time when his star was very much in the ascendant as a jewel in the crown of his generation. He was Stanford's favourite pupil (quite an accolade from the notoriously difficult man). Gerald Finzi, writing about Howells in the *Musical Times* in April 1943 and comparing him with Vaughan Williams, said "nothing could be more remote from the slow, oak-lie growth of the elder composer,

with his hard-won and entirely personal technique, then the diamond-cut brilliance with which Howells seems to have been born, and which, on the technical level, has never failed him. It would, in fact, be far more reasonable to think of the consummate case of Mendelssohn when considering Howells' particular dexterity."

Certainly these three works demonstrate a wonderfully natural skill and an innate feeling for the intimate world of chamber music. The *Piano Quartet*, Op. 21 is the earliest, written in 1916, and has an interesting history. Howells submitted the work for Stanford's scrutiny, always a challenging time. As Howells recalled, "None of us lived in the easy atmosphere of neutrality when we took lessons with him. Mastery of the subject carried with it, in him, a very definite sense of where he stood; and that definition ill accorded with vagueness of attitude in others... Whatever else one might have become under his shrewd guidance, it never could have been a wobbler, a neutral, a befogged practitioner. It was often his way to make a student fight hard in defence of a point of view, an expression or a mere chord. Failure in this was apt to bring trouble upon the pupil. But that the defence generally prevailed, and brought self-reliance, as Stanford in his wisdom always hoped it would, ought to be clear to anyone who observes the remarkable degree to which most of his pupils have established their own particular identities in composition".

That Howells was particularly successful in his pupillage was signified when he wrote: "I think Stanford wished to have a link with me. He was a most powerful friend at all times and one sign of his interest and goodwill was his general presentation formula when he brought me to the notice of his friends: 'This is my son in music'".

This profound belief in Howells' gift was powerfully demonstrated in relation to the *Piano Quartet*. Stanford asked Howells to pack up and post an opera of his which he wished to submit to the trustees of the Carnegie Foundation who were sponsoring the publication of a number of major works by leading British composers. The next day Stanford asked Howells for the score of his (Howells') *Piano Quartet* which Stanford, in turn, parcelled up and posted. The outcome was that Howells' Quartet was the first to be published, and his was the unknown name among those chosen.

Howells' idea for the Quartet apparently began as 'some folk-tunes done hurriedly' while he was waiting for tea to be served by an unpunctual landlady on the 12th February 1916. Finzi noted later that Howells' conception of folk-song was a curious one! Nevertheless these melodies were incorporated into the work which also had something of a programmatic element to it. It is dedicated 'to the hill at Chosen and Ivor Gurney who knows it'. Chosen, or Churchdown, is a hill between Gloucester and Cheltenham from which there are spectacular

views of the surrounding countryside. It is a very picturesque spot with a lovely ancient church at its highest point. Beneath this is a sexton's cottage set in the churchyard where Gerald Finzi, already suffering from leukaemia in 1916, contracted his last fatal illness whilst visiting the inhabitants. Such resonances serve only to heighten the emotional pull of the place.

According to Howells' close friend and confidant, Marion Scott, the three movements of the work show the hill in different aspects. Writing an appreciation of the work shortly after its completion she gave a programme for the work based on conversations with Howells:

"When the first movement opens it is dawn, and the hill wind, pure, eternally free and uplifting, is blowing; gradually the greyness changes to crimson, the half-light to full radiance, mystery to vision, dawn to day.

The second movement is the hill upon a day in mid-summer, and the thoughts are those which come as a man lies on the grass on his back gazing upwards into the vast vault of the sky, seeing 'the giant clouds go royally', watching the blue depths of height untold flow outward to surrounding immensity until, floating on the flood of wonder, mind and soul are almost loosed from the earthly anchorage.

The finale is the hill in the month of March, with splendid winds of Spring rioting over it, and flashing in the exuberant rush, wild daffodils goldenly dancing (Ivor Gurney says there are no daffodils nearer Chosen than Dymock, but I leave the two Gloucesterians to settle his botanical detail). That is as much of the basis of the quartet as Herbert Howells yet allows to be told."

Marion Scott's flowery language, the hallmark of all her writing, nevertheless allows a keener insight into the conception of the Quartet than its non-descriptive title would otherwise allow. Gurney responded to the dedication by writing a poem which has all the same feeling of ecstasy. He dedicated it in like manner to Howells:

*Beauty of song remembered, sunset glories,
Mix in the mind till I do not care nor know
Whether the stars do move me golden stories,
Or ruddy Cotswold in the sunset glow.
I am unrapt, and not my own, immortal,
In winds of Beauty swinging to and fro.*

The music is Howells at his most fluently rhapsodic. To my mind this was the greatest fluency he ever achieved with a piano part. Too often Howells' piano parts fall too easily into busy patterns which sound impressive but have little substance. The other most successful piano parts for me are the *Clarinet and Oboe Sonatas* from much later in his life. There is much similarity in the *Piano Quartet* with the *Piano Trio* of Ravel which, although it had been written two years previously, was unlikely to be known to Howells at the time. There is a remarkable similarity in the way the two works are brought to their conclusions. It also underlines how close the colourful harmonic language is. This is a major chamber work of the period from any country and it deserves to be not just better known, but familiar.

One of the interesting things about this recording is seeing Howells handling three different instrumental groupings. The other works show him tackling the classic medium of string quartet (which he did on two other occasions) and clarinet quintet. These two works bear an outward similarity as they are single movement works. The first, the *Phantasy String Quartet*, Op. 25, was written in 1917 as an entry for the W.W. Cobbett Folksong Phantasy Competition which it won. Cobbett's competition was set up in the early years of the century to revive the Elizabethan form of Phantasy which was a single movement piece with several sections. By this means a whole genre of works was created between 1905 and 1930 by all the major composers active at the time.

Howells' *Quartet* divides the single span into four principal sections and the themes, which are all folksong inspired, speak again of Howells' love affair with his native country. There is no programme for this work but it does not take a particularly fertile imagination to paint its own picture to this lovely music. The themes are subjected to constant transformation so that the sense of development and forward motion is very strong. Howells was fascinated by form and he even tried to make his second *Piano Concerto*, despite its three linked but separate movements, into a huge Sonata-form structure with the first movement as the exposition, the slow movement as the development and the finale as the recapitulation.

The *Rhapsodic Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet*, Op. 31, was written in 1919 and, like the *Piano Quartet*, was another recipient of an award from the Carnegie Trust who sponsored publication of the work. The shape of this single movement is very different from the *String Quartet* and is a further example of Howells' imaginative approach to form. It is comparatively easy to compose a piece which mirrors the outlines of a three or four movement work. In the *Quintet* Howells uses just two basic ideas which are developed freely throughout the work, the first the energetic motif heard at the beginning and the second

a beautifully lyrical melody for clarinet. There is a wonderful variety of mood in this work and, most especially, some serenely peaceful music which brings the work to its close.

These three works show a truly original mind at work. It is no wonder that Stanford saw Howells as his natural successor. It has to be said, however, that in this case, surely, the pupil surpassed the master. That, of course, is as it should be and all too rarely is. What is certain is that Howells' chamber music – as with his orchestral, instrumental and choral music – should be very much better known than it is. It is a treasure-trove of delights.

Notes © Paul Spicer 1992

From their formation in January 1990, the **Lyric Quartet** rapidly established itself as an ensemble very much in demand. The Quartet's enthusiasm extends beyond the traditional chamber music repertoire and has included world premières of works by many leading composers. The Quartet has performed on television and broadcast regularly on radio, has built up an impressive discography following this early Metier recording. The ensemble's determination to broaden the appeal of classical music led to the fostering of a unique collaboration with visual artist Louise Purves, who became the ensemble's "artist-in-residence" and who provided the cover painting for this CD.

Michael Collins began his career at the age of 16 when he won the woodwind prize in BBC Television's "Young Musician of the Year" competition. He later studied at the Royal College of Music and made his proms début in 1984. He then became principal clarinet with the Nash Ensemble, the London Sinfonietta and the Philharmonia Orchestra and is without doubt one of the world's leading clarinet soloists.

Andrew West read English at Clare College, Cambridge before winning a postgraduate Scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in 1984. He has won among other awards the Queen's Award for Excellence and was awarded the Hodgson Fellowship by the R.A.M. After winning the 1988 Esso National Federation of Music Societies' Piano Award he went on to his recital début at the Purcell Room and concerto début at the Barbican. He regularly took part in the Park Lane Young Artists and 20th Century Music series and continues to enjoy a busy and highly successful schedule as solo recitalist and accompanist.

METIER

msvcd92003

Herbert Howells at the time of
composition of these works



Recorded at St. Silas Church, London NW5 on 6-8 April, 1992

Recording producer/balance engineer: David Lefeber

Cover: original artwork by Louise Purves

Yamaha Piano provided by Shackell Pianos, Oxford

Acknowledgments: Bob Harrison, Barry Cobden

© 1992 Metier Sound & Vision Ltd

© 2019 Divine Art Ltd

DIVINE ART RECORDINGS GROUP

Over 500 titles, with full track details, reviews, artist profiles and audio samples, can be
rowised on our website. Available at any good dealer or direct from our online store in CD,
24-bit HD, FLAC and MP3 digital download formats.

UK: Divine Art Ltd.

email: uksales@divineartrecords.com

USA: Diversions LLC

email: sales@divineartrecords.com

www.divineartrecords.com

find us on facebook, youtube and twitter

WARNING: Copyright subsists in all recordings issued under this label. Any unauthorised broadcasting, public performance, copying or re-recording thereof in any manner whatsoever will constitute an infringement of such copyright. In the United Kingdom, licences for the use of recordings for public performance may be obtained from Phonographic Performance Ltd, 1, Upper James Street, London W1R 3HG.