



WILLIAM MATHIAS



THE THREE STRING QUARTETS

Medea Quartet

William Mathias • The Three String Quartets

String Quartet No. 1 Op. 38

(single movement)

20.00

String Quartet No. 2 Op. 84

2 Allegro

4.18

3 Andante

4.26

4 Lento molto ed espressivo

5.18

5 Allegro vivo

5.10

String Quartet No. 3 Op. 97

6 Allegro moderato e flessibile

9.46

7 Lento, e molto fervente

6.34

8 Molto moderato

6.48

Total running time 63.26

With grateful acknowledgement to Yvonne Mathias & Rhiannon Mathias.

Recorded in the church of St. Martin's, East Woodhay on 4th May, 29th July and 5th November 1993.

Recording Producer/Engineer: David Lefeber. Notes: Geraint Lewis.

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WILLIAM MATHIAS

(1934 - 1992)

The Three String Quartets

William Mathias was by training and inclination a pianist and not a string player. He started piano lessons at the age of four and within a year was composing small pieces for the instrument. He went on to develop a formidable technique and in 1968 gave the first performance of his *Third Piano Concerto* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, a work subsequently recorded by his teacher at the Royal Academy of Music, Peter Katin. But while an undergraduate at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, he set out to learn exactly what stringed instruments could do and was taught the viola by Raymond Jeremy who had worked regularly with Elgar both as an orchestral musician and chamber music player. And in fact Mathias' first published work was the *Divertimento for Strings*, Op. 7 (1958) written while he was still a student at the Academy and which proved to be his first international success.

Mathias' early background in South West Wales did not lead him naturally towards instrumental or chamber music. The musical culture in which

he grew up was largely vocal and amateur. He depended very much on the radio to broaden his horizons and an acute awareness of the limitations of indigenous Welsh music made him determined to acquire a thoroughly professional technique particularly in the field of instrumental and orchestral music. Although he later became renowned as a composer of choral music on both sides of the Atlantic it is worth noting that his early reputation in the 1960s as one of the brightest voices of the younger generation rested largely on his chamber and orchestral pieces, including several Cheltenham performances and commissions (*Clarinet Sonatina*, 1957, *Violin Sonata no.1*, 1961, *Wind Quintet*, 1963, *Piano Trio*, 1965) and works for the RLPO (*Concerto for Orchestra*, 1964) and CBSO (*Symphony no. 1*, 1966). These works effectively constitute a 'first period' characterised by the typical Mathias fingerprints of rhythmic verve, structural clarity, tonally based but modally inflected harmony and an exuberant air of optimism.

The ***String Quartet no. 1***, Op. 38 of 1967 marks the first major turning point in Mathias' career. This change of direction was already apparent in the famous and impressive organ work *Invocations*, Op. 35 (written to inaugurate the organ of Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral) and the neglected orchestral *Litanies*, Op. 37. The basic difference concerns the nature of musical continuity. Hitherto, Mathias' music moved in a continuously-argued and logical progression within broadly traditional

parameters. Suddenly he seems to throw his metaphorical balls into the air and juggles them in what might seem to be a free and disjunct manner. Any seemingly random nature is however totally illusory as the underlying structure of the single-movement *Quartet no. 1* eloquently demonstrates. But the surface of the music certainly seems to favour discontinuity over continuity and in so doing subtly relinquishes the certainty of tonal goal-orientated direction. The obvious markers for such a dramatic change of direction are Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* and, closer to home, Tippett's *Piano Sonata no. 2* (1962) – both composers and works happily acknowledged by Mathias as potent influences.

But the sound-world of neither composer permeates the first Quartet which was immediately, if in the context quite surprisingly, recognised as one of Mathias' most impressively personal utterances. Bartók and Britten perhaps ripple the surface from time to time (two other figures Mathias admired enormously) but this is quite clearly the music of a composer in his early maturity. The contrasts of character inherent in the material are profound and ideas jostle with one another quite ferociously at times. But they are in fact organised in such a way as to create a blurred sense of an archetypal 'sonata' outline. What this means in practice is that the material is felt to be 'presented', then violently juxtaposed or 'argued' and then finally 're-presented' in a spirit of

resolution. A satisfying and naturally evolving dramatic curve is therefore created which contains within itself the elements of contrast and balance necessary for an integrated design. The *First Quartet* was commissioned by the Cardiff University Quartet on April 25th, 1968. It is dedicated to Mathias' colleague and the festival's founder Alun Hoddinott and his wife Rhiannon. It was subsequently first recorded by the Chilingirian Quartet.

Quartet no. 2 did not follow until 1980–81. This was a BBC commission for the Gabrieli Quartet who gave the premiere in Cardiff on March 6th, 1981. Although the rhetorical gestures and the character of the quartet writing are recognisably those of the same composer the two works are in other respects poles apart from each other. The second Quartet was written in the wake of the composition of Mathias' first and sadly only full-length opera, *The Servants*, to a libretto specially written by Dame Iris Murdoch. The idea and outline of the work was actually sketched before preparations for the stage production began, but was then dropped for a full six months before eventually being written quite quickly over Christmas 1980 and New Year 1981. Fascinatingly the germinal idea remained identical, showing how works had a habit of formulating themselves in Mathias' subconscious as a process of gestation. In this case the material involves a quite saturated degree of 'quotation' of mediaeval vocal sources, such as the *chanson* and *minnelied*. Mathias

referred to them as being heard through an aural prism, and he succeeds to a quite extraordinary degree in making this material seem entirely his own. He then subjects it to structural parameters which create resonances with and also against certain classical archetypes. The first movement for instance is a terse 'sonata' design which evaporates in mid-air. The ABCBA second movement is a haunting blend of song and dance, involving literal palindromes while the core of the work is a deeply expressive introspective 'song without words'. The finale is a dazzling fugue-cum-rondo at the end of which time momentarily stands still before a clinching final gesture.

Quartet no. 3 was commissioned by the 1986 Harrogate International Festival and premiered there on August 7th, by the Medici Quartet. This work, though not based on any pre-existing material, seems to be a logical structural development from its predecessor. It is cast on a much larger scale and enlarges upon the formal outlines which he was happy to relate to obliquely in no. 2. Accordingly the opening movement is a fully-elaborated 'sonata' movement, though of course within its own terms it has quite a few surprises to spring. The central slow movement is derived from related material and is darkly lyrical with an echo-refrain and a passionate climax which throws the song into sharp relief. The finale, after a rhetorical introduction, careers brilliantly between invigorating fugal writing and ironic off-the-cuff episodes marked 'scherzando'. The

ensuing tussle between these divergent ideas yields to a wild cadenza and a climactic recollection of material last heard inconclusively in the first movement. The movement's own ideas are then heard again, but with the strength finally gaining an upper hand over the flippant scherzo in a resounding and exhilarating conclusion. Though the projected Fourth Quartet for the Lindsay Quartet in 1996 was sadly not to be, the Third is a worthy summation of Mathias' quartet-writing concerns and remains one of his most eloquent chamber works.

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THE MEDEA QUARTET

The Medea Quartet was formed in 1991 at the Royal Academy of Music, London, where a tradition of String Quartet playing has prevailed for many decades. This association continues through the Leverhulme Fellowship award which allows them to continue their studies with members of the Amadeus Quartet.

In October 1993 they became Quartet-in-Residence at the University of York, perhaps the most prestigious post open to a young string quartet in the UK. The same path was trodden by the Amadeus, Medici and Fitzwilliam Quartets, all of whom built upon the opportunities offered by the residency to launch highly successful performing careers.

In the Summer of 1992, the Medea Quartet attended a week of master classes at the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies at Aldeburgh with the highly respected Russian ensemble, the Borodin Quartet. This began an association with Russia and Russian music which they intend to continue. After hearing the Medea play, Professor Berlinsky ('cello) invited them to study with him privately in Moscow and whenever the Borodin Quartet is in the UK. This liaison led to an invitation for the Medea Quartet to participate in their competition held during September in St. Petersburg. They were awarded the Bronze Medal.

During the course of 1993 they studied in Budapest with the Bartók Quartet and continued to attend courses at the Britten-Pears School, most recently with members of the Alban Berg and La Salle Quartets.

Following their acclaimed premiere of William Mathias' Third String Quartet, they were invited to record all three of the composers' works for the genre for the METIER record label. This is very much in keeping with the Quartet's commitment and enthusiasm for 20th century works which already comprise a central part of their repertoire.

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