

Programme note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) Piano Quintet in A minor Op 84 (1918)

Moderato; Allegro

Adagio

Andante: Allegro

By 1917 Elgar's creativity as a composer appeared to be winding down: as Diana McVeagh says in Grove's Dictionary 'oversimplifying, it could be said he turned towards either propaganda or fantasy'. Indeed, after his wife Alice's death in 1920 he composed very little of substance. But, surprisingly, between 1917 and 1919 he produced four instrumental works which are still hugely popular: the Violin Sonata and String Quartet in 1918, and the Piano Quintet and Cello Concerto in 1918-19. All four were largely composed while the Elgars rented Brinkwells in Fittleworth. Their London neighbour Ford Maddox Ford had proposed a move out of London in response to Elgar's poor health, which indeed improved. In these works, as if accepting his own unresponsiveness to the new directions that contemporary music had taken, Elgar reverted to the instrumental music of his youth, but composed with a life-time's experience.

The eerie opening and strange episodes of the first movement of the quintet have led to much speculation about Elgar's inspiration. His wife Alice's diary in September 1918 proposes a copse of lightning-struck trees in nearby Flexham Park:

'[Edward] Wrote part of Quintet wonderful weird beginning same atmosphere as 'Owls' [an Elgar part-song] – evidently reminiscence of sinister trees & impression of Flexham Park ... – sad 'dispossessed' trees & their dance & unstilled regret for their evil fate '.

The trees later became associated with impiously-inclined, itinerant Spanish monks through a "local legend" for which there is no independent evidence and which may have been invented after the quintet was written. Another suggestion, again from Alice's diary, is that Elgar was influenced by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel "*Strange Story*". Whatever. Incidentally, the infamous opening of another Bulwer-Lytton novel - *Paul Clifford* - "It was a dark and stormy night..." inspired the San Jose State University's *Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest* "to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels".

The first movement combines a variety of episodes contrasting in tempo and mood. The opening slow plainsong-like phrase is commented on by nervously apprehensive interjections (*illustrated*). The scoring here is curious: the sustained chorale given to the usually



Musical notation for the first movement of the Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84, showing the opening slow plainsong-like phrase and the first interjection. The notation is in 2/4 time, marked *Moderato*. The first staff shows a series of notes with dynamic markings *pp*, *serioso*, *>*, *< mf*, *>*, *p*, and *pp*. The second staff shows a sustained chorale with dynamic marking *p serio*.

percussive piano, and the percussive comments to the strings. A sighing little motif in falling semitones leads to the robust, familiarly Elgarian theme of the main *Allegro*. But it is soon interrupted by more sighs and then by a transformation of the opening interjections into a seductive (Spanish?) little number from the violins in thirds above a strummed pizzicato (*illustrated*). The different episodes take on new forms and roles during this long and intriguing movement.



Musical notation for the first movement of the Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84, showing the seductive little number from the violins in thirds above a strummed pizzicato. The notation is in 2/4 time, marked *ppp*.

The slow movement's glorious, spacious opening (*illustrated*) is a joy for the viola, though soon to be taken over by the violin. The movement is perhaps



Musical notation for the slow movement of the Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84, showing the glorious, spacious opening. The notation is in 3/4 time, marked *Adagio* and *pp espress.*

the emotional heart of the quintet. It was certainly a favourite of Elgar's who, during his final illness, would listen to it in tears.

The opening of the last movement recalls one of the work's initial phrases, albeit at a slower tempo, before breaking into a robust theme marked *con dignita, cantabile*. The mood changes to a ghostly *piano*, the chorale of the opening returns and the two violins dance a nostalgic waltz before the main theme returns us (*nobilmente*) to more solid, even exuberant, ground - ghosts apparently banished.