

Programme notes by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) String Quartet in E minor Op 83 (1918)

Allegro moderato

Piacevole (poco andante)

Allegro molto

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 neighbour Ford Maddox Ford had proposed the move from 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 reverts to the instrumental music of his youth, but composed with a life-time's experience.

The String Quartet of 1918 is the only one by Elgar to survive - an early work of 1887 was destroyed. It followed a request made around 1900 by the cellist of the Brodsky Quartet (the second of the quartets founded by violinist Adolph Brodsky), to whom the piece was dedicated. Elgar had started on a String Quartet in 1907 but it was abandoned to the First Symphony which incorporated some of its ideas. Early in 1917, while recovering from a tonsillectomy, he embarked on a new quartet which was completed only after further interruptions from the Violin Sonata and Piano Quintet.

The string quartet shares the key of E minor with both the Violin Sonata and the Cello Concerto, a key associated by Ernst Pauer in his 1876 treatise on "*The elements of the beautiful in music*" with "grief, mournfulness, and restlessness of spirit (p.24)".

Restlessness is certainly there in the opening figure's rhythmic uncertainty (*illustrated*), duplet opposing triplet. The tension relaxes with a new *espressivo*, purely triplet version of the opening (*illustrated*).

Allegro moderato

The image shows two staves of musical notation in E minor, 12/8 time. The first staff features a duplet of eighth notes followed by a triplet of eighth notes. Dynamics include *p legato*, *<>*, *<sf>*, and *p*. The second staff continues the melody with dynamics *espress.*, *f*, and *p*.

The *Piacevole* (Agreeable) middle movement was described by Lady

Elgar as 'captured sunshine'. The second violin gets to release the first sunbeams (*illustrated*).

Piacevole (poco andante)

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in E minor, 3/8 time. The melody is characterized by a triplet of eighth notes. The dynamic marking is *p dolce*.

Lady Elgar also wrote that the finale is 'most fiery &

sweeps along like Galloping of Squadrons'. The second movement was played at her funeral in 1920.