

scottish ensemble

Re-defining the string orchestra

William Walton (1902–83) Sonata for Strings (1971)

- 1 *Allegro*
- 2 *Presto*
- 3 *Lento*
- 4 *Allegro molto*

William Walton had a tough time composing his String Quartet in A minor, back in the mid-1940s. He wrote to his assistant Roy Douglas in January 1945: 'I'm in a suicidal struggle with four strings, and am making no headway whatever.' Nevertheless, the piece went down well at its 1946 premiere – but it's no surprise that the composer jumped at the chance to rethink it decades later.

The Sonata for Strings was born when conductor Neville Marriner bumped into Walton in a London hotel in 1971, and promptly asked him for a new piece to be premiered by his chamber orchestra, the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. Walton didn't want to write anything new – but he was happy to reinvent his A minor String Quartet as a piece for string orchestra, hoping to take it to a broader audience and delighted at the opportunity to rethink the work.

In the end, though, its final three movements stuck closely to the original. But Walton made substantial changes to the first movement, taking out some passages entirely, streamlining others, and adding entirely new material. He was keen to retain the piece's original quartet scoring in certain passages, creating textures that shift between chamber intimacy and orchestral power. It's even been suggested that the piece should really be called Concerto for String Quartet and String Orchestra.

The quartet players are in the spotlight right from the start of the first movement, with its soft, lyrical viola melody, which contrasts with the agitated, highly rhythmical theme that follows. Both melodies are developed in a tense contrapuntal section, where they pile up one on top of another, before the quartet musicians take centre stage again as the movement dies away to its mysterious conclusion.

The breathless second-movement scherzo manages to conjure a remarkable variety of textures as its torrent of notes zip through the orchestra, only stuttering to a halt at the very end. And the lush, melancholy third movement opens with an expansive viola theme, later taken up by other instruments, and ending in calm and resignation.

The boisterous final movement is an essay in pure energy, from the clipped, assertive gestures of its opening to its rushing, repeated-note melody – and there are even a few snatches of a soaring folksy tune that seem to invite Vaughan Williams to the party.

David Kettle

Martin Suckling (1981–) Short Stories (2013)

Originally described as 'postcards', these pieces were written for the Scottish Ensemble's 2012–13 season, with one included in each of their UK tours. Although the musical idea underlying each piece might fit on the back of a postcard, the result is a little more substantial than such a title suggests – hence 'short story'. They can be performed individually or as a complete set.

I – Chimes at Midnight

A series of bells. From within the resonance, echoes of a dance emerge, and a high violin sings.

II – Mr Jonathan Morton, His Ground

Where the violin leads, the others follow, eventually arriving at rich, gleaming microtonal chords covering all registers. Throughout the whole piece a simple melodic phrase loops over and again.

III – Touch

A toccata of scurrying semiquavers in which the players join, separate, and recombine in ever-changing groupings to create a many-voiced polyphony. The journey repeats – though with each iteration it is squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces, until eventually it is barely there at all.

IV – In Memoriam

Stepping out into what seemed to be the first day of spring: barely a breeze, and the sunlight warm against my face. A sequence of microtonal harmonies gradually transform into singing cello lines backed by fragments of dance and birdsong.

Martin Suckling

Leopold Hurt (1979–) Dead Reckoning (2012)

Dead reckoning is a term used in shipping and aeronautical navigation. A continuous geolocation is being done by the help of different parameters such as direction of movement, speed and shipboard time.

Those kinds of calculations are usually extremely prone to errors, since the measurements need to be constantly rectified with each change of course and acceleration. A fixed route is therefore only given by lining up successively determined course sections.

This technical procedure served as a rough model for the present composition. This way I did for example take some longer computer simulated sections to which I applied several changes of direction. The original forms of this projection then serve as musical "standard situations". Synchronous movements, cluster structures and tonal spectra are being precisely located, rectified and distorted, by the help of the possibilities of microtonal approaches. Next to these unpredictabilities, the course is also being crossed by a megaphone that briefly sends noisy signals from a double bass bow.

Leopold Hurt

Johannes Brahms (1833–97)
String Quintet in G Major, Op.111 (1890)
(arr. Morton)

- 1 *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio*
- 2 *Adagio*
- 3 *Un poco allegretto*
- 4 *Vivace ma non troppo presto*

'With this note you can take leave of my music, because it is high time to stop.' That's Brahms in 1890, aged 57, bidding farewell to writing music as he sent the final corrections on his G major String Quintet to Simrock, his publisher in Vienna. He later went back on his decision to retire – lured to return to composing by the remarkable talents of clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld, for whom he wrote a trio, a quintet and two sonatas – but at the time he wrote the op.111 String Quintet, he considered it to be his final work.

It's clear, though, that he intended to bow out with one of his sunniest, most relaxed and also grandest pieces – there's no hint of a tearful farewell. Writing at his rural retreat in Bad Ischl in the Austrian Alps, where he traded the stifling heat of summertime Vienna for the freshness of the mountains, he constructed a cheerful, cosmopolitan work that blends styles from Italy, Vienna, Hungary and further afield.

Brahms' biographer Max Kalbeck claimed that the very opening was based on sketches Brahms had made for a Fifth Symphony. And there's undoubtedly something symphonic about its surging, soaring cello melody – one of the longest tunes that Brahms ever wrote – and its rich, shimmering texture in the upper strings (even if it's a challenge for the poor cellist to make themselves heard against it). The texture soon thins for a more elegant, dancing viola tune, but there's a sense of good-natured energy that runs right through the movement until its ringing conclusion.

The viola returns for the inward-looking second movement's wistful melody, in a slow, stately march against plucked cello. The distinctive tune returns again and again in different contexts, building to an intense, tortured climax before subsiding in resignation.

The tripping third movement is a surprisingly pensive Viennese-style waltz, with a sunnier central section that alternates duets for violins and violas. And the joyful finale, full of spiky melodies and foot-tapping rhythms, shows Brahms' love of Hungarian gypsy music, especially in its brisk and characterful final passage.

David Kettle

Martin Suckling

Associate Composer with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Martin Suckling was born in Glasgow in 1981. He has been commissioned by many leading orchestras and ensembles including the London Symphony Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, London Sinfonietta, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. Notable conductors of his works include Ilan Volkov, François-Xavier Roth, Robin Ticciati, Nicholas Collon, Pierre André Valade, and George Benjamin. Martin has benefited from residencies at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Aldeburgh, Aspen, and IRCAM, and has won numerous awards including the 2008 Royal Philharmonic Society Composition Prize. After studies at Cambridge, King's College London, Yale University, and the Royal Academy of Music, Martin was appointed Stipendiary Lecturer in Music at Somerville College, Oxford. He lives in Manchester and is currently Lecturer in composition at the University of York. He is published by Faber Music.

Leopold Hurt

Leopold Hurt (born 1979 in Regensburg/Germany) first studied at the Richard-Strauss-Conservatory in Munich (zither with Georg Glasl, viola da gamba and historical informed performance with Hartwig Groth and Michael Eberth) and received his first lessons in composition with Peter Kiesewetter. In 2004 he continued his studies in musical composition with Manfred Stahnke at the Academy of Music and Theatre in Hamburg. He participated in masterclasses with Dieter Schnebel, Paul-Heinz Dittrich, Brian Ferneyhough (composition) and Nigel North (early music), and attended classes for electronic music at IRCAM in Paris.

Leopold Hurt has received several awards for his work, including the "Gustav Mahler Composition Prize Klagenfurt (Austria)", 2008, the "Stuttgart Composition Prize 2010" and the „Bach Prize Scholarship of the City of Hamburg 2011". As a fellow of the State of Bavaria, he lived in 2003/2004 at the "Cité Internationale des Arts" in Paris and during 2009/2010 at the International House of Arts "Villa Concordia" Bamberg.

