

The Fitzwilliam String Quartet



“ ...a triumph: the most revelatory version of the [Brahms Clarinet Quintet] I've heard in years; animated, dynamic, passionate.... I have no hesitation in naming this the new benchmark.”

BBC Music Magazine

Founded in 1968 by four Cambridge undergraduates, **The Fitzwilliam String Quartet** first became well known through its close personal association with Dmitri Shostakovich, who befriended them following a visit to York to hear them play. He entrusted them with the Western premieres of his last three quartets, and before long they had become the first ever group to perform and record all fifteen. These recordings, which gained many international awards, secured for them a worldwide concert schedule, and a long term contract with Decca/London which

embraced some byways of late Romantic repertoire (including Franck, Delius, Borodin, and Sibelius) before they embarked on a Beethoven cycle. Indeed, the Shostakovich set was included in **Gramophone** magazine's "Hundred Greatest-ever Recordings" in November 2005. Generous private patronage has made possible their current collaboration with Linn Records, which began with Haydn's **Seven Last Words**, and has since continued with the Brahms clarinet quintet (Lesley Schatzberger) as well as a disc of 20th century English songs with James Gilchrist and Anna Tilbrook (including Vaughan Williams's **On Wenlock Edge** – a finalist for the 2009 **Gramophone Awards**). Future plans include Purcell's string music and the complete quartets of Tchaikovsky.

The Fitzwilliam was Quartet-in-Residence at the University of York for twelve years and at the University of Warwick for three, as well as Affiliate Artists at Bucknell University, USA, since 1978. Twelve years ago they began a new Residency at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, with similar associations at Bangor and London Royal Holloway following soon after. They are one of the few string quartets in the world using Classical instruments for the appropriate repertoire, and perhaps unique in that they perform on both historical and modern set-ups (sometimes within the same concert!). At the other end of the musical spectrum, a renewed interest in contemporary music has resulted in nearly forty additions to the new century's repertoire; as part of their recent 40th Anniversary celebrations, they invited a number of composer friends to contribute to a series of new fantasias along the lines of those by Henry Purcell. This included the German composer/saxophonist Uwe Steinmetz, with whom they have been collaborating since 2002, working extensively with his jazz group in Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany – where a CD of his **Bonhoeffer Suite** has been released.

Other recent travels have included a weekend in Munich to contribute to an international dance film featuring Shostakovich's last three quartets. There have also been four visits to Russia, which included concerts in the St Petersburg Conservatoire, Pushkin's House, the Sheremetev Palace, the Summer Palace at Peterhof, as well as at Agora – former home of Modest and Pyotr Tchaikovsky. For most of their career the Fitzwilliam have been making

regular trips to the USA, one of the more recent including a second marathon three-hour event in Lorin Maazel's private concert hall at his farm in Virginia. In 2009, they made their first trip to the snows of Newfoundland, followed by a Martin Randall Travel archeological cruise from Athens to Istanbul – taking in performances in a number of ancient amphitheatres en route (repeated in October).

The Vaughan Williams 50th Anniversary figured prominently in their schedule for 2008, with performances of **On Wenlock Edge** and the second string quartet around the country. For 2009, the quartet focussed its efforts on the Haydn anniversary, this reaching a climax with a complete cycle of his quartets at The Castle in Taunton, featuring ten ensembles from around the world, to which the Fitzwilliam contributed the major part. Haydn concerts continued unabated throughout 2009, and, at the end of August, they completed a second trip to Slovenia with festival concerts and a radio broadcast of a programme including a selection of his songs as well as two of his most celebrated quartets. The 09/10 season marked 40 years of quartet playing with celebratory events right across the UK, including an Artist Residency for the entire duration of the 2010 Ryedale Festival.

In 2011, the Fitzwilliam completed the recording sessions for their CDs of the Bruckner String Quartet and Quintet with violist James Boyd for Linn Records; a jazz recording with saxophonist Uwe Steinmetz and violinist Mads Tolling; and a recording of the complete String Quartets of John Ramsay for Divine Arts – all due for release throughout 11/12.

Highlights for 2011/2012 and beyond include exciting new residencies at St. Andrews University, at the Bucknell University in Pennsylvania and the Tuckamore Music Festival in Canada; concerts at Wigmore Hall; the Delius Anniversary concert at the Conway Hall on the occasion of the composer's 150th birthday; and concert tours of South Africa, Scotland and Italy.

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