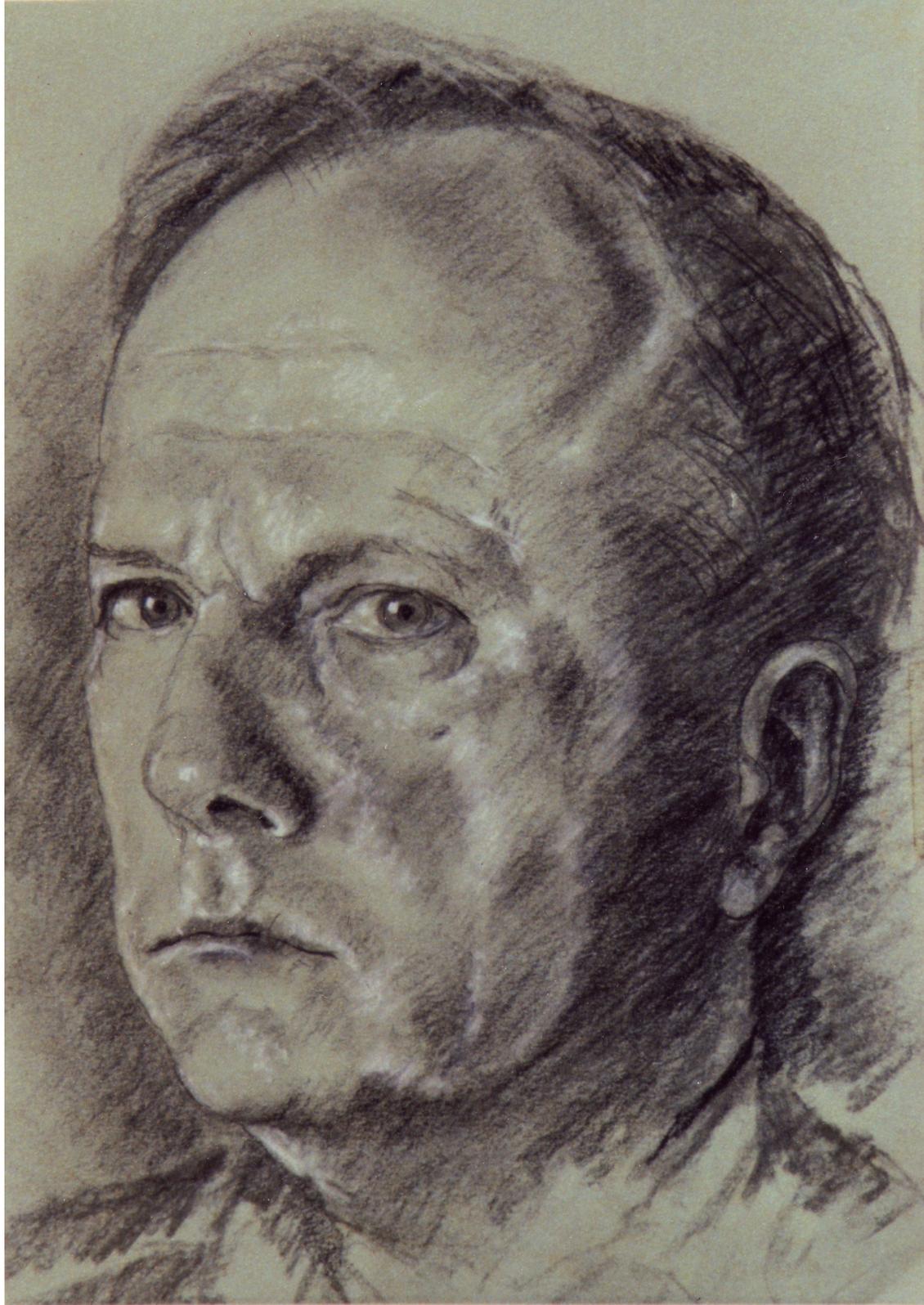


NAXOS

Robert
STILL

**The Four
String Quartets**

Villiers Quartet



Robert Still (1910-1971)

The Four String Quartets



The English composer Robert Still, born in 1910, was educated at Eton College and Trinity College, Oxford. Apart from a brief return to Eton to teach, he devoted the rest of his life to composition, the study of psychoanalysis and a keen pursuit of various ball games: he had achieved a "blue" for real tennis at Oxford. His compositions include four symphonies (the *Third* was premièred and recorded by Sir Eugene Goossens), concertos for piano and violin, instrumental and chamber works, orchestral music, motets and an opera. Many works lay unperformed at his death in 1971 although interest has been shown in more recent times through both performances and recordings. Although he had a loyal network of friendships within the music profession, Still lacked the ability for self promotion, and hence his output was only partially seen and performed by fellow musicians during his lifetime.

Despite his rather restrained personality, Still did possess ambition for writing works that seemed relevant to the changing times he lived in. When he was born in 1910, English music was undergoing a dramatic transformation. That year saw the premières of two works by Vaughan Williams, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and *A Sea Symphony*, that challenged the then current English musical style very much formed by Elgar, a style that was based on the German romantic tradition. Vaughan Williams had undertaken many years of study of English folk-song and English music from the Reformation era: both were evident in these two works from Still's birthdate.

Still died in 1971 and by then Vaughan Williams had been overtaken by yet further upheavals in English musical styles. In post-war Britain there was a powerful movement embracing musical trends from continental Europe. Music broadcasts from the BBC and many concert programmes were taken up with works by Britten, Tippett, Birtwistle, Maxwell Davies and other modernist inclined English composers of varied persuasions. They all acknowledged the revolution that stemmed from the twentieth-century German/Austrian schools of composition represented by Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. However, in a particular English way of independence of both mind and spirit (first noted by the works of Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst!) each of the above native composers responded to the European revolution very differently.

Still's composing career embraced both Vaughan Williams's inclination towards folk-song and early music and the much later change towards a modern, European influenced, method of composition that can be summed up by the abandonment of writing in a tonal style.

The four string quartets contained on this recording vividly illustrate this changeover; the first two display an admiration for both pre-classical models (the opening of the *First Quartet* is a strict fugue) and of folk-song influences. The last two are both written "without key" to

quote the composer's own note in the scores. Such a dramatic change in any composer's musical language is relatively rare. Still seems to have had the courage to face up to some unpalatable truths in the latter part of his life. By the late 1950s the British musical establishment had decided that it was time for "out with the old and in with the new", meaning that composers attached to a tonal way of writing music, which was the vast majority of those born in the interwar years, suddenly found themselves excluded from the inner sanctum of decision makers' views of the style of music that was to be performed on the airwaves and in the concert halls. A new generation of largely post-war educated composers, who showed keen interest in modern musical styles coming from the continent, was favoured in both commissions and performances.

Still was as affected as anyone else writing in a tonal manner and knew his music was being left behind by modern trends. In the early 1960s he decided to do something about this exclusion by seeking advice and counsel (though not quite formal lessons) from Hans Keller, who later wrote that Still was too old to be "taught" a new musical language though he proved himself to be very adept at adopting certain new ways of writing music outside of the tonal system.

Still probably chose Keller, an Austrian émigré from the war years, because he had been trained in Schoenberg's twelve-tone system and was now a key custodian at the BBC of the broadcaster's new ethos of active promotion of non-tonal music. Such an institutional attitude from the BBC was key in producing widespread performances of so-called modern music. Still was evidently a keen recipient of Keller's coaching, as can clearly be heard by comparing the first two and the last two of the series of four string quartets.

Only the first quartet was performed in Still's lifetime. The première took place in 1948 and it thereafter languished until its revival by the Villiers Quartet in 2014. Given Still's reluctance to date his scores, the dates of composition of the following three quartets are unknown. Detective work uncovers the almost certain knowledge of the second quartet being composed prior to Still's

sessions with Keller in the early 1960s and the last two in the series being the result of these studies.

The *First Quartet* springs an immediate surprise in that the opening movement is in two distinct parts with a short pause marked by a double bar line; the fugue at the beginning acts as a prelude to the more folk orientated sound world in the second half. The following movement acts as a sort of Haydnesque scherzo and contains the most immediately appealing music in the whole series of four quartets. The last movement is marked *Tempo di Marcia* and is a folk-song inspired passacaglia.

The *Second Quartet* retains a love of folk melodies that permeate all three movements. The opening has a breezy tune on the first violin that sets the tone for the whole work. The second movement contrasts the opening *Adagio* with a more lively middle and end section before reaching a quite close. The lively finale is based on a jig and retains the dance element to the end.

The last two quartets enter a world of non-tonal music, perhaps more polytonal than atonal. Still kept his desire to communicate with his audience, but in ways more appropriate to the times he was living in. Influences here include early Schoenberg and Bartók, where the music is heavily chromatic with little guidance as to key centre.

The *Third Quartet* is the most rigorous in this regard with a general lack of melodic writing and a preference for more self-reflection. This could be linked to Still's overt interest in psychoanalysis, in the study of which he immersed himself in the 1960s. The music throughout is intense and concentrated, although he expands his thoughts into four movements.

The *Fourth Quartet* is a considerable advance on its predecessor with more varied contrasts of mood and feeling. The first movement has real velocity and is followed by a deeply thoughtful though brief second movement. A forceful *Tempo di Marcia* follows and the solemn finale brings about a moving conclusion to a work that demonstrates an increasing mastery of quartet writing.

Edward Clark

Villiers Quartet

James Dickenson, Violin I • Tamaki Higashi, Violin II • Carmen Flores, Viola • Nicholas Stringfellow, Cello



Photo: Charles Gervais

Kuljit Bhamra, jazz drummer Davide Giovannini, and music broadcaster Roderick Swanston, and has been a featured quartet in numerous music festivals and series, including the North York Moors Chamber Music Festival, the Brit Jazz Fest, the Barnes Music Festival, and concerts for the British Music Society. Members of the quartet have appeared on-screen and performed on the scores for episodes of the television series *Downton Abbey*. In 2014 they hosted the acclaimed digital VQ New Works Competition, an international competition designed for audiences to interact with contemporary music performance online.

Named after Villiers Street in London's energetic and colourful musical epicentre, the Villiers Quartet encompasses the grand and iconic spirit of the extraordinary spirit of London. With performances that combine explosive energy and stylistic refinement, the Quartet has established itself as one of the most charismatic and adventurous of the British chamber music scene. Nothing is outside the Quartet's repertoire as they define the string quartet for the 21st century. Dedicated to the established works of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, they have also developed a reputation as exceptional interpreters of English composers including Elgar, Britten, Delius, and Thomas Adès. The Quartet has been involved in a range of groundbreaking cross-genre collaborations, including string quartet projects with Bhangra composer



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In addition the Society produces a Journal, *British Music*, packed full of scholarly articles and reviews, as well as a regular e-newsletter for members. Our website lists forthcoming BMS events as well as performances of British music, and also provides a forum for discussion and debate.

www.britishmusicsociety.com

Robert Still's four string quartets vividly encapsulate his compositional career. The first two, of which *No. 1* was first performed in 1948, display an early inclination towards folk-song and pre-classical models, while *Nos. 3 and 4*, written during the 1960s "without key", reflect his later change towards a continental European-influenced method of composition that can be summed up by the abandonment of writing in a tonal style. These world première recordings owe a considerable debt to the editorial expertise of James Dickenson, leader of the Villiers Quartet, who prepared the performance material from the original scores.



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(1910-1971)

String Quartet No. 1	16:39	String Quartet No. 3	22:22
1 I. Adagio/Allegretto Serioso	8:40	7 I. Allegro marcato	6:17
2 II. Allegretto Giocondo	3:23	8 II. Adagio sostenuto	6:37
3 III. Tempo di Marcia quasi Passacaglia	4:36	9 III. Allegro Pressante	2:55
		10 IV. Tempo di Marcia	6:33
String Quartet No. 2	17:58	String Quartet No. 4	19:25
4 I. Allegro risoluto	4:41	11 I. Allegro agitato	3:58
5 II. Molto adagio Molto legato	9:17	12 II. Poco lento	5:19
6 III. Allegro vivo	4:00	13 III. Tempo di Marcia	3:30
		14 IV. Angoscioso	6:38

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

Villiers Quartet

James Dickenson, Violin I • Tamaki Higashi, Violin II
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The tempo markings reproduced in the track lists are exactly as written by the composer.

Recorded at The Church Of St Silas the Martyr, London, UK,
on 20th and 21st January, 2014 (tracks 1-6), and on 18th and 19th July, 2013 (tracks 7-14)

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