SOMM RECORDINGS

IVOR HODGSON

String Quintets Nos. 1 & 2 · String Septet No.1



I MUSICANTI

LEON BOSCH



Photo: Simon Cross

Ivor Hodgson

The British composer Ivor Hodgson was born in the ancient Cumbrian city of Carlisle in 1959. As with so many instinctive, naturally gifted composers, his attributes soon manifested themselves, which led to Hodgson studying cello, double bass and composition at the Birmingham School of Music, from which he graduated in 1981 to join the National Centre for Orchestral Studies (NCOS), part of London University, as principal double bass. Around that time, he also studied composition with the distinguished British composer and conductor Alan Bush. Upon graduating from the NCOS in 1982, Hodgson joined the then newly renamed BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, where he continued to serve as a member of the double bass section for 37 years before retiring in April 2019 to devote his time (in his own words) "to composition and travel".

Throughout his extensive performing career, Hodgson has written a wide variety of music, by no means all of it for stringed instruments. His largest work is an opera, *The Plague of Eyam*, which tells the gruesome true story of the plague arriving in the small Derbyshire village of Eyam in 1665. However, it is instrumental music that has formed the majority of Hodgson's output, including a notable body of orchestral music, at the head of which is a significant number of concertos. His piano concerto, composed for Peter Donohoe in 1992, was broadcast by Kathryn Stott and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, and a year later he wrote the contrabassoon concerto for Peter Wesley and the Chester Philharmonic Orchestra; in 1996 his accordion concerto was performed by the Russian virtuoso Oleg Sharov and the Manchester Camerata, and two years later, Hodgson's intriguingly titled "On a long walk back from Manchester" – a bassoon concerto – appeared. Hodgson's critically acclaimed trombone concerto received its world premiere at Chester Cathedral in 2000 and was subsequently performed several times with Robert Holliday as soloist before being recorded in 2002 by the BBC Philharmonic. Hodgson has also composed concertos for double bass and clarinet. His trumpet concerto was premiered at the International Trumpet Guild in Dallas in 2003, and his cello concerto was first performed in 2021, following his retirement from the BBC Philharmonic.

Notwithstanding the foregoing impressively varied series of works for solo instrument and orchestra, it is perhaps chamber music that lies closest to the composer's creative heart. The three significant works in our collection are indicative of Hodgson's inherent mastery of the genre.

That mastery is demonstrated fully in the **String Quintet No.1** – "Sonata da chiesa" – for two violins, two violas and cello. The *sonata da chiesa* concept emerged in Italy at the beginning of the 17th century, referring to (mainly) string instrumental music for performance in churches, often during services. Clearly, such locations are not always available today, and Hodgson's work is not exclusively to be played in such an acoustic, but the implication of serious thought and lack of superficial expression invites the listener to approach the work in a suitably reflective frame of mind – subtly implied by the instrumental layout.

The first movement, "Come una chiesa" (Like a Church), marked Largo, opens with a simple four-note idea that expands gently from a basic F major before moving through adjacent tonalities, as if awakening from rest and glimpsing more vivid, almost enticing keys and gentle melodic lines, until the first viola offers the first extended theme, answered by the first violin. Now, all are involved, and the music's inexorable sense of organic growth continues as the texture expands through newer ideas and varied workings.

The sense of a living organism, of a civilised conversation piece, with ideas passing from one to another, soon becomes almost tangible. The listener is drawn into this growing exordium, which subsides over a low A pedal from the cello, with the first viola, now *meno mosso,* bringing a new variant of an earlier idea and galvanising all in the first true *fortissimo* quasi-tutti that coalesces many of the earlier ideas in a genuine symphonic statement from which the music, *rallentando poco a poco al fine*, returns to end the movement, *pianissimo*, over a long low G.

The second movement, a "Processione" marked Allegro ma non troppo, brings daylight – not vivid, but clear and bright. In 3/4, this is no martial scene, but one full of inner movement and life, expanding and contracting, the thematic material constantly reworked to reveal new aspects and wider emotions in a texture that becomes consistently symphonic, and wholly original. However, the mirror changes once more: now marked *moderato* (the triple pulse retained), our attention transferred, the music subsides to a simple *pianissimo* D minor close.

The opening of the third and last movement, titled "Pregare" (To Pray) and marked Adagio, is no simple utterance of devotion. In many ways, Hodgson displays his structural and expressive mastery in music that finds depth in what might at first appear to be quite simple material. This music could be considered post-Mahlerian, the depth of feeling genuine but never overworked and never demanding so much of the listener's involvement, whilst retaining a directness of utterance that is clear and unambiguous.

There is one more offertory to come: a return to the opening "Come una chiesa". Marked Largo and in 2/4, *ppp*, the composer takes his leave of us in a mood of genuine beatification, the tonality now C sharp minor, the opposite remove from that in which the work began, as the music concludes, passing from our perception.

Hodgson has written on his **String Quintet No.2**, "Whilst my String Quintet No.1 'Sonata da chiesa' was my first completed composition, String Quintet No.2 is my most recent. The title, 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', makes connections to the heavenly theme of my first composition.

"On New Year's Eve 2023, I was on a Dark Sky experience atop Mount John, near Lake Tekapo in New Zealand's South Island. At first, looking up into the ink black heavens, I saw nothing. It was bitterly cold and the darkest of nights. But then, as my eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness, an odd pinprick of light sparkled down, followed by another, then another, until the sky became alive with lights shining down on what was an order

in this unfolding chaos. The astronomers also spoke of the enormous distances between planets and stars (it can be millions of miles) and how journeys from one to another would take many thousands of years. The stargazing experience showed me how unimaginable the scale of our universe is and perhaps, more importantly, just how little we know of what is out there beyond the reach of our telescopes.

"This experience sparked an idea for a piece, but not one that would reflect what we see or know – rather one that would portray the continual shifting of light and distances involved in travelling through space.

"Movement 1: 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are'
The opening of this movement represents the stars slowly revealing themselves in a random pattern before becoming unified. The harmony continually shifts until nearly every beat is a new texture in the celestial tapestry. This movement develops by alternating between two very different moods.

"Movement 2: 'Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky'
This movement covers the entire range of the quintet, from the lowest notes of the double bass to the very high register of the violin. There is a distant feeling to the opening harmony, but by the middle of the movement, all instruments are involved and vying for prominence, creating a thick web of contrapuntal lines. This movement ends as it started, with a great distance between the double bass and violin.

"Movement 3: 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, though I know not what you are'
Despite great knowledge and modern insight into our universe and its distant worlds, scientists have only just begun to scratch the surface of what truly lies out there in the vastness of space. These were the words of an astronomer on top of Mount John as he summarised our stargazing experience.

"Like the astronomer, the third movement summarises the Quintet in what is a set of variations. The opening theme recalls the opening movement, and it is followed by four variations, each featuring melodies and harmonies from the other movements. No material is wasted; the references appear randomly throughout this last movement."

The third work in our collection of chamber music for strings by Hodgson is his **String Septet No.1**, scored for two violins, two violas, two cellos and double bass.

The piece was inspired by the poem *The Women of Gairsay*, written for the composer by Erlend Clouston. The poem weaves together themes of Viking journeys, touching on the resilience of those left behind, and the interplay of hope and loss, the sea ever present. Its vivid imagery – ships setting sail, the ominous presence of ravens, the chill of glacier winds – serves as the creative foundation for each movement.

The Women of Gairsay

The women of Gairsay
Roll the barrels down to the ship.
They salt the skua and stir the pitch
And crimp the beards of the dragon men
And kick barnacles from the anchor chain
And bury the drumbeats in the sand.
While the glacier wind
Gurgles in the chimney of the hall
And Mac the Pict
Washes up thoughtfully.

The women of Gairsay
Mope, and skim stones across the water.
They practise judo and stalk the otter.
They tie gold thread round the raven's beak
And stretch a goatskin over the leak
And blatter the drum so the children can't sleep.
While the glacier wind
Curdles the ocean
And Mac the Pict
Spreads seaweed on his fields.

The women of Gairsay
Are drunk. Who cares about gold and greed?
Travelling's the thing. Give me Wick in the spring.
This necklace was forged by a dainty machine
That they put on the platform at Aberdeen.
A raven's beak scrapes the frosted glass
And just for a second, an ugly second, a dead drum paws at their hearts.
Underneath the window
Mac the policeman lights a cigarette
And laughs quietly to himself
About the Boat that never came back.

Erlend Clouston © 1990. Used by permission.

In the first movement, “Women’s lament”, the women of Gairsay are left to shoulder the burdens of daily life as their Viking husbands prepare to depart. Their daily tasks – working, cleaning, repairing and hunting – become heavier in the absence of their loved ones. The music opens with a plaintive melody that is passed from one instrument to another, symbolising the shared sorrow and solidarity among the women. Each phrase is tinged with longing, as if each woman is voicing her own private grief, yet together they form a collective lament. The movement transitions seamlessly into the next, reflecting how life must continue even in the face of uncertainty.

In this second movement, “Chorale of the dragon men”, a sense of foreboding permeates; the music grows darker and more intense, capturing the brooding mood of the Viking warriors as they steel themselves for the perilous voyage ahead. The chorale texture evokes the sound of voices joined in ritual or prayer, underscoring the gravity of their departure. The harmonies are thick and unsettled, mirroring the apprehension and unspoken fears of the men as they confront the unknown.

With the winds now favourable, the Vikings are poised to embark. The third movement, “Bury the drum beat”, has the pulse of the drum – represented by rhythmic motifs in the lower strings – driving the music forward, echoing the heartbeat of the community. Over this, whispered motifs in the upper strings suggest hushed conversations and anxious speculation: will the journey end in triumph or tragedy? The movement balances anticipation with uncertainty, as the fate of the voyagers hangs in the balance.

The raven, a powerful symbol in Norse mythology, takes centre stage in the fourth movement. Its presence is ambiguous: is it a harbinger of doom or a messenger of wisdom? The music oscillates between ominous, sharp-edged figures and moments of eerie calm, reflecting the dual nature of the raven. Dissonant chords and sudden silences evoke the bird’s unpredictable flight, leaving the listener to ponder its true meaning.

After the tension of the previous movement, the next section, “Skimming stones”, offers a moment of relief and hope. The music becomes lighter and more playful, with quick, skipping rhythms that mimic the motion of stones skimming across the water’s surface: a brief escape from isolation and despair, with the women finding solace in small joys and fleeting moments of optimism. The interplay between instruments suggests laughter and camaraderie, a reminder of resilience in the face of hardship.

The mood shifts once more as the reality of absence sets in. The women, now huddled together against the biting cold of the glacial wind, gaze out to sea, their hopes pinned on the return of the boats. The music is stark and windswept, with icy harmonics and slow, mournful lines that evoke the relentless glacier wind. The ocean is described as being “curdled” by the cold, a vivid image that finds its echo in the music’s texture. This movement captures both the endurance and the vulnerability of those who wait.

The final movement is a meditation on loss and unanswered longing. The absence of returning boats is felt in the music’s unresolved phrases and lingering silences. Themes from earlier movements reappear, transformed by grief and memory. The Septet ends not with closure but with a sense of open-ended yearning, honouring the resilience of the women of Gairsay and the enduring power of defiant hope, even in the face of loss.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2026



Photo: Juno Snowdon
Art Direction: Adam Hypki

Leon Bosch is an internationally renowned double bass virtuoso and conductor, and one of the most distinctive musical voices of his generation. For nearly two decades he served as principal double bass of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, before forging a wide-ranging career as a conductor, soloist, chamber musician, recording artist, broadcaster, writer, publisher, educator and artistic director.

A musician of exceptional breadth, Bosch's work extends far beyond performance. His acclaimed discography of over 20 solo recordings has transformed the double bass repertoire, bringing to light a wealth of neglected and newly commissioned works, many of them world-premiere recordings. His commitment to rediscovery and advocacy has become a defining feature of his artistic identity.

As a conductor, he appears with orchestras across the UK, Europe, Africa and Asia, drawing on a lifetime of experience working with the world's leading ensembles and conductors. He is equally at home directing from the double bass, a rare and distinctive dimension of his musicianship.

Founded and directed by Leon Bosch, **I Musicanti** is a flexible, mixed-instrument chamber ensemble bringing together some of the UK's most distinguished soloists and chamber musicians. The ensemble was created to explore repertoire that falls between the cracks of convention: great works by neglected composers, overlooked masterpieces by celebrated figures, and historically significant music that deserves a renewed voice.

At the heart of I Musicanti's work lies a commitment to intelligent programming, rigorous scholarship and the spontaneity of true chamber music collaboration. Programmes are shaped by curiosity and rediscovery, often placing familiar works alongside unjustly forgotten repertoire, or presenting chamber reimaginings that illuminate major works from a fresh perspective.

A defining aspect of the ensemble's identity is its close partnership with SOMM Recordings, whose shared commitment to artistic enterprise has enabled I Musicanti to build a distinctive and critically acclaimed discography. Releases such as *Piano Quintets* by British composers and the ongoing *Treasures from the New World* series exemplify this collaboration, combining advocacy, scholarship and performance at the highest level.

Regularly appearing at leading venues including Wigmore Hall, I Musicanti approaches each project not simply as a performance, but as a lasting contribution to the living chamber music tradition.

imusicanti.co.uk

Photo: Holly Cassidy



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FIRST RECORDINGS

IVOR HODGSON b.1959

String Quintets Nos. 1 & 2 · String Septet No.1

I MUSICANTI · LEON BOSCH *double bass [bc] & director*
MARTYN JACKSON [abc], BENEDICT HOLLAND [abc] *violins*
ROBERT SMISSEN [abc], SARAH-JANE BRADLEY [ac] *violas*
URSULA SMITH [abc], JACQUELINE THOMAS [c] *cellos*

String Quintet No.1 [a]
"Sonata da chiesa"
for 2 violins, 2 violas & cello

1	I.	Come una chiesa: Largo	4:57
2	II.	Processione: Allegro ma non troppo	10:01
3	III.	Pregare: Adagio – Tempo primo	9:05

String Quintet No.2 [b]
"Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"
for 2 violins, viola, cello & double bass
(written for Leon Bosch and I Musicanti 2024/25)

4	I.	Allegro *"Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are"*	9:28
5	II.	Largo *"Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky"*	7:25
6	III.	Vivo *"Twinkle, twinkle, little star, though I know not what you are"*	9:16

String Septet No.1 [c]
"The Women of Gairsay"
for 2 violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos & double bass

7	I.	"Women's lament"	3:31
8	II.	"Chorale of the dragon men"	1:41
9	III.	"Bury the drum beat"	2:16
10	IV.	"Raven's beak"	9:06
11	V.	"Skimming stones"	3:13
12	VI.	"Glacier wind"	8:17
13	VII.	"The boat that never came back"	4:34

Total Duration **82:58**

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