

## Septura

Septura brings together London's leading players to redefine brass chamber music through the uniquely expressive sound of the brass septet. By creating a canon of transcriptions, arrangements and new commissions for this brand new classical configuration, Septura aims to re-cast the brass ensemble as a serious artistic medium. Currently ensemble-in-residence at the Royal Academy of Music in London, the group is recording a series of discs for Naxos, each focused on a particular period, genre and set of composers, creating a 'counter-factual history' of brass chamber music. Weaving this ever-increasing repertoire into captivating live events, Septura is gaining a reputation for engaging audiences with innovative and imaginative programming, built around strong concepts and themes. Septura's members are the leading players of the new generation of British brass musicians, holding principal positions in the London Symphony, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, Basel Symphony and Aurora orchestras.

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The Finzi Trust

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Photo: Bethany Clarke



# MUSIC FOR BRASS SEPTET • 6

Elgar • Finzi • Parry • Walton  
**SEPTURA**

Elgar • Finzi • Parry • Walton  
Music for Brass Septet • 6

<b>Gerald FINZI</b> (1901–1956)		<b>Hubert PARRY</b> (1848–1918)				
<b>Three Anthems, Op. 27</b>		<b>Songs of Farewell</b> (1916–18)				
<b>1</b>	No. 2, God is gone up (1951)	<b>4:27</b>	<b>6</b>	(arr. Matthew Knight)	<b>13:43</b>	
	(arr. Matthew Knight)			I. My soul, there is a country		3:33
	<b>Edward ELGAR</b> (1857–1934)			II. I know my soul hath power to know all things		2:03
	<b>Serenade in E minor, Op. 20</b> (1892)			III. Never weather-beaten sail		3:22
(arr. Matthew Knight)		<b>10:44</b>	<b>9</b>	IV. There is an old belief	4:39	
<b>2</b>	I. Allegro piacevole		<b>Gerald FINZI</b>			
<b>3</b>	II. Larghetto		<b>10</b>	<b>Romance in E flat major, Op. 11</b> (1928)		
<b>4</b>	III. Allegretto				(arr. Simon Cox)	<b>7:52</b>
			<b>William WALTON</b> (1902–1983)			
<b>Gerald FINZI</b>		<b>Sonata for String Orchestra</b> (1971)				
<b>5</b>	<b>Prelude in F minor, Op. 25</b> (1929)	<b>4:36</b>	(arr. Simon Cox)		<b>28:05</b>	
	(arr. Simon Cox)					
			<b>11</b>	I. Allegro		9:10
			<b>12</b>	II. Presto		4:49
			<b>13</b>	III. Lento	9:00	
			<b>14</b>	IV. Allegro molto	4:56	

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Huw Morgan, Trumpet in E flat • Alan Thomas, Trumpet 1 in B flat • Simon Cox, Trumpet 2 in B flat  
Peter Moore, Trombone 1 • Matthew Knight, Trombone 2 • Daniel West, Bass Trombone • Peter Smith, Tuba  
Simon Cox, Artistic Director • Matthew Knight, Artistic Director

This recording is something of a homecoming for Septura – a chance to play music by composers very close to our hearts. The first half of the 20th century was a golden age in England’s rather chequered compositional history, and also a period when the brass band movement was arguably at its peak, establishing its place at the very heart of British musical culture. And so the composers of the time had a natural affinity for brass instruments, and we, in turn, have grown up surrounded by their distinctive musical style – listening to it and performing it in brass bands, orchestras and choirs. For this, our first foray onto home turf, we have selected, from the many composers of this period whose work endures, four of the finest: Elgar, Parry, Finzi and Walton.

We begin with the characteristically ‘English’ sound of **Gerald Finzi** (1901–1956), and a genre that particularly flourished in the early 20th century: English choral music. Finzi wrote a number of sacred choral works, despite being

an agnostic of Jewish descent, and one of his most popular is the rousing anthem, *God is gone up with a triumphant shout*. This elated celebration of the Ascension is ripe for brass transcription: Finzi’s fanfare-like organ opening clearly reflects the ‘sounding trumpet melodies’ of Edward Taylor’s text. The septet plays both organ and choir roles – in the gentler and more transparent middle section (‘Methinks I see Heaven’s sparkling courtiers fly’) this distinction is made clear, with the melodic voices of the choir accompanied by trickling cup-muted organ lines. The full might of the brass septet then returns for the emphatic reprise of the opening material.

Our other two Finzi pieces are not choral, but instrumental. His 1929 *Prelude in F minor, Op. 25* for string orchestra, originally intended to be the first third of a triptych called *The Bud, the Blossom and the Berry*, was salvaged from his unpublished works after his death in 1956. Finzi wrote this in the fertile period after he had

moved to London in 1925, surrounded by other young English composers such as Holst and Vaughan Williams. His earlier life had not been altogether happy – his father had died when he was just 7, and he was deeply affected by the death of his teacher, Ernest Farrar, at the Western Front in 1918 – and lots of his music reflects this background. The *Prelude* is no exception: a throbbing tuba introduction ushers in a heavy-hearted melody, starting with the low trombones alone. A lighter texture signals a more hopeful middle section, but before long the trombone theme returns, exhibiting Finzi’s unique rich harmonic language. This time the music builds to an epic climax as the prevailing minor key finally gives way to a bright and exultant major.

A year earlier Finzi had written his *Romance in E flat major*, also for string orchestra. He revised it much later in his career, and it only received its first performance in 1951, long after he had moved from London to Wiltshire to devote himself to his twin passions: composing, and the preservation of rare varieties of English apple. Fittingly the *Romance* has an air of elegiac nostalgia, warmer and more optimistic than the *Prelude*, growing from a pensive introduction into a lilting and unwaveringly lyrical movement.

**Sir Edward Elgar** (1857–1934) began his musical career as a professional violinist, and so it is no surprise that his works for strings – the violin and cello concertos, the *Introduction and Allegro*, and of course the *Serenade* – form such a central part of his output. However, in his mid-forties he also took up the trombone. This came a little less naturally to him, as recalled by his close friend Dora Penny (the subject of *Variation X* of the ‘*Enigma*’ *Variations*):

‘On one occasion, he [Elgar] got up and fetched a trombone that was standing in a corner and began trying to play passages in the score. He didn’t do very well and often played a note higher or lower than the one he wanted ... and as he swore every time that happened, I got into such a state of hysterics that I didn’t know what to do. Then he turned to me [and said]: “How do you expect me to play this doggasted thing if you laugh?” I went out of the room as quickly as I could and sat on the stairs,

clinging to the banisters till the pain eased but it was no good. I couldn’t stop there as he went on making comic noises, so I went downstairs out of earshot for a bit.’

Perhaps this insider knowledge of brass instruments (and the difficulties they sometimes present) contributed to Elgar’s very idiomatic writing, demonstrated so clearly in the symphonies, the ‘*Enigma*’ *Variations*, and the *Severn Suite* (written for the National Brass Band Championship in 1930). And given his affection for brass, he might have approved of our appropriation for brass septet of his favourite work, the *Serenade*, despite describing it as ‘really stringy in effect’.

Composed in 1892 as a gift for his wife to mark their third wedding anniversary, the *Serenade* was one of Elgar’s earliest successful works – predating the ‘*Enigma*’ *Variations*, the piece that really established him as the foremost British composer since Purcell, by six years. Nevertheless, it contains all the hallmarks of Elgar’s mature style, particularly in the elegiac slow movement, with its rising and falling lines giving way to an archetypal Elgarian tune of great emotional intensity. The outer movements are, by contrast, imbued with a youthful charm. The gently lilting first movement develops from uncertain shyness to youthful confidence, with the E minor key signature adding a hint of darkness and nostalgia. Reminders of the first movement’s theme return in the finale, but any shadows are banished by the movement’s cheerful nature, in a carefree E major.

For **Sir Hubert Parry** (1848–1918), who had always revered German music and culture, the First World War was deeply depressing; it was, in the words of Herbert Howells, ‘a scourge that cast a devastating shadow over Parry’s mind and heart.’ He sensed that he was close to death: as he wrote on his 70th birthday, ‘I have reached the last milestone’, and he did in fact die in 1918. This is the context for his introspective *Songs of Farewell*, composed between 1916 and 1918. Parry himself labelled them motets, but only the last of the six songs has a traditional sacred text (Psalm 39); the rest are more personal than strictly devotional. Through the set Parry gradually expands his forces from four voices to eight, and with this expansion comes greater textural variety. We have arranged the first

four: the opening two movements, *My soul, there is a country*, and *I know my soul hath power to know all things*, are both in four parts and almost entirely homophonic. The five-part *Never weather-beaten sail* starts out in the same vein, but soon gives way to counterpoint. Finally, *There is an old belief* is largely polyphonic, with a few notable instances of emphatic homophony, for the text ‘That creed I fain would keep / That hope I’ll ne’er forget’.

After Elgar’s death in 1934, **Sir William Walton** (1902–1983) became the de facto figurehead of the British musical establishment. It was to Walton that the establishment turned for an Elgarian march to celebrate the coronation of George VI in 1937 (*Crown Imperial* the result); and during the War Walton was excused military service and instead attached to the Army Film Unit, put to work composing music for propaganda films. In these establishment roles his music was, perhaps predictably, slightly conservative. But he re-found his modernist voice in his most substantial work of the 1940s, his *Second String Quartet*.

Unlike Elgar, Walton never became particularly proficient at any particular instrument. However, this didn’t

stop him writing extensively for strings – concertos for viola, violin and cello, the sonata for violin, and two string quartets. It was the second of these, the *A minor String Quartet*, that Neville Marriner convinced the composer to transcribe for string orchestra in 1971.

The final three movements deviate very little from the quartet original (the transcription of the last movement was actually completed by Malcolm Arnold). The opening movement, however, differs significantly, with some completely new material. In a clear sonata form, Walton contrasts a meandering and gently lyrical first theme with an aggressively rhythmic second; the development features a bustling *fugato* leading to a brief and questioning recapitulation. The second movement is an energetic *scherzo* to which brass instruments lend a particularly menacing edge. By contrast, the warm sound and *cantabile* lyricism of brass is explored in the lush lines of the slow movement, which features a solo trombone. The turbulent *rondo* finale is classic Walton, with driving rhythmic intensity eventually culminating in a triumphant A major conclusion.

Matthew Knight