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# DELIUS • SMYTH

## String Quartets

Villiers Quartet



## **Ethel Smyth (1858–1944): String Quartet in E minor**

## **Frederick Delius (1862–1934): String Quartet in C minor**

There are few more path-breaking and original figures in English music than Ethel Smyth. Born in Sidcup, Kent, on 22 April 1858, Smyth was the fourth child of a major general in the British Army, John Hall Smyth, and demonstrated a strong aptitude for music from an early age. The idea of a woman pursuing a professional musical career, however, was highly unusual in 19th-century English life: one of the many ways in which Smyth consistently challenged social norms and expectations. Despite her parents' strenuous objections, in 1887 Smyth enrolled at the Leipzig Conservatoire, founded by Felix Mendelssohn and one of Europe's foremost schools of music, where she commenced lessons with Carl Reinecke and Salomon Jadassohn. After barely a year, Smyth had left the Conservatoire, disillusioned with its institutional regime, to study privately with Heinrich von Herzogenberg, husband of the eminent pianist Elisabeth and close friend of Johannes Brahms. As a composer, Smyth secured her English concert debut at the Crystal Palace in London in 1890. She later became an active member of the suffragette movement, spending two months in Holloway prison on account of her activism; her *The March of the Women* (1910, pub. 1911) became the campaign's unofficial anthem and rallying call. Over the course of her career, Smyth composed six operas, including *The Wreckers* (1902–04), originally with a French libretto, which was premiered at the Neues Theater in Leipzig in November 1906. Although she received honorary doctorates from the universities of Durham (1910) and Oxford (1926), and a DBE in 1922, Smyth never received full critical acclaim, perhaps as a lingering legacy of gender politics in English music, and it is only in recent years that her music has begun to be appreciated and performed more widely.

Smyth composed the first two movements of her *Quartet in E minor* in 1902, but she waited a decade before adding the third movement and finale in 1912, and the score was not published until 1914. The work nevertheless has a masterful coherence and consistency. The initial *Allegretto lirico* opens with an eloquent viola solo: the instrument features especially prominently throughout the score. A gentle rocking figure lends greater impetus, leading to a lively second subject. After an impassioned development, a subtly reconfigured reprise withholds the opening viola melody until the coda, where it reappears in an idyllic tonic major. The second movement, in contrast, is an imaginative *scherzo*. Rhythmically and harmonically playful, the music never feels settled in its ostensible 'tonic', A minor. The viola again takes the lead, and the combination of bowed and plucked strings weaves a fascinating texture. The trio, which appears twice, brings an unusual change of metre and musical direction: the way in which the return of the *scherzo* is dovetailed creates a delightful sequence of quick-steps and double-takes.

The opening of the third movement, *Andante*, signals a more hushed and reverential mood. The central section opens in A flat, a tonal shift anticipated by the movement's introductory gesture, but the music wanders more widely as it proceeds, through a series of unexpected harmonic turns and excursions. The coda brings a surprise: a delicate series of triplets that ushers the music toward a quiet close. The finale commences with a stern fugato, the most serious and scholarly of musical idioms, but swiftly gives way to a more rustic abandonment, often with a whole-tone flavour. The music is characterised by a continual rhythmic interplay between straight and triplet figures and obstinate ostinato patterns. The progress of the development is interrupted by ominous tremolando passages and the ostinato's insistent presence. The fugato finally returns to initiate a coda which gathers up the movement's themes before concluding with a brusque flourish – forthright, bold and uncompromising.

Frederick Delius's musical career was no less unconventional than Smyth's. Born in Bradford on 29 January 1862, the son of middle class German immigrants who moved to Yorkshire in connection with the textile industry, the young Fritz (as he was then known) grew up with chamber music in the household but was always intended to follow his father's path into commerce and the manufacturing trade. It took no less a figure than Edvard Grieg to persuade Delius's parents to send their son to Leipzig, where Delius enrolled at the Conservatoire in 1886. Delius found the institution no more amenable than Smyth before him and stayed only two years. One of the lasting impressions of his time at the Conservatoire, however, was attending a performance of Grieg's monumental *Quartet in G minor, Op. 27*, performed by the Brodsky Quartet in February 1888. This may have been the stimulus for Delius to attempt to compose a string quartet of his own, perhaps as a 'graduation piece'. The quartet nonetheless had a troubled genesis: Delius sent the score to his friend, the Norwegian pianist and composer Christian Sinding, in the hope that he might be able to persuade his colleagues to perform the work, but the score was evidently returned unplayed. Delius took the rejection hard and seemingly abandoned the work, although he later re-used the second movement, a *scherzo*, in the revised version of his single mature *String Quartet* (1916, rev. 1917, premiered 1919). The fate of the early *Quartet* thereafter took an unexpected turn: the score of the two opening movements was lost until it reappeared at auction in 2018. Edited and reunited with the two final movements, the complete work received what was probably its world premiere performance by the Villiers Quartet during the COVID-19 pandemic, via a livestream broadcast from Oxford on 8 October 2020. This is the *Quartet's* first recording in its original four-movement form.

The two newly discovered movements add significantly to our understanding and appreciation of Delius's early compositional development. The opening *Allegro* is written on an ambitious scale – more like an orchestral tone poem than a piece for chamber ensemble. The arresting opening bars, with their gently pulsating syncopation, avoid unequivocally establishing the tonic key. The second subject enters without transition and has a wistful nostalgia: the exposition closes in the dominant minor with a series of cadential echoes that die away as though heard across a vast open natural space. After a vigorous development and reprise, the movement closes with a restful play-over of the second subject in the tonic major, before a brief coda brings the music to a swift no-nonsense conclusion.

The *scherzo* is a rapid fairy-light dance in triple time that gets momentarily caught in little harmonic eddies as it whirls away. The more expansive trio has a gently swaying motion and a characteristic melodic allure, generously shared across the four instruments. As though enamoured of its own lyricism, the trio slips reluctantly away as the *scherzo's* playful shadows and syncopations return once more.

A more earnest tone is invoked at the start of the formally innovative third movement, but the spirit of solemn sobriety soon gives way to a graceful, lilting intermezzo and then a chivalrous central section in the manner of a mazurka. The finale starts in a stern epic-heroic vein, as though recounting an ancient Nordic ballad. Through the pounding, obsessive rhythms of the closing bars, it feels as if the music has been overrun by a horde of mountain trolls and other malignant beings. Delius's creative appetite for wild adventure and the fantastical could not be more vividly imagined.

**Daniel M. Grimley**

## Villiers Quartet

Katie Stillman, Violin I • Tamaki Higashi, Violin II • Carmen Flores, Viola • Leo Melvin, Cello



Photo: Charles Gervais

The Villiers Quartet encompasses the grand and iconic spirit of the extraordinary music tradition in Britain, and is the quartet-in-residence at the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building at St Hilda's College, Oxford University. The Villiers Quartet is one of the most recognised quartets in the UK for the performance of British music, releasing acclaimed recordings of works by Elgar, Delius, Fricker, Alwyn, William Sterndale Bennett, David Matthews and Kuljit Bhamra, MBE. In 2020 the quartet gave the world premiere of the 1888 Delius *String Quartet*, featuring movements from original versions uncovered by Professor Daniel Grimley from Oxford University. This album is the first recording of the complete 1888 Delius *String Quartet*, following the quartet's previous Naxos release of the original 1916 Delius *String Quartet* (8.573586). The broad curiosity of the Villiers Quartet and its passion for teaching and performing have made the ensemble a valuable resource for students and audiences alike. Inspiration comes from the heart of the Villiers Quartet's philosophy: to believe in the art of string quartet.

Website: [www.villiersquartet.com](http://www.villiersquartet.com)

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The *String Quartet in E minor* by Ethel Smyth, one of the most innovative and original figures in English music, has a masterful coherence and consistency. With eloquent writing for the viola in particular, it is both playful and reverential, and ends with a flourish – forthright, bold and uncompromising, like Smyth herself. Delius wrote the early *String Quartet* in 1888 but it was rejected for performance and he was later to reuse the *Scherzo* for his mature *Quartet* of 1916–19 (8.573586). In 2018 the score of the two opening movements of the 1888 *Quartet*, long assumed lost, reappeared at auction and have been edited and reunited with the final two in this premiere recording, which adds significantly to our understanding of Delius's early compositional directions.

Ethel  
**SMYTH**  
(1858–1944)

**String Quartet in E minor**

(1902, rev. 1912)

- |                              |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| ❶ I. Allegretto lirico       | 12:41 |
| ❷ II. Allegro molto leggiero | 5:21  |
| ❸ III. Andante               | 12:14 |
| ❹ IV. Allegro energico       | 9:10  |

**39:35**

Frederick  
**DELIUS**  
(1862–1934)

**String Quartet in C minor**

(1888) (reconstructed by

Daniel M. Grimley [b. 1973],  
2021 ❺ ❻\*)

**25:55**

- |                                      |       |
|--------------------------------------|-------|
| ❽ I. Allegro assai                   | 10:18 |
| ❾ II. Allegro vivace                 | 4:42  |
| ❿ III. Adagio, con molta espressione | 5:15  |
| ⓫ IV. Finale: Agitato, allegro       | 5:37  |



\*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

**Villiers Quartet**

**Katie Stillman, Violin I • Tamaki Higashi, Violin II**  
**Carmen Flores, Viola • Leo Melvin, Cello**

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