



# Welsh Music for Strings

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Owain  
Arwel  
Hughes

RUBICON



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- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
|   | Grace Williams 1906–1977  |       |
| 1 | <b>Elegy</b> (1936; rev. 1940)<br>for string orchestra                          | 6.35  |
|   | Arwel Hughes 1909–1988  |       |
| 2 | <b>Gweddi</b> (A Prayer)<br>for soprano, chorus and strings or orchestra (1944) | 10.42 |
|   | Paul Mealor b.1975  |       |
| 3 | <b>O Sacred Heart</b> (2023)  | 8.37  |
|   | Morfydd Owen 1891–1918  |       |
| 4 | <b>Romance for Strings</b> (1911)   | 2.24  |
|   | Arwel Hughes  |       |
| 5 | <b>Divertimento</b> (based on the tune 'Ebenezer')                              | 7.51  |
|   | Christopher Wood (b.1945)   |       |
| 6 | <b>Aberfan</b> (2016)   | 6.54  |
|   | William Mathias 1934–1992   |       |
|   | <b>Music for Strings</b> (1961)   |       |
| 7 | I. Maestoso   | 5.55  |
| 8 | II. Canto   | 5.46  |
| 9 | III. Danza  | 5.07  |

*World-premiere recordings*

Jessica Robinson soprano (2)  
Côr Llundain (2)  
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
Owain Arwel Hughes conductor







Music lovers will know that pieces such as Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* (1905) and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* (1910) belong to a glorious and much celebrated tradition of British music for strings. And yet how many of us are aware of the outstanding contributions that 20th-century Welsh composers have made to this genre? This collection of music from Wales features works that perfectly capture the different colours and tones of the string orchestra and includes world-premiere recordings of pieces by Arwel Hughes, William Mathias, Paul Mealer, Morfydd Owen, Grace Williams and Christopher Wood.

Grace Williams (1906–1977) composed her *Sea Sketches* for string orchestra (1944) during the war but first came to national attention in the 1930s – shortly after completing her studies with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music in London. She wrote her **Elegy** in 1935 for the strings of the then newly founded BBC Welsh Orchestra, and the work received its broadcast premiere in February 1936. The questing melody in the violins and violas that opens the work is poignant in tone, and Williams uses arresting, octatonic harmonies and pulsing bass lines to colour the braided melodic lines as they are spun through the strings. The music builds in a series of intense waves before a rhapsodic song in the solo violin brings us back to source in the closing bars.

Arwel Hughes (1909–1988) may well have been present in the BBC Cardiff studio when Williams's *Elegy* received its broadcast premiere in 1936. Fresh from his own studies at the Royal College of Music, Hughes had been appointed to the new BBC Wales Music Department in 1935, eventually rising to become Music Director from 1965 to 1971. He composed his **Gweddi (A Prayer)** in 1944 for the National Eisteddfod of Wales, and

it is a piece that has become a favourite with Welsh audiences. Scored for solo soprano, chorus and strings, this is a beautiful, ecstatic prayer for peace, where richly varied passages for the chorus, singing 'Kyrie eleison' and 'Christe eleison', are ingeniously interspersed with solo soprano entries to Welsh words from the Mass.

Leading today's generation of Welsh composers, Paul Mealer (b.1975) has gained global recognition for composing music inspired by encounters with the divine. His **O Sacred Heart**, a piece especially composed for this album, is a prayer without words and is prefaced by a quotation from the late Pope John Paul II:

*In the Sacred Heart, every treasure of wisdom and knowledge is hidden. In that divine heart beats God's infinite love for everyone and for each of us as individuals.*

Softly chanting chords and mellifluous melodies in solo strings lie at the heart of this work, and Mealer's use of the 'Lombard' rhythm – where a short, accented note on the beat is followed by a longer note – gives this prayer a particularly Celtic accent. The rhythm echoes inflexions of the Welsh language and can often be heard in folksong settings as well as in the music of Welsh composers.

No collection of Welsh music would be complete without a piece by Morfydd Owen (1891–1918). Although Owen's career was tragically cut short by her death at the age of 26, pieces such as her popular song 'Gweddi y Pechadur' (The Sinner's Prayer, 1913) and Nocturne for orchestra (1913) have secured her place in music history. She completed her enchanting **Romance for Strings** in 1911, when she was a music student at University College, Cardiff, and this work seems infused with the spirit of youth and promise of spring. The syncopated swing of the melody has a winning, dance-like quality and there are dramatic harmonic twists and dynamic changes as the music unfolds. Little is known of the piece's performance history, but this recording premiere reveals a fascinating, early work that teems with fresh ideas and finesse.


Arwel Hughes's **Divertimento** for string orchestra was recently rediscovered by his son (and conductor of this album), Owain Arwel Hughes, and is also recorded here for the first time. Hughes based his *Divertimento* on the famous, 19th-century Welsh hymn tune 'Ebenezer', and this tune is played by the violins in the opening bars before being extensively developed. The richly varied treatment of old 'Ebenezer' in the piece's playful outer Allegro sections ensures that none of the solemnity of the original hymn is retained – despite more reflective moments in the central Andante.

**Aberfan** was commissioned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster. At 9.15am on the morning of 21 October 1966 an avalanche of rain-soaked coal waste raced into the small Welsh village of Aberfan, killing 116 children and 28 adults as it engulfed Pantglas Junior School and a row of houses. *Aberfan* was first performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Owain Arwel Hughes, as part of the Last Night of the Welsh Proms on 23 July 2016 and broadcast on Classic FM as part of the Full Works Concert in August 2017. It was also performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at Cadogan Hall in April 2018 and the Britten Sinfonia in King's College Chapel, Cambridge in July 2023.

William Mathias (1934–1992) first came to wide public attention with his very own *Divertimento for String Orchestra* (1958) – a piece he composed when he was a student at the Royal Academy of Music, London. His **Music for Strings** followed three years later and was premiered by the Douglas Cameron String Orchestra at the Wigmore Hall in December 1961. The work is in three movements – (I) Maestoso, (II) Canto, (III) Danza – and Mathias adopts a dramatic, *concerto grosso* stride throughout. The piece opens with a majestic Maestoso introduction, where a fanfare-like theme in the violins is explored by both tutti and solo strings. A witty flick of the cello bow brings this introduction to an end, and in the 'Toccata' (Allegro) that follows, a brusque theme and contrasting counter-themes are developed at pace. The 'Canto' second movement (*Lento*) is darker in tone, and takes the form of an extended song in the violins (both solo and tutti) accentuated by double-dotted rhythms in the lower strings. A brief, two-bar echo of the Maestoso fanfare in the solo viola introduces the 'Danza' movement before violins and the other strings take to the dance floor (*Vivace*). Just before the movement's end, the Maestoso fanfare returns – in a fuller statement this time – revealing that the introduction has, all along, contained the whole work's core ideas.

### **Rhiannon Mathias**

(Paragraph on *Aberfan* by Christopher Wood)

Executive producer for Rubicon Classics: Matthew Cosgrove  
Producer: Andrew Keener  
Engineer: Philip Rowlands  
Assistant engineer: James Clarke  
Recording: Smith Square, London, 22 & 23 July 2024  
Publishers: Oriana Publications (1, 2, 4, 5); Novello (3); Oxford University Press (7–9)  
Cover: The River Dee in Llangollan, Wales  
All photos by Matthew Cosgrove  
Design, layout; editorial: WLP London Ltd   
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