

NAXOS

Arthur
BLISS

Clarinet Quintet • String Quartet No. 2

David Campbell • Maggini Quartet



Arthur Bliss (1891-1975)

String Quartet No. 2 · Clarinet Quintet

Arthur Bliss, who was half-American on his father's side, studied at Cambridge with Charles Wood and also found in Edward Dent a stimulating mentor. His studies continued at the Royal College of Music and in 1912 he met Elgar who encouraged his aspirations as a composer. During the First World War he served with distinction, and in the post-war years his career was launched with a series of bold ensemble works, which often exploited the voice, such as *Conversations* (1920) and *Rout* (1920). These were deemed to be modernistic, with the result that Bliss gained a reputation as an avant-garde experimentalist, a view confirmed by his first major orchestral work *A Colour Symphony* (1921-2).

From 1923 to 1925 Bliss lived in the United States, where he married an American, Gertrude Hoffmann. With his burgeoning domestic happiness his musical language matured rapidly, as heard in the *Oboe Quintet* (1927) and *Pastoral* (1928). In the early 1930s his memories of the carnage of the trenches found musical expression in the profound choral symphony *Morning Heroes* (1930), while the *Viola Sonata* (1933) and the *Music for Strings* (1935) demonstrated his mastery of musical structures.

A characteristic of Bliss's career was his many collaborations with major artists of his day from other genres. In 1934-5, for example, he composed the score for Alexander Korda's film *Things to Come* based on H.G. Wells's novel; it remains a classic score for the medium and the suite drawn from it is one of Bliss's most popular works. Ballet was also an important medium for him and he collaborated with Ninette de Valois on *Checkmate* (1937) and Robert Helpmann on *Miracle in the Gorbals* (1944) and *Adam Zero* (1946), all three premières being conducted by Constant Lambert. J.B. Priestley wrote the libretto for the opera *The Olympians* (1948-9), and with Christopher Hassall and Kathleen Raine he wrote the choral works *The Beatiudes* (1962) and *The Golden Cantata* (1963) respectively.

Bliss's orchestral works include three concertos all written for great performers, the *Piano Concerto* (1938-9) for Solomon, *Violin Concerto* (1955) for Campoli, and *Cello Concerto* (1970) for Rostropovich, as well as the masterly *Meditations on a Theme of John Blow* (1955) and the *Metamorphic Variations* (1972). His formidable organisational talents were brought into play as Director of Music at the BBC during the Second World War and from 1953 until his death as Master of the Queen's Music, a post to which he brought great distinction. He was knighted in 1950 and his autobiography *As I Remember* is a fascinating portrait of his life and times.

After composing works with programmatic or dramatic subjects, Bliss frequently felt the need to write a purely abstract work. Hence the *Second String Quartet* came in the wake of the opera *The Olympians*: as he wrote in *As I Remember*, 'I retreated into the intimate and private world of chamber music'. He composed the quartet in 1950 dedicating it to the members of the Griller Quartet in honour of their twentieth anniversary and they gave the première at the Edinburgh Festival that year. Bliss felt that 'it grew into the most substantial chamber work that I had attempted' and it is indeed a powerful and rigorous essay in compositional skill.

The first movement explodes into life with a dramatic theme on the three upper strings marked by trills. This theme informs much of the musical argument that follows. A spacious chordal idea and one percussive in character complete the first group of themes. By contrast a new section commences with a relaxed, flowing theme heard initially on the first violin. The development reaches its climax with a forceful statement of the chordal idea and in the recapitulation the principal ideas are heard in a different scoring. Soft dissonances, with the strings muted, open the *Sostenuto*, which is contemplative in character. A short faster section leads to a brooding climax and on to an

impassioned cello solo, unmuted, against the other instruments playing *tremolando* still with their mutes on. As if the music is suspended, a still threefold repetition of the opening dissonance played *pianissimo* concludes the movement.

Bliss described the third movement as having 'the spirit of a Scherzo', and to be played 'at top speed'. It opens with a bounding rising arpeggio that dominates this rhythmically energetic music. The brief trio-like section is characterised by a dogged, insistent figure played by the quartet in rhythmic unison. A fugato on the arpeggio idea and a swinging viola solo follows, before a second appearance of the trio where the viola again takes centre stage set against the harmonics of the violins and the cello's pizzicato, providing a magical and inspired transformation of its first appearance. The finale is shaped from ideas heard in alternate tempos at the outset. A series of descending chords usher in the *Larghetto* and are followed by an elegiac viola solo. By contrast the *Allegro* is marked by a purposeful theme introduced by the first violin. Later in the movement the *Larghetto* melody is played by both the first violin and cello and it is this theme which ends the quartet as a whole, as in the very final bars the music comes to rest serenely in the major rather than minor key.

As in many of Bliss's works the inspiration of a great artist was a powerful stimulus in the composition of the *Clarinet Quintet*. In this instance it was Frederick Thurston who, together with the Kutcher Quartet, gave the first performance at the composer's home in December 1932. It was dedicated to Bliss's friend the composer Bernard van Dieren. Clearly Bliss loved the clarinet, and significantly it was the instrument of his brother Kennard, who had been killed in the First World War. As the quintet was the next work to be composed after *Morning Heroes*, Bliss's overtly public requiem for his beloved brother, it is possible to view it as a further expression of his loss. Undoubtedly the work is one of his finest achievements.

Like Mozart and Brahms in their clarinet quintets,

Bliss chose the A clarinet because of its silkier tones. In a lecture of 1932 he described the instrument's qualities: 'The clarinet has a curiously varied manner of expression, being capable of sounding like three different instruments. In its highest register it is brilliant and piercing, with an almost pinched trumpet sound; in its middle octave it is beautifully pure and expressive, with a clear even tone; in its lowest register it is reedy in sound, with a dark, mournful and rather hollow quality. It is an immensely agile instrument, capable of extreme dynamic range, extending to a powerful *forte* to the softest *pianissimo*.'

The clarinet is heard to expressive effect at the beginning of the first movement with an extended solo *cantilena*. Gradually, in a manner that Bliss likened to a conversation, the other instruments steal in tenderly echoing the clarinet's melody to produce a web of luminous counterpoint. Surely for sheer beauty this opening must rank among the most memorable in twentieth-century chamber music? But, as often with Bliss, the serenity which marks the first movement is contrasted with altogether ominous moods in the stabbing rhythms, martial-like fanfares and dissonances of the succeeding dramatic scherzo. Contrast is provided by a solo violin melody of aching poignancy, which is followed by a pizzicato passage before the drama returns. At the heart of the work is the pensive slow movement which grows from the simple syncopated violin phrase at the start. The full expressive range of the clarinet is exploited in long florid lines and decorated arabesques as the music quickens to a climax in the movement's centre. After this central point a stately sarabande-like melody leads to a return of the principal idea. In the predominantly carefree and effervescent finale the brilliance of the clarinet's upper range is exploited. Shadows intrude intermittently in more introspective sections, only to be banished once and for all in the sparkling coda.

Andrew Burn

The Maggini Quartet

Laurence Jackson Violin I • **David Angel** Violin II • **Martin Outram** Viola • **Michal Kaznowski** Cello

Formed in 1988, the Maggini Quartet is established as one of the finest string quartets on the international chamber music circuit, performing at major festivals and concert halls throughout Europe, the United States and the Far East. Renowned for championing British composers, the Quartet won Gramophone Chamber Music CD of the Year 2001 for the *String Quartets and Phantasy Quintet* of Vaughan Williams (8.555300), part of the Gramophone Award-winning Naxos series that has brought world-wide sales of more than 100,000 discs. The recording of Elgar's *String Quartet and Piano Quintet* (8.553737) with Peter Donohoe was a 1997 winner of the Diapason d'Or, France's most prestigious award for classical music recordings, and the release of the *String Quartets and Trio* (8.554079) by E. J. Moeran proved to be one of the best selling chamber music CDs of 1998. The Maggini has also recorded all the Britten *String Quartets* for Naxos (8.553883 and 8.554360), winning praise from *Diapason* in France, while the second volume was an Editor's Choice in *Gramophone* and in *Classic CD*. The recording of Walton's *String Quartet and Piano Quartet* with Peter Donohoe (8.554646) was nominated for a Gramophone Award, as well as being an Editor's Choice in *Gramophone* and the *BBC Music Magazine*, and the CD of Bax *Quartets Nos. 1 and 2* (8.555282) won a 2002 Cannes Classical Award. The first CD of repertoire by Bliss (8.557108) was nominated for a Grammy Award 2004. The Maggini Quartet has won similar praise for other recordings and has commissioned a number of works, including the late Robert Simpson's last work, his *Cello Quintet*, first performed at the Cheltenham International Festival in 1996, a year which also saw the first performance of *Olivia* by Roxanna Panufnik, commissioned for the Maggini by Brunel University Arts Centre in London. The Maggini's 10th Anniversary commission was James MacMillan's *Second Quartet*, which received its world première at the Wigmore Hall in London in 1998, with subsequent performances in North America and Europe. The Maggini has embarked on an exciting collaboration with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, performing and recording his ten new *Naxos Quartets*. The Wigmore is hosting performances of all ten works, including six world premières. Commissioned by Naxos, the works fulfil the composer's long-held intention of bringing a major contribution to chamber music repertoire, and the project is providing a unique opportunity for performers and composer to work together over a five-year period. The first CD of *Naxos Quartets Nos. 1 and 2* (8.557396) was an Editor's Choice in *Gramophone*. The Quartet takes its name from the famous sixteenth-century Brescian violin-maker Giovanni Paolo Maggini, an example of whose work is played by David Angel.

David Campbell

The British clarinetist David Campbell is recognised internationally as a concerto soloist, recitalist and chamber musician and has performed in over forty countries. He has made countless radio broadcasts for the BBC and for Classic FM, as well as television appearances, and his extensive discography reflects his wide-ranging repertoire. David Campbell has played with Britain's foremost chamber ensembles and he has appeared as guest soloist with many leading string quartets including the Maggini Quartet. He is passionate about music education and has given numerous master-classes, including a series on chamber music for BBC Radio 3. Since 2001 he has been Artistic Director of MusicFest-Aberystwyth and is the United Kingdom Chair of the International Clarinet Association.



DDD

8.557394

Playing Time
59:04

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Arthur Bliss belongs to the generation of English composers who came to maturity in the years between the two World Wars. The composer himself described the powerful *Second String Quartet*, written in 1950, as 'the most substantial chamber work that I had attempted'. The *Clarinet Quintet* is one of Bliss's finest achievements and considered by many to be his masterpiece. The clarinet was the instrument of Bliss's brother Kennard, who had been killed in the First World War. As the quintet was the next work to be composed after *Morning Heroes*, Bliss's overtly public requiem for his beloved brother, it is possible to view it as a further expression of his loss. For sheer beauty the opening solo cantilena must rank among the most memorable in twentieth-century chamber music.

Arthur BLISS (1891-1975)

String Quartet No. 2	31:17	Clarinet Quintet*	27:47
1 Allegro con spirito	9:53	5 Moderato	5:30
2 Sostenuto	5:25	6 Allegro molto	7:45
3 Vivo e con brio	5:43	7 Adagietto espressivo	8:12
4 Larghetto - Allegro	10:16	8 Allegro energico	6:20

David Campbell, Clarinet*

Maggini Quartet

Laurence Jackson, Violin 1 • David Angel, Violin 2
Martin Outram, Viola • Michal Kaznowski, Cello

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 (Bridgeman Art Library / Ruskin Museum, Coniston, Cumbria, UK)

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The Maggini Quartet, and Eleanor and Andrew Walton wish to dedicate this CD to the memory of Alan Foster, friend and owner of Potton Hall, who sadly passed away during the recording of this disc.

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