

NAXOS

Edmund
RUBBRA

String Quartets Nos. 1, 3 and 4

Maggini Quartet



Edmund Rubbra (1901–1986)

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Charles Edmund Rubbra was born in Northampton in very modest circumstances. His father, also Edmund, worked as a journeyman lastmaker in the boot and shoe trade, although he later became a keeper of a small watch and clock shop. Edmund junior's later love for Ravel's opera *L'heure espagnole*, set in a clock-shop of course, perhaps stems from these early experiences. His mother was a pillar of the Congregational chapel and blessed with a very good soprano voice. Both parents were encouraging for their two sons, Edmund and Arthur (1903-1982), who both achieved considerable success, in spite of initially poor educational opportunities. Arthur became an engineer at Rolls-Royce and played a key part in the teams responsible for both the development of the famous and highly successful Merlin engine, used in the Spitfire, and the first commercial jet engines, the successors of which still power much of modern aviation.

The talents of Arthur's older brother, however, lay in music and, in spite of having to leave school at fourteen to work for the London and North Western railway, he managed to begin to develop his wide-ranging musical interests. It was the generosity of Cyril Scott, however, who gave the young Rubbra free lessons, that set him on the road to become a composer. A scholarship to University College, Reading, followed, where he became a pupil of Gustav Holst. Rubbra's talents were soon recognised by Holst and he continued as his pupil over many years, both at Reading and then at the Royal College of Music in London. Although now a fact largely overlooked by the critical establishment, Rubbra should be regarded as Holst's most important pupil – Holst certainly regarded Rubbra's talents highly and Holst's death in 1934 was a tremendous personal loss to the younger composer.

String Quartet No. 1 in F minor, Op. 35, was begun in the year of Holst's death, at a time when Rubbra was only beginning to branch out successfully into larger forms and a year before he started work on his epic *First Symphony*. It was given its first performance in November 1934 by the Stratton Quartet. Rubbra felt dissatisfied with the piece, however, and might well have abandoned it altogether had not Vaughan Williams encouraged him to revise it after the war and write an entirely new finale (hence the dedication: '*To R.V.W. whose persistent interest in the original material of this work has led me to the present revisions and additions*').

In Rubbra's own words: 'My later substitution for this last movement was altogether lighter and more airy in texture and, what is more to the point, its main material consisted of a transformation of the ending of the preceding slow movement. The resulting unity of thought was strengthened by going back to the tonal centre of the first movement, F minor.' The two main subjects of the first movement are lyrical in feeling, but the climaxes are highly rhythmic, the tension being produced by mixing time signatures. As so often with Rubbra, the emotional core of the work lies in the slow movement, a deeply felt elegy which must be among the most beautiful movements in any English string quartet written before the Second World War. I firmly believe that this movement was written in response to Holst's death, so personal and immediate are the emotions portrayed here.

The new (1946) finale follows seamlessly from this, and a listener without knowledge of the revision would not realise that the whole work was not composed in one stretch. The movement, however, is more highly contrapuntal than the previous two and looks forward to the sound world of the *Second Quartet*

and beyond. The first performance of the revised version was given by the Blech Quartet on 13th November 1946 at the Wigmore Hall, London.

String Quartet No. 3, Op. 112, was completed in 1963 and commissioned by the Allegri Quartet who gave the first performance at the 1964 Cheltenham Festival. The piece was written at a time of immense personal change for Rubbra and this can perhaps be detected in the nervous energy of some of the music, especially in the third movement.

Many have commented on the vocal nature of the writing and in an article by Rubbra, written at the time of the first performance, he states that the quartet is prefixed by a quotation from St Thomas Aquinas: 'Song is the leap of mind in the eternal breaking-out into sound.' Strangely, this does not appear on the printed score but Rubbra goes on in the article to reinforce the point: 'Song, lyrical song, is indeed the motivating force of this work.' Rubbra had in fact only recently completed *Lauda Sion*, a virtuoso choral setting of an Aquinas text (A BBC/William Glock commission of 1960) so the theologian was much on his mind when he approached the new quartet.

The work begins with a noble *largo* which, to quote Rubbra again 'contains in the first eight bars three melodic intervals and two keys which vitalise the whole work. The former are the semitone, the fourth and the fifth, and the latter the keys of D flat major and C major.' As Stephen Johnson has commented, in many ways the music can be understood as searching for a home key and much of the drama of the piece arises from this quest. All three movements are interlinked, with no actual break in the music and the writing has

the effortless assurance of a master of his art.

String Quartet No. 4, Op. 150, was completed in 1977 and first performed in that year by the Amici Quartet. It was one of Rubbra's last larger scale pieces and, in its compression and concentration, has very much the feeling of a 'late work'. The quartet is unusually cast in only two movements, although the first movement is in two distinct sections, the second, *Allegretto scherzando*, providing a contrast to the meditative adagio which follows.

Although dedicated to the composer Robert Simpson, the quartet was written in response to and bears the inscription *In memoriam Bennett Tarshish 1940-1972*, a young American music critic and friend who died tragically young of acute diabetes. In many ways, therefore, it is an elegiac work, but the final pages, marked *Con dignatà e calmo*, have a quietly optimistic and spiritual radiance so characteristic of the composer.

It is perhaps because Rubbra's music is so quietly optimistic – counter perhaps to the prevailing artistic mood of the century in which it was written – that, so far, it has not achieved the recognition, especially in Britain, that it so richly deserves. In a typically direct letter to his widow written soon after Rubbra's death in 1986, Robert Simpson wrote: 'Of course I will try to do what I can for his music. Too late for him, those fools will suddenly tumble to the fact that he was one of the greatest English composers of any period'.¹

Adrian Yardley

¹ Quoted with the kind permission of the Simpson Estate

A note from two members of the Maggini Quartet:

Among the many great qualities of Rubbra's quartets are their sheer originality of concept, organization and sound world. Rubbra's outstanding craftsmanship places him in the tradition of Bridge and Britten, but he shares little musically with them. In performance, one is very struck by the organic development of the pieces: the way they unfold through the transformation of ideas and the resulting uniqueness of structure becoming an emotional and intellectual journey, quite unlike others' works in more traditional forms wherein certain 'junctions' are expected. Rubbra frequently uses the interval of the fifth (which he once said was for him, "the most mysterious" but "it immediately affirms") and of course this lies very well harmonically on string instruments and lends a particularly open quality to the texture. He loves propulsive rhythms and these are always tremendous fun to play – perhaps my favourite example being the finale of the *Third Quartet*, a classic example of music therapeutic both to perform and to listen to. After the darkness and foreboding of much of the slow movement, via the development of an earlier rhythmic idea, this communicates an energy and feeling of unshakeable and irrepressible optimism, enormously rewarding to play.

Martin Outram

Rubbra's music is wholly individual: he belongs neither to the folk-song movement, nor to any twentieth century continental school, and he is not Germanic in the nineteenth century sense. He is able to be unambiguously tonal and abundantly melodic and still sound new.

Particularly moving for me is his *Fourth Quartet*, completed in 1977, dedicated to Robert Simpson, and inscribed 'in memoriam Bennett Tarshish (1940 to 1972)' an American critic and supporter of Rubbra. The work is unusual in many ways: it has only two movements, neither of which is fast and harmonically it uses the interval of a seventh, which in this context has a glowing warmth. The opening movement alternates highly expressive music with that of controlled unhurried energy, finally rising, at its conclusion, to one of the most radiant climaxes we have played. The second movement begins broodingly, like an elegy. It becomes ever more spacious and at the climax, the work's opening theme is heard unbroken and in impassioned form. After this the music subsides to end like an intimate Amen. It appears to encapsulate the most intimate thoughts of a composer, written for the ears of a fellow composer, as a thanksgiving for a departed friend.

David Angel

The Maggini Quartet

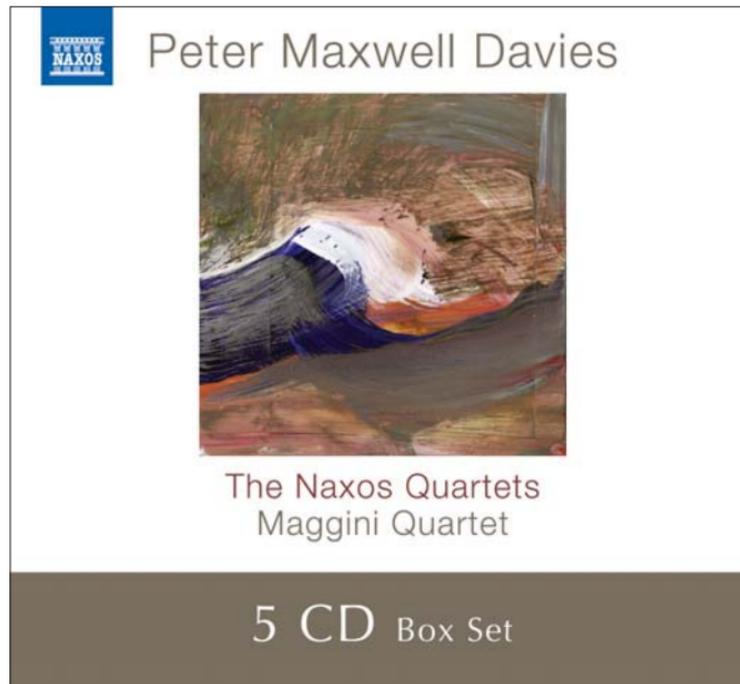
Gina McCormack, Violin I • David Angel, Violin II • Martin Outram, Viola • Michal Kaznowski, Cello

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Photo: Melanie Strover

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