

Mozart *Piano Quartet K493*

Britten *String Quartet No.2*

Amadeus Quartet

Benjamin Britten



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Benjamin Britten 1913–1976

String Quartet No.2 in C Op.36

1	I. Allegro calmo senza rigore	8'37
2	II. Vivace	3'30
3	III. Chacony: Sostenuto	15'29

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1756–1791

Piano Quartet in E flat K493

4	Applause	0'56
5	I. Allegro	10'27
6	II. Larghetto	11'26
7	III. Allegretto	8'03
8	Applause	1'16

The Amadeus Quartet

with **Benjamin Britten** *piano* (Mozart)

Recorded in Aldeburgh: 1 December 1951 (Britten)
and 23 June 1953 (Mozart)

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Britten and (the) Amadeus: a harmonious partnership

Tully Potter

Britten and strings

Although in his performing guise Benjamin Britten was known as a scintillating pianist and a conductor of great insight, he was a competent exponent of the viola, which he played from the age of ten. His beloved composition teacher Frank Bridge was a well-known violist and like so many composers before him, Britten came to appreciate the value of playing the alto instrument and being in the middle of the harmony. He always sought the society of string players, and all his life he wrote skilfully and sympathetically for strings. His first great success was scored with the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, for a small string orchestra, and his three ‘official’ string quartets are among his finest works, displaying his uncanny ear for texture and sonority.

Britten’s First Quartet was written in America in 1941, commissioned by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge for her own Coolidge Quartet. His Second Quartet, composed in 1945, was a salute to Purcell for the bicentenary of that composer’s death – Britten made the final movement a Chacony, with cadenzas for cello, viola and violin, to underline his admiration for Purcell – and was premiered at the Wigmore Hall on the actual anniversary, 21 November. The players were the all-female Zorian Quartet, who had been together since 1942. In 1946 the Zorians made the first recording of the work, for HMV; and as it took up an odd number of 78rpm sides, to fill the vacant side Britten joined the quartet in Purcell’s *Fantasy on One Note* for his only recording on the viola. He and his lifelong companion Peter Pears had already recorded Vaughan Williams’ haunting song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* with the Zorians in 1945, for the Decca label.

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It followed that when Britten and Pears started the Aldeburgh Festival in 1947, the Zorians were asked to take part. They played Tippett's Second Quartet (of which they had made the pioneer recording), Britten's realisation of Purcell's Golden Sonata and (with Britten at the piano) Bridge's Phantasy Piano Quartet. Sadly the quartet disbanded in 1949 but Olive Zorian continued to be central to Britten's musical activities, leading the orchestra at the festival and on tour with the English Opera Group, until the fickle composer axed her in 1957.

The Amadeus, loved by London

Meanwhile there was a need for a first-rate string quartet at the Aldeburgh Festival, and it was inevitable that Britten would turn to the young Amadeus Quartet. Their début had taken place on 13 July 1947 at Dartington Hall in Devon. At that stage they were known to a small but select group of admirers as the Brainin Quartet; and they then had a spell as the London Vienna Quartet. But second violinist Siegmund Nissel came up with a much more inspired name and by the time they made their London entrée as the Amadeus Quartet, at the Wigmore Hall on the afternoon of Saturday 10 January 1948, word-of-mouth reports had created so much excitement that 200 people had to be turned away. The faith of their devoted sponsors, including Gustav Holst's daughter Imogen, had been justified.

These four men seemed destined to make their careers together. Three talented young Austrian violinists – Norbert Brainin (1923–2005) and Nissel (1922–2008), both from Vienna, and Hans Peter Schidlof (1922–87) from provincial Mödling – came to England as refugees, were interned early in the war and moved into the orbit of an older refugee, the Silesian-born violinist and pedagogue Max Rostal. They became friends and found that chamber music was what they most enjoyed – but someone had to play viola and they needed a cellist. Schidlof got to know Martin Lovett, born in London in 1927, when they were both in the little orchestra at Glyndebourne for Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*. 'Actually I didn't really

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like Peter at first,' says Lovett. 'He made some remark about my playing...'
Nevertheless Lovett was inexorably drawn closer to the other three – his future wife was a Rostal pupil and he himself was soon in Rostal's chamber orchestra. Also, despite his Englishness, he was of similar immigrant stock to the others and understood intuitively what they were about.

In the early days Brainin and Schidlof traded places a bit; but in the end each found his true métier: Brainin as an inspirational leader and Schidlof as an increasingly assured violist. Nissel was a natural for second violin, as he had an equable temperament, an analytical mind and excellent intonation. At first Lovett was in awe of the others but he quickly advanced in skill and confidence to become one of the best quartet cellists on the scene. The immediate post-war years were a drab time in England, with food rationing and general austerity. No wonder the leading string quartet, the Griller, went off to California in 1949 to take up a residency. One way and another, there was a dearth of good chamber music, as most of the pre-war international ensembles were passé or disbanded and the new generation had barely made themselves felt. The BBC's new Third Programme was also looking for talent. So the fledgling Amadeus was able to find work while building up its repertoire and honing its technique.

The Amadeus in Aldeburgh

When Britten made Imogen Holst his assistant in 1952, she at once thought of bringing the Amadeus to the Aldeburgh Festival. The players themselves welcomed the approach, as the violist Cecil Aronowitz, virtually a fifth member of the Amadeus, was already heavily involved with the festival and the English Opera Group. At the 1952 festival Britten wanted to play a quintet with them. He did not care for Brahms, so the Schumann Quintet was chosen instead. The following year, he joined Brainin, Schidlof and Lovett in this performance of Mozart's E flat Piano Quartet, the programme being completed by all four of the Amadeus playing

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Schubert's mighty G major and finally, after the interval, Britten's Second Quartet. This beautifully constructed work was one of the first pieces by a British composer that the Amadeus played; and it always drew a good response from the players – indeed their Decca recording of it is famous.

At the 1954 Aldeburgh Festival the Amadeus gave two concerts, one in which Aronowitz joined them and another, two days earlier, at which they were to share the platform with Francis Poulenc. In the event the Frenchman did not show up and Britten stood in for him – the quartet's contributions included Bartók's Fourth Quartet. From then on the Amadeus was a virtual fixture at the festival. The group's participation had its high points, such as the Schubert C major Quintet with Rostropovich in 1964, and one low point, on 7 June 1969. That afternoon they opened the festival at The Maltings, the hall in Snape which had been Britten's pride and joy since its inauguration in 1967. Their main contribution was Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet with Britten at the piano and Adrian Beers playing the double-bass. That night The Maltings burnt down, immolating not only Britten's piano but Beers's Grancino chamber bass – it was the second time he had suffered such a calamity, as he had lost his grandfather's bass in the 1941 Queen's Hall fire. Britten, who could be amazingly generous to those in his favour, somehow found Beers a similar Grancino and paid for it himself.

Martin Lovett has many memories of working with Britten, although he has absolutely no recollection of their collaboration in the Schumann Quintet. He first became aware of the composer's special qualities when playing in that 1946 run of *The Rape of Lucretia* at Glyndebourne. 'It was very thrilling – I hadn't heard anything like it.' Rehearsing and giving concerts with Britten, from the 1950s onwards, was 'marvellous – he was music from top to toe. I actually played all three of his quartets. Before the Amadeus I played the First Quartet, with Norbert playing second violin. We often played the Second Quartet and Britten always promised to

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write us a piece – and he did, but he dedicated it to Hans Keller. That was the Third Quartet. I remember that we played the Piano Quartet of Bridge with Britten and I also remember doing the Mozart piano quartets [in 1956] with him playing an old Stein piano, a semitone down. He was very proud that he played those triplet passages in the last movement of the E flat Quartet with two hands! That evening I had to go back to London and play the Dvořák Concerto, at normal pitch.’

The Amadeus continued to appear at Aldeburgh and Snape until the death of Peter Schidlof in 1987 put paid to their career after exactly 40 years. Some of their concerts were given outside the summer festival. Two programmes were even filmed in colour, at the 1977 autumn festival in The Maltings. The organiser of the event had some trepidation about approaching Britten and Pears to gain their support, as the autumn concerts would be sponsored by a tobacco company. However, when he laid out his plan to Pears, explaining that the festival would be devoted to music by Schubert and Britten and that Sviatoslav Richter, Clifford Curzon and the Amadeus would be involved, the tenor was won over. And Britten, who was already ill, gave his blessing too. The composer planned to attend but alas, he died on 4 December 1976. A fortnight later, on 19 December, the Amadeus gave the premiere of the Third Quartet at The Maltings. They had worked on it with Britten at his home, The Red House, at the end of September but had been unable to return for another session in October, as planned, because he had become too weak.

It appears that we have just this one memento of the Britten-Amadeus collaboration, but at least it is a work by Mozart, the composer who was dearest to all their hearts. The broadcast recording even has one advantage over the famed Amadeus studio version with Clifford Curzon – Lovett’s cello is more audible, a tribute to the skill of the BBC engineers.

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