

The music

Joseph Phibbs String Quartet no1 1st Movement

Leaf || Alice Oswald

Phibbs String Quartet no1 Canto3

Woods etc. || Alice Oswald

Frank Bridge Three Idylls for String Quartet
II. Allegretto poco lento

In this stilled air the turning trees || Christopher Meredith

Charlotte Harding ‘Iorsa’

A short story of falling || Alice Oswald

Phibbs String Quartet no1 3rd Movement

Waterfall || Seamus Heaney

Mark-Anthony Turnage Winter’s Edge III

Sea Poem || Alice Oswald

Thomas Adès Arcadiana op12
V. L’embarquement

Floating || Susanna Harding

Edmund Finnis String Quartet no1 ‘Aloysius’
IV. Hymn (After Byrd)

Birdsong for Two Voices || Alice Oswald

Phibbs String Quartet no1 Duo1

The Lofty Sky || Edward Thomas

Phibbs String Quartet no1 5th Movement
Vocalise

A Star Here and a Star There || Alice Oswald

Ralph Vaughan Williams String Quartet no2 in A minor

‘Albion Refracted’ is a programme combining music and words, inspired by taking a contemporary look at our relationship with nature and the English landscape. At its heart are evocative poems by Alice Oswald and music by Joseph Phibbs, a composer with whom the Piattis have built up a particularly close relationship.

Starting by looking downwards at the miniature and intimate, the poetry then guides us outwards through woodland, waterfalls, the sea, the sky and – lastly – the moon and stars. In curating the programme the quartet say they hope to inspire us to explore a deeper connection to nature, to reflect on the healing possibilities of taking time to observe, and to seek solace in earth’s natural beauty. As background to the music, visual projections will guide the viewer’s slow-moving journey from leaf to stars.

Joseph Phibbs (b1974) describes his *String Quartet no1* thus: “In common with Haydn’s first quartets, as well as numerous examples of the genre from the 20th century, this work is set in **five main movements**, the **first** being perhaps the most simple: soft, widely-spaced chords support a series of melodic phrases in the first violin which grow in intensity as the movement unfolds, with all four instruments coming to the fore during the coda. The second movement opens with the first of **three versions of a lamenting melody (or canto)** in the viola, before a fast and abrasive scherzo begins, the middle section contrasting with more lyrical passages. A **slow duo** for violin and cello follows, giving way to a lively pizzicato **third movement**...**The last movement, a vocalise**, recalls the opening movement by way of its simple chordal accompaniment, each instrument now assigned a melodic phrase.

The work’s structure as a whole could be seen as interweaving three layers: five principal movements; four duos, each drawing on a different combination of players; and three short cantos, all of which present the same viola melody in a different guise.”

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) composed his *Three Idylls* in 1906 and they’re typical of the era. Bridge in later life became Britten’s composition teacher and the younger composer paid homage in using the theme of the *second Idyll* for his 1937 *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*. The short piece is framed by a dreamlike waltz with a more vigorous and slightly acerbic centre.

Charlotte Harding (b1989) studied at the Royal College of Music with Mark-Anthony Turnage (composition) and Martin Robertson (saxophone). Her recent work *Iorsa* was commissioned by the Three Choirs Festival and the Piatti Quartet and premiered at Hereford in 2022. Its inspiration came from a visit to Glen Iorsa on the Isle of Arran.

Winter’s Edge (2016) is **Mark-Anthony Turnage’s** (b1960) fourth string quartet which – belying the composer’s image somewhat – is an intensely lyrical work. The third movement is vigorous and, with one or two false starts, positively skips along.

Thomas Adès (b1971) composed *Arcadiana*, his seven-movement suite for string quartet, in 1994. It aims to evoke vanished or vanishing idylls and in its fifth section, *L’embarquement*, inspired by the Watteau painting ‘The Embarcation for Cythera’, a ship is imagined sailing away to L’isle joyeuse, Aphrodite’s birthplace.

Hymn (After Byrd) (2023) is the penultimate movement of **Edmund Finnis’s** (b1984) *String Quartet no1 ‘Aloysius’*. In the composer’s words “It is a reflection on William Byrd’s setting of the 5th-century hymn *Christe, qui lux est et dies*. That ancient melody is a prayer for Light in the darkness of the night. The rising and falling contours within it became integral to my work on the quartet as a whole, as did the mental image of the rising and the setting of the sun.”

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) started writing his *String Quartet no2 in A minor* in 1942 and it was premiered two years later at one of Dame Myra Hess’s wartime National Gallery concerts. It was dedicated to Jean Stewart, who had played in the Leith Hill Orchestra and was also violist in the Menges Quartet, which gave that first performance. In a letter to Vaughan Williams, Jean Stewart wrote “Without exaggeration this Quartet is the most lovely thing that has happened to me in my life”. The viola, appropriately, plays a central role in the work, starting each movement and also introducing the key thematic material.

The quartet was written at the same time as RVW’s *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies* and reflects their two very different characters. The **first movement** (*Prelude: Allegro appassionato*) is angry and agitated – a melody occasionally tries to escape but is pulled back into the chilling landscape. By contrast, the **Romance: Largo** starts with a slow canon on what feels like a mournful folk tune before opening out into vistas of great pastoral beauty. The four instruments are, however, directed to play without vibrato throughout, flattening the effect, and we’re not surprised when we’re taken back into more desolate territory to end.

The **third movement** (*Scherzo: Allegro*) is full of urgency, propelled forward by an insistent four-note motif. Then, as final contrast, the **Epilogue** (*Andante sostenuto*) breathes the same air as the beautiful, serene, finale of the *Fifth Symphony* – calmer, more reflective and, ultimately, accepting.

Notes by Dick Ware

The artists

Emily Holland, Michael Trainor *violin*
Miguel Sobrinho *viola* **Jessie Ann Richardson** *cello*

“Anyone who is at all interested in contemporary string quartet music, and/or the art of string quartet playing, must absolutely hear this recording.” *David Rowe, Classical CD Review*

Resident Quartet at Kings Place, London, the **Piatti Quartet** are widely renowned for their “profound music making” (*The Strad*) and their “lyrical warmth” (*BBC Music Magazine*).

Since their prizewinning performances at the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, they’ve performed all over the world and made international broadcasts from many countries.

The Piattis are well-known for their diverse programming across the spectrum of quartet writing, and have commissioned and recorded major and impressive works to add to the quartet canon in recent years.

Historical research into undiscovered quartet repertoire or which deserves to be better known has led to the premiere recording of Ina Boyle’s *String Quartet in E minor*, and performances of lesser known quartet gems by Vaughan Williams, EJ Moeran, Rachmaninov, Ireland, Haas, Ulmann, and Durosoir.

The quartet’s name is dedicated to Alfredo Piatti, a 19th-century virtuoso cellist who was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music (the alma mater of the founders of the quartet) and also a major exponent of the chamber and contemporary music of his time.

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- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

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Programme Notes

PIATTI QUARTET

Albion Refracted



12pm, Sunday October 5th, 2025
Little Missenden Village Hall

65th Little Missenden Festival

Visit www.little-missenden.org