
TOCCATA CLASSICS
Naresh SOHAL
STRING QUARTETS
STRING QUARTET NO. 1: CHIAROSCURO II
STRING QUARTET NO. 3
STRING QUARTET NO. 4
STRING QUARTET NO. 5
The Piatti Quartet
FIRST RECORDINGS

NARESH SOHAL, A COMPOSER ASTRIDE TWO WORLDS

by Suddhaseel Sen and Janet Swinney

Naresh Sohal's voice was unique in contemporary classical music. He was the first person of Indian origin to make a successful career as a composer of western music in the western world. As a British composer, he wrote fluently in the western idiom; as an Asian composer, he drew heavily on the insights of Indian poetry, philosophical ideas and texts.

The influence of the music of his homeland was far less obvious but was apparent from his willingness to question some foundational aspects of compositional practice, such as the ways of subdividing the octave, and in his choice of pitch-classes provided by certain *ragas* to create original works. He was not a composer of 'fusion' music, however, and shunned the juxtaposition of easily identifiable elements of western and Indian traditions in his work. Nor does his work belong to any particular modernist movement or compositional trend of the mid-twentieth century. His music usually features free atonality and occasional elements of twelve-tone music, with a rather free approach to form, unconstrained by convention.

Sohal was an extremely versatile composer. Over the course of his musical career he added more than 70 works to the classical repertoire, ranging from cutting-edge avant-garde pieces to works that reimagined the folk traditions of Punjab. But in addition, he provided the music for several TV documentaries and a French feature film[1] as well as producing an album of songs in the North Indian *ghazal* style and writing a set of film songs for the Indian film-director Vijay Anand ('Goldie'; 1934–2004) based on Goldie's lyrics. His music appears in a number of popular British drama series, including *Coronation Street* and *Waking the Dead*.

[1] *Manika, une vie plus tard*, 1989, directed by François Villiers.

Sohal's classical works have been performed nationally and internationally by eminent orchestras, ensembles and soloists. The BBC Symphony, the BBC Scottish Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Israel Philharmonic, the Berlin Staatskapelle, the London Symphony and the Royal Scottish National orchestras have all performed his work. He received a number of BBC commissions. Zubin Mehta commissioned three pieces from him, and Sir Andrew Davis two.

He was the first composer to receive a bursary from the Arts Council of Great Britain. In 1987 he was awarded a Padma Shri (the fourth-highest civilian award of the Republic of India) by the Indian government for his services to western music. At the time of his death, he was working on an orchestral commission for the South Bank Centre in London.

Sohal was born in Harsipind, Punjab, on 18 September 1939, into a family with no musical background, and no connection with western classical music. His tastes were formed by listening to the popular music broadcast on All India Radio and Radio Ceylon. Like many young men of his generation, he was encouraged to study the sciences, and so he embarked on a degree course in physics and mathematics at Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) College in Jalandhar, but shortly before he graduated, he decided to devote himself fully to music and to try his luck in the Bombay film industry, a decision that was not popular at home. By this time he was highly proficient on the harmonica, entertaining large audiences of his fellow students which on one occasion included the then president of India. He was also busy composing marches and waltzes for the Punjab Armed Police Band.

On his arrival in Bombay, on the lookout for an opportunity to start his chosen career, things took an unanticipated turn: he heard a broadcast of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony on All India Radio. It was the first piece of western classical music he had ever heard, and it was a transformative experience, changing the course of his life. As a consequence he moved to Britain in 1962, determined to become a composer in the western classical tradition. After a few grim months in London, he secured a job as a copyist with the music publisher Boosey & Hawkes. This appointment proved to be a godsend. There he copied works by composers ranging from Bach to Britten, from

Panufnik to Tippett. The work gave him a unique opportunity to learn, at close quarters, about compositional techniques, and to gain insight into the ways that contemporary music was developing at that time.

It was here that he encountered Iannis Xenakis' *Eonta*, a work by a composer who, like himself, came from a background in the sciences, and who used mathematical elements as compositional tools. This approach intrigued Sohal, who decided to embark upon a more serious course of study than the evening classes he had been attending. He gave up his job at Boosey & Hawkes to become a freelance copyist, took lessons from the composer Jeremy Dale Roberts and devoted more time to composition.

In 1965 he completed his first major score: *Asht Prahar* for orchestra, followed in 1970 by *Surya* for chorus, percussion and flute. Even at this early stage of his career, many of his personal characteristics are evident: his mastery of orchestral colour, the turn towards the macrocosmic aspects of nature for inspiration, the tendency to think in terms of large-scale single-movement musical structures and a reluctance to belong to any particular 'school' or easily identifiable coterie. His works display few affinities with Schoenberg and his followers, for instance.

In 1969 *Asht Prahar* was premiered at the Royal Festival Hall by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Norman del Mar and was well received. There followed a highly productive decade of composition of large-scale works, as well as receipt of an Arts Council bursary that took him to the University of Leeds to research quarter-tone music. However, his interests in composition overtook his commitment to carrying out research.

During the 1970s Sohal had many premieres of vocal, chamber, choral and orchestral pieces. The works from this period are stylistically diverse: the austere soundscape of *Dhyan I*, a work from 1974 for cello and orchestra in which he made creative use of his systematic study of quarter-tones, sounds very different from the exuberant *Asht Prahar*, whereas the chamber work *Octal* (1972) makes use of electronic devices. *Chiaroscuro II* (1976), his first string quartet, belongs to this initial period of experimentation.

In the late 1970s he concentrated on writing vocal and chamber pieces, including *Chakra* in 1979. He returned to orchestral composition in 1982, producing a dramatic setting of the Old English poem *The Wanderer* for baritone, symphony orchestra and

chorus for the 1982 BBC Proms and *From Gitanjali*, an elegiac setting of poetry by the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore for baritone and orchestra for the Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York in 1985. Also from this time is the orchestral work *Tandava Nritya (Dance of Destruction and Re-Creation)*, commissioned by the British Council for the London Symphony Orchestra, but first performed only on 8 April 1993 by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in Glasgow conducted by David Davies, and a violin concerto premiered by Xui Wei with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins on 24 October 1992.

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s Sohal devoted himself primarily to works for the stage, cinema and television, among them his ballet *Gautama Buddha* (1987) and a music-theatre piece, *Madness Lit by Lightning* (1989). The principal work not intended for stage or screen from this period was a trio for violin, cello and piano commissioned by the cellist Anup Kumar Biswas to mark Sohal's 50th birthday.

At the age of 66, he finally returned to the string-quartet genre, producing four quartets in rapid succession, three of which (Nos. 3, 4 and 5) appear on this album. They are a far cry from *Chiaroscuro II* and demonstrate the wealth of compositional experience gained over the years.

Sohal continued to compose, producing works large and small, until his death at the age of 78 on 30 April 2018. They include *Lila* in 1996, an orchestral work in which he strove to capture in musical terms the process of enlightenment as described in Hindu philosophy and experienced through meditation. *Lila* brings to the fore Neo-Romantic elements hinted at in some of Sohal's earlier works. Many of the pieces from this later period have more pronounced Indian connections than his works from the preceding decades, as though the composer were longing for closer ties with his philosophical home.

Suddhaseel Sen holds two PhDs, one in English from the University of Toronto and a second in Musicology from Stanford University. He is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai.

Janet Swinney is the composer's widow and the author of two collections of short stories, The Map of Bihar *(Circaidy Gregory Press, Hastings, 2019) and* The House with Two Letter-Boxes *(Fly on the Wall Press, Manchester, 2021).*

NARESH SOHAL'S STRING QUARTETS

by Utsyo Chakraborty

Naresh Sohal's first quartet, *Chiaroscuro II* [1], was composed in 1976 and premiered two years later by the Arditti Quartet, on 8 July 1978, in Middelburg, Zeeland, with a subsequent private recording in 2001 by the ConTempo Quartet. Written during a period of intense experimentation, the piece is deeply rooted in the spirit of its era, reflecting the composer's engagement with the avant-garde as he learned the tools of his trade and worked to establish himself in his chosen profession. The influence of contemporary composers such as Iannis Xenakis is readily discerned here.

The quartet opens memorably with aleatoric 'tick-tock' figures played by the violins and viola, each at its own tempo, creating a texture of considerable rhythmic variety. Beneath, the cello introduces a variety of colouristic effects, including quarter-tones, *col legno* and *ponticello*. True to its title (*Chiaroscuro* – Italian for 'light and shadow'), the music develops through a play of contrasts between static harmonies, often enriched by artificial harmonics and bursts of wildly dynamic movement, heightened by polyrhythms and independent *glissandi* across the instruments. At the core of the work lie two cadenzas – one for cello and the other for first violin. These expressive solos act as focal points, offering moments of clarity amidst the restless energy. Following these cadenzas, the music returns to the static chords and concludes with a sense of quiet inevitability, fading into silence.

Sohal had little interest in composing a series of quartets during his early years as a composer, seemingly more concerned with exploring a wide variety of combinations of other instruments. But after almost thirty years, he returned to the genre, producing four string quartets in rapid succession: the second (not heard on this album) in 2005, the third in 2008, the fourth in 2009 and the fifth in 2010.

String Quartet No. 2 was commissioned by the Edinburgh Quartet with funds provided by the Scottish Arts Council and the Performing Rights Society; it was

premiered by the Quartet on 17 November 2005 in Cowdray Hall, Aberdeen. There were further performances by the Vardanyan String Quartet. String Quartet No. 3 was written for the Dante Quartet, who premiered it at the Wigmore Hall, London, on 17 July 2010, as part of Sohal's 70th-birthday concert. He explained in the programme note: 'Of late, I have felt that the format of the string quartet will survive the onslaught of music generated on the computer better than most other instrumental combinations thrown up by twentieth century music writing. I have therefore decided to write six string quartets'. He wrote five before other musical interests drew his attention. String Quartets Nos. 4 and 5 had not been performed before this recording.

By the time Sohal returned to the string-quartet genre, his musical language had evolved far beyond the experimental tendencies of his early works. Although retaining the visceral and dramatic qualities of his earlier music, these final quartets showcase his mature style. They reflect his enduring connection to Indian culture, the profound influence of Hindu philosophy, and a preference for a simpler, more direct mode of self-expression. India's rich diversity, with its multitude of cultures, religions and schools of thought coexisting within one land, profoundly influenced Sohal's musical outlook. His keen ear for musical eclecticism allowed him to weave a wide range of influences into these three last quartets, ranging from the mysticism of Indian classical music to the acerbic dissonance of European modernism. And yet, despite these varied sources of inspirations, they emerge unmistakably as works in the composer's unique and distinctive voice.

String Quartet No. 3 [2], a work of profound inwardness, unfolds in one long, continuous movement, much like Quartet No. 1. Centred on the pitch C, it opens mysteriously with slithering quarter-tones in the second violin and viola, evoking the resonant drones of a *tanpura*. This microtonal haze creates an atmospheric foundation over which the first violin and cello introduce melodic material in an almost improvisatory manner – and yet Sohal gradually develops this initial melodic fluidity into an intricate fugato, creating a contrapuntal texture of striking clarity. The modal character of the music, shaped by oriental scales and diminished intervals, enhances its meditative essence. As the counterpoint gives way to a more transparent texture, the

first violin and cello freely expand on their earlier melodic ideas, gradually building to a moment of impassioned expression. The opening drone returns but transforms into a slow, percussive rhythmic framework (played *col legno battuto*), over which the first violin unfolds an introspective melody. It leads into the middle section (marked 'crotchet = 104 BPM'). Here, a jaunty 3+3+2 rhythm propels the music forward with lively momentum and vibrant contrast. Gradually, this energy dissipates, and the music drifts back into the initial drone. This time, however, the harmonic ambiguity gently dissolves into tonality. In its final moments, the quartet culminates in a series of bold, grand gestures (marked *sforzati*), firmly re-establishing the tonal centre on the pitch C.

String Quartet No. 4, written a year after its predecessor, takes on a markedly different character. With a Shostakovich-like sense of grit and irony, the work unfolds in three distinct movements – fast, slow and fast. At its core lies an interplay between two contrasting musical characters, both introduced and thoroughly explored in the opening movement. The first movement [3] alternates between two primary ideas: the first, marked *Allegro*, is rhythmically agile, feisty, and energetic, whereas the second, marked *Adagio*, is noble, lyrical and rich in contrapuntal texture. These contrasting ideas form the foundation from which the subsequent movements grow, making the opening movement the seed from which the entire quartet blossoms. The second movement, *Moderato* [4], evokes 'night music' in the spirit of Bartók's nocturnal soundscapes. It focuses on developing the second idea from the opening movement, with an enigmatic and moody atmosphere underscored by a conversational texture among the four instruments. Subtle tremolos and metric modulations bring moments of vibrant colour and rhythmic elasticity. At the heart of this movement (and the quartet itself) lie two cadenzas for the first violin and cello, which, despite their improvisatory quality, reinforce the harmonic essence of the music. Sohal, perhaps may have experienced a touch of wistful nostalgia, recalling a similar occurrence in *Chiaroscuro II*, where cadenzas for the same instruments served as pivotal moments. The movement concludes abruptly with majestic G major triads, signalling a transformation in character as the music transitions into the finale. The third movement, *Allegro* [5], draws on rhythmic motifs from the opening *Allegro* (notably, a 'DUM-dah-dah' pattern). Extended passagework, first in the

cello and then in the viola, introduces a sardonic, burlesque-like quality, enhanced by expressive *portamenti*. This episode gives way to a mellifluous section where the first violin soars with a lyrical melody over wave-like figurations in the accompanying strings. The rhythmic motif resurfaces, eventually yielding to a recollection of the second musical character, now imbuing the nobility with a newfound lyricism. In its final moments, the quartet revisits its original energy, resolving in a descending flourish on an F sharp major triad.

String Quartet No. 5, composed in 2010 and dedicated to Sohal's wife, Janet Swinney, is a three-movement work like its predecessor. It stands out as the most rhythmically vital of all his quartets. Rooted in the octatonic scale – a pattern of alternating semitones and whole tones – and its modifications, the work possesses a distinctly 'eastern' sound. The first movement, marked *Allegretto* 6, is a 'cosmic dance'. It brims with rhythmic intensity and incisive energy, showcasing Sohal's deep affinity for counterpoint through extended canonic passages. The sharp rhythmic drive is enhanced by frequent use of *pizzicato*, which injects a playful liveliness into the texture. Gestures from the first movement are expanded and recontextualised in the second movement, marked *Adagio* 7. Beginning with a canon and centred on the pitch D, the quartet divides into two duets: the first and second violins form one pair, viola and cello the other. A dialogue between two contrasting moods ensues: one characterised by long, lyrical *legato* melodies, and the other by the edgy, nasal quality of *ponticello* in the viola and cello, dotted rhythms and sharp *spiccato* figures. The movement closes with a dominant sonority, leaving a sense of harmonic openness. The final movement, *Allegro* 8, bursts forth with fiery energy, recalling gestures from the earlier movements. The conversational dynamic between the two duets returns, now imbued with a frenetic urgency. This restless energy eventually subsides (marked *tranquillo*), giving way to a brief, reflective cello solo. What follows is an extended passage of intricate canonic and fugal writing, passed between the first violin, second violin and viola, all underpinned by a plucked bass line in the cello. The calm is fleeting, as momentum is regained, building to an emphatic conclusion. The music accelerates towards its final gesture – a resounding series of three open fifths centred on the pitch F – bringing the quartet to a bold and definitive close.

Utsyo Chakraborty is an Indian composer and pianist whose diverse body of work, ranging from electronic music to solo piano and chamber music, has been performed worldwide. He is also a professional statistician, holding a Master's degree from the Indian Statistical Institute.

The Piatti Quartet – Michael Trainor and Emily Holland (violins), Miguel Sobrinho (viola) and Jessie Ann Richardson (cello) – is Resident Quartet at Kings Place, London. The Quartet is widely renowned for its 'profound music making' (*The Strad*) and its 'lyrical warmth' (*BBC Music Magazine*). Since its prizewinning performances at the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, it has performed all over the world and made international broadcasts from many countries.

The Piattis are famed for their diverse programming and for passionate interpretations across the spectrum of quartet-writing. Their wide-ranging discography and repertoire have grown from their enthusiasm and curiosity, and from their collaboration with a broad range of artists. Recent accolades for recordings include a Presto Music Award for one of the 'Top 10 Recordings of the Year 2023', a *Gramophone* 'Editor's Choice for the Month' and a five-star review from *BBC Music Magazine*.

Contemporary music has been ever-present in their repertoire; indeed, creating a legacy for the quartet as a genre through commissions is one of the Quartet's central tenets. Major commissions have drawn new music from Mark-Anthony Turnage, Emily Howard, Charlotte Harding and Joseph Phibbs (usually with accompanying dedications), and the Quartet has premiered a huge number of other new works over the years, beginning with Anna Meredith back in 2009. The Concertgebouw Amsterdam, the Flagey Radio Hall in Brussels, the Wigmore Hall in London and the Aldeburgh Festival are some of the high-profile venues where new music has been presented.

The Quartet takes its name from Alfredo Piatti, a nineteenth-century virtuoso cellist who was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music (the *alma mater* of the founder of the Quartet) and also a major exponent of the chamber music and contemporary music of his time.

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VAUGHAN WILLIAMS FOUNDATION

Further Information
www.nareshsohal.com
sohalestate@gmail.com

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Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK
Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com

NARESH SOHAL String Quartets

1	***Chiaroscuro II* (String Quartet No. 1)** (1976)	**14:46**
2	**String Quartet No. 3** (2008)	**15:32**
	String Quartet No. 4 (2009)	**23:59**
3	I *Allegro – Adagio*	8:00
4	II *Moderato*	8:47
5	III *Allegro*	7:12
	String Quartet No. 5 (2010)	**20:14**
6	I *Allegretto*	8:09
7	II *Adagio*	6:32
8	III *Allegro*	5:33
		TT **74:33**

The Piatti Quartet

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