

# David MATTHEWS

## COMPLETE STRING QUARTETS, VOLUME SIX

STRING QUARTET NO. 8, OP. 75

STRING QUARTET NO. 16, OP. 161

STRING QUARTET NO. 17, OP. 164

### **BACH ARR. MATTHEWS**

THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER, BOOK ONE, NO. 24:

PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN B MINOR, BWV869

Kreutzer Quartet

## THREE MORE QUARTETS – AND BACH

by David Matthews

This sixth volume of my complete string quartets and quartet arrangements continues my now nearly 30-year relationship with the Kreutzer Quartet, which has been as invaluable to me as Shostakovich's with the Beethoven Quartet, or Beethoven's with the Schuppanzigh Quartet (though – unlike Beethoven and the Schuppanzighs – I have never had the slightest reason to criticise the Kreutzers' playing!).

My Eighth Quartet was composed in 1997–98 as a fortieth-birthday present for my Czech composer friend Pavel Novák. The Quartet is dedicated to him, but when I obtained a commission from the Mandelring Quartet, I decided that the last movement should be a tribute to another composer friend, Berthold Goldschmidt, who had died in 1996 and whose own four string quartets were played and recorded by the Mandelring Quartet.

The first movement is a lyrical sonata movement, *Leggiero con moto* [1], with a second subject based on the Welsh folksong 'Y Deryn Du' ('The Blackbird'), which appears in its original form at the end of the movement. The *Vivo* second movement [2] is a scherzo, which as in several similar movements I have written is built out of scraps of material of popular character. It seems to me that, just as in Classical times, a scherzo should be related in some way to contemporary popular music. The rhetorical outer sections of the last movement, *Adagio sostenuto* [3], frame a tranquil fugue, the first I had written since I was a teenager. The last two notes in the first violin refer to the initials of Berthold Goldschmidt's name.

My Sixteenth Quartet was composed in the last months of 2021, and premiered by the Salomé Quartet at the 2022 Beverley Chamber Music Festival in Yorkshire. Like my First, Third and Fourteenth Quartets, it is written in a single movement, although it is in three distinct sections. I knew from the start that it would be dedicated to the

memory of my friend Hugh Wood, who had died in August 2021, and who was one of our finest composers. At the 2021 Presteigne Festival I first heard Hugh's last work, his string trio *Ithaka*, and had been very moved by it. I decided to incorporate a motif from the end of *Ithaka*, a rising and falling minor third; and minor thirds play a prominent part throughout the piece.

The quartet begins *Andante con moto* [4] with a G minor viola theme that came to me as I looked out from a train at some clouds over the sea near Folkestone. The first violin extends the melody, ending with a little chorale which descends a minor third chromatically, then rises. A transition leads to a faster development, with a brief return to *Andante* before a complete change of mood and pace: an exuberant scherzo in A major, *Molto vivace*, with a trio in A minor [5]. The return of the scherzo culminates in a few bars of the trio before the third section, *Lento con molto espressione* [6], where some of the material is derived from the opening *Andante*. At its centre is a passage of robin song (as far as I could notate it), the only bird singing at the time I was writing. An *appassionato* repeat of the opening of the *Lento* leads to a quiet return of the *Andante* and the quotation from *Ithaka*, and then the quartet ends with the little chorale, here on high harmonics, before a final *pizzicato* G.

The Seventeenth Quartet was begun in June 2022, simply with a wish to write another piece for the Kreutzers, for whom I had already written five of my quartets. It is in the traditional four movements, all except the slow movement fairly concise. The first movement begins with solos for the four instruments in turn, marked 'Flamboyant' [7]. A short sonata movement follows, with the solos returning at the end. The scherzo second movement, *Vivace* [8], is played *pizzicato* throughout; there is a trio, which is briefly recalled before the abrupt end. The slow movement, marked *Adagio* [9], begins with a plangent theme in B flat minor, recalling the slow movement of my Twelfth Quartet. Its mood is mostly quiet and contemplative.

The finale began with a dream. I was sitting at a rather beautiful upright piano with a vocal score of *Billy Budd*: I had just attended a rehearsal, but the music I heard wasn't Britten's, nor was that in the vocal score. I played five *andante* bars, then woke up and found I could remember what I had played exactly, and so wrote it down and decided

I could use it for the opening of my finale. It was only later that Peter Sheppard Skaerved told me that the Quartet would be premiered by the Kreutzers at the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival – founded, of course, by Britten. The *Andante con moto* opening [10] leads to an *Allegro con brio* which is based on a variation of the *Andante* theme. Its second half is fugal. The *Andante* returns, before an exuberant coda alternating B flat major with D major, ending in D.

The Quartet is dedicated ‘In homage to Benjamin Britten’, in return for all I learned from him during my four years as one of his assistants, and throughout my composing life.

The arrangement of the 24th Prelude and Fugue in B minor from Book One of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* was made in 2002. This pairing is the longest of all the preludes and fugues from the ‘48’ and, I think, one of the greatest pieces Bach ever wrote. In the prelude [11] the bass was obviously going to be cello *pizzicato*. The fugue theme [12] uses all twelve notes of the scale (with a few repetitions – Bach is not Schoenberg), though it always feels like B minor, and is supremely expressive.

## A PERSONAL NOTE

by Peter Sheppard Skærved

I have played David Matthews' string quartets for nearly all of my adult life, alongside my exploration of his solo works; indeed, I am writing this note just a few days after premiering his *Arctic Suite* for solo viola in Zagreb.

A few weeks ago, during a performance of some of his works for solo violin in Oxford, the composer, speaking from the stage, observed that our collaboration, more-or-less constant for the past 25 years, has the effect of making the works 'like a diary'. For me, though I am not the composer, the works that I have explored with him, whether written for me or not, have felt like a journal of my personal journey. When my son Marius was young, David wrote masterly duos for us to play together, works which also reflected on our shared adventure and experiences: playing Paganini's violin in Genoa, a trip to northern Finland or just walks around London's East End (where both David and I grew up), or time spent at our respective dinner tables.

The point is that shared music-making is special because it is habitual. The outstanding South African pianist, Daniel-Ben Pienaar, calls this sharing our 'daily bread'. We can't live without it, and our need for its nutrition is equally as simple, and as fundamental.

But there's something more: spending a lifetime in dialogue with this great composer, I can say that he has profoundly influenced the way that I hear, and see, the musical world. Immodestly, his musical voyage is one on which I can perhaps claim to be a stowaway. Considering the issue of writing for string quartet, his approach has changed, just as his (always profound) understanding and command of this most demanding medium has deepened and metamorphosed. The very first quartet of his that we, the Kreutzer Quartet, performed, many years ago, was the Fourth,<sup>1</sup> written

<sup>1</sup> Recorded on Volume One of this cycle, Toccata Classics TOCC 0058.

in 1981, when I was still in short trousers! If one were to observe similarities, as well as differences between that and his most recently completed quartet (No. 17), which we premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 2023, one could observe the same fiery lyricism (which permeates all of his string writing), alongside a most laconic means of expression, which, far from being remotely Spartan, is of such sophistication that it is difficult to comprehend, from the apparent austerity of the scores, where the richness, the energy, the *anima*, comes from. Even the composers closest to David are thunderstruck at his ability to achieve the maximum intensity, energy, with the bare minimum of means. After that Aldeburgh premiere of No. 17, talking backstage, I showed the score to David's brother, the wonderful composer Colin Matthews. Holding it, he looked up and said: 'I don't how he does it... Where is all the music that we just heard?'

Of course, there isn't a simple answer to this question. One answer is experience. David's cycle of quartets is one of the most substantial in modern times: Nielsen wrote four, Sibelius five (sort of!), Elliott Carter five, Bartók and George Rochberg six, Hindemith and Holmboe seven, Shostakovich fifteen, Weinberg seventeen, Milhaud eighteen; Wolfgang Rihm is on twelve.... As for composers from the British isles, Benjamin Britten wrote three (and change), Michael Tippett five, John McCabe and Edward Cowie seven, Elisabeth Maconchy thirteen, Robert Simpson fifteen. David Matthews is on seventeen, and working on No. 18 as I write this! He is one of the most consistently prolific composers for the medium, and with his vigour and commitment to the quartet has come mastery.

How does this mastery reveal itself? I would draw a comparison with the last three quartets Mozart completed, his D, B flat and F major 'Prussian' Quartets, K575, K589 and K590. These three are distinguished not only by the exceptional control and virtuosity they demand of the players but by their economy of means. By his mid-thirties, Mozart had reached a command of the quartet which enabled him to suggest the most striking musical outcomes while rarely using more than three lines at any one time. This ability put clear water between his approach and that of Haydn, whose mature quartets Opp. 76, 77 and 103 rarely 'strip back' the material in this way. David's most recent quartets take the Mozartean trust in the line to new heights: all three works heard here

include striking moments of monody, often shared out between the players. This textual restraint can be heard, to striking effect, at the opening of the Seventeenth Quartet [7], and in the extraordinary ‘per ardua ad astra’ covering the whole gamut of the instruments, from the bottom of the cello to the heights of the E string of the first violin, which sets up the *envoi* of the work.

This command does not come from nowhere: in my work with David, I can say that one source of this ‘linear eloquence’, is his deep love for counterpoint, and for fugue. Here I must declare an interest: David and I have been talking about fugue since 1999, when he completed the first of what would become his *Fifteen Fugues* for violin alone,<sup>2</sup> and which I first played in London for his 60th-birthday celebrations in 2004. This work emerged from our conversations about Bach, but along with these discussions, we talked about the more vexed presence of the form in and out of the quartet medium. Over the years our conversations ranged from the fugal finales to be found in Haydn’s Op. 20 Quartets, to the Mozart’s pointed eschewal of the medium, with a few notable exceptions, such as the finale of the G major Quartet, K387.

Of course, we talked about Beethoven. A turning point in our discussions, which have always been as musical as they are verbal, was the beautiful arrangement David made for the Kreutzers of Beethoven’s A major Piano Sonata, Op. 101.<sup>3</sup> This piece features a remarkable four-part ‘fugato’ (which I would define as a ‘bit of fugue’, ‘an unfinished fugue’) in its last movement: a huge challenge for a solo pianist, but simplicity itself, even ‘Handelian’, for four string-players. From there our conversations naturally turned to Beethoven’s ‘big fugue’, his *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133, and, after a number of performances where we paired David’s earlier quartets with this work alone, and in its ‘full manifestation’ as the peroration of the B flat major Quartet, Op. 130, David wrote us his largest single quartet to date (No. 12<sup>4</sup>), which became a companion piece for Beethoven’s ‘monster’ in either form. David’s quartets now are full of fugues, of ‘fugati’

<sup>2</sup> Recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0152.

<sup>3</sup> Recorded on Volume Four of this cycle, TOCC 0318.

<sup>4</sup> Recorded on Volume Two, TOCC 0059.

and hints of fugues to come, fugues as yet unheard; counterpoint dances from his pencil, seemingly without effort.

For a composer to write successful fugues for four string instruments, every single line must have its own autonomy within the texture. But, in addition, each must also have the 'spine' to stand, to sing by itself. After all, in pure counterpoint writing, the only 'permissible' accompaniment to a line, to a voice, is another line or voice (not a mere chord or harmonisation). In this particular, the sort of orchestral 'stuffing' which fills out the (very energetic) fugato in the last movement of Mahler's Fifth Symphony can be described as a betrayal of the medium (however exciting or impressive it is in concert!). The success of David's melodic counterpoint, is, at least in part, what gives his 'pared-down' quartet texture such eloquence.

Only a composer with David Matthews' command of voices, of counterpoint, would countenance an arrangement of the penultimate work from Book 1 of *Das wohltemperierte Klavier*, one of the wonders of western music history. This B minor *Praeludium & Fuga* [11][12], although one of Bach's longest, is a miracle of understatement and even humour. Every line is a wonder and there's even a deliberate mistake: the line David gives to the second violin, brings the first subject in two bars early at the beginning of the development section of the fugue.

David treats the Bach with deep respect, but nonetheless as his own material. After all, one of our favourite topics of musical conversation over the years has been the permeable membrane between the act of composition and the act of transcription. Like Ferruccio Busoni, David is of a mind that the two are, to a considerable extent, mutually interdependent, that one can almost be the other. And at the end of the first and second sections of Bach's three-part prelude, Matthews 'lends a hand': he steps forward from being purely an arranger, to a composer, adding a fourth line (practically, something for the viola to do). This act is utterly Matthews; quietly confident, even laying down the law. It is this assurance that underlines the lyrical, burning economy of his quartet-writing, and it answers his brother's question to me: 'How did he do that?'



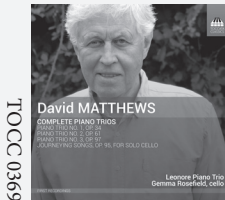
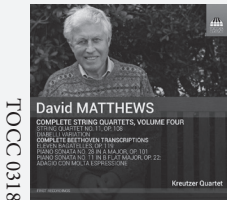
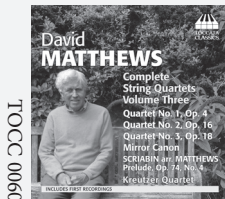
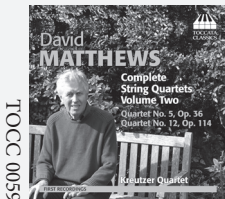
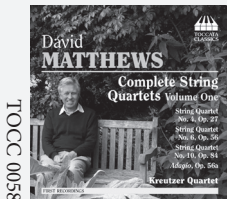
The members of the **Kreutzer Quartet** are proud to have collaborated with David Matthews for many years, and count their unfolding cycle of recordings of his quartets, solo works and arrangements on Toccata Classics as one of their proudest achievements. The Quartet is acclaimed for its adventurous performances and recordings of works from our time and from the great quartet literature. Their fascination with musical exploration has resulted in cyclic performances and recordings of works ranging from Antoine Reicha and David



Matthews to Michael Tippett and Roberto Gerhard, on the Chandos, Guild, Innova, Lorelt, Metier, Move, Naxos, New Focus, NMC, Tadzik and Toccata Classics labels. Composers who have written, or are writing, for them include Jim Aitchison, Simon Bainbridge, Laurie Bamon, Gary Carpenter, Gloria Coates, Edward Cowie, Jeremy Dale Roberts, Peter Dickinson, Michael Finnissy, David Gorton, Hafliði Hallgrímsson, Sadie Harrison, Hans Werner Henze, Michael Hersch, George Holloway, David Horne, Nicola LeFanu, John McCabe, David Matthews, Rosalind Page, Paul Pella, George Rochberg, Poul Ruders, Evis Sammouris, Robert Saxton, Elliott Schwartz, Roger Steptoe, Jeremy Thurlow and Jörg Widmann. The Quartet has held residencies at York University and Goldsmiths University of London and has given hundreds of workshops for young composers, in the UK and internationally. The Quartet has a truly international career, playing at venues ranging from the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, the Bergen Festspillene and Venice Biennale to Wilton's Music Hall, their 'home' near the Tower of London, and the Aldeburgh Festival, where they premiered David Matthews' Seventeenth Quartet in 2023.



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—Robert Reilly, *Crisis* magazine



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Engineer and editor: Jonathan Haskell, Astounding Sounds

Producer: Peter Sheppard Skærved

Musical supervisor: David Matthews

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