

Thursday 19 March, 1pm

## Villiers Quartet with Lucy Cox: From Sunrise to Nightfall

### Full Programme Notes

The *'Sunrise' Quartet* is the fourth in Haydn's last set of string quartets published in 1797, also including the *'Emperor' quartet*. It opens with a rising arabesque in the first violin over sustained chords in the lower strings, elaborated and developed throughout the first movement. A hymn-like Adagio is followed by a lively Minuet whose elements of folk dance remain in the theme of the finale, featuring a dazzling sequence of elaborate and elegant variations and a coda playfully fragmenting the theme between the four instruments.

Ailsa Dixon's 'lost' *Scherzo* for string quartet is her earliest significant work, written in 1955 at Durham University where it earned her the Kisch Prize. The manuscript subsequently disappeared and was believed to have been lost, but she spoke of it as the work which gave her the confidence to return to composing in the 1980s. Following her death in 2017, many previously unheard works were discovered in manuscript in her archive and premiered posthumously, but it was not until several years later that the manuscript of this early work came to light in the attic of her former home. This lively, mercurial piece features frequent changes of time signature, possibly hallmarks of her early interest in Bartok, whom she cited in later life as an inspiration for his 'elasticity of musical motifs'. The work's free and playful counterpoint shows the beginning of her compositional style, with a tonality suggesting influences from 20th-century British composers. While the *Scherzo* is featured on the Villiers Quartet's recording of Ailsa Dixon's chamber music, released on the Resonus Classics label in 2025, this is its first live performance, over 70 years after it was written.

Three decades later she returned to writing for string quartet with the *Nocturnal Scherzo*, premiered in 1986 at the Little Missenden Festival by the Brindisi Quartet. A note accompanying the score sheds light on her compositional method:

*'It seems to me that no music is truly abstract. Pieces which have no words or 'programme' must be a condensation either of past experience or of processes going on in the psyche. When I write music which intends to be abstract, an exposition of the main themes materialises before I feel any need to question what I am writing. Then I find it difficult to continue until I have asked myself what the themes seem to signify. Dream-like images emerge in my mind, and from that part of the process develop the ideas of how to use the themes.'*

The note goes on to explain the dream sequence underlying the *Nocturnal Scherzo* and its symbolic significance, representing the contest and reconciliation of two halves of the psyche:

*'From a 'sleep' theme a slow rising motif suddenly erupts into action. Out of a jack-in-the-box bursts Pierrot, with his white face, his funny gait and his sad little song. He is swept off stage by the macho man whose theme in the cello verges on the bombastic. Pierrot climbs the stage curtains and swings up there, mocking the macho man. Eventually he responds to the macho's angry call, not to assume unfair advantage, but to come down. They try on each other's themes, like hats. Scarcely has a harmonious contrapuntal synthesis of their themes developed before the 'sleep' theme calls and the lid of the box slowly and gently closes down on them.'*

This vignette, combining an apparently trivial piece of commedia dell'arte with a deeper psychological meaning, gives an insight into the emotional significance she attached to the contrapuntal interplay and resolution of musical themes.

*Sohrab and Rustum*, written in 1987-88, is the most ambitious of Ailsa Dixon's works for string quartet. It was inspired by Matthew Arnold's narrative poem of 1853, drawn from a Persian epic, which tells the story of the fatal encounter between an estranged father and son on opposite sides of a battle between the Tatar and Persian armies. The music is a vivid response to the poem's human drama and atmospheric setting. The opening sequence evokes the river Oxus rising in the starlit mountains: a long, searing high E in the first violin over a deep chord from the lower strings gives way to an eerie chromatic oscillating motif between the two violins, like the scintillation of light on water. Through a gradual crescendo it turns into a fast, falling motif as the river gathers momentum, tumbling towards the plain where the drama will take place. A leaping phrase ending with a trill, marked 'brillante' and passed between the players, brings the action to life, and the story unfolds as the two armies come face to face. Towards the close of the piece, its human tragedy played out, the armies light their evening fires, and after a brief, poignant return of the leaping motif, all is dissolved in the relentless flow of the Oxus pouring out into a calm sea. As the mighty warrior gives up the ghost, a haunting out-breath from the players escapes into a moment of silence before the final chord.

Ailsa Dixon's three songs for soprano and string quartet, written either side of *Sohrab and Rustum* in 1987-8, were subsequently grouped under the title *The Spirit of Love*. Among the works found in her musical archive after she died, it was given its posthumous premiere in 2020 and immediately found its way into the hearts of audiences and critics. A review for the British Music Society, noting *how 'foreboding and dissonant harmonies...smoothly morph into rich and sweet sounds'* concluded *'At the end of the concert there was a feeling that something special had occurred'*. A performance in Oxford was described as *'unforgettable'* and at the Nottingham Chamber Music Festival the songs were hailed as *'a stunning find...Rarely have I heard a piece of new music which has moved me so deeply'*.

The first song, *As the harmonic to the sounding string* (set to the composer's own words) evokes the ethereal purity of a distant love, bound 'by none but cords of aerial harmony'. The musical metaphor in which 'cords' coalesce with 'chords' - bonds that are not constraints but represent a resonating spiritual sympathy - revisits an idea that had been central to her opera *Letter to Philemon* about the teachings of St Paul in captivity. The flowing lyricism of the opening section marked 'tranquil' gives way to a darker mood of tonal uncertainty, with an angular chromatic line in the vocal part, as the poem questions whether such disembodied love can be reciprocated; in

the final section the spirit of love is released in a long, joyful melisma accompanied by harmonics in the first violin at the song's radiant close.

This sense of transcendence is echoed in the second song, a setting of A E Housman's *From far, from eve and morning*, in which the poet imagines life as a mere breathing space 'ere to the wind's twelve quarters I take my endless way'. The strings' scurrying triplets evoke the swirling coalescence of matter borne on the winds, as 'the stuff of life to knit me blew hither: here am I'. Concentrated in this brief moment of existence is the lover's urgent enquiry, 'Take my hand quick and tell me, what you have in your heart'. The song's harmonies are darker and its motion unsettling, resolved only briefly in moments of unison before the strings' contrapuntal postlude unravels the miracle of being, and the spirit is dispersed once more for eternity.

In *The night has a thousand eyes*, dying love is figured in Bourdillon's poem as the setting of the sun whose light was brighter than the myriad stars in the night sky. The string writing in the opening bars evokes the vast expanse of the heavens punctuated by glimmering starlight, from which emerges a soaring soprano melisma. Darkness encroaches in the harmonies as 'the light of a whole life dies', reaching a sombre, slowing cadence 'when love is done'. The song returns at its close to the opening melisma, coming to rest on a radiant top A, which the composer described as depicting 'the effect of looking up and focussing one's gaze on the stars (and eternal love)'.

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## Song Texts

### As the harmonic to the sounding string (Ailsa Dixon)

As the harmonic to the sounding string,  
Soft, tender, pure, remote, yet from within  
Heard when the soul is like a well-tuned violin  
Thus have you power within my life to sing.  
And yet maybe that I can never sound so sweet in your life  
While for many another one your note must be the fundamental.  
This love by none but cords of aerial harmony is bound.

### From far, from eve and morning (A. E. Housman)

From far, from eve and morning  
And yon twelve-winded sky,  
The stuff of life to knit me  
Blew hither: here am I.  
Now—for a breath I tarry  
Nor yet disperse apart—  
Take my hand quick and tell me,  
What have you in your heart.  
Speak now, and I will answer;  
How shall I help you, say;  
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
I take my endless way.

### The night has a thousand eyes (F. W. Bourdillon)

The night has a thousand eyes,  
And the day but one;  
Yet the light of the bright world dies  
With the dying sun.  
The mind has a thousand eyes,  
And the heart but one:  
Yet the light of a whole life dies  
When love is done.

## The Villiers Quartet

The Villiers Quartet, founded in 2011, have established a reputation as outstanding interpreters and champions of British music. Hailed for their extraordinary 'commitment and virtuosity' (*The Sunday Times*) and 'exquisite ensemble playing' (*Seen and Heard International*), they are the quartet in residence at the Jacqueline du Pré concert hall in the University of Oxford. In addition to live broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and on Netherlands public radio from the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, international appearances include masterclasses in the USA, and a tour of California with programmes of music by British composers. Their innovative recordings include revivals of music by William Sterndale Bennett, William Alwyn and Peter Racine Fricker, and in 2020 they premiered newly discovered movements from the 1889 quartet by Delius to great acclaim. Since 2020 they have been exploring the music of Ailsa Dixon, and released a recording of her chamber music in 2025, hailed by the British Music Society as 'beautifully crafted...fascinating and many-faceted...a rewarding experience'.

## Lucy Cox

Lucy Cox (soprano) read music at Oxford University before winning a scholarship for postgraduate studies at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, Switzerland. A former Brighton Early Music Festival Young Artist and finalist in the John Kerr Award for English Song, she has appeared as a soloist in concert venues from London's Wigmore Hall to the Konzerthaus in Vienna, and sung title roles in Baroque operas from Handel's *Semele* and *Acis and Galatea* to Scarlatti's *La Giuditta*. She also enjoys singing with small choirs and consorts including the BBC Singers, the Sixteen and the Tallis Scholars.