

**FRANK BRIDGE (1879–1941)**  
**String Quartet No.4 H.188 (1937)**

Allegro energico  
Quasi Menuetto

Adagio ma non troppo – Allegro con brio

Bridge's fourth quartet, his last, represents the farthest, most advanced point he reached in the stylistic exploration which characterised the final period of his life. The newness of idiom consists chiefly in his developed use of tonality. The discoveries made in the third quartet (H.175, 1927) are pursued in the fourth; while other aspects of composition – the directional treatment of themes, the motivic sequences, structure – remain rooted in classical principles. The opening movement of the fourth quartet is the longest, most varied and most substantial; the second, Minuet, the most slender; the third the most tonally explicit. The whole is driven by an energico rhythmic impulse.

On 21 July 1936, Frank Bridge wrote to his American patron Elisabeth Sprague Coolidge about the latest work he was trying to compose for her music festival in Berkshire, Massachussetts:

"I wanted so much to send you something that the South Mountain Quartet might play for you, but the damned thing won't

go where I want it to. As fast as it progresses, I slash it to bits and begin again. A very tiresome and wearisome business it is to create one day and destroy the next. Even more annoying when alternate days become alternate weeks. But knots of all kinds are in the wind and it can't be expected that they should not run in one's own mind..."

Those knots were not to unravel for sixteen months. The 1930s were Bridge's leanest creative years. Elisabeth Sprague Coolidge's regular money orders, which he had received since 1923, had diminished in value in the wake of the US stock market collapse. Bridge relied on her support to give him time to spread his creative wings, and he repaid that generosity by composing some of his most adventurous chamber music for her festivals in the United States and Europe. However, the 1930s were his leanest years at home. The music profession, the audience, and particularly some of the music critics were baffled by Bridge's post-1918 music. Reviews of his two masterpieces, the 3rd *Quartet* (1927) and the *Piano Trio* (1929) were dismissive – making "common cause with the advocates of modernity," "bartering a noble birthright for less than a mess of pottage" – and, although these hurt Bridge,

they did not deflect him from his creative path.

"It is going to be increasingly difficult for people who have standardised their ideas as to which music is when they compare my work at 27 and at 50, but that there can be any compromise between what is expected by others and what my instinct insists upon is an utter impossibility. The last few years have strengthened my mental powers – such as they are – to a degree that leaves them untouched by any outward manifestation."

[Letter to Elisabeth Sprague Coolidge, 8 November 1929]

However, Bridge's productivity did diminish in the 30s. The *Violin Sonata* (H.183) was his last major work, completed in 1932. The creative block that caused all the trouble with the new quartet four years later, paled into insignificance when he was faced with a crisis in his health, as his wife Ethel wrote.

"A week ago yesterday he was his usual jolly, happy self. We'd parted with our maid who was going to be married and had tidied up the cottage preparatory to leaving for London for the rest of the winter, except for a weekend now and

then. About a quarter to nine, he felt very sick and then was dreadfully sick... His condition worried me as I thought he'd strain his heart... Two days later he seemed to collapse and we've had a nightmare time all the week... We had one specialist down on Friday, who practically gave us no hope, but today's man has, and actually the difference tonight is most marked and he is conscious again at times... He'd caught a severe chill, which turned out to be bronchitis with complications and of course he'd strained himself so badly..."

[part of a letter from Ethel Bridge to Elisabeth Sprague Coolidge, 25 October 1936]

Bridge's illness nearly killed him. He suffered with high blood pressure and a weak heart for the remaining five years of his life. After six months convalescence, including a two week trip to Paris in April 1937, he was strong enough to take up his composing pen once again. Mrs Coolidge was the first to read the good news, in July: "Just please rejoice with me again. I am the proud father of a completed first movement... It is contrary to my usual habit of not counting my chickens until they are hatched, but as

I can scarcely believe the fact myself I feel I must try to make you share my joy at becoming alive again... You have no conception what a surprise it is to be able to concentrate at all." Four months later the String Quartet No. 4 was finished and within a month the premiere was confirmed – once again in Mrs Coolidge's Berkshire Festival (Pittsfield, Mass.), to be given on 13 September 1939, by her resident ensemble, the Gordon String Quartet.

Intimations of mortality clearly sharpened Bridge's mind and the new quartet emerged as the most concise and rigorously composed of the five he completed. It is Haydnesque in scale, with a sonata allegro, a minuet and a rondo finale. The musical language is the most progressive of all Bridge's chamber works. The opening flourish from viola presents the main thematic material and exposes eleven semitones. The first movement is the most substantial of the three, frenetic in its rhythmic and motivic energy. The music is not twelve – note, since it is rooted on D, but Bridge's harmonic language is dominated by one of his favourite polychords – a major triad superimposed on a minor triad with a root one tone lower (eg. B major above a C minor triad). Some respite

is afforded by an extended, beautifully proportioned lyrical second subject.

The Minuet is founded upon an obsessive ostinato bass. The music has a haunted quality about it, with pizzicato chords accompanying the second idea, prefiguring what Bartók was to do in his Quartet No. 6 three years later. The finale is equally pithy – a slow introduction preceding a lighter, almost neo-classical rondo, in which Bridge allows himself to reveal stronger tonal foundations, quartal (fourth and fifth based) harmonies dominating the principle episode. In the coda, Bridge re-introduces first movement material to produce a joyous conclusion.

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**ALAN BUSH (1900-1995)**  
**Suite of Six**  
**for String Quartet Op.81 (1975)**

Introduction  
Pavan  
Interlude I / Reel  
Interlude II / Andamento  
Interlude III / Air  
Interlude IV / Moto Perpetuo  
Interlude V / Sword Dance  
Postlude



Alan Bush's music develops the British tradition differently from that of Bridge. Whereas Bridge's later works become more complex in style, Bush's become simpler. The *Suite of Six* is more accessible and tonally explicit, not so concentrated and intellectually rigorous, as *Dialectic*, written 45 years earlier.

He was younger than Bridge by twenty years, and was more of a theorist and philosopher than the older composer, seeking logical answers to some of the aesthetic problems of the twentieth century, which he went to Berlin in 1929 to study at first hand. It was a time of aesthetic uncertainty for European music; the absolutes no longer held; there was no longer a common musical language; therefore every composer had to choose. To Bush the first necessity was that music should be universally accessible.

As well as an internationalist, Bush was also a scholar, aware of the force of national tradition, particularly the English tradition of the 16th and 17th century. He shared with many 20th century British composers – Constant Lambert, Peter Warlock, Benjamin Britten – the thrill of discovering some of the glories of an earlier period which had been lost during the intervening years: Dowland's *Lachrimae*, Purcell's *Fantasias* for

strings. Such a creative sense of past tradition, which Vaughan Williams called "building national monuments," was equally part of Bush's aesthetic. His language and technique were developed in a direct line from the past. After 1945 his style was simplified, and his new tonality resulted from a modal modification of the diatonic scale. It was folk-inspired. Indeed the 5/8 melody in the Aeolian mode, of the third dance of *Suite of Six, Andamento*, bears a striking resemblance to the modal theme in Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Christmas carols, The Truth sent from above*.

Bush's substantial output of chamber music includes four works for string quartet. The first of these, *String Quartet in A minor* (1923) is a highly concentrated work, written under the influences of Ravel and of his teacher John Ireland. In *Dialectic for String Quartet Op. 15* (1929) Bush forged his approach to total thematic integration within a tonal context. *Dialectic* is an acclaimed masterpiece of English chamber music, but it is also a transitional work in Bush's output. It was in the late 1940's that Bush found the musical language that he was looking for. In parallel with developments in the Soviet Union, Bush reviewed his musical language. In an effort to make his music more accessible he

sought to simplify and to give it a national character. To achieve this, he adopted the six modes common to English folk music. A seminal work is the piano work, *Twenty-four Preludes Op. 84* (1977) in which he set out to explore the twelve keys, aligning them to different modes. In place of major and minor keys he admits the possibility of 'diatonic' and 'chromatic' applications of modality. One might (and some of his pupils did) argue that the six 'English' modes are common to European Renaissance church music, and other traditions, and that once music becomes chromatic it is no longer modal. The stamp of 'Englishness' in Bush's late work stems more from the adoption of folk-derived dance rhythms and the soaring lyricism that characterises the work of his last four decades. Bush, like his friend and colleague Tippett, achieved a greater fluency and productivity in his later years.

The *Suite of Six Op. 81* (1975) was the last of Bush's four works for string quartet. The BBC commissioned it. The first performance was given by the Chilingirian String Quartet at a lunchtime recital in St. John's Smith's Square on 15 December 1975. The work is a suite of dances, each representing one of the six 'English' modes. However, it plays continuously through an ingenious formal

scheme that may have been inspired by the example of Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* (1942). An Introduction lays out the six modes in the order that they are to appear in the work. The five short Interludes are transitions of mood, material and modality. The Postlude retraces the order of presentation of the modes. Within this scheme there is a highly effective contrast between the formality of the dances and the structural freedom of the Interludes in which the main ideas evolve.

The first Dance, *Pavan*, opens with the instruments in pairs. The second violin and cello outline the dance rhythm in stately pizzicato chords. The first violin and viola launch a *tour de force*, of imitative writing at different pitches, much of it by inversion. The *Reel* is altogether earthier. Cast in ABA form, Bush makes subtle use of small motivic cells and their inversions. The juxtapositions of compound and simple time resonate through the second Interlude, giving way to the expressiveness of the *Andamento*. This is the first of two slow movements. The folk-like Aeolian main theme is of touching simplicity, but Bush cunningly exploits seemingly insignificant accompanying figures as a means of drawing the movement towards its powerful climax. The second slow movement, *Air*, reveals the glowing warmth

and lyrical intensity that is characteristic of Bush's later music. Its broad main theme is in the lowest range of the violin. It is taken up by the viola and given to the cello for its final statement. Graceful triplet arabesques flow from the theme and lead into the middle section which is lighter in texture. So too is the fifth dance, *Moto perpetuo*, a jig-like movement built on a three-bar phrase that is subtly varied. The powerful *Sword Dance* would have made for a convincing, if conventionally lively ending to the Suite, but Bush allows the music to melt away in a magical whirl of arabesques that lead us once more through the tonal journey of the work.

## HENRY PURCELL (1659–1695)

### Chacony in G minor (c.1690)

ed. Benjamin Britten

The work of Purcell stands at the summit of the century rich in music in England; not least in the development of string music, both solo and ensemble, since the newly-introduced violins had replaced the former consort of viols. At the Restoration in 1660, Charles II, not to be outdone by his French rival Louis XIV, who boasted of having his *vingt-quatre violons du roi*, required his orchestra also to be established with twenty

four violins. This was properly celebrated by Purcell when he composed his *Fantasias* for strings, in three, four and five parts, in 1680. The eighteen variations of the *Chacony in G minor* may be performed by string quartet or string orchestra. Writing in the introduction to his edition of it, Benjamin Britten says:

"It is not known when Purcell composed this isolated, independent *Chacony*, nor for what occasion, if any, he wrote it. It was most probably written as incidental music for a play – most likely a tragedy, judging by the serious and severe nature of the music."

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