

Villiers Quartet - Ivor Gurney Hall, 1 December 2019

Graham Whettam was a composer who meant business. The no-nonsense approach he had to his art resulted in a catalogue of works of integrity and distinction. And as a patron and friend of Gloucester Music Society, Whettam enjoyed hearing many of his new pieces for the first time during a typical concert season. Today we were treated to a performance of the Hymnos Quartet from 1997, given by the Villiers Quartet – a young, dynamic and visionary group of string players whose *raison d'être* is the championing of British music.

All the hallmarks of Whettam's mature style were in evidence right from the off: bold, incisive irregular rhythms, scrunching dissonances and restless harmonies, and pertinent fragments of melody sprinkled liberally around the instruments. Then there were the elements of surprise that he liked to add into the mix, like the brittle sounds of the snap pizzicato in the high strings or the chilling cello tremolandi. Whettam apparently withdrew the score after its first performance for revision, citing 'a preponderance of slow-paced music' as his reason to rewrite the piece.

So what we hear today still possesses the solid central core as originally conceived, but balances it out with some radiant warmth as suggested in the work's title. There are even times when the music takes on a spiky, satirical edge redolent of Shostakovich at his virulent best. Yet throughout we are privy to Whettam's maverick musical mind at work. The clarity and boldness of his ideas communicate directly, often on a very visceral level, and leave the listener in no doubt about the composer's intentions. In essence, Whettam is the epitome of the artisan composer – a craftsman in every respect.

Two more hard-working musicians supplied the music for the rest of today's concert: William Alwyn and Charles Hubert Parry. Alwyn's String Quartet no 1 in D minor is hard to pigeon-hole. Its musical lexicon ranges from late Romantic eastern European flavours à la Smetana or Dvorak, to the mid-20th century astringency that Britten or Bridge (Alwyn's compatriots) might employ. All bound up in a delightfully lyrical style borne out of Alwyn's proficiency at writing music for films. Not as weighty or profound as Whettam's opening piece perhaps, but beguiling all the same.

The most readily accessible music of the afternoon, though, was to be found in Parry's Quartet no 3 in G major. If Parry's most well-known work is to be found in the hymnals and choruses of the nation's churches, then the bulk of his chamber music has been undeservedly overlooked. It comes as something of a revelation, then, that it is music of breadth and quality. Cast in the high Victorian language of its time, melodically the quartet displays the influence of Brahms as well as the elegance of Elgar in its sweep and majesty. Yet even here the whiff of incense is never far away, as one can imagine immense stone pillars – suggested by pirouetting legato violins – rising up from the foundations – supplied by a rooted pizzicato bassline. All power to the Villiers Quartet for bringing this impressive piece back in from the cold.