

# THE DANTE QUARTET

Monday 8 July 3pm – 5pm St John's Church

Zoe Byers **Violin**  
Ian Watson **Violin**  
Carol Ella **Viola**  
Richard Jenkinson **Cello**

The Dante Quartet was founded in 1995 and has recorded for Hyperion, Signum, Toccata and Naxos. It has received BBC Music Magazine and Royal Philharmonic Society Awards. Frequently heard on Radio 3, the Quartet has given many recitals at London's Wigmore Hall and Kings Place, and played at many of the UK's foremost festivals and societies. Abroad, the Quartet has played throughout Europe, Japan and South Africa. For its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025, it will tour the USA.

## Three Idylls

**1. Adagio molto espressivo – allegretto moderato e rubato – Tempo 1. Adagio; 2. Allegretto poco lento; 3. Allegro con moto**

*Frank Bridge (1879-1941)*

For much of the early part of his career, Frank Bridge was a professional viola player, and his extensive output of chamber music shows an instinctive feel for effective string writing.

His *Three Idylls* date from 1906. Expressively and structurally, they are modest in scope, but display the same confident handling of quartet textures and sonorities as his more ambitious scores. The first and longest is tenderly elegiac, opening with a sombre theme, initially unaccompanied, for the viola. The slightly quicker middle section is an Elgarian blend of caprice and wistfulness. When the opening music returns, all four instruments are muted, enhancing its introspective quality.

The second piece is a slow waltz, whose opening theme Britten took as the starting-point for his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, for string orchestra, of 1937. Again, there is a quicker central section, by turns playful and passionate.

A rhythmic kick from the cello launches the third *Idyll*, driven by a kind of brisk, nervy energy. The opening section culminates in a broad, singing melody which returns at the end, before the music accelerates towards its emphatic conclusion.

## String Quartet in E minor, Op. 83

**1. Allegro moderato; 2. Piacetole. Poco andante; 3. Finale. Allegro molto**

*Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934)*

Elgar's three major chamber works – the Violin Sonata, String Quartet and Piano Quintet – were written between 1918 and 1919 and belong, emotionally, with his Cello Concerto, which followed immediately afterwards. The four pieces have their own kind of enchantment, wistful and eerie by turns. The pre-war world of Edwardian opulence and swaggering self-confidence was now irretrievable. With Elgar's response to his new surroundings comes a strain of deep longing – haunted, sad, and resigned – which had always been present in his music, but which had not been quite so near to the surface before.

The rhythmic vigour with which he launches the Quartet is undercut by an ambivalence and uncertainty in the harmonies, and the first movement continually shifts between an apparently easy-going, relaxed flow, and a tense undercurrent that comes to the surface in the big central climax.

The central movement's gentle, song-like motion ('Piacetole' = 'pleasant', or 'peaceful') settles twice into a passage of drowsy, almost motionless, reverie. Alice Elgar was particularly fond of this movement, likening it to 'captured sunshine', and it was played at her funeral in 1920.

There is a kind of anxious energy to the finale, a forward drive but also moments when the music seems to be looking back over its shoulder, haunted by previous uncertainties, though without actually quoting earlier material. The final bars are brisk and to the point, but in a way that suggests that the resolution of the earlier tensions, though genuine, is also somehow provisional.



## String Quartet in C minor, Op. 51 No. 1

**1. Allegro; 2. Romanze. Poco adagio; 3. Allegretto molto moderato e comodo; 4. Allegro**

*Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)*

Brahms' claim that he destroyed twenty quartets before releasing one which completely satisfied him may be an exaggeration, but it illustrates the ruthless self-criticism which led him to withhold anything he felt did not measure up to the great Viennese classical tradition that he was committed to maintaining.

The first of his chamber works for strings alone which he allowed to appear in public were his two sextets, of 1862 and 1866, for which there were no important and inhibiting precedents. He began composing the two works of Op. 51, his first published string quartets, by at least 1869. After being played through and revised a number of times they were finally completed in 1873.

The C minor Quartet's powerfully dark emotional world is expressed in almost orchestrally rich, dense writing. The first movement is set in motion by an upward-striving theme that is then stopped in its tracks by two abrupt, detached chords, followed by a lyrical phrase for the first and second violins in turn. The second main theme plays the expected role of lowering the emotional temperature. The music's strenuous energy eventually exhausts itself in a written-out slowing down on the second violin and viola in the final bars.

The two middle movements relieve the emotional pressure without particularly lightening the mood. The heading 'Romanze' for the second movement suggests a song-like, straightforward character, both melodically and structurally. It is simple in outline, but anything but straightforward in other respects, particularly in the central section's broken, hesitant phrases, suggesting strong emotions behind the reticence.

The third movement is not a quick scherzo but a moderately-paced, gently melancholy piece. Written in F minor, it has a quicker F major trio section hinting slightly at the gypsy in Brahms' soul. The intermezzo-like nature of this movement throws our attention forward onto the propulsive finale. This is driven by the same determined energy as the first movement and makes several more or less veiled references to the quartet's opening theme, launched by a compressed version of its initial phrase. The most overt of these references occurs right at the end, bringing the work full-circle.