

The music

JS Bach	Sarabande from Partita in D major BWV828
Robert Schumann	Kinderszenen op15
Maurice Ravel	Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn A la manière de Borodine A la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier
Huw Watkins	Prayer
Igor Stravinsky	Tango

INTERVAL

Dmitri Shostakovich Piano Quintet in G minor op57

JS Bach's (1685-1750) six keyboard *Partitas* appeared between 1726 and 1731. They were his first published works, designated opus1, even though he'd been composing for a good 20 years already. The **Sarabande** from the *D major Partita* (no4) is preceded, unusually, by an *aria* which establishes a mood of calm serenity – a mood which continues into the movement proper, where the at times explorative counterpoint carries its sense of complete assurance to the end.

Robert Schumann's (1810-1856) **Kinderszenen** (*Scenes from Childhood*) were written in 1838 to amuse his wife-to-be, Clara. Joan Chissell described them as “an adult’s recollection of childhood, for adult performers” – she found them “remarkable in distilling a poetic idea into its purest, simplest and most potent form”.

Schumann chose 13 pieces from an original 30 to form the final compendium, which he first called *Leichte Stücke* (*Easy Pieces*). The section titles, which were only added after the work’s completion, are as follows:

- 1 Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and Peoples)
- 2 Kuriose Geschichte (A Curious Story)
- 3 Hasche-Mann (Blind Man’s Buff)
- 4 Bittendes Kind (Pleading Child)
- 5 Glückes genug (Happy Enough)
- 6 Wichtige Begebenheit (An Important Event)
- 7 Träumerei (Dreaming)
- 8 Am Kamin (At the Fireside)
- 9 Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight of the Hobbyhorse)
- 10 Fast zu Ernst (Almost Too Serious)
- 11 Fürchtenmachen (Frightening)
- 12 Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep)
- 13 Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was one of six composers chosen by a French journal in 1909 to commemorate the centenary of Haydn’s death. The resulting **Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn** is less than two minutes long, its five-note thematic motif based on Haydn’s name.

Ravel’s two ‘In the manner of...’ pieces were written as contributions to the second volume of pastiches put together by his friend the composer and pianist Alfredo Casella and published in 1914. **A la manière de Borodine** is a waltz with echoes from several works by a favourite composer; while **A la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier** is a double pastiche, as Chabrier himself was parodying a Gounod aria in his original.

Huw Watkin’s (b1976) *Prayer* is a tribute to Lars Vogt, the German pianist and conductor who died in 2022. Befittingly, it’s a reflective piece, solemn at times but at heart infused with sparkling positivity.

Tango was written for solo piano in 1940, the year after **Stravinsky’s** (1882-1971) arrival in America. It was deliberately aimed at US audiences as a way of earning royalties again when those he’d earned to date were frozen in Europe. It’s an immediately appealing work with its own distinctive tango flavour – syncopation happening on the second note of the bar rather than the fourth, as in the more familiar Argentinian dance.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) *Piano Quintet in G minor op57* (1940)

- 1 Prelude: Lento – Poco più mosso – Lento
- 2 Fugue: Adagio
- 3 Scherzo: Allegretto
- 4 Intermezzo: Lento
- 5 Finale: Allegretto

Originally conceived as a string quartet, the work as we now know it seemingly became a quintet because, as the pianist, the composer would be able to travel more. He certainly got his wish – demand for performances of the new *Quintet* was so great that Shostakovich composed barely anything else until mid-1941, when the German invasion began and his mind turned towards writing his *Seventh (Leningrad) Symphony*.

The **first movement** *Prelude: Lento* opens with a grand entry by the piano, emphasising the seriousness of what’s to come. Confirmed by a rich, yearning, cry from the strings, we’re somewhat surprised when a stately, flowing waltz changes the tone. But a series of heavy unison string chords restores the mood and prepares us for the **second movement** *Fugue*. This begins with a muted first violin introducing the

fugal motif, which is then taken up in canon by the other strings and, finally, the piano. The music becomes more impassioned and rises to a climax before the piano calls a halt and returns us to the original attenuated version of the fugue on which we close.

The **Scherzo** brings an abrupt change. It’s a straightforward quick march right from the start, full of manic energy with all five players having great fun. Along with the final movement, it was constantly demanded as an encore by early audiences, leading to the piece being called by some ‘a five movement work, of which there are seven.’

The **fourth movement** *Intermezzo* brings us down to earth again – in a literal sense too, as it’s underpinned throughout by a walking bass line from the piano. The solo violin’s slow and wistful entrance establishes a solemn, reflective mood which is only interrupted once by a brief impassioned outburst by the whole quintet before we fade away to a quiet end.

The **Finale** is one typical of the composer. It starts off in a light-hearted way, the piano entering without a care in the world, skipping along and then firmly stating the main theme, which is quickly echoed by the strings. After some delicate decorative work by the piano, the strings turn eerie with a solo violin semi-tragic. The coda, with muted solo violin again, never regains the movement’s opening vigour and we’re left with an enigmatic conclusion and the question – does Shostakovich want to leave us in optimistic mood or are any attempts at this simply false reassurance? Is our real state perhaps the one expressed earlier in the *Fugue* and *Intermezzo*?

Notes by Dick Ware

The artists

Huw Watkins piano Emily Holland, Michael Trainor violin Miguel Sobrinho viola Jessie Ann Richardson cello

“Anyone who is at all interested in contemporary string quartet music, and/or the art of string quartet playing, must absolutely hear this recording.” David Rowe, *Classical CD Review*

Resident Quartet at Kings Place, London, the **Piatti Quartet** are widely renowned for their “profound music making” (*The Strad*) and their “lyrical warmth” (*BBC Music Magazine*).

Since their prizewinning performances at the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, they've performed all over the world and made international broadcasts from many countries.

The Piattis are well-known for their diverse programming across the spectrum of quartet writing, and have commissioned and recorded major and impressive works to add to the quartet canon in recent years.

The quartet's name is dedicated to Alfredo Piatti, a 19th-century virtuoso cellist who was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music (the alma mater of the founders of the quartet) and also a major exponent of the chamber and contemporary music of his time.

Huw Watkins was born in Wales in 1976 and studied piano with Peter Lawson at Chetham's School of Music and composition with Robin Holloway, Alexander Goehr and Julian Anderson at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music. In 2001 he was awarded the Constant and Kit Lambert Junior Fellowship at the Royal College of Music, where he later taught composition. He currently teaches composition at the Royal Academy of Music.

As one of the UK's finest pianists, Watkins has premiered works by Oliver Knussen, Tansy Davies, Mark-Anthony Turnage and Michael Zev Gordon and has performed concertos with numerous leading orchestras including the *BBC Symphony Orchestra* and *London Sinfonietta*. His recordings include chamber music discs on *Chandos*, *Signum* and *Nimbus*; Alexander Goehr's piano cycle 'Symmetry Disorders Reach' on *Wergo*; and music by Knussen on *NMC*. Watkins was awarded the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Elise L. Stoecker Prize in 2016.

His own music has been recorded twice for *NMC* – 'In my craft or sullen art', a chamber music disc, in 2012; and a second disc of orchestral music, 'Symphony', in 2018. 'Five Larkin Songs' with Carolyn Sampson and Joseph Middleton (2020); and his captivating song cycle 'Echo' (2023) with soprano Ruby Hughes both came out subsequently on *BIS*.

schott-music.com/en/person/huw-watkins piattiquartet.com

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Programme Notes

PIATTI QUARTET with HUW WATKINS



3pm, Sunday October 5th, 2025
Little Missenden Church

65th Little Missenden Festival