

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 23 July 2026
1.00pm

Charles Wood Centenary

The Bridge String Quartet

Colin Twigg violin
Catherine Schofield violin
Michael Schofield viola
Lucy Wilding cello

Charles Wood (1866-1926)

Variations on an Irish Folk Tune (1916)

String Quartet Movement in G minor (?1917)

String Quartet No. 6 in D (1916-7)

I. Allegro con moto

II. Allegro vivace

III. Adagio

IV. Allegro molto



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'To the public, Charles Wood is best known by his choral works and songs, but to composers and string players he is emphatically one of that small band of chamber music composers whose music really counts.' Those words could almost have been written today. But they were, in fact, written in January 1916 by Marion Scott, herself a violinist, in an article on Wood and his chamber music. He was born in 1866 in Armagh, where his father was a member of the Cathedral choir. In due course, the young Charles became a chorister and so began his musical education. At the age of 17, he won a scholarship to the newly-founded Royal College of Music, where he became a pupil of Stanford. Five years later, he was appointed to the teaching staff. In 1889, he became the organ scholar of Gonville and Caius College in Cambridge and was elected a Fellow of the College a year later. He continued to teach at these institutions for the rest of his life. On the death of Stanford in 1924, he was appointed Professor of Music at Cambridge. Sadly, his health was not good and it was to be a brief tenure. He died in Cambridge on 29 July 1926.

His interest in Irish folk music was sparked in the 1890s, when he collaborated on a collection of Irish Folk Songs. While his sacred choral music remained largely free of Irish idioms, they began to feature extensively in his instrumental music as you will hear in today's programme. All three pieces were composed during the First World War.

Variations on an Irish Folk Tune

A note on the autograph score of the *Variations* records that the work was completed on 25 August 1916. Professor Edward Dent, his successor at Cambridge, believed that the work had been intended as the slow movement for a projected string quartet. But the inner power of the music had taken over and the piece ended as a work in its own right. It is a truism that the best variations are composed on the blandest of themes. The Irish tune that Wood has chosen here is quite ordinary and yet he has conjured up a wonderful set of 16 variations, while introducing several other themes of an Irish character. There is also a reminder that the work was composed in wartime as one hears echoes of military drums. The *Variations* had one performance in Cambridge in May 1925 and it is possible that the set of parts used in that performance is now held by the Royal College of Music.

String Quartet Movement in G minor

The First World War was a difficult time for Wood since his son, Patrick, was killed in the conflict as were many men who had been his pupils. At the same time,

the troubles in Ireland were becoming more intense. As a result, the Quartet Movement in G minor is a serious and dark-hued work. It is undated, though Edward Dent believed that it was probably composed in 1916-7. As with much of Wood's instrumental music, there is a strong Irish influence. The movement was probably intended as the first movement of a projected string quartet. Yet, like the young Schubert with his *Quartettsatz*, Wood seems to have been at a loss as to how he should continue. The movement, with its modal inflections, has a great intensity and power, quite unlike the music found in the earlier quartets. It first appeared, with expression marks added by Dent, in a memorial volume published by Gonville and Caius College in 1929.

String Quartet No. 6 in D

This Quartet No. 6 in D is the last of Wood's six acknowledged quartets and is believed by several authorities to be his finest. In her article entitled *The Chamber Music of Charles Wood*, Marion Scott does not include the work. She hoped, though, that Wood would compose at least one more quartet. This would suggest that the work dates from 1916-7. I am grateful to Jeremy Dibble, whose book on Wood has recently appeared, for letting me know that the work had one performance. It was played by the Philharmonic Quartet at a Cambridge University Music Society Popular Concert in the Cambridge Guildhall on 13 November 1918. Despite taking place two days after the Armistice, the *Cambridge Daily News* reported the concert. 'Dr Wood's Quartet was charming. It well illustrates the modern treatment of folksong in quartet-writing and immediately delighted the audience.'

The first movement is in sonata form and is based on three Irish-sounding themes, the first of which returns at the end to act as the coda. The second movement is a short scherzo with, in places, the feel of an Irish reel. It is in binary form. The first section is lively with two melodies, both introduced by the viola, while the second section is more lyrical. After a repeat of the first section, the coda brings back the two viola melodies before ending quietly. The slow movement is a set of variations on 'an Irish theme of singular beauty', to quote Professor Dent. The movement starts and ends calmly and quietly in the key of F sharp major. However, for the more agitated middle section, Wood moves to the enharmonic key of G flat major. The high-spirited finale is full of Irish-sounding melodies and rhythms before ending with a lively jig.

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