

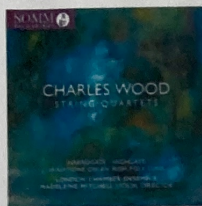
C Wood

String Quartets – No 2 in E flat, 'Highgate';

No 4 in E flat, 'Harrogate'. Variations on an Irish Folk Tune

London Chamber Ensemble

Somm (SOMMCD0723 • 70')



Led by the indefatigable Madeleine Mitchell, the members of the

London Chamber Ensemble have already alerted us to Armagh-born Charles Wood's formidable skills in the field of chamber music, the work under the spotlight being the last of his six numbered string quartets (a captivating offering, completed around 1916). Coupled with the 1920 version of Herbert Howells's exhilarating and achingly personal *In Gloucestershire*, it's an album that understandably found favour with Adrian Edwards (12/24) – and I can bestow just as warm a welcome on this comparably enterprising newcomer.

Both of the quartets here share the same home key of E flat, No 2's intriguing epithet in all likelihood sparked by fond memories of visiting his elder brother, William, who taught music at Highgate School. The work was begun in April 1893 and finished six months later, by which time Wood was based in Cambridge and dividing his time between teaching at the Royal College of Music (where he had studied under Stanford) and his duties as organ scholar to Gonville and Caius College (the following year, he was appointed its first director of music). It's an eminently assured, clean-cut affair, by no means lacking in fresh-faced appeal. The best music is to be found in the touchingly expressive, passacaglia-like slow movement, which comprises eight miniature variations on a seven-bar viola theme over a ground bass; the way the husky timbre of the viola's low register offsets the tremolando first and second violins in the coda is highly effective.

Pleasing achievement as it is, however, it's effortlessly outstripped by its companion, which evinces a swaggering confidence, cogent thrust and idiomatic flair that really make one sit up. Not only are the ideas more strongly individual and subtly integrated throughout, there's an acute awareness, too, of the bigger scheme that genuinely impresses (that flattened seventh early on already hinting at the nourishing harmonic and emotional rewards of the journey ahead). Once again, the slow movement is particularly eloquent, a gloriously songful theme-and-variations

in A flat with a distinct Irish flavour, and it's preceded by an aphoristic scherzo with many a jinking sidestep. Moreover, the opening *Allegro con moto* is a consummately crafted, superbly argued creation, while the rondo finale's effervescent reel culminates in a tremendous burst of energy.

Incidentally, this fine piece also boasts a nickname, in this instance *Harrogate* – Wood having completed it in August 1912 during a happy stay with his wife in the North Yorkshire spa town. Sandwiched between the two quartets, the characterful and engagingly mellifluous *Variations on an Irish Folk Tune* (dated August 25, 1916, on the manuscript, and based on a melody originating from County Mayo) is never less than enjoyable, but it's the Fourth Quartet that really stands out.

What a lovely album this is, showcasing performances of heart-warming dedication, shapely sensitivity and infectious spontaneity. Truthful sound and balance, too. As ever, Jeremy Dibble's extensive notes provide an abundance of insightful detail and helpful context. Do investigate!

Andrew Achenbach