

# Music@Menlo *LIVE*

## 2 Maps and Legends

Music@Menlo's eighth season, *Maps and Legends*, explored a wide compass of times, places, and universal phenomena. The season's offerings ranged from programs that celebrated a nation's identity to music composed in response to the changing of the seasons and the trauma of war. The 2010 edition of Music@Menlo *LIVE* chronicles this fascinating journey, preserving for listeners the exceptional performances that made *Maps and Legends* such a memorable experience.

Disc 2 spotlights the rebirth of England's musical culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Following the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, England entered a long era of silence, becoming known for two centuries as "a land without music." Sir Edward Elgar reawakened England's composers to the richness of their musical heritage with his iconic *Enigma Variations* for orchestra in 1896. With Elgar leading the way, subsequent generations of English composers—including William Walton and Benjamin Britten—revitalized their country's musical landscape.

### **BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976): *A Charm of Lullabies* (1947)**

Arguably England's greatest composer of the twentieth century, Benjamin Britten was an especially key figure in the advancement of that country's vocal tradition. The confluence of a deep sensitivity to literature, the composer's fruitful partnership with the tenor Peter Pears, and the particular qualities of Britten's musical language yielded an extensive catalog of vocal music whose quality is unsurpassed in the postwar era.



Ani Kavafian, violin; Lily Francis, viola; Wu Han, piano; David Finckel, cello

Britten composed his Opus 41 song cycle *A Charm of Lullabies* for the soprano Nancy Evans following the premiere of his second opera, *The Rape of Lucretia*, in 1947. Evans had doubled the lead role in the opera and was furthermore instrumental in guaranteeing the funds to launch the Aldeburgh Festival, an arts festival founded by Britten, Pears, and the librettist Eric Crozier the following year. The cycle presumably was an expression of Britten's appreciation; Evans received it in the mail with a note from Britten that the title, "thought up by Eric and me, is only provisional, do you like it?"

The cycle comprises five songs on texts by William Blake, Robert Burns, Robert Greene, Thomas Randolph, and John Philip. The poems are lullabies, but each contains some enigmatic element, magnified by Britten's musical setting. In "A Cradle Song" (a poem possibly

intended for Blake's *Songs of Innocence*), the piano accompaniment obliges "the cunning wiles that creep/In thy little heart asleep" with unsettling harmonic ambiguity. Likewise, Britten sets the cryptic words of the fourth song, "A Charm," to music at once playful and threatening. Even the cycle's sweetest moments, in "The Nurse's Song," are tempered by the haunting absence of the piano.

**WILLIAM WALTON (1902–1983): Piano Quartet (1918–1921, revised 1955, 1974–1975)**

Seeking a stronger education for his son than what their home province of Oldham offered, the English baritone and choirmaster Charles Walton enrolled ten-year-old William in the Choir School at Oxford's Christ Church. In addition to his choral training, early piano and violin lessons revealed the younger Walton's musical aptitude, and he was admitted by the Right Reverend Thomas Banks Strong, Dean of Christ Church College, to the university six years later at the age of sixteen. Recognizing Walton's musical precocity, the Reverend Strong furthermore secured the necessary funding to support his studies. In the same year as his matriculation at Christ Church College, Walton undertook his first major work, a quartet for piano and strings. He later dedicated the Piano Quartet to his benefactor as a token of gratitude.

Although Walton's foundation, rooted in his boyhood years as a Christ Church Cathedral chorister, was decidedly English, he was equally fascinated by composers ranging from Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky to George Gershwin as he was by Edward Elgar and his own English contemporaries. The Piano Quartet brandishes with abandon the catholicity of Walton's palate.

An essentially English pastoral theme, introduced by the violin over a rustic drone in the cello, guides the opening *Allegro moderato* through a veritable harmonic wilderness. The music in turn evokes Elgar, German Romanticism, French Impressionism, and American popular song. Walton integrates these disparate elements with a degree of cohesiveness remarkable for any composer, let alone a teenager.

The *Allegro scherzando* demonstrates even greater daring, in its impish rhythmic gait as well as its harmonic freedom. A clever *fugato* passage in the strings briefly recalls the first movement's pastoral theme. The movement's highest drama occurs in passages marked by melodic breadth and spacious piano chords but encompassing divergent harmonic worlds: now in debonair Oxford fashion and then marked by harrowing chords that call to mind *The Rite of Spring*.

The lovely *Andante tranquillo* sets unabashedly heartfelt tunes in a deceptively sophisticated harmonic landscape. Murky chords in the piano colored by rarefied violin harmonics raise the curtain on the contrasting middle section; a softly crooned viola melody develops into a stark recollection of the first movement's main theme. The music intensifies and the movement's dreamy opening returns.

Echoing the thematic materials of the first movement, the closing *Allegro molto* begins with a startling burst of energy. The finale further betrays Walton's diverse spectrum of musical influences. The movement is rife with references to Stravinsky, Ravel, and jazz. A complex fugue later in the movement nods to the modal folk idiom of Walton's countryman Ralph Vaughan Williams.

**EDWARD ELGAR (1857–1934): Piano Quintet in a minor, op. 84 (1918–1919)**

In 1917, with Europe engulfed in the First World War, Edward Elgar departed London for the English countryside. He remarked to a friend, "I cannot do any real work with the awful shadow over us." Elgar and his family retreated to Brinkwells, a secluded cottage in Sussex, where they could enjoy some measure of escape from the war's centrality to daily life. The change of scenery rejuvenated Elgar. He immediately set to work on two new chamber pieces: the Opus 82 Violin Sonata and Opus 83 String Quartet. He completed the sonata on September 15, 1918, and proceeded immediately to the Piano Quintet in a minor, op. 84, which has endured as his finest contribution to the chamber music literature.

When he had completed the quintet's first movement, Elgar wrote to the critic Ernest Newman (to whom he would later dedicate the work), "It is strange music I think and I like

it—but it’s ghostly stuff.” A spurious legend associated with the twisted trees immediately outside Brinkwells prompted the music’s ghostliness. According to W. H. Reed, Elgar’s biographer and one of the violinists who took part in the quintet’s premiere, the work was inspired by a story about a group of Spanish monks who were turned into trees after performing a sacrilegious ritual. This supposed legend, accepted for a time as the quintet’s genuine program, was actually a fiction invented by a friend of Elgar’s (the perfectly named Algernon Blackwood).

Inauthenticity notwithstanding, Elgar’s atmospheric music perfectly captures the spirit of the faux-legend. The piano intones a stoic melody evocative of Gregorian chant amidst eerie whispers in the strings. The influence of Brahms and German Romanticism becomes evident with the emergence of the first theme. Following the spooky introduction and Brahmsian theme, Elgar presents the lighter second subject: amiable salon music that nevertheless proceeds cautiously, as if suspicious of trouble afoot. As Elgar establishes and develops further thematic material, the “ghostly stuff” of the introduction continues to haunt the movement.

The exquisite *Adagio* is the quintet’s centerpiece emotionally as well as structurally. Elgar biographer Percy M. Young writes, “[I]n some ways, the *Adagio* may be ranked as Elgar’s greatest single movement.” Elgar couches the serene intimacy of the heartrending theme in orchestral majesty. The spacious texture Elgar achieves with the ensemble of piano and strings is a sonic signature of English music of this period.

The finale opens with a recollection of the first movement introduction, reinforcing the quintet’s sense of narrative, before the strings present a sweeping new theme en masse. Midway through the movement, Elgar unexpectedly returns the listener to the twisted trees outside Brinkwells. The first movement’s sunnier second theme also reappears, now reduced to an anxious murmur. But Elgar ultimately restores the finale’s confident demeanor, ending the work on a triumphant note.

—Patrick Castillo



## About Music@Menlo

Music@Menlo is an internationally acclaimed three-week summer festival and institute that combines world-class chamber music performances, extensive audience engagement with artists, intensive training for preprofessional musicians, and efforts to enhance and broaden the chamber music community of the San Francisco Bay Area. An immersive and engaging experience centered around a distinctive array of programming, Music@Menlo enriches its core concert programs with numerous opportunities for in-depth learning to intensify audiences’ enjoyment and understanding of the music and provide meaningful ways for aficionados and newcomers of all ages to explore classical chamber music.