

## Leo Geyer    Born 1992    Unfurling

Leo Geyer was born in London of Anglo-Indian descent. He studied jointly at Manchester University and Royal Northern College of Music where the emphasis was on composition and conducting. After graduation Leo moved to Vienna University of Music and Performing Arts where he studied conducting. Back in the UK Leo has worked with many orchestras and has also continued to compose. He has restored and performed a collection of music that was written in Auschwitz. Leo has trained at the BBC as a presenter and has broadcast on R3 and in the BBC proms.

For a fuller biog go to [Leogeyer.co.uk](http://Leogeyer.co.uk)

Unfurling is a short piece for string quartet which was commissioned by the Elmore Quartet in 2022. The first performance was at King's Place London, in 2024.

The piece opens with a rocking motif using open strings which are a fifth apart. This reflects the unfurling of a fern as it grows in spring. Harmonically the central section is broader and more stretching but the piece returns to the first rocking 5ths idea thus giving an ABA structure, which is so readily absorbed and understood by listeners on their first hearing of a piece.

## Claude Debussy (1862-1918) "String Quartet No 1 in G minor Op 10" (1893)

*Animé et très décidé*

*Assez vif et bien rythmé*

*Andantino, doucement expressif*

*Très modéré – Très mouvementé et avec passion*

Debussy's own title for this work is rather misleading: he only wrote one string quartet and it was the only work to which he gave an opus number (10 sounds like an impressive number for the ambitious young composer to have arrived at); it was also the only work for which he specified the key. The quartet was written for a music society in Paris who admired the serious, classical Germanic tradition of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, in preference to the more frivolous path (operetta, opéra comique) that French music had taken in the 1860s. The piece's form is classical: four conventional movements all derived from its opening motif. Within this structure Debussy weaves his own densely detailed magic using modal along with tonal harmonies. Sadly, neither the society's audience nor Debussy's supporters, such as Ernest Chausson, were impressed; the best thing that anyone managed to say about the quartet was that it was '*bewilderingly full of originality and charm, but diabolically difficult*'. Subsequent generations have still found it full of originality and charm, but less bewilderingly difficult; indeed it is now a popular favourite.

Debussy admired César Franck's use of 'cyclical form' where material reappears in later movements; here it is the opening material that returns in various guises. For example, it appears, with F# rather than F, in the viola's opening theme of the *Assez vif* second movement. Cyclical form asserts itself in a big way in the last movement – a movement that

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is in G minor (one flat) and 4/4 time, marked 'Animé et très décidé' and 'f'. It shows a rocking motif with notes G, F, D and a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff is in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time, marked 'Assez vif' and 'f'. It shows the same motif with F# instead of F, also with a triplet of eighth notes.

gave Debussy problems ('I think I can finally show you the last movement of the quartet, which has made me really miserable!').

After about a hundred bars the work's opening theme returns slowed to half speed and a third lower; it then grows to dominate the movement's native material before the triumphant close.



### **Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Quartettsatz in C minor, D.703 (1820)**

*Allegro assai*

At the age of eight, Schubert started to learn the violin from his father; six years later he was composing for the family string quartet: brothers Ignaz and Ferdinand on violin, Franz on viola and his father on cello. However, the eleven or so quartets that Schubert wrote between the ages of 14 and 20 are now, like Mozart's early quartets, rarely played. The exuberant "Trout" piano quintet of 1819 and this *Quartettsatz*, a surviving first movement of a planned C minor quartet written in 1820, set the scene for the great chamber works of his later years: in 1824 the Octet, the "Rosamunde" and "Death and the Maiden" quartets; in 1826 the G major quartet; in 1827 his two piano trios; and in his last year, 1828, the incomparable C major two-cello quintet. It is not clear why Schubert failed to continue with the "*Quartettsatz*" quartet beyond its first movement and a sketch of 40 odd bars for an *Andante*. It may be that he was unable to match the power of the first movement to make a hoped-for great leap forward in quartet writing.

The movement opens with threatening, semi-tonal creepings. "The phrase itself has a dramatic intensity which is new in Schubert's chamber music, an intensity which is all the more powerful because it begins quietly" (Jack Westrup). The tension is relaxed by the joyfully open, *dolce* second subject; it encourages the transformation of the opening phrase into more nostalgic versions of itself, before the opening phrase's final emphatic return.



### **Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) String Quartet No.2 in C, Op.36 (1945)**

*Allegro calmo senza rigore*

*Vivace*

*Chacony: Sostenuto – molto più andante – Molto più adagio*

Britten's compositions for string quartet fall into three groups that were written at very different times of his life: first, a number of early works from his teens (1928-33) reflect his growing independence from his teacher, Brightonian Frank Bridge; second, his first two numbered quartets, the first finished in 1941 in America and the second in October 1945, a few months after the premier of *Peter Grimes*. Finally, his third quartet was composed after the opera *Death in Venice*, shortly before Britten's own death.

Britten had met Bridge through his first violin teacher, Audrey Alston, who had been a fellow student with Bridge at the Royal College. Although Bridge, an established composer,

was only teaching violin rather than composition, he was so impressed by Britten's precocious compositions that he befriended him and took him under his compositional wing, probably also encouraging Britten's pacifism. When Britten and Pears left England at the end of April 1939, sailing on the SS *Ausonia* for Canada, Frank Bridge saw them off, giving Britten his viola. It was their last sight of him, since he died in 1941, the year Britten finished his String Quartet No 1. That work was commissioned by Mrs Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge to whom Britten had been introduced through Bridge.

Today's second quartet was written after Britten's return to England and the success of *Peter Grimes*. In July 1945 Britten and Menuhin spent a gruelling 10 days touring Germany including a visit to Belsen where they played for survivors. Britten said that his visit to Belsen coloured everything he subsequently wrote. The despairing and angry mood of his song cycle *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* stems from this visit. The second quartet followed shortly afterwards and like the *Sonnets* was written in commemoration of Purcell's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday that year; it was premiered exactly on Purcell's birthday. The work was commissioned by arts patron and friend Mary Behrend to whom he wrote of it from Aldeburgh: 'to my mind it is the greatest advance I have yet made'.

The opening bar (*illustrated*) shows Britten's unsurpassed ability to conjure sound: a simple rising tenth with the four strings in octaves and the viola also holding the initial bottom C, the whole on a diminuendo. Simple. And magic. We are entering a different world – part Purcell, part the sea swell of *Grimes*, part Balinese gamelan - and all grounded in Britten's 'home' key of C. In fact the whole quartet is firmly grounded in C, emphatically so with the 23 consecutive C-major chords at the end of the last movement. It is remarkable that Britten can produce such variety throughout the piece despite keeping so close to this home key.

**Allegro calmo senza rigore**

The illustration shows a single staff of music in 2/2 time, key of C major. The melody consists of a rising tenth: C2 (whole note), G2 (quarter note), A2 (quarter note), B2 (quarter note), C3 (quarter note), D3 (quarter note), E3 (quarter note), F3 (quarter note), G3 (quarter note), A3 (quarter note), B3 (quarter note), C4 (half note). The first note is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a diminuendo hairpin.

The second movement's series of nightmare episodes is a complete contrast to the first. It is in C minor and starts with *fortissimo* stabs against the muted flutterings of unsettling moths. The unease is augmented by echoing, parallel descending scales one note apart (*illustrated*). A ghoulish tripping accompaniment introduces anguished howling octaves from the first violin. Finally the moths flit away into the night and the nightmare is over.

The illustration shows two staves of music in 6/8 time, key of C minor. Both staves feature parallel descending eighth-note scales, one note apart. The top staff starts with a piano (*pp*) *legato* dynamic and ends with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The bottom staff also starts with a piano (*pp*) *legato* dynamic and ends with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic.

The third movement brings us home from these torments to the security of C major and a Purcellian Chacony. The portentous opening (*illustrated*) heralds a substantial movement, and indeed it is longer than the first two together. The Chacony theme is first played by all four instruments in octaves and is followed by 21 variations in four sets separated by cadenzas from cello, viola and then first violin. As Britten explained in a short program note for the première: 'The sections may be said to review the theme from (a) harmonic, (b) rhythmic, (c) melodic, and (d) formal aspects'. This massive structure ends

**Sostenuto**

The illustration shows a single staff of music in 3/2 time, key of C major. The melody consists of a series of notes: C2 (half note), G2 (quarter note), A2 (quarter note), B2 (quarter note), C3 (quarter note), D3 (quarter note), E3 (quarter note), F3 (quarter note), G3 (quarter note), A3 (quarter note), B3 (quarter note), C4 (half note). The dynamics are marked as *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mf*, *p*, *f*, *mf*, *ff*.

with a final variation interleaved with those 23 consecutive C major chords: an impressive and original ending to a profound and moving work.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin (Britten, Debussy and Schubert) and Helen Simpson (Geyer).