



Steve ELCOCK

CHAMBER MUSIC, VOLUME TWO: STRING QUARTETS

THE AFTERMATH OF LONGING
THE CAGE OF OPPROBRIUM
THE GIRL FROM MARSEILLE
NIGHT AFTER NIGHT

The Tippett Quartet

FIRST RECORDINGS

MY MUSIC FOR STRING QUARTET

by Steve Elcock

In late 2013, I received an e-mail from David Conway, founder of the 'Indian Summer of Music' festival in Levoča, Slovakia, asking if my string quartet *The Girl from Marseille* could be performed during the festival the following year. This request was the first tangible result of the discovery of my music in August 2013 by Martin Anderson, founder and director of Toccata Classics. Before that time I had been writing music for as long as I can remember but without telling anyone I was doing so. There were two reasons for my reticence: one was that I didn't know whom to tell – living in rural France did not help here – and the other was that my default assumption was that no one would be interested anyway.

I was born in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, in 1957 and studied at the local grammar school, where I obtained an A-Level in music and learnt the violin up to grade 7. Those are my only musical qualifications: as a composer I am otherwise self-taught. I trained as a teacher of French but, once qualified, in 1981, I immediately moved to France where I have lived ever since, working until my retirement in language services for companies. Work and raising a family took up most of my time until the mid-1990s when I joined the local amateur symphony orchestra as a violinist, then a violist and finally as conductor. It was at this time that I began composing in earnest, and several of my early works received their first performance with this orchestra.

By the early 2000s it was becoming increasingly difficult to find good amateur musicians and the orchestra disbanded, leaving me free to write without having to take account of the technical limits of the musicians, but by the same token leaving me with no possibility of hearing my work. The Third and Fourth Symphonies were the immediate fruit of this new-found technical freedom.

Martin's timely discovery led in 2017 to the first recording of my music: the Third Symphony and two other works by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

under Paul Mann.¹ The favourable reviews of this recording and the airing on BBC Radio Three of one of the other pieces, *Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction*, led to some measure of recognition. Two other orchestral albums, both with the Siberian Symphony Orchestra under Dmitry Vasiliev,² and a recording of my chamber music by the Veles Ensemble³ followed over the next few years. A planned BBC Philharmonic performance and recording of the Fourth Symphony fell an early victim to Covid in March 2020, but will be rescheduled.

Meeting the conductor Ken Woods – again thanks to Martin – led in 2022 to my being nominated as the John McCabe Composer-in-Association for the English Symphony Orchestra, which has since recorded the Eighth Symphony and the Violin Concerto for later release (on Nimbus). They have performed both works in concert and have also premiered the symphonic poem *Wreck*.

<https://steveelcock.fr/>

***The Cage of Opprobrium, Op. 22* (2014)**

October 2014 found me in the Slovak town of Levoča for the first performance of my string quartet *The Girl from Marseille*. While exploring the region, I came upon a sixteenth-century metal pillory in the form of an iron cage, described in the tourist brochure as ‘the cage of opprobrium’. Among the people it was used to punish were women whose only crime was to have been found walking unaccompanied in the streets after dark. They were usually locked in the cage for 24 hours and were no doubt made to suffer humiliation from the local populace. This cage immediately struck me as being shot through with powerful tensions that demanded musical expression. First, because the opprobrium, or shame, should more properly be heaped on the head of those who

¹ Symphony No. 3, Op. 16 (2005–10), *Choses renversées par le temps ou la destruction*, Op. 20 (2013), and the *Festive Ouverture*, Op. 7 (1997), were released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0400.

² *Incubus*, Op. 28 (2017), *Haven: Fantasia on a Theme by J. S. Bach*, Op. 4 (1995, rev. 2011–17), and Symphony No. 5, Op. 21 (2014), were released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0445 and Symphony No. 6, *Tyrants Destroyed*, Op. 30 (2017), *Manic Dancing*, Op. 25, for piano and orchestra (2015), and Symphony No. 7, Op. 33 (2020), on TOCC 0616.

³ String Trio No. 1, Op. 8b (1998/2016), Clarinet Sextet, Op. 11b, for clarinet and string quintet (2001/2014), *An Outstretched Hand*, Op. 24, for flute, clarinet and piano quartet (2015) and *The Shed Dances*, Op. 26b, for clarinet and string trio (2016) were presented on Toccata Classics TOCC 0506.

had invented such a cruel instrument of torture, and not on that of the people it was designed to punish. Second, because the cage is decorated with wrought-iron hearts and lilies, symbols of love and innocence. It is hard to reconcile such symbols with the intention behind the pillory.

In *The Cage of Opprobrium* I have not attempted to resolve these contradictions in any way, but have tried to express them in music that is by turns angry and heartbroken. The work is in five sections, played without a break, and alternating slow and fast music. The two fast parts are to some extent developments of the opening slow music. In the slow sections, making the voices overlap with one another and the use of superimposed fifths causes the instruments to sound old and strained, as if all the pain inflicted throughout the ages is keeping them from sounding in tune any more. The five sections may be heard as portraying how the captive girl occupies her time inside the cage: sighing [1], dancing [2], singing [3], screaming [4] and mourning [5], the cage itself a symbol of man's inhumanity to mankind in general and to women in particular.

The Cage of Opprobrium was first performed on 10 October 2015 by the Czech Philharmonic Quartet as part of the 'Indian Summer' festival in Levoča. The work is dedicated to David and Nadia Conway, the festival organisers.

***The Girl from Marseille, Op. 17* (2010)**

This was the first of my string quartets to be written, if one discounts four much earlier attempts which I have since plundered for use in other pieces, most notably my Eighth Symphony. It started out as a joke to relieve the tedium of having to play the same music once a month at a certain gathering that I attended for some sixteen years, and quickly became a self-imposed challenge: to write one variation per month over a period of eight months.

There are many instances in music of themes being made to undergo variation as a means of creating a large-scale musical structure from something that in itself may be quite insignificant. The usual approach is to state the theme first, and then subject it to variations. I find this method unsatisfactory: I feel that it is much more fun to have the theme emerge via the variations and let the listener discover it gradually. I have watched

the effect on the audience as light slowly dawns during performances of *The Girl from Marseille* and it is a source of much delight, for me certainly, and I hope for the audience too.

The eight variations follow each other without a break. The first (*Poco Andante*) [6] does duty as an introduction, with a calm melody in the viola sandwiched between ethereal violins and a trilling bass. The central part is more agitated, throwing out heavy hints as to the subject of the variations before the viola melody returns. The second variation (*Allegro*) [7] has its material split up into semiquavers and divided over the three upper instruments, giving an effect of sustained but pulsating notes. Variation 3 (*Allegro molto*) [8] offers a nod to Stravinsky, culminating in a nasty, snarling passage over a rumbling bass. In contrast, the fourth variation (*Largo*) [9] begins quietly over a funeral rhythm, but it soon goes horribly out of tune and reaches a terrifying climax, after which the theme returns on all three higher instruments, offset from one another by a quaver to give a distant, echo-chamber effect.

Light relief is provided by the fifth variation (*Allegro*) [10] in which the cello has the theme beneath a lively rhythmic figure in the violins, the viola providing the bass. Variation 6 (*Andante*) [11] is an interlude, having only the remotest kinship with the theme. Its gentle melody may call to mind the music of Gabriel Fauré, and provides a moment of calm before the seventh variation (*Vivace*) breaks out [12], unsure whether it is in $\frac{6}{8}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$. The last variation (*Poco Allegro, Tempo di valse, Più allegro, Presto*), the finale in all but name, begins confidently [13], but is quickly undermined by the first violin, who is instructed to play as if he has forgotten what he is supposed to be doing. The cello calls him back to order in military style and everyone then has a go at a jazzy version of the theme. After another military interruption the theme takes on the character of a waltz, which quite naturally goes over into a recapitulation of the viola melody from the opening variation, with a *col legno* accompaniment from the first violin. The theme is then at last presented almost verbatim and the end seems in sight, but instead a raucous double fugue bursts onto the scene at top speed to drive the music to a hectic conclusion.

The Girl from Marseille was first performed during the 'Indian Summer' festival in Levoča on 11 October 2014 by the Czech Philharmonic Quartet.

***The Aftermath of Longing, Op. 36* (2021)**

This work is the most recent of these four quartets to be written and the only one not to have received a public performance so far. Like the three others recorded here, it is in a single continuous movement. The title sets the atmosphere of the piece, particularly that of the outer slow sections. It has no programmatic associations other than those that the listener may care to bring.

From its gently pulsating opening on the note D [14] until its icy close, none of the passages in this piece is destined to get anywhere: all peter out in one way or another as though they have lost the will to live. Fragments of melody come and go; the music stops and starts in an atmosphere of quiet regret. A chant-like passage [15] leads to a brief climax, but that does nothing to alleviate the climate of sadness and the music continues in the same vein, in a section marked *Tranquillo* [16]. As it dies away, the music seems almost frozen with grief, and is indeed at that point marked to be played *gelidamente* ('icily') [17]. At last an *allegro* arrives [18] and with it a sense of momentum. Some anger is stirred, but it seems half-hearted and soon subsides into an obsessive ticking figure. Eventually the opening is recapitulated, still in the *allegro* tempo, and a sizable climax is achieved, bringing some release. The music gathers itself again over a nagging rhythmic figure and builds to a long, drawn-out scream which gradually [19] subsides, leaving only the D from the opening.

In the closing pages, the viola intones a long threnody over a pedal bass, becoming less and less articulate until at last the very substance seems drained out of the music, leaving only ghostly harmonic suspensions fading away to nothing.

The Aftermath of Longing is dedicated to the Tippett Quartet in gratefulness for having sought out my music, performed it, and now recorded it.

***Night after Night, Op. 27* (2017)**

In March 2019 I received a message from a musician then unknown to me: Jeremy Isaac, the second violin of the Tippett Quartet. The message ran 'Dear Steve, Mike Ponder, a long-time colleague and friend of my quartet [...] was speaking very highly about your string quartets on our most recent recording project. We would love to get to know

them!’ Mike had been the production engineer on two earlier recordings of my music, and so was familiar with my idiom. I sent Jeremy the parts and full scores of my quartets, and Mike’s recommendation quickly bore fruit in the shape of the first performance of the quartet *Night after Night* at Caryl Churchill Theatre, Royal Holloway University of London, on 17 October of the same year.

The title of the quartet comes from a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson: one of his *Songs of Travel*, entitled ‘The infinite shining heavens’. The third and final verse begins ‘Night after night in my sorrow’ and it is this phrase which provides the key to the atmosphere of the piece, especially the fourth section.

The work is in one continuous movement, broken up into six sections to three of which I have given the following names: *Pavor nocturnus*, *Per noctem plurima volvens* and *Incubus*. Beginning the work, and inserted between each of the three sections, is a kind of refrain, which I have called ‘Somniloquy’, or sleep-talking, an apparently common phenomenon during which the subject, while asleep, produces utterances ranging from nonsense to coherent sentences. The whole is intended to depict the lonely journey through the night of the chronic insomniac, a prey to fears, longing, loneliness and regret.

The first ‘Somniloquy’ (*Largo*) [20] begins with a gently revolving *ostinato* in the upper strings within which the cello projects a long melody, its notes making gentle but disturbing dissonances with the *ostinato*. These dissonances tend to suggest that what is being said is closer to nonsense than to coherent thought. The viola offers a variant of this melody over a *pizzicato* bass in the cello, while the *ostinato* continues. Another variant is then given by the first violin, and the *ostinato* runs away to nothing, leading to a period of stasis during which cello and first violin muse over the first three notes of the theme. The *ostinato* begins again, accompanying a canonic presentation of the theme between first violin and cello. The viola then seizes upon a small motif drawn from the *ostinato* which repeatedly punctuates the music as it takes on a doleful air. This motif will form the basis of the second section [21], marked *Allegro*. *Pavor nocturnus* means ‘night terror’ and is a sleep disorder involving abrupt awakening from sleep in a terrified state. The music is by turns violent and sinister with, in its central section, a

grotesque waltz, instructed to be played ‘rather drunkenly’. As it breaks up into isolated chords, the ‘Somniloquy’ refrain begins again [22], this time with the cello playing a fiendishly difficult version of the main theme in harmonics. Beneath the fading *ostinato*, the fourth section begins, *Largo* [23], as at the beginning. *Per noctem plurima volvens* is a quote from the *Aeneid*, Book 1. It means ‘turning over many things [in one’s mind] by night’, which is what one tends to do when struggling to get back to sleep. Here, the ‘many things’ are clearly sorrowful ones, as befits the Stevenson quote. The music seems hypnotically rooted to the spot, but in reality is constantly changing by small degrees. As it fades away, the final ‘Somniloquy’ enters [24]. It is very short, built on a fragment of the *ostinato* and transitions quickly into the sixth and final section [25]. The word *incubus* means a nightmare induced by a demon, and for the sake of completeness I would add that in folklore an incubus is also a demon in male form that seeks to have sexual intercourse with sleeping women. The nightmarish quality most in evidence in this section is that of obsessiveness, and is portrayed by vastly speeding up the *ostinato* from the opening of the work. Underneath, the cello plays the first two notes of the opening theme, expanding it by one note and then being joined by the viola. Together they describe a melodic turn,⁴ which joins the *ostinato* in an obsessive build-up until it can go no further, whereupon it simply stops, with the insomniac, who has managed to get to sleep after all, jolted awake by the surprise ending.

The Tippett Quartet – John Mills and Jeremy Isaac, violins; Lydia Lowndes-Northcott, viola; and Božidar Vukotić, cello – was formed in 1998, the name chosen in homage to Sir Michael Tippett in the very week of his death. The Quartet has performed in the UK’s major chamber music venues – including the Wigmore Hall, BBC Proms, Kings Place, Purcell Room and the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London and Bridgewater Hall in Manchester; it has broadcast on BBC Radio 3, and has toured Europe, Canada and Mexico. It has a broad and diverse repertoire that flows from its unusual versatility. The Quartet has an impressive catalogue of recordings, the most recent being awarded *Gramophone* ‘Record of the Month’: Gorécki quartets for Naxos. For Toccata Classics the Tippett Quartet has already recorded chamber music by David Braid

⁴ A turn is an ornament consisting, for example, of a note, the note above it, the note again, the note below it and the note again.



(on TOCC 0149), quintets by Stephen Dodgson (with the cellist Emma Abbate and pianist Susan Monks, on TOCC 0357) and song-cycles by Derek B. Scott (with the baritone James Atkinson and pianist Lynn Arnold, on TOCC 0619).

The Quartet pursues a keen interest in educational work with both schools and universities. It was Ensemble in Residence at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University, in 2012–13, and from 2015 it has been resident at Royal Holloway, University of London.

The Tippett musicians worked on a ground-breaking re-imagining of Beethoven's Op. 135 with composer/soundscape-artist Matthew Herbert and has also given numerous world and UK premieres, including newly discovered works by Tchaikovsky and Holst, as well as new works by John Adams, Alissa Firsova, Howard Goodall and Freya Waley-Cohen. The Tippett players also worked with Peter Maxwell-Davies for a performance of his String Quartet No. 9 at the South Bank, with Anthony Payne on his Quartet No. 1 for a live BBC broadcast from Spitalfields Festival, and Hugh Wood on his String Quartet No. 3 at the Presteigne Festival. They have had the enormous pleasure of collaborating with such inspirational soloists as Emma Abbate, Lynn Arnold, James Atkinson, Julian Bliss, Mary Dullea, Stephanie Gonley,

Craig Ogden, Lawrence Power, Kathryn Stott, Melvyn Tan, Nick Van Bloss and Ashley Wass. They have also performed with the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and premiered a newly written film score for Alfred Hitchcock's 1927 silent-film classic *The Lodger*. In 2014 they started a collaboration with some of the UK's finest jazz musicians with the launch of their 'Close To You' project – a tribute to the album that Frank Sinatra made with the Hollywood String Quartet. In 2011 they celebrated the centenary of the iconic film composer Bernard Herrmann with a series of concerts and radio broadcasts. They have worked with Damian Montagu and Hugh Bonneville for 'In a South Downs Way', a collection of poems set to music, and can also be heard as featured artists on the film *Knives Out*.

The Tippett Quartet recently released a recording of the Penderecki Quartets for Naxos which was described as 'life-enhancing' by *The Times* and gained a five-star review in *BBC Music Magazine*. This project was a special one: in January 2020 – only weeks before he died – Penderecki sent a letter giving the Quartet permission to record the Fourth Quartet.

<http://www.tippettquartet.co.uk/>

[@tippettquartet](https://twitter.com/tippettquartet)



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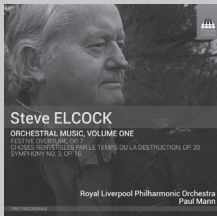
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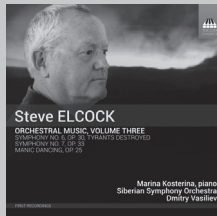
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T0CC 0400



TOCC 0445



10CC 0616



TCCC 0506

'Elcock may take on the mantle of the greatest living symphonist'

—David DeBoor Canfield, *Fanfare*

'Features of Elcock's style that strike the listener more or less instantly [...] are the confidence and fluency of his writing, a seemingly infinite melodic and harmonic imagination, an unerring sense of purpose and direction'

—Richard Hanlon, MusicWeb International

STEVE ELCOCK Chamber Music, Volume Two: String Quartets

***The Cage of Opprobrium, Op. 22* (2014)**

1	<i>Largo</i> –	18:48 4:34
2	<i>Allegretto</i> –	2:33
3	<i>Largo</i> –	4:26
4	<i>Allegro</i> –	3:52
5	<i>Largo come prima</i>	3:23

***The Girl from Marseille, Op. 17* (2010)**

6	Variation I (<i>Poco Andante</i>)	18:03 3:20
7	Variation II (<i>Allegro</i>)	1:30
8	Variation III (<i>Allegro molto</i>)	1:22
9	Variation IV (<i>Largo</i>)	3:27
10	Variation V (<i>Allegro</i>)	1:38
11	Variation VI (<i>Andante</i>)	2:00
12	Variation VII (<i>Vivace</i>)	1:13
13	Variation VIII (<i>Poco Allegro, Tempo di valse, Più allegro, Presto</i>)	3:33

***The Aftermath of Longing, Op. 36* (2021)**

14	<i>Largo</i> –	19:40 3:38
15	<i>Solenne</i> –	1:31
16	<i>Tranquillo</i> –	2:26
17	<i>Gelidamente</i> –	1:05
18	<i>Allegro</i> –	6:11
19	<i>Largo</i>	4:49

***Night after Night, Op. 27* (2017)**

20	Somniloquy –	23:58 6:59
21	<i>Pavor Nocturnus</i> –	5:22
22	Somniloquy –	1:25
23	<i>Per noctem plurima volvens</i> –	4:20
24	Somniloquy –	0:33
25	<i>Incubus</i>	

TT 80:31

The Tippett Quartet

John Mills and Jeremy Isaac, violins

Lydia Lowndes-Northcott, viola

Božidar Vukotić, cello

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MADE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE COMPOSER