



United Kingdom **Walton, Shostakovich, Elgar**: Atrium Quartet, Nicolas Stavy (piano), Bromsgrove Concerts 50th Anniversary, The Artrix, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, 18.10.2013.

Walton: String Quartet No 2 in A Minor (1947)

Shostakovich: Piano Quintet in G minor Op 57

Elgar: Piano Quintet in A minor Op 84

The post Second World War boom in the arts gave rise to music clubs and societies springing up in many towns and cities across the UK during the 1940s and 1950s. Their aim was to enrich peoples' lives after the horrors of the conflict by bringing classical music to wider audiences and communities. Many of these organisations still survive today and are flourishing, although sadly some music clubs have ceased to exist, victims of reductions in funding sources from both the public purse and private donors.

Bromsgrove Concerts Club (as it was first called) made a relatively late entry on to the music society scene. Their first concert was held in Routh Hall at Bromsgrove School on 22 October 1963. Over the years the Society, like many other similar organisations, has inevitably experienced both triumphs and difficulties. However it has built up an enviable reputation for putting on enterprising concerts by the most renowned performers. Bromsgrove also has a performing arts centre that must be the envy of any similar sized town. The Artrix was built in the middle part of the last decade and is a multipurpose arts centre possessing an excellent clear acoustic, perfect for chamber music.

One of the high points in the history of Bromsgrove Concerts was the Shostakovich weekend held in October 1992, when the Brodsky Quartet played all of the Russian master's 15 string quartets, an event that attracted concert goers from far and wide. So it was appropriate that Shostakovich should feature in the Society's 50th birthday concert.

The Atrium String Quartet hail from St Petersburg and have played twice at Bromsgrove Concerts before. Pianist Nicolas Stavy is one of the rising stars of today in France.

The programme began with Walton's *String Quartet in A minor* written in 1946-1947 and not to be confused with his early student work in the same key, which Walton later rejected. His mature Quartet is one of his finest works in any medium with a slow movement of profound beauty and eloquence. Walton's characteristic biting rhythmic energy and jazzy syncopations are also much on display in the fast second and fourth movements. The Atriums are to be congratulated on including this great work in their programme when most UK ensembles ignore it. They had the full measure of Walton's sun drenched lyricism and bitter sweet harmonies as well as the teasing rhythmic disruptions of the scherzo, a first cousin to the scherzo movement in Walton's *First Symphony*. Most impressive was the dark inward tone of Dmitry Pitulko's viola playing in the slow movement.

Shostakovich's *Piano Quintet* has always been one of his most popular works. It won him the Stalin prize in 1940 and right from the outset was taken up by ensembles in Western Europe. The work displays Shostakovich's fascination with baroque forms which was to eventually result in the *24 Preludes and Fugues for piano* composed in 1950. This five movement *Quintet* also begins with a massive Prelude and Fugue, by turns declamatory and introspective. The main theme of the fugue bears more than a passing resemblance to a melody in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony.

Despite a somewhat variable sounding keyboard pianist Nicolas Stavy brought tremendous drama to the opening Prelude and calm restraint to the Fugue. What impressed me most about the whole performance was how carefully the players had thought about the balance between the piano and the quartet – something rarely experienced in chamber music with piano. The relentless dancing energy of the scherzo and the delicious throw away ending of the finale were superbly done and brought a smile to many faces in the audience.

Elgar's *Piano Quintet* dates from 1918-19 and is the last of the trilogy of chamber works composed at the end of the First World War (the others are the *Violin Sonata* and *String Quartet*). The work is well known in the UK but, as Nicolas Stavy explained to me after the concert, Elgar is little played in other European countries apart from the *Cello Concerto* and *Enigma Variations*. As with the Walton the players deserve praise for adding this work to their repertoire and performing it with such freshness.

I have heard several broadcast performances recently of this piece where so many ensembles wallow in Elgar's more introspective moments, pulling the tempi about in a self-conscious manner. Not so the Atriums and Nicolas Stavy who had simply studied the score and taken Elgar's instructions at face value. Tempi were on the fast side in the outer movements and the slow movement was profound without descending into sentimentality. Balance between the instruments was again perfect. I was reminded several times in this performance of how close Elgar's emotional world is to that of his French contemporary Fauré.

The players treated the audience to an encore. The scherzo of the Shostakovich *Quintet* was reprised, this time performed with even greater energy and panache, if less precision.

(Seen and Heard International)