



# VILLIERS QUARTET FROM HOME

Five Composers. Five Stories.

## From Home

## Villiers Quartet

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### Villiers Quartet

Katie Stillman *violin 1*

Tamaki Higashi *violin 2*

Carmen Flores *viola*

Leo Melvin *cello*

Florence Anna Maunders (b.1982)

1. **Not Getting Out** [5:13]

Philip Herbert (b.1960)

2. **Sollicitudo** [5:00]

Alex Ho (b.1993)

3. **Our Common Wealth** [6:19]

Robert Fokkens (b.1975)

4. **Spinning, Weaving** [5:54]

Jasmin Kent Rodgman (b.1987)

5. **where the conflict ends** [4:00]

Total playing time [26:29]

### About Villiers Quartet:

*'The playing of this highly talented quartet [...] is superb throughout'*  
The Observer

*'The Villiers musicians open their hearts, mining the music's expressive core'*  
The Strad



## Composing From Home

In 2020, the lexicographers tasked with deciding on the Oxford Languages Word of the Year felt unable to nominate a single word, given the huge changes in language use that had resulted from the experiences of the global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests that year. Instead, they sought to understand how changes in language reflected the upheavals in our lives of isolation, a deadly disease, and social protests. The Villiers Quartet *From Home* commissions originated with a similar desire to process these experiences through music. The quartets were written in the course of a larger Oxford University project called *Diversity and the British String Quartet*, which used the string quartet as a lens through which to reflect on an extraordinary period of pandemic and protests. The string quartet is, on the one hand, an abstract and elite phenomenon: four highly-trained classical musicians perform masterpieces of unfolding musical argument in hallowed concert halls. Yet it is, on the other hand, a genre that can – and has been – accessed by composers at all levels of experience and from all backgrounds. And, like any music, it can be a powerful vehicle for expressing emotions and identity. Above all, the past two years have invited a discussion about the meaning and

experience of *home*. How does it feel to be stuck at home, deprived of a normal working, family, or social life? Is home, in 2021, a refuge or a prison? And what of the nation as home, as the Black Lives Matter movement has protested the exclusion of minority cultures? In diverse ways, the composers of the *From Home* commissions have wrestled with these questions, creating a unique collection of artistic impressions of being at home in 2021.

Florence Anna Maunders's **Not Getting Out** tackles the experience of lockdown itself. Anger, frustration, and a restless energy that cannot be dissipated form the central character of this work. The piece opens with a relentless and harsh repeated rhythmic figure starting on the open string G but rapidly introducing microtonal intervals which, inevitably, circle back to the starting note. Following the initial gradual build-up of relentless rhythmic energy, the music alternates angry outbursts with moments of eerie stasis achieved with open-string harmonics, before a central section built around a C major chord promises a release of tension, only to introduce a new process of 'circling endlessly'. In this new section, the circles repeatedly fade to nothing. Ultimately, the music disintegrates into an endlessly repeated rise and fall as the players move out of sync. The experience of not

getting out is one of frustration and uncertainty, which asks when it will end.

Also reflecting specifically on the pandemic, Philip Herbert's **Sollitucitudo** instead looks at Covid-19 itself, both for those suffering serious illness and their relations. The title of the work, from the Latin, signifies anxiety, concern, uneasiness, watchfulness, solicitude. Herbert seeks, in this work, to find 'musical representations' of these words in order to articulate the emotional experience of 'Sollitucitudo' that so many underwent during the pandemic.

In Herbert's own account of the quartet, the opening gentle, lyrical G major theme depicts the patient in a state of delirium. As the patient is rolled to sitting, attempts to stand, experiences discomfort, the music becomes more anxious and fitful, punctuated by silences that reflect the watchful concern of the patient's loved ones. At the end of the piece, the opening theme of the sleeping patient returns in a harmonically altered and fragmentary form, signalling a concerning change in the patient's condition. Yet the emotional trajectory of the quartet goes beyond the harrowing scene Herbert aims to portray. The dreamy, circling opening theme in G major, we might say, captures not only the patient's sleep but the beauty of that

individual human. The fracturing of that theme and the ultimate lapse into silence not only shows a deterioration in their condition, but the possible loss of that humanity. Herbert was particularly moved by the experience of elderly and disabled people during the pandemic and the questions raised regarding their rights by practices like the widespread use of 'Do Not Resuscitate' orders. *Sollitucitudo* is a personal and affecting account of that experience and the issues it raises about care and value for life in our society.

Alex Ho alludes more broadly to current events in **Our Common Wealth**, which takes up the exploration of 'home' in the form of a reflection on the British Empire and Commonwealth. Ho writes that *Our Common Wealth* is a 'reckoning of a structure and an identity that is fragile and crumbling. A structure that is made up of forgotten stories. Forgotten stories about people and their communities'. A British-born composer with parents from Hong Kong, Ho has spoken of the urgency of issues of British identity during the pandemic, with experiences of racism and violence directed towards East Asian communities. *Our Common Wealth* tackles all this in a work demanding formidable virtuosity from the performers, who use both their voices and instruments

throughout. Ho is conscious of both the 'theatre' of performance and the specific commission for the Villiers Quartet, a British-based quartet who nevertheless embody multiple ethnic and national identities. By speaking as well as playing, the quartet thus articulate the heterogeneity of Britishness.

The work is constructed musically around fragments of *God Save the Queen*. In the opening section, what begins as hissing punctuated by violent interjections of ricochet bowing and ethereal harmonics gradually emerges as the repeated whisper 'save'. With the overlapping iterations and long hissing 's' sounds, it is unclear whether this is the isolated word or a plea to 'save us'. Indeed, the aggressive ricochets increase as the performers repeatedly whisper 'long live', before a fortissimo climax. A new section, marked 'Hasty and Crippled', is once again ghostly as fragments of the national anthem emerge alongside the whispered 'happy' and 'glory'. The text shifts to 'long reigneth' as the music increases in intensity to an angry and frantic climax of ricochets and strangled vocal sounds alternated with the word 'us'. Following a silence, the fragments of melody return in ghostly form as the hissing is transformed into the softly

uttered 'us'. From the voices and instruments, one feels the sense of an 'us' who is both the subject of violence, and demanding to be heard.

Like Ho, Robert Fokkens is concerned with the complexity of post-imperial British identities and the challenges of finding a home in Britain in **Spinning, Weaving**. The quartet uses musical material from Fokkens' opera *Bhekizizwe* (2021), a collaboration with librettist Mkhululi Mabija which narrates the life of a young Zulu man from life in South Africa under apartheid to study and fatherhood in the UK. Specifically, Fokkens here employs music from two arias that occur as the eponymous Bhekizizwe meets and falls in love with a young white British woman. Borrowing from the arias, the quartet is woven out of a 'ground bass', a repeated four-note rising figure that is passed among the instruments and gradually elaborated. It is this endless cycling, with increasing complexity and exchange above it, gradually coalescing into a complete melodic statement, that is signified by the spinning and weaving of the title. The opening of the work is hesitant and ethereal in colour, with a nervous rhythmic figure in the viola underpinning harmonics and fragments of melody in the other instruments. As the piece progresses, however, these fragments

blossom into a luxuriant duet for the two violins above the ground bass, before ultimately collapsing again into the ghostly sounds of the opening.

From the melodious lines of Fokkens' quartet, Jasmin Kent Rodgman's **where the conflict ends** returns to the world of violent utterances that characterised Ho's quartet. For Rodgman, the creative process coincided with her own anger and frustration hearing the news at a time of violence against women, especially women of colour. She was inspired by lisa luxx's poem of the same name, from the chapbook *Trust Your Outrage*, to articulate not only the violence of oppression, but the strength and possibility of women in their voices and bodies. Consequently, Rodgman's work deploys all the resources of the performers into a work of physicality and discomfort, leading gradually to a sense of uneasy peace.

The work opens with a series of breaths and vocal sounds whispered among the players, as the instruments are variously hit rapidly with the fingers or bowed to create a harsh, flat sound. The effect is to create an almost physical discomfort, the sensation of one's skin crawling, a sound that both articulates and protests

bodily violence. Indeed, the climax of this passage is a sustained, high-pitched note for all instruments, ending in a disturbing strangled scream from the players that dissolves into silence. In the central section, the work engages in an almost Webernian atomised counterpoint, still dissonant and punctuated by abrupt silences. In the final section, a much more conventional style of string writing is matched by hints – still fragmentary – of tonal progressions. The ending of the piece is still halting and frequently silent, but beautiful. Moving away from the earlier vocalisations, it also seems to find, in the increasingly abstract beauty of sound, a way out of the conflict in the previous sections.

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#### Acknowledgments

*From Home* has been supported by Arts Council England, The Oxford Humanities Cultural Programme, The RVW Trust, and the VQ From Home Commissioning Fund. The Villiers Quartet wishes to thank these organisations for their continued support of new music.



Photography: Charles Gervais

## Villiers Quartet

Named after Villiers Street in London, the Villiers Quartet (VQ) has been praised for their 'exquisite ensemble playing' (*Seen & Heard International*), and their absolute 'commitment and virtuosity' (*The Sunday Times*). The Villiers Quartet is the Quartet-in-Residence at the Jacqueline Du Pré Music Building at St Hilda's College, Oxford University.

Hailed as 'Champions of British Music' (*The Observer*), the Villiers Quartet is one of the most recognised quartets in the UK for the performance of British music, releasing acclaimed recordings of works by Elgar, Delius, Peter Racine Fricker, William Sterndale Bennett, David Matthews, William Alwyn and Kuljit Bhamra.

As part of their encompassing *Diversity and the British String Quartet Symposium* at Oxford University in 2021, the VQ commissioned five new works from British composers for their From Home: VQ Commissions project, to reflect the life-changing impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic had upon artists.

The Villiers Quartet has been broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 and on NPO Radio 4 live from the Concertgebouw. The VQ has

been featured on BBC's *In Tune* and *The Andrew Marr Show* and on the score to the BBC Film's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The VQ has presented masterclasses at many institutions including Oxford University, Duke University, Dartmouth College, University of Nottingham, Syracuse University, Cal State LA, Jacksonville University, and Indiana University South Bend. As ambassadors for contemporary music, the VQ has given premieres and performances of music by British composers including Anthony Payne, Alexander Goehr, Martyn Harry, David Matthews, and Elizabeth Kelly. With the From Home Commissions, the VQ is pleased to have brought to light quartets by Florence Anna Maunders, Philip Herbert, Alex Ho, Robert Fokkens, and Jasmin Kent Rodgman.

The broad curiosity of the Villiers Quartet and its passion for teaching and performing have made the VQ a valuable resource for students and audiences alike. Inspiration comes from the heart of the Villiers Quartet's philosophy: to believe in the art of string quartet.

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Recorded in Alpheton New Maltings, Suffolk on 11–12 May 2021

Producer, engineer & editor: Adam Binks

Recorded at 24-bit/96kHz resolution

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