

The Spirit of Love

Chamber Music by Ailsa Dixon



VILLIERS QUARTET Lucy Cox Charlie Draper

Ailsa Dixon (1932–2017)

Chamber Music

The Villiers Quartet

Katie Stillman *violin I*

Tamaki Higashi *violin II*

Carmen Flores *viola*

Leo Melvin *cello*

Lucy Cox *soprano*

Charlie Draper *ondes Martenot*

The Spirit of Love: Three songs for soprano and string quartet

- | | |
|---|--------|
| 1. As the harmonic to the sounding string | [2:33] |
| 2. From far, from eve and morning | [2:06] |
| 3. The night has a thousand eyes | [3:27] |

4. Nocturnal Scherzo for string quartet	[4:36]
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5. The 'lost' Scherzo for string quartet	[5:14]
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6. Sohrab and Rustum for string quartet	[12:09]
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7. Shining Cold for soprano, ondes Martenot, viola and cello	[5:48]
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Variations on Love Divine for string quartet

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| 8. In the Beginning was the Word | [1:34] |
| 9. The Angel Gabriel visits Mary | [1:50] |
| 10. The Visitation of the Holy Spirit | [0:53] |
| 11. Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem | [0:25] |
| 12. The Birth of Jesus: the Word made Flesh | [0:44] |
| 13. The River Jordan, where Jesus is Baptised | [0:47] |
| 14. The Spirit of God descending like a Dove | [0:52] |
| 15. Jesus calls to his Disciples | [1:04] |
| 16. Jesus' Healing and Teaching | [0:34] |
| 17. The Pharisees Plotting | [0:51] |
| 18. Jesus and the Disciples on the Mount of Olives | [0:40] |
| 19. The Disciples see Jesus led away | [0:49] |
| 20. The Agony and the Nails | [0:36] |
| 21. The Centurion: 'Surely this was the Son of God' | [0:37] |
| 22. The Disciples' Fear and Anguish; Jesus appears to them | [1:16] |
| 23. The Ascension | [0:37] |
| 24. The Disciples' Preaching | [1:39] |
| 25. The Great and Terrible Day of the Lord | [2:16] |
| 26. The Song of Praise and the Dance of Joy | [1:55] |

Total playing time	[56:03]
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The Spirit of Love: Chamber Music by Ailsa Dixon

'[...] a stunning find! The lush harmonies of the outer movements, the strange yet still beautiful dissonances of the second movement... Rarely have I heard a new piece which has moved me so deeply.'

The reception of Ailsa Dixon's *The Spirit of Love* at the Nottingham Chamber Music Festival in 2024 echoed a review published by the British Music Society after its premiere, which concluded 'At the end of the concert, there was a feeling that something special had just occurred'. That a work written several decades earlier should be hailed as a new 'find' says much about the cultural shift in which women composers long sidelined in musical history are finally coming to light.

The performance history of Ailsa Dixon's music is one such story of rediscovery. A handful of concerts during her most fertile period of composition in the 1980s and 1990s (including notable performances by Ian Partridge, Lynne Dawson, and the Brindisi Quartet) were followed by several decades of almost complete neglect. Then in 2017, a work that had remained in manuscript for several decades was chosen for premiere by the London Oriana Choir, as

part of the Five15 project highlighting the work of women composers. Her anthem *These things shall be* received its first performance in the spectacular glass-roofed hall surrounding the keel of the Cutty Sark ship, thirty years after it was written and five weeks before she died. This landmark performance sparked a renewal of interest in her music, and as works were rediscovered in her archive, there followed a succession of posthumous premieres. In 2020 the revival of her music was featured as the cover story in the British Music Society's magazine. Her works have since been performed in venues from the Queen Elizabeth Hall to the Italian Chapel in Orkney, and broadcast in America. Her scores have been digitised in Britain, France and Finland, and are now being made available through Composers Edition.

An interview in the 'Meet the Artist' series a few months before she died sheds some light on the origins of her composition. Born Ailsa Harrison in 1932, she came from a musical family; perhaps her childhood imagination was stirred by the portrait of her ancestor, the Polish-Lithuanian violinist and composer Felix Yaniewicz (1762–1848), which hung near the piano in the cottage where she grew up in Buckinghamshire. She played the violin in the London Junior Orchestra, studied the piano with Hilda Bor, and went on to read music at Durham University in the 1950s

under Professor Arthur Hutchings, whose lectures in music history and analysis proved inspirational. There was no formal tuition in composition, but by the time she left Durham she had written her first work for string quartet and was awarded the Kisch Prize.

Composition offered no obvious career path, and it was not until some decades later that she would return to writing music. The intervening period was spent teaching, singing and playing the lute, which she studied with Diana Poulton (founder of the Lute Society and biographer of John Dowland).

She began her career teaching classes in music appreciation, and while raising a family taught singing and gave song recitals with her guitarist husband Brian Dixon. In 1976, she directed a production of Handel's opera *Theodora* with a cast formed largely of her pupils, singing the title role with Brian conducting. In the wake of this all-consuming project, to fill the gap it had left in her creative life, she set out to compose an opera of her own. *Letter to Philemon* was staged in 1984, and proved to be the start of her most fertile period as a composer.

The string quartet, at the core of the opera's instrumentation, had been central to her writing from the outset. **The 'lost' Scherzo**,

a quartet movement written at university in Durham in the mid-1950s, disappeared for over half a century until the manuscript turned up in an attic after her death. Its frequent changes of time signature may be hallmarks of her early interest in Bartok, whom she cited in later life as an inspiration for his 'elasticity of musical motifs', though the tonality also suggests influences closer to home. This recording gives the work its first performance, seventy years after it was written.

Two years after *Philemon*, the **Nocturnal Scherzo** was premiered in 1986 at the Little Missenden Festival by the Brindisi Quartet, led by Jacqueline Shave (later director of the Britten Sinfonia). It was paired in performance with **Shining Cold**, a haunting vocalise exploring the different sonorities of the high soprano voice, strings (viola and cello) and the ondes Martenot, an early electronic instrument best known for its role in Messiaen's *Turangalila* symphony. Her programme note for the first performance explains the ideas behind this intriguing piece:

In ancient languages such as Greek and Hebrew one word can be used for a) breath, b) wind, and c) spirit. The three intermingle in this piece. A questioning spirit inhabits particularly the upper parts, the Ondes seeming more disembodied

than the voice, its mortal, sighing 'sister'. If there is any answer, it is borne on the wind, as fragmentary sounds from another world, or in the piercing light which at moments illuminates this winter landscape.

A note accompanying the two manuscript scores sheds some light on her compositional method:

It seems to me that no music is truly abstract. Pieces which have no words or 'programme' must be a condensation either of past experience or of processes going on in the psyche. When I write music intended to be abstract, an exposition of the main themes materialises before I feel any need to question what I am writing. Then I find it difficult to continue until I have asked myself what the themes seem to signify. Dream-like images emerge in my mind, and from that part of the process develop the ideas of how to use the themes.

The note goes on to explain the dream sequence underlying the *Nocturnal Scherzo* and its symbolic significance, representing the contest and reconciliation of two halves of the psyche:

From a 'sleep' theme a slow rising motif suddenly erupts into action. Out of a jack-in-the-box bursts Pierrot, with his white face, his funny gait and his sad little song. He is swept off stage by the macho man whose theme in the cello verges on the bombastic. Pierrot climbs the stage curtains and swings up there, mocking the macho man. Eventually he responds to the macho's angry call, not to assume unfair advantage, but to come down. They try on each other's themes, like hats. Scarcely has a harmonious contrapuntal synthesis of their themes developed before the 'sleep' theme calls and the lid of the box slowly and gently closes down on them.

This vignette, investing an apparently trivial piece of commedia dell'arte with a deeper psychological meaning, gives an insight into the emotional significance she attached to the contrapuntal interplay and resolution of musical themes.

The *Nocturnal Scherzo* was performed again in 1992 by the De Beauvoir Quartet, alongside the premiere of a new work, **Sohrab and Rustum**, written in 1987–88. This was a more ambitious undertaking: a substantial through-composed piece, inspired by Matthew Arnold's poem about the fatal encounter between an estranged father and son on opposite sides

of a battle between the Tartar and Persian armies. The music is a vivid response to the poem's human drama and atmospheric setting. The opening sequence evokes the river Oxus rising in the starlit mountains: a long, searing high E in the first violin over a deep chord from the lower strings gives way to an eerie chromatic oscillating motif between the two violins, like the scintillation of light on water. Through a gradual crescendo it turns into a fast, falling motif as the river gathers momentum, tumbling towards the plain where the drama will take place. A leaping phrase ending with a trill, marked 'brillante' and passed between the players, brings the action to life, and the story unfolds as the two armies come face to face. It centres on a tragic act of violence in single combat between the great warrior Rustum and his long-lost son Sohrab, unknown to one another on the battlefield. As Sohrab is mortally wounded, their identities are discovered; despair, tenderness and forgiveness follow. Towards the close of the piece, its human tragedy played out, the armies light their evening fires, and after a brief, poignant return of the leaping motif, all is dissolved in the relentless flow of the Oxus pouring out into a calm sea:

the majestic river floated on,
Out of the mist and hum of that low land,
Into the frosty starlight... till at last

The long'd-for dash of waves is heard,
and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the
new-bathed stars
Emerge, and shine upon the Aral Sea.

As the mighty warrior gives up the ghost, a haunting out-breath from the players escapes into a moment of silence before the final chord.

Written either side of *Sohrab and Rustum* in 1987–8, three songs for soprano and string quartet were subsequently grouped under the title **The Spirit of Love**. Among the works found in Dixon's musical archive after she died, it was given its posthumous premiere in 2020 at St George's Bristol by the performers on this recording.

The first song, 'As the harmonic to the sounding string' (set to the composer's own words) evokes the ethereal purity of a distant love, bound 'by none but cords of aerial harmony'. The musical metaphor in which 'cords' coalesce with 'chords' – bonds that are not constraints but represent a resonating spiritual sympathy – revisits an idea that had been central to her opera *Letter to Philemon* about the teachings of St Paul in captivity. The flowing lyricism of the opening section marked 'tranquil' gives way to a darker mood of tonal uncertainty, with an angular chromatic

line in the vocal part, as the poem questions whether such disembodied love can be reciprocated; in the final section the spirit of love is released in a long, joyful melisma accompanied by harmonics in the first violin at the song's radiant close.

This sense of transcendence is echoed in the second song, a setting of A.E. Housman's 'From far, from eve and morning', in which the poet imagines life as a mere breathing space 'ere to the wind's twelve quarters I take my endless way'. The strings' scurrying triplets evoke the swirling coalescence of matter borne on the winds, as 'the stuff of life to knit me blew hither: here am I'. Concentrated in this brief moment of existence is the lover's urgent enquiry, 'Take my hand quick and tell me, what you have in your heart'. The song's harmonies are darker and its motion unsettling, resolved only briefly in moments of unison before the strings' contrapuntal postlude unravels the miracle of being, and the spirit is dispersed once more for eternity.

In 'The night has a thousand eyes', dying love is figured in Bourdillon's poem as the setting of the sun whose light was brighter than the myriad stars in the night sky. The string writing in the opening bars evokes the vast expanse of the heavens punctuated by glimmering starlight, from which emerges a soaring soprano melisma. Darkness

encroaches in the harmonies as 'the light of a whole life dies', reaching a sombre, slowing cadence 'when love is done'. The song returns at its close to the opening melisma, coming to rest on a radiant top A, which the composer described as depicting 'the effect of looking up and focussing one's gaze on the stars (and eternal love)'.

Written in 1991–2, her final work for string quartet, **Variations on Love Divine**, represents an unusual foray into religious chamber music. One source of inspiration may have been Haydn's *Seven Last Words from the Cross*, suggested in the penultimate variation's echo of its final *tremolando* earthquake. Woven around Stainer's familiar Anglican hymn tune, the Variations offer a musical exploration of the meanings of divine love, from the opening of St John's Gospel 'In the beginning was the Word' through the nativity, passion and ascension, to a culminating vision of heavenly joy. In a recording made by the Rasumovsky Quartet in the mid-1990s, the titles or short texts heading each variation were spoken (by the viola player Christopher Wellington), allowing the listener to follow a kind of musical meditation. This spiritual journey takes us through a sound-world that is by turns mysterious, lyrical, dramatic, poignant, and finally exultant in 'The Song of Praise and the Dance of Joy'.

In an essay on the use of hymn tunes in classical music, Simon Brackenborough placed the Variations in a long tradition of composers' engagement with hymns, likening the work to Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on the Old 104th Psalm Tune*, albeit on a smaller instrumental scale. Commenting on the paradox of the work's scope, at once conceptually expansive and minutely concentrated on a single melody, Brackenborough writes, 'There is something quietly thought-provoking about Dixon's insistence on using this modest, contented-sounding tune to cover such large theological ground... [suggesting] that a whole world of religious meaning can be revealed through even the smallest means.'

He observes how the treatment of the theme changes at the incarnation, when the hymn tune, hitherto buried or splintered into hesitant half-phrases, is heard distinctly for the first time. Elsewhere it is subject to fragmentation, dissonance, and various techniques in the string writing, from *pizzicato* for the trotting donkey on the journey to Bethlehem, jabbing and martelé attack for the hammering of the nails at the crucifixion, a shimmering chromatic *tremolando* for the ascension, and knocking on the wood for the disciples' house-to-house calling. Harmonic effects lend much to the work's emotional impact: the sagging and

distorted chords pulling the melody out of tune evoke the wrenching sadness of the disciples watching as Jesus is led away. Reflecting the strong impulse towards redemption underlying the work's theological scheme, there is elsewhere a yearning for tonal resolution that draws the music from dissonance into a harmonic sweetness at significant moments, such as the centurion's revelation that 'truly this was the Son of God', where listeners may recognize an echo of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. After the *tremolando* earthquake, a sweet, halting melody emerges out of the wreckage and leads into the last movement's contrapuntal recapitulation of the theme, finally erupting in an exuberant dance, shot through with a flash of dissonance at its triumphant close.

The Villiers Quartet gave the Variations their first complete concert performance alongside Haydn's *Seven Last Words* in the Italianate church at Wilton on Palm Sunday 2022.

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Ailsa Dixon and Irene Bracher: A Musical Friendship



Ailsa Dixon



Irene Fischer (Bracher)

Several of the works on this recording owe their existence to a musical friendship which began three-quarters of a century ago. While Ailsa was studying for a piano diploma before going to Durham University to read music, she met Irene Fischer from Stuttgart, who was working in England as an au pair, and they sang together in a local choir. Their shared love of music was at the heart of a friendship that was to last a lifetime, and a thread running through their correspondence in the decades that followed. Irene's husband Erich Bracher played the violin in a string quartet, and after Ailsa returned to composition in the 1980s, Irene commissioned her to write several works for Erich's quartet. When Ailsa had little hope of making a profession of her composition, this was a vital stimulus which gave her the means and the confidence to write. Over the years that

followed, Irene became her musical confidante in letters recording the ebb and flow of her inspiration, as moments of self-doubt gave way to a new sense of purpose: 'I feel as if my life's orientations are confirmed, and ... I cannot but channel energy through music'. Among the first commissions was a set of songs for Irene's daughter Christiane to sing with the quartet; the subsequent correspondence charts the emergence of what would become *The Spirit of Love*. Many of the early private recordings of Ailsa's works from the 1980s and 1990s were made by Irene's son Christoph, a sound engineer living in London. The original cassette tapes were rediscovered after Ailsa's death, and these archival recordings formed part of the stimulus to retrieve the manuscript scores and bring these pieces to life again.

This recording is dedicated to our mothers and their musical friendship.

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Texts

The Spirit of Love: Three songs for soprano and string quartet

1. As the harmonic to the sounding string,
Soft, tender, pure, remote, yet from within
Heard when the soul is like a well-tuned violin
Thus have you power within my life to sing.

And yet maybe that I can never sound
so sweet in your life
While for many another one your note must
be the fundamental.
This love by none but cords of aerial
harmony is bound.

Ailsa Dixon

2. From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

Now—for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters
I take my endless way.

A. E. Housman

3. The night has a thousand eyes
And the day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.

The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one:
Yet the light of a whole life dies
When love is done.

F. W. Bourdillon

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The Villiers Quartet

Founded in 2011, the Villiers Quartet has established a reputation as outstanding interpreters and champions of British music.

Hailed for their extraordinary 'commitment and virtuosity' (*The Sunday Times*) they are the quartet in residence at the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building at St Hilda's College, University of Oxford.

Their innovative recordings include revivals of music by Ethel Smyth, Edward Elgar, William Sterndale Bennett, William Alwyn and Peter Racine Fricker, and in 2020 they premiered newly discovered movements from the 1889 quartet by Delius to great acclaim. Since 2020 they have been exploring the music of Ailsa Dixon, with posthumous premieres including *The Spirit of Love*.

Lucy Cox (soprano) read music at Oxford University before winning a scholarship for postgraduate studies at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, Switzerland. A former Brighton Early Music Festival Young Artist and finalist in the John Kerr Award for English

Song, she has appeared as a soloist in concert venues from London's Wigmore Hall to the Konzerthaus in Vienna, and sung title roles in Baroque operas from Handel's *Semele* and *Acis and Galatea* to Scarlatti's *La Giuditta*. She also enjoys singing with small choirs and consorts including the BBC Singers, The Sixteen and The Tallis Scholars.

Charlie Draper (ondes Martenot) is a leading specialist in the ondes Martenot and theremin. His recent work spans solo appearances with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, tours with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, and contributions to film and television scores. A long-standing member of the Radio Science Orchestra and an active advocate for new music for early electronic instruments, he has also uncovered and recorded previously unknown repertoire, and contributed to the republication of works including Bernard Herrmann's score to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).

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