

Cecil Armstrong Gibbs  
String Quartets

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RECORDS

The Atchison Quartet

# Cecil Armstrong Gibbs

# String Quartets

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## String Quartet in C, Op.95, (1940)

- |   |                                      |      |
|---|--------------------------------------|------|
| 1 | i. Allegro non troppo . . . . .      | 7.02 |
| 2 | ii. Slow and broad . . . . .         | 5.30 |
| 3 | iii. Allegro poco maestoso . . . . . | 5.26 |

## String Quartet in A minor, Op. 8, (1917)

- |   |  |      |
|---|--|------|
| 4 | i. Allegro grazioso . . . . .                | 8.03 |
| 5 | ii. Andante e legato . . . . .               | 7.08 |
| 6 | iii. Poco andante - Allegro vivace . . . . . | 5.42 |

## Three Pieces for String Quartet (1927)

- |   |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| 7 | i. Above Blea Tarn . . . . .                | 3.28 |
| 8 | ii. Winster Valley . . . . .                | 3.27 |
| 9 | iii. Loweswater: Calm after Storm . . . . . | 2.37 |

## String quartet in E minor, (1958)

- |    |                                     |      |
|----|-------------------------------------|------|
| 10 | i. Allegretto . . . . .             | 4.53 |
| 11 | ii. Andante ben moderato . . . . .  | 4.48 |
| 12 | iii. Theme and variations . . . . . | 6.06 |

## A Birthday Greeting for

## Ralph Vaughan Williams, (1942)

- |    |                      |      |
|----|----------------------|------|
| 13 | i. Andante . . . . . | 2.09 |
|----|----------------------|------|

Total Running Time . . . . . 66.24



## PROGRAMME NOTE

Armstrong Gibbs was born into a family business, D. & W. Gibbs, soap and toothpaste manufacturers, known for Gibbs SR toothpaste, the first product ever advertised on UK commercial television, and later known as Mentadent. At Cambridge, he studied composition with Edward J. Dent and counterpoint with Charles Wood. Spurning the family business, and following a spell as a schoolmaster, Gibbs responded to a plea from Adrian Boult to become a mature student at the Royal College of Music. There he studied with Vaughan Williams before the College appointed him to its staff.

He was to become an extremely prolific composer, working in a wide range of genres. This included a substantial number of solo and part songs, a significant contribution to church music, works for chorus and orchestra, works for the stage and for film, full-scale orchestral music of many kinds, solo piano and organ music, and chamber music that includes some twelve string quartets and a number of works that have a string quartet as an accompanying texture. It is an immense and broad output, and might make one wonder when he had time to do anything else. Yet he was also a crucial and leading figure in the Music Festival movement, a driving force in the remarkable improvement of standards in

music education and performance in the United Kingdom that changed the musical life of the country out of all recognition, but risks being thrown away in our own times. He was also a particularly significant figure in the musical life of his native Essex, especially in Danbury, where he and his family went to live, and where he was active in setting up and conducting for many years a very well-regarded choral society. During his latter years, clearly the result of a major cultural reaction to the horrors of World War II, the serious music world abandoned composers such as Gibbs for more than half a century. Only now are they being reassessed — and not before time.

The twelve or so String Quartets Gibbs composed did not all make it into published form or onto the concert platform. Roughly half of them, even when produced as fair copies with parts for the individual instruments, remained solely in the composer's hands and were unperformed in his lifetime. Of the three full-scale examples on this recording, only the Opus 8 A minor Quartet was performed in his lifetime, unlike the other two presented here for the first time. These two belong to a group described below as "inner works", clearly important to their author, but not offered by him for either performance or publication.

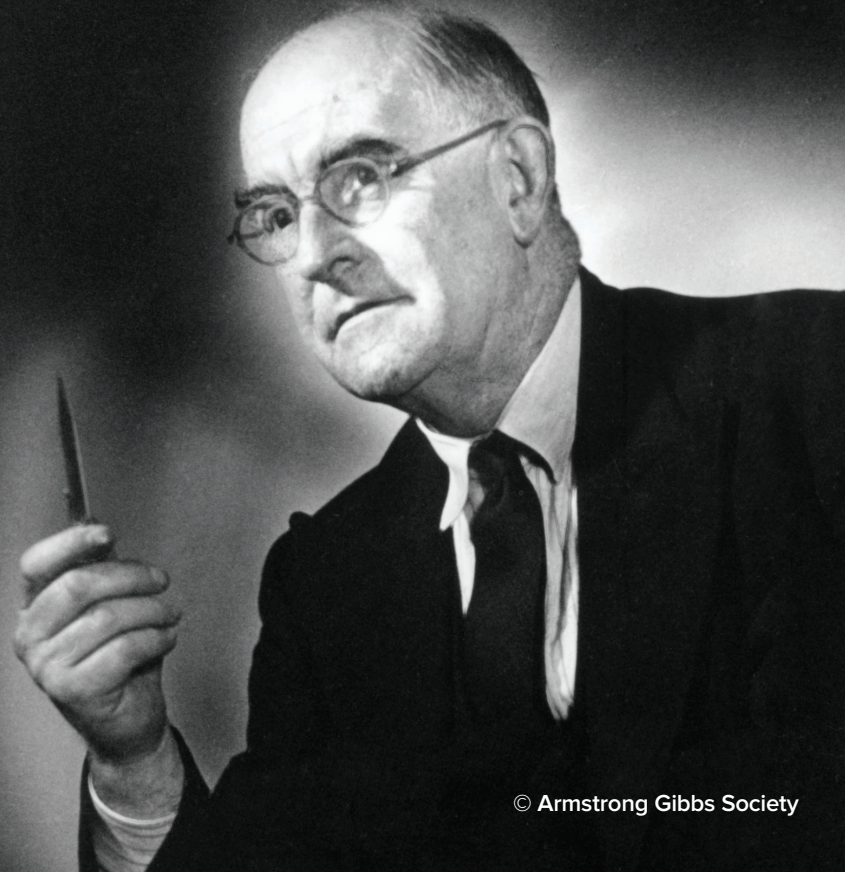
## PROGRAMME NOTE

In 1912, while at Cambridge, Gibbs composed a well-received *Quartet in C*, making it his opus 1. In 1916, while working as a schoolmaster, he wrote a *Quartet in G minor, op. 7*, dedicated to E.J. Dent. The London String Quartet performed this on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1917 at The Aeolian Hall. These were already highly regarded performers, who formed their ensemble towards the end of the first decade of the century, and were by this time on the way to building a substantial international reputation both as touring and recording artists. Importantly, they were committed *both* to the performance of the great repertoire of the past *and* to contemporary works. The high quality of their work can be heard in recently re-released recordings. Even before this performance, Gibbs had begun his *Quartet in A minor, op. 8*. This time it was dedicated to the London String Quartet itself. The work was complete by the end of May. Easter fell on 9<sup>th</sup> April in 1917, so this burst of compositional energy took full advantage of the school holidays. Moreover, Gibbs repurposed a previously composed but unused movement in Db as the second movement, notwithstanding its remote key.

Its dedicatees gave its first performance at the Aeolian Hall on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1917. It is

remarkable that performers of their stature were willing to put in the work involved in two premieres in such quick succession. Gibbs, it should be noted, was at this point still two years away from even beginning his studies at the Royal College of Music.

In the early twentieth century, the rediscovery of traditional folksong and Tudor church music and madrigals influenced many British composers. This underpinned the development of the English pastoral tradition which found inspiration in — among other things — the variety and richness of the British landscape. Gibbs and his wife Honor, had relatives and friends in the Lake District, and were frequent visitors long before they temporarily moved there during the War. In September 1927, Gibbs wrote *Three Pieces for String Quartet*, musical impressions of three Lake District locations. The titles of the movements are *Above Blea Tarn*, *Winster Valley*, and *Loweswater, Calm after Storm*. Lewis Foreman, who has written about the music of Armstrong Gibbs, as well as many other British composers, comments that “the last movement exhibits a characteristic Gibbs sensibility – for any other composer would surely have ended with the vigour of the storm rather than the calm reflection after it...”







## PROGRAMME NOTE

Quartet writing runs like a thread throughout Gibbs's output. In 1932, the Daily Telegraph ran a competition for chamber music compositions. Astonishingly, almost 500 manuscripts arrived, including a *Quartet in A* (not included on this album) from Gibbs. On 10<sup>th</sup> March 1933, Arthur Watson, Managing Editor, wrote to tell him that he had won the second prize of £75 — £1,750 today. Interestingly, Benjamin Britten submitted his Phantasy Quartet for the competition. While there was no prize for him, the judges did at least commend the work.

Gibbs wrote his *Quartet in C, op. 95* in 1940. Armstrong and Honor had just moved to Windemere from *Crossings*, their house in Danbury, which the military had commandeered for a convalescent home. It is part of the series of “inner works” for string quartet by Gibbs alluded to above, written for himself rather than the outside world. This description is strengthened by the fact that in 1941 he wrote a further *Quartet in G minor, op. 99*, performed at Windemere by the Catterall Quartet. Clearly Gibbs did not consider the 1940 work appropriate for this purpose.

Op. 95 sets off with jolly energy, evoking a cheerful hike through the stunning countryside of Windemere. Suddenly, an edgy figure starts

to make itself felt, interrupting and mutating the cheerful line of the opening. The music changes into something more languorous and pastoral. Here too something unsettling interrupts the flow, and the movement proceeds as though depicting a ramble through the beauty of the countryside against the fraught background of the War and everything that it was doing to daily life, musical and otherwise. The anxiety was well-founded: in 1943, the War would tragically claim the life of the Gibbs' son, David.

Vaughan Williams's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday fell on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1942. Gibbs sent him a package: *FOR RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS A GREETING for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, October 1942 composed in affection and gratitude by his pupil C Armstrong Gibbs*. The music of this brief but skilfully executed work borrows heavily from the language of the teacher. It is a charming miniature that shows how well the pupil studied.

On 4<sup>th</sup> November 1942, Vaughan Williams wrote to Gibbs in his distinctive scrawl: *I was much touched by your birthday present. I like your 16 bars very much – But I do hope you will incorporate them in something larger – so that it shall not waste its sweetness in my present cupboard. I played it off the pft score as in duty bound – I fear*

## PROGRAMME NOTE

*you know by experience what a bad score reader I am! Also the parts – I wish I had a tame 4<sup>th</sup> in Dorking which would play it through to me.*

Gibbs wrote the third quartet in this recording — in E minor and not assigned an opus number — in October and November 1958, less than two years before he died. It was to be his last contribution to the genre. It belongs for good reasons to the category of “inner” works. In January 1958, his wife of some forty years had died after a lengthy illness. Then in August, Vaughan Williams died suddenly.

The first movement opens with an insistent rhythm giving a sense of an obsessive tension. At times of difficulty, Gibbs always seemed to try to drive through them with a determined optimism about facing up to whatever life threw at him. The music reflects this, but stressful figurations repeatedly subvert the mood.

The marking on the middle movement is *Andante ben moderato*. Many a slow movement has an air of wistful melancholy about it, but here there is anguish in the music, including a cello solo that sounds like the composer crying out. Rapid quaver and semiquaver figurations break out like little expostulations of grief. In the final bars, the viola plays a little resigned figure that brings the

piece to a close. It is not difficult to associate the loss of Honor with this movement.

The final movement is a set of variations. The subject is akin to a Vaughan Williams folk tune, and surely this movement is a memorial to him. While quite different, the subject seems “atmospherically” related to the birthday greeting also on this recording. The first variation evokes Tudor viol music in its modal harmony and texture. The second is upbeat but restless, reminding us in its last moments of the obsessive figure from the first movement. The third variation is a dance reminiscent of Peter Warlock's 1926 Capriol Suite—the cello at one point quotes a memorable moment from its *Basse-Dance*. The fourth variation is all energetic pizzicato but cuts short abruptly before a wistful final arco chord. The fifth and final variation starts as a strict fugue, inevitably evoking Bach, as though such “pure music” might provide solace. Finally, a theatrically rising figure subverts the fugue, leading to a dramatic altered dominant chord. A brief pause and a restatement of the theme begins, but heartbreakingly falters, as though it is too painful to continue. The quartet ends with two resigned E minor chords.

By Nicholas Riddle



## BIOGRAPHY

The Atchison Quartet was founded by internationally acclaimed violinist Robert Atchison in 2015 in order to have a regular group of like-minded artists who are interested in a very broad spectrum of artistic ventures. The quartet is purely project based so is unlike many other groups.

**Robert Atchison** first violin is also the founder of the London Piano Trio, Raga Garage and the Altamira Chamber Orchestra and has performed across the globe to rave reviews.

**Ian Belton** second violin is a founder member of the Brodsky Quartet, formed in 1972. Ian remains as an active member of the group over forty years on.

**Elisa Bergersen** is one of the most respected viola players in the UK and is founder of the Bergersen Quartet that specialises in works and recordings by living composers.

**Sophie Harris** started her professional life as a founder member of the Smith Quartet with whom she travelled the world and gave acclaimed performances and premieres of new works.



# Cecil Armstrong Gibbs

# String Quartets

## ATCHISON QUARTET

**Violin (1)** Robert Atchison

**Viola** Elisa Bergersen

**Violin (2)** Ian Belton

**Cello** Sophie Harris

## PRODUCTION

**Engineering** Adaq Khan

**Creative Designer** Mike Cooter

**Producer** George Richford

**Executive Producer** Adrian Green

**Recorded at** St George's Headstone, Harrow, 17 & 18 August 2022

**Cover Image** istockphoto-826281142 (johnwoodcock)



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