



# Piers Hellawell

## Driftwood on sand

This string quartet was commissioned by the Classical Music Society of Londonderry, with financial assistance from the National Lottery, and was premiered in the Nerve Centre, Derry by the Medici String Quartet in March 2001.

The design of this work shares with my earlier quartet, *The Still Dancers*, a concern with external structure – with whether movements are fixed in position, whether they can be displaced among other works, whether in this way a single work can tell different stories. In *Driftwood On Sand* this affects the actual ordering of pieces, and thus the overall structure: two main movements are fixed, while four contrasted ‘preludes’ are deployed around them in any order, at the players’ discretion. These shorter pieces occupy four slots around the two main ones. Because the preludes are of sharply contrasted moods, their order determines the dynamic shape of the whole work – it might open ethereally and close forcefully, or could open powerfully but fade away at the end; it is like a story that has various endings, chosen by the teller.

In a sense the preludes are ‘driftwood’, against the fixed background of the ‘sand’, the two main movements. These are respectively slow and faster pieces, though both go through different phases. The slow one opens with an aria for viola; later, the two violins climb higher and higher, locked into a duet. The faster movement begins by outlining six disconnected fragments, as if it, like the whole work, is telling different stories. These fragments later resume, expanded, the strangest of them ending the movement with a coda.

Piers Hellawell 2001

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