Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) Quartet no. 2 in A minor (1942-1944)  
‘For Jean on her birthday’  
Prelude: Allegro appassionato  
Romance: Largo  
Scherzo: Allegro  
Epilogue - Greetings from Joan to Jean: Andante sostenuto

Ralph Vaughan Williams was not a composing prodigy. After learning the viola, piano and organ at Charterhouse, he studied for two years at the RCM under Stanford and then read History, and Music under Charles Wood, at Cambridge. Though drawn to composing, progress was slow. His cousin Gwen Raverat recalled ‘overhearing scraps of conversation about “that foolish young man, Ralph Vaughan Williams”, who would go on working at music when “he was so hopelessly bad at it”’. But he persevered and returned to the RCM as a student of Hubert Parry, forming lasting friendships with Leopold Stokowski and Gustav Holst. He later studied with Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris. His discovery of English folksong in 1904 led not only to a change in his composing style but also, as with Bartók in Hungary, to collecting the songs of an oral tradition threatened with extinction.

Vaughan Williams wrote three string quartets: an early, unnumbered one in C minor in 1898 which he suppressed, No 1 in G minor in 1908 (revised 1921) and today’s A minor quartet composed between 1942 and 1944, around the same time as his 5th Symphony. The Jean of the dedication is Jean Stewart, violist of the Menges Quartet (founded by Sussex violinist Isolde Menges) which premiered the quartet at one of the National Gallery’s lunchtime concerts in October 1944. Jean was the daughter of Haldane Stewart, composer and cricketer, and sister of Johnnie Stewart, who is best known as the creator and director of ‘Top of the Pops’ for the BBC. The quartet, though, is a creature of the dark days of the war - the bleakness of Shostakovich fighting idyllic memories of a pre-war world. As befits the dedication, the viola has a dominant role in this quartet as indeed it has in many of Vaughan Williams’ works for strings.

The viola's opening is agitated and ominous: a theme for its time and one that dominates the whole movement. The viola also introduces a contrasting, dolce, triplet-based theme, which provokes a violent climax based on the opening theme and its transformation into a peaceful ending.

The second movement is the heart of the piece. The viola, very quietly, without vibrato, presents the bleak, slow fugue. A psalm-like passage with thick chording and responses from the viola gives way to a triumphantly cantabile version of the opening fugue. But the opening mood returns to end the movement with a feeling of loss. The movement is not a conventional Romance, perhaps more a chivalric quest. The short Scherzo is an anguished cry from the viola against the ominous octave forces of the other strings. The theme is borrowed from Vaughan Williams’ film score for The 49th Parallel, a Powell-Pressburger film aimed at bringing the United States into the war.

‘Joan’ of the Epilogue’s subtitle is St Joan of Arc; the main theme of the movement comes from the composer’s sketches for a film about her which never materialised. Again the viola opens but now the mood is of reconciliation; this short, serene, hymn-like movement ends after an uplifting shift from F to D major and the final ‘Amen’ of a plagal cadence.