

for Gabriel Thomson
Field of Stars
for Four String Quartets

Timings of individual entries are approximate

EAST NEUK OF FIFE

Sally Beamish 2024

Adagio

Violin 1E while walking on *pp*

Violin 2E while walking on: to be played freely, with ornamentation and bowing as desired *p*

Viola E *pp*

Violoncello E walk on and go straight to seat

Adagio

Violin 1H

Violin 2H

Viola H while walking on *pp*

Violoncello H walk on and go straight to seat

Adagio

Violin 1C

Violin 2C while walking on *pp*

Viola C while walking on *pp*

Violoncello C walk on and go straight to seat

Adagio

Violin 1B

Violin 2B while walking on *pp*

Viola B while walking on *pp*

Violoncello B walk on first and go straight to seat

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Vln 1E

Vln 2E

Vla E

Bell E

Vc. E

while walking on

Vln 1H

Vln 2H

Vla H

Bell H

Vc. H

while walking on

Vln 1C

Vln 2C

Vla C

Bell C

Vc. C

while walking on

Vln 1B

Vln 2B

Vla B

Bell B

Vc. B

Field of Stars

This piece is about pilgrimage. When my husband's son returned from an extraordinary and transformative feat – running the *Camino de Santiago de Compostela* – he brought us the emblem of the pilgrimage: a scallop shell. I noticed that this same shell is the logo for the East Neuk Festival – referring to the pilgrimage made by many to St Andrews in Fife. The East Neuk Festival is host to a wealth of nationalities, who gather to make music together.

Compostela means 'Field of Stars' – the navigational tool used by pilgrims over the ages. The stars are represented by small bells – E, H, C and B – one for each cellist, taking its note from the first letter of the name of each quartet performing the premiere (in German notation H=B, and B=B \flat)

In the daily videos sent to us by Gabriel, there was often a village bell chiming, as if heralding his arrival or departure at each stage of the journey. I have used this idea to mark the journey of the work.

All the music in the piece relates in some way to journeys, and/or to the variety of nationalities contained within the four quartets who performed the premiere: the Elias, Pavel Haas, Castalian and Belcea. The themes characterize each quartet by giving them material that pertains to them in some way. The piece opens with a Scottish melody: *East Neuk of Fife*, played by Donald Grant – the Scottish violinist in the Elias Quartet.

Next comes a fragment of Haas's second string quartet, to represent Haas's tragic final journey to Auschwitz – now a pilgrims' destination for many. Over this section, birds are heard – each quartet adding their own 'bird calls'.

After the next 'bell refrain' is a Castalian Hymn, which is amongst the oldest known notated music. It is a Hymn to Delphi, describing arrival at the oracle and the Castalian Spring.

A South Korean folk song played pizzicato follows, and then a Dutch ballad about a maiden's heroic journey to kill a predatory troubadour. The pace picks up and leads to a celebratory climax, after which a sequence of folk-melody-fragments (all suggested by the original performers of the piece, and representing their respective homelands), over cello drones. This gradually merges and swells, leading to a bell refrain which heralds the final theme: the medieval Hymn to St Andrew, signifying arrival and the culmination of the pilgrimage. This dissolves into a passage using held muted chords, and crotales, representing the 'Field of Stars' itself.

The piece ends with a chiming of bell-like chords. *Field of Stars* represents music's crossing of borders as well as celebrating Gabriel's personal journey.

Sally Beamish, 2025

Performance notes

The crotales are E, B, C and B \flat , and should be mounted on individual stands next to each cellist's stand. They are played with beaters and also with bows.

The quartets should be at the four corners of the hall – two (C and B) on the stage and two (E and H) behind the audience.

The violins and violas walk to their places while playing and may play standing if desired. The cellists should walk straight to their places in order to play their crotales.

The folk songs may be replaced by other songs if desired, but should be played in G major or E minor.

Commissioned by the East Neuk Festival for their 20th anniversary, and first performed on 29 June 2025 by the Elias, Pavel Haas, Castalian and Belcea Quartets.