

LIR CLASSICS

LIR011 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Phantasy

Sir Arthur Bliss (1891-1975) - Sonata for Viola and Piano

Generally considered to be one of Bliss's finest works, the Viola Sonata was written in 1933. As with so many of his works, it was inspired by a great performer, in this case Lionel Tertis, 'the first virtuoso British violist'. Bliss himself played the viola and once described it as 'the most romantic of instruments; a veritable Byron in the orchestra... its whole rather restless and tragic personality makes it an ideal vehicle for romantic and oratorical expression'.

Such was the collaboration between composer and performer that Bliss suggested in his autobiography that Tertis should have had equal credit for the composition; moreover, as the work grew, Bliss began to see it more as a concerto for viola than a sonata, and spoke of plans to orchestrate the work - plans which sadly never came to fruition. The first performance was given by Tertis and pianist Solomon in Bliss's home for a group of friends, with a certain William Walton turning pages!

The Sonata makes use of the fullest possible range of the viola, especially the higher register, and explores the lyrical and technical possibilities of the instrument - particularly in the first movement, characterized by restless oscillations between major and minor harmonies. The second movement, opening with a muted pizzicato passage, has the character of a solemn procession. The rhythmic, virtuosic third movement is entitled *Furiant* and is followed immediately by a Coda which reminisces on the themes of all three movements.

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) - Gondoliera (1907) - Meditation (1912) - Allegro Appassionato (1908)

Although Bridge was himself an extremely accomplished violist (most notably, he was a member of the English String Quartet for many years), he wrote relatively little for the instrument. However, in addition to miniatures such as the *Allegro Appassionato*, the three songs for mezzo-soprano, viola and piano and a *Lament* for two violas (written for himself and Lionel Tertis), the recent transcription of a number of short works for violin or cello has given violists the possibility of indulging in some of his most beautiful melodies.

The three works presented here clearly display two sides of Bridge's musical personality - melodic charm and elegiac warmth in *Gondoliera* and *Meditation*, and the restless exuberance in *Allegro Appassionato*, reminiscent of his *Phantasie Piano Trio*.

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) - Morpheus

'Perhaps in the old days people used to think it wasn't quite nice for a girl to compose!' wrote Rebecca Clarke in a draft of a lecture on 'The Woman Composer - Then and Now' in 1945. Having been removed by her parents from the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 17 following a marriage proposal from her harmony teacher, she became the first female composition student of Sir Charles Stanford (teacher of Holst, Vaughan Williams and Bridge) at the Royal College of Music. Clarke was a violinist until Stanford suggested that she try the viola, launching a successful career as a soloist and chamber musician.

Clarke herself gave the first performance of Morpheus in a Carnegie Hall recital in 1918, though she used the pseudonym 'Anthony Trent' she adopted for many of her works (chosen since she liked the name 'Anthony' and saw the River Trent on a map). Morpheus was the Greek god of dreams, and Clarke's wistful musical description is one of the most beautiful of her miniatures. Such works dominate her compositional output: she wrote only two large-scale chamber works, a Piano Trio and the popular Viola Sonata, and composed very little once settled in the USA after war was declared in 1939.

When asked, in a BBC interview celebrating her ninetieth birthday, why she didn't continue to compose, she replied: 'I can't do it unless it's the first thing I think of every morning when I wake and the last thing I think of every night before I go to sleep...if one allows too many other things to take over one is not liable to be able to do it...'

However, following the success of the Viola Sonata she was able, at least, to ditch the alter-ego: '...when my music was beginning to be published, I killed Anthony Trent - officially and with no regrets - and I've never been bothered with him since!'

York Bowen (1884-1961) - Phantasy for Viola and Piano, Op.54

Born in Crouch Hill, London, Edwin Yorke Bowen is remembered largely as an accomplished pianist and as a composer for that instrument. However, like Clarke, Bridge and so many other composers, he was also a violist - moreover, like Bliss and Bridge, he was inspired by the brilliance of Lionel Tertis. Bowen's prolific output for the instrument includes two sonatas, a concerto, numerous shorter works such as this Phantasy, several pieces for viola and organ and a Fantasie for four violas.

The Phantasy was written in 1918, and at the time was considered outrageously difficult - like the Bliss Sonata, it makes frequent use of the highest range of the viola. The influence of the Russian romantic piano tradition on Bowen's music is evident in much of the work; the final statements of the theme which begins and runs through the piece are particularly reminiscent of Rachmaninov.

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