

Rebecca Clarke 1886-1979

Two Pieces for String Quartet: Comodo e amabile (Comfortable and gentle) and Poem

Composed 1924

Rebecca Clarke was born in Harrow in 1886. Her father was American and her mother of German descent. They were a musical family and Rebecca was encouraged to learn the Viola and study Composition, Harmony and Counterpoint. In 1907 she became the first female composition student of Sir Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music, London. Lionel Tertis was her Viola teacher. Much of Rebecca Clarke's adult life was spent in the USA. In 1919 she won 2nd prize in a competition with her sonata for Viola and Piano. There was considerable surprise among the judges that the composer was a woman and in order to avoid a recurrence of this situation, Rebecca adopted the pseudonym Anthony Trent. In an interview later in life she said that compositions submitted to publishers under the male name brought more acclaim than those under her real name. She settled in New York and married an old college friend James Friskin in 1944. They toured and travelled widely, performing as a Viola and Piano duo.

These two pieces are short and they demonstrate Rebecca Clarke's musical position between Ethel Smyth [1858-1944] and Elisabeth Lutyens [1906-1983]. The first piece is, as expected, relaxed and the counterpoint between the four instruments is mellow and thoughtful. There is a more strident passage which gives way to pizzicato which underpins solo lines. The piece ends on a conventional major chord but with the 5th in the Cello part. There is less security here, than if the root had been in the bass.

Poem is similarly calm, reflective and with shifting tonality very characteristic of this period. The simple motif is clear and its progression and development is sinuous and chromatic. Nothing jars however, and rhythmically there is continuity throughout this short piece. Insistent repetition and contraction draws this to its close.

Both these pieces can be heard on YouTube where they are played by the Julstrom String Quartet.

Helen Simpson

Gabriel Fauré 1845-1924 Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor Op.15

Allegro molto moderato

Scherzo: Allegro vivo

Adagio

Allegro molto

Fauré started writing his First Piano Quartet in the Summer of 1876 during his intense relationship with Marianne Viardot, the daughter of the famous singer Pauline Viardot. After five years of wooing her, Marianne broke off their short engagement in 1877, much to the anguish of Fauré. The shy Marianne later confessed she found her fiancé more intimidating than endearing! Some of the turmoil of his emotions during this period can perhaps be heard in the more turbulent and passionate moments in the work.

He completed it in 1879 and it was given its first performance on February 14th 1880. Then in 1883 he revised the quartet and completely rewrote the last movement. The original last movement hasn't survived and Fauré is thought to have destroyed it at the end of his life. It is such a shame as it would be great to know what the original movement was like and why he was clearly so dissatisfied with it. The first performance of the revised version was in April 1884.

The first movement, the most extensive of the four, starts strongly with a theme in unison on the strings accompanied by offbeat chords on the piano. This passionate opening moves effortlessly into the more lyrical second theme and the whole movement maintains an almost Brahmsian sense of flow. There is a magical more reflective moment when over quietly held string chords the piano gently plays the opening theme. The extensive Development builds to an intense climax with tremolo strings and the Recapitulation leads the movement to a serene end.

After the overall turbulent mood of the first movement, the Scherzo comes as a wonderful surprise with its lively, joyful and playful mood. The central Trio with muted strings wittily inverts the theme from the Scherzo. A mini piano cadenza leads to a return of the scherzo.

The Adagio opens in a more somber mood with long chords on the piano and each string instrument enters in turn with a phrase that seems to be striving upwards. (Interestingly Fauré was also working on parts of the Requiem during 1877). Soon the piano takes up a gentle triplet rhythm over which the strings spin their melodic lines, eventually leading to a dark close.

The last movement is launched by an energetic theme with a characteristic dotted rhythm which appears in various guises throughout the movement, most notably when played quietly in one of the more reflective moments, creating a wonderful moment of suspense. Another striking and magical passage to listen out for is when the music dies right down, there is a dramatic pause, and the piano enters with quiet shimmering chords and the strings weave high melodic lines. The movement builds to a passionate and thrilling climax and closes with decisive and dramatic chords.

Programme note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) Piano Quintet in A minor Op 84 (1918)

Moderato; Allegro

Adagio

Andante: Allegro

By 1917 Elgar's creativity as a composer appeared to be winding down: as Diana McVeagh says in Grove's Dictionary 'oversimplifying, it could be said he turned towards either propaganda or fantasy'. Indeed, after his wife Alice's death in 1920 he composed very little of substance. But, surprisingly, between 1917 and 1919 he produced four instrumental works which are still hugely popular: the Violin Sonata and String Quartet in 1918, and the Piano Quintet and Cello Concerto in 1918-19. All four were largely composed while the Elgars rented Brinkwells in Fittleworth. Their London neighbour Ford Maddox Ford had proposed a move out of London in response to Elgar's poor health, which indeed improved. In these works, as if accepting his own unresponsiveness to the new directions that contemporary music had taken, Elgar reverted to the instrumental music of his youth, but composed with a life-time's experience.

The eerie opening and strange episodes of the first movement of the quintet have led to much speculation about Elgar's inspiration. His wife Alice's diary in September 1918 proposes a copse of lightning-struck trees in nearby Flexham Park:

'[Edward] Wrote part of Quintet wonderful weird beginning same atmosphere as 'Owls' [an Elgar part-song] – evidently reminiscence of sinister trees & impression of Flexham Park ... – sad 'dispossessed' trees & their dance & unstilled regret for their evil fate '.

The trees later became associated with impiously-inclined, itinerant Spanish monks through a "local legend" for which there is no independent evidence and which may have been invented after the quintet was written. Another suggestion, again from Alice's diary, is that Elgar was influenced by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel "Strange Story". Whatever. Incidentally, the infamous opening of another Bulwer-Lytton novel - *Paul Clifford* - "It was a dark and stormy night..." inspired the San Jose State University's *Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest* "to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels".

The first movement combines a variety of episodes contrasting in tempo and mood. The opening slow plainsong-like phrase is commented on by nervously apprehensive interjections (*illustrated*). The scoring here is curious: the sustained chorale given to the usually



percussive piano, and the percussive comments to the strings. A sighing little motif in falling semitones leads to the robust, familiarly Elgarian theme of the main *Allegro*. But it is soon interrupted by more sighs and then by a transformation of the opening interjections into a seductive (Spanish?) little number from the violins in thirds above a strummed pizzicato (*illustrated*). The different episodes take on new forms and roles during this long and intriguing movement.



The slow movement's glorious, spacious opening (*illustrated*) is a joy for the viola, though soon to be taken over by the violin. The movement is perhaps



the emotional heart of the quintet. It was certainly a favourite of Elgar's who, during his final illness, would listen to it in tears.

The opening of the last movement recalls one of the work's initial phrases, albeit at a slower tempo, before breaking into a robust theme marked *con dignita, cantabile*. The mood changes to a ghostly *piano*, the chorale of the opening returns and the two violins dance a nostalgic waltz before the main theme returns us (*nobilmente*) to more solid, even exuberant, ground - ghosts apparently banished.