

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 17 March 2022 7.30pm

## Trio Balthasar

Michael Foyle violin

Timothy Hugh cello

Iain Burnside piano

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Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Joan Trimble (1915-2000)

Phantasy Trio (1940)

Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

Piano Trio No. 2 (1928-9)

*I. Allegretto ben moderato • II. Molto allegro •*

*III. Andante molto moderato • IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Trio No. 2 in C Op. 87 (1880-2)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •*

*III. Scherzo. Presto - Poco meno presto • IV. Finale. Allegro giocoso*

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A native of Enniskillen, **Joan Trimble** studied at Trinity College, Dublin and the Royal College of Music in London. Her teachers at the latter were Herbert Howells for composition, whom she described as 'dynamic, volatile, full of nervous energy', and Arthur Benjamin for the piano. It was under the guidance of Howells and, later, Vaughan Williams, that Trimble produced her earliest compositions, including songs published by Boosey & Hawkes and pieces for her and her sister Valerie's piano duo, not least the *Sonatina* of 1940. The *Phantasy Trio* dates from the same year, when it won the coveted Cobbett Prize. According to the composer, it was 'written, copied out, and delivered in ten days', a doubly impressive feat, given that she and her sibling were also working eight-hour shifts, six days a week, for the Red Cross at a hospital air raid precautions post.

Following the spirit of Howells's *Phantasy String Quartet* Op. 25, written in similarly troubled times in 1916-7, this is a through-composed work, at turns 'rhapsodic and rhythmic', according to Trimble's own reflections. Indeed, although the composer was highly aware of unfolding events – 'disaster was looming', she wrote, as German troops invaded the Low Countries – Trimble responded with a sense of escapism. Later, she was to distance herself from the composition, yet it is impossible not to be drawn into its open-hearted lyricism, doubtless pining for Fermanagh.

A year after Trimble unveiled her two most important compositions to date, **Frank Bridge** died. A former student of the Royal College, he had been encouraged as a young man by WW Cobbett, after whom the institution's composition prize was named. Often more famed as Britten's erstwhile teacher, Bridge nonetheless created a rich and rewarding output that is, finally, getting the attention it deserves.

The *Second Piano Trio* bears the hallmarks of the composer's post-tonal style – what one critic sourly termed the 'present international vogue of atonalism'. The score was completed on 31 January 1929, when it was dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, Bridge's US patron. Her gift of an annual stipend had allowed him to focus on composition, rather than teaching and performance, and she also ensured recitals of his music throughout the States, where the *Trio* met with much greater appreciation than at its première at the Langham Hotel in London in November 1929.

On the page, the work is cast in four movements, though, in performance, it feels more like two interlinked sections. The first sets out a rich if elusive soundworld, with wan string lines sounding over hypnotic piano ostinatos. This music is juxtaposed with a more intense section, lower in tessitura, though tracing the same rhythmic and harmonic profile. These elements are further varied over the course of the first movement, which eventually gives way to the spry pizzicato games of the *Molto allegro*, at turns capricious and cussed.

The opening of the third movement mirrors the first, though here Bridge suggests an uneven lullaby, to which the strings add ghostly tremolandos. At times, the rocking can sound more like a salon waltz, though feelings of disembodiment continue until the finale launches in helter-skeltering fashion. Its ostinatos prove more tenacious, rendering ironic the passing moments of legato lyricism, before the whirling nightmare of the last movement begins to peter out and the coda returns us to the atmosphere of the opening.

**Brahms** remained rather silent about the gestation of his *Piano Trio* No. 2 in C Op. 87, completed in 1882, though its context is nevertheless intriguing. It had been 28 years since he had penned its predecessor, the heart-on-sleeve *Piano Trio* No. 1 in B Op. 8 (itself revised after the composer had completed Op. 87). This later work certainly marks a contrast with the music of Brahms's youth, though it also looks to the past, with its Beethovenian economy – surprising, really, given that it was composed between Brahms's heady *Piano Concerto* No. 2 in B flat Op. 83 and the unbridled Romanticism of the *Third Symphony*.

The opening movement begins with a snappy violin and cello unison, which sets off in search of the first subject. It provokes an involved journey, with a broad harmonic palette, frequent changes in phrase length and some metrical uncertainty. The subsequent material is more flowing and written in a Lied-like style, albeit continuing the chromatic bent of its predecessor. This leads directly into the development, though the recapitulation will offer further extrapolations of the material, before a return of the initial unison.

The *Andante con moto* is in theme-and-variation form and couched in the relative minor. The principal material is again stated in unison by the strings, with an offbeat accompaniment in the piano. The first variation reverses these roles, before the piano again takes the lead in the rhapsodic third variation. A move to A major brings a burst of warmth, before the final variation returns us to the tonic minor, with a pining iteration of the theme from the strings and a somewhat fretful arpeggiatic figure in the piano.

The *Scherzo* (in C minor) is a *danse macabre*, while its *Trio* harks back to the open-hearted lyricism of the Op. 8 work. Here, an inevitable reprise of the minor-key *Scherzo* has two functions, not only concluding one movement but also leading back to C major to prepare for the next. As before, Brahms wavers between the major and minor modes – the latter hinted at by repeated appearances of a diminished seventh. Undoubtedly propulsive, the music is also elusive. But as the *Finale* continues, charting an extraordinary range of textures and tonalities, its theme is able to don a heroic guise and build to a defiant conclusion.

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