

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 February 2025  
7.30pm

## Wigmore Soloists

Benjamin Marquise Gilmore violin  
Sini Simonen violin  
Rachel Roberts viola  
Steffan Morris cello  
Tim Gibbs double bass  
Emily Beynon flute  
Peter Facer oboe  
Michael Collins clarinet  
Robin O'Neill bassoon  
Alberto Menéndez Escribano horn  
Wu Qian piano  
Catrin Finch harp

Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

Nonet

*I. Molto moderato - Lento • II. Allegro - Lento espressivo*

Robin Holloway (b.1943)

Serenade in C Op. 41

*I. Marcia • II. Menuetto alla tarantella • III. Andante •  
IV. Menuetto – Trio • V. Finale*

*Interval*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Sinfonietta Op. 1

*I. Poco presto ed agitato • II. Variations • III. Tarantella*

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Piano Quintet in A minor Op. 84 (1918-9)

*I. Moderato – Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Andante – Allegro*



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**Bax's** *Nonet* dates to 1930, when the composer was a well-regarded figure on the British music scene. While his compositions had, at times, been considered too modern or difficult, a series of orchestral tone poems including *The Garden of Fand*, *November Woods* and, most of all, *Tintagel*, gradually found welcome audiences. Bax was also no stranger to the symphony and considered the form's greatest exponent in Britain after **Elgar**, before Vaughan Williams and Walton seized that crown during the 1930s.

The *Nonet*, commissioned by the Bradford Festival and performed there for the first time, is directly contemporaneous with Bax's Third Symphony and forms a chamber pendant to that 'gentle rather than sombre' work. But the *Nonet* derived much of its material from a 1928 sonata for violin and piano which had never been performed. It is a richly rhapsodic work, underpinned by sonata principles. At first, the oboe is given the thematic honours, as an ebbing *ostinato* passes between the viola and the clarinet. These atmospheric beginnings then give way to more violent passages, 'tossed about between the various instruments as if blown by a storm', according to Bax, before calming into an eerie coda.

The darker mood continues in the second of the two movements, where the clarinet is again given prominence, its rapid stream of semiquavers juxtaposed with a pugnacious chordal dance. Another contrasting subject area, with string outpourings and the clarinet in equally heartfelt form, provides the warm heart to the movement, which is taken into an 'idyllic epilogue', as the squall finally abates.

The model for **Robin Holloway's** *Serenade in C major Op. 41* was Schubert's F major Octet and written for the same instrumentation following a commission from the Nash Ensemble. Dating to 1978, it was sketched, like Bax's *Nonet*, in tandem with an orchestral work: Holloway's *Second Concerto for Orchestra*. It offered 'relaxation' during the weekend breaks from that much larger score, combining 'an affectionate twist to tonal common practice' and 'light-music clichés all the way from Biedermeier Vienna to Southend Pier', according to the composer.

There are five movements: an opening Marcia, with a Trio stringing together some well-known phrases over a stereotyped chord sequence, then a Menuetto alla tarantella which whirls along in a kaleidoscope of displaced bar lines and phrase lengths. The gaunt opening of the Andante is given harmony and melody in four modulating variations and climaxes in a fifth, which opens out into a heartfelt dying rise and fades away on distant roundabouts. The second Menuetto, unlike the first, is a stolid affair, ostensibly Neoclassical except that the 'repeats' take different turnings; its Trio is a tender hybrid of Schubert and Poulenc; both 'cubistified'. The Finale is really another tarantella in which a few scraps of silly tune are put through the textural, tonal and rhythmic mincer. Again, after the climax, it fades away, this time into a sort of 'haunted ballroom'.

**Britten's** first official opus was dedicated to his teacher Frank Bridge. Written between 20 June and 9 July 1932, it shows evidence of scores discovered by the young composer at the time, including by Schoenberg and Berg (with whom Britten had hoped to study). Their example certainly provided a rich foil to the fusion of pastoralism and Anglicanism espoused by many of Britten's other teachers at the Royal College of Music.

Hearing the Sinfonietta, Schoenberg's acolyte Erwin Stein remarked that Britten's prime influence must have been the First Chamber Symphony Op. 6. The same developing variation structure is certainly evident in the first two movements, as is the (still) magnetic pull of tonality, despite atonal enclaves. A lyrical vein is also present here, juxtaposed with more angular sounds in the first movement, before turning pastoral-spiritual in the Andante. The latter's curling violins even predict the brackish soundworld of *Peter Grimes*, 13 years ahead of its première, before the woodwind reminds us of the youthful pluck of the first movement. Finally, there is a fidgety Tarantella, with a hint of Elgar's Introduction and Allegro for strings Op. 47.

Rather than that exuberant 1905 work, however, tonight's concert closes with Elgar's Piano Quintet in A minor Op. 84, first heard at Wigmore Hall in 1919. Like the famous Cello Concerto that was to follow, it is often imbued with nostalgia and loss, no doubt in response to the recent war. And yet there is also a sense of resolve, what Jerrold Northrop Moore calls the 'cut-and-thrust dialogue of ferocity new to Elgar's music'.

The opening movement begins nervously, followed by a more lachrymose tone, to which the piano adds flattering arpeggios. Things are not so quickly soothed, however, and a rhythmically complex struggle ensues. At times, there is a hint of the salon and the composer's early hits – *Salut d'Amour* and *Chanson de Matin* – while, at others, the memories are ones of war. Indeed, Elgar wrote of 'ghostly stuff', though this was likely a reference to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's occultist novel *A Strange Story*, which the composer had recently completed reading.

The Adagio, like the third movement of Elgar's First Symphony, finds him in an even more searching mood; a form of war requiem. After its dignified opening theme, a probing type of music tugs the melody apart, even threatening to return us to the conflicts of the first movement. But the principal subject eventually returns, brooking no refusal from the passages that dared to question its fidelity. While the Finale begins slowly, its Andante is quickly superseded by another restive Allegro. Vital, the music can sound almost jazzy, as if heralding a new creative period in Elgar's life. But after the death of his wife Alice in 1920, that last chapter would never really come to fruition.

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