

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 25 September 2024  
7.30pm

## Crossing Over the Atlantic

### O/Modernt Chamber Orchestra

Hugo Ticciati violin, director, leader  
Charlotte Scott violin  
Linda Suolahti violin  
Eloisa-Fleur Thom violin  
Eva Aronian violin  
Laura Lunansky violin

Hannah Dawson violin  
Jure Smirnov Oštir violin  
Sascha Bota viola  
Francis Kefford viola  
Frauke Steichert viola  
Gordon Cervoni viola

Julian Arp cello  
Claude Frochoux cello  
Reinoud Ford cello  
Jordi Carrasco-Hjelm double bass  
Alexander Jones double bass

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge Op. 10 (1937)  
interspersed with

Radiohead

I Will (2003) *arranged by Johannes Marmén*

Sting (b.1951)

Shape of My Heart (1993)

Pink Floyd

Paranoid Eyes (1983) *arranged by Johannes Marmén*

Radiohead

Exit Music (For a Film) (1997) *arranged by Johannes Marmén*

### Interval

Philip Glass (b.1937)

Movement I from *Symphony No. 3* (1995)

Nirvana

Something in the Way (1990) *arranged by Johannes Marmén*

Philip Glass

Movement II from *Symphony No. 3*

Nirvana

Lithium (1990) *arranged by Johannes Marmén*

Philip Glass

Movement III from *Symphony No. 3*

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

The Cold Song ('What power art thou') from King Arthur Z628  
(1691) *arranged by Johannes Marmén*

Nirvana

Smells Like Teen Spirit (1991) *arranged by Klemens Bittmann*

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Aged 14, Britten was introduced to Frank Bridge in 1927 by his viola teacher Audrey Alston. Having looked at some of Britten's work, Bridge invited the budding composer to take lessons with him, and there began a friendship that lasted until Bridge's death in 1941. The *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937) turn on a dual crisis. The melancholy theme, taken from the second movement of Bridge's *3 Idylls for String Quartet* (1906), allows Britten to spotlight currents of emotional and harmonic drama that circulate beneath the surface of his admired friend's music. Interpreted in the context of the violent awakening caused by World War I, as a consequence of which the pacifist Bridge wholeheartedly embraced Continental modernism, Britten also voices some of the unease felt in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II. The piece has an additional personal dimension, confirmed in two of Britten's scores (one presented to Bridge), where each section is connected with a character trait attributed to Bridge. The result is a kaleidoscopic sequence of contradictory fragments, each invoking an aspect of the high culture of European music, while also (with hints of impish affection) marking facets of Bridge's personality.

The work, which was completed in just four weeks for a concert of British music at the 1937 Salzburg Festival, opens with an *Introduction and Theme* (labelled 'Himself' in the score given to Bridge), including a clear statement of Bridge's subject; this is followed by the first variation, a troubled *Adagio* (labelled 'His depth' or 'integrity'). Next comes a somewhat menacing quick *March* ('His energy') and a parodic pastoral *Romance* ('His charm' or 'wit'). The scintillating *Aria Italiana* ('His humour'), a richly coloured sherd of operatic brilliance, gives way to the *Bourrée classique* ('His tradition'; variation 5), with the word 'classique' being disruptively applied to the conventional Baroque form. The *Wiener walzer* ('His enthusiasm' or 'gaiety') sustains the sense of disruption in a movement that owes more to Viennese modernism than to the Strauss family of waltz composers.

The frenzied bustle of the *Moto perpetuo* ('His vitality' or 'enthusiasm') is resolved in the sombre shimmer and bombastic accents of the *Funeral March* ('His sympathy' or 'understanding'), while the snippet of spooky *Chant* ('His reverence') insinuates an unrealised cinematic narrative. Finally, the splendid *Fugue* ('His skill') is overlaid with allusions to Bridge's theme that are consummated in a reprise (the *Finale*) that is fraught with intense lushness, again permeated by indeterminate suspense.

Taking a cue from Britten's destabilising strategies, O/Modernt adds its own commentary to Britten's *Variations* by interpolating four modern rock and pop classics. Radiohead's profoundly unsettling 'I Will' (2003) reflects on the difficulty of protecting helpless innocence from the ever-present danger of human violence, while the same band's 'Exit Music (For a Film)' portrays an individual in the deepest depths of despair. Sting's 'Shape of My Heart' (1993) describes a

card player mining the 'sacred geometry of chance' in a ceaseless quest for truth; 'Paranoid Eyes', released by Pink Floyd in 1983, tells the life story of an idealistic individual whose initial feelings of neurotic suspicion descend into mere social unease and commonplace middle-aged disillusion.

Philip Glass's *Symphony No. 3* was commissioned by the director of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra, who asked for a work that would treat each of the orchestra's 19 players as *de facto* soloists. Glass responded with an intimately condensed symphonic piece in four movements that provides opportunities for the instrumentalists to perform like members of a trio or quartet. Disregarding earlier conventions of symphonic shape, it is structured as a prelude and a short concluding finale (crowned with a novel closing theme) that frame two central sections (movements 2 and 3), which form the vital substance of the piece.

As described by Glass: 'The second movement mode of fast-moving compound meters explores the textures from unison to multiharmonic writing for the whole ensemble. It ends when it moves without transition to a new closing theme, mixing a melody and *pizzicato* writing.' Alluding to the form of a Baroque chaconne, the third movement is underpinned by a repeating motif (referred to by Glass as a 'harmony sequence'), played initially by the cellos and violas. With each successive restatement, these dark forces are joined by other members of the ensemble to create a layered ground bass, completed with swirling arabesques in the violins, that builds in intensity throughout the entire movement. At the same time, rising above the reiterating rhythmic texture, a solo violin plays an extended ululating melody that is passed from one player to the next until it is eventually overwhelmed by the structural underpinning.

Treating the organisational principle as an end in itself, Glass's symphonic writing highlights affinities between American minimalism and the conventions of rock and pop music, where the hypnotic beat is as important as the circumscribed harmonies. The pop theme is enhanced in this evening's performance of Glass's symphony with arrangements of 'Something In the Way', 'Lithium' and 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' by the rock band Nirvana, together with Henry Purcell's 'Cold Song' from *King Arthur*. Sung by the Cold Genius, the aria achieved chart success in the 1980s, when it was recorded by the German countertenor Klaus Nomi. Grasping its commercial potential, Nomi understood that the *modus operandi* of much of Purcell's music is familiar to modern audiences because, like rock and pop, it is driven 'from the ground up' (the title of an award-winning album by O/Modernt) by recurring bass lines. Furthermore, as intimated by its use in Glass's *Symphony No. 3*, the musical genre that spawned the procedure was none other than the chaconne – originally a sexy and subversive dance that was all the rage in 16th Century Spain.

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