

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 31 March 2025
7.30pm

Wye Valley Chamber Music 25th Anniversary Concert

Daniel Tong piano
Simon Crawford-Phillips piano
Jeffrey Armstrong violin
David Adams violin

Maya Broman Crawford-Phillips violin
William Coleman viola
Isobel Neary-Adams viola
Alice Neary cello

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) Phantasy Piano Quartet in F sharp minor (1910)
Andante con moto - Allegro vivace - Andante con moto

Huw Watkins (b.1976) String Trio No. 2 (2025) *London première*

Mel Bonis (1858-1937) Piano Quartet No. 1 in B flat Op. 69 (1905)
*I. Moderato • II. Intermezzo. Allegretto tranquillo •
III. Andante • IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) Piano Quintet No. 1 in D minor Op. 89 (1905)
I. Molto moderato • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto moderato



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Since 2000, the Wye Valley Chamber Music Festival has grown into a truly important cultural event in the Wye Valley. It has retained its unique character of being a musicians' retreat, founded on the passion of all of those involved. Each February, around 25 chamber musicians take up residence in Treowen Manor outside Monmouth in Wales. They live and work together, performing concerts around the local area. In 2015 the annual Summer Residency was established to pass this tradition of musical creativity on to a new generation of chamber musicians. A combination of coaching, rehearsal and performance, this Residency offers emerging ensembles the chance to learn from and play alongside experienced tutors.

A slew of British *Phantasies* came into being around the turn of the 20th Century thanks to Walter Willson Cobbett, a wealthy businessman, keen amateur violinist and patron of music, who promoted the idea of a single, multi-section piece of chamber music. Cobbett funded a competition that ran for six iterations between 1905 and 1919. Having won a special prize at the inaugural competition in 1905, **Frank Bridge** won the 1907 competition outright. In 1910 Cobbett commissioned a new *Phantasie* from Bridge – the one we hear tonight, for piano quartet. After its première in January 1911, the critic of *The Times* admired the originality of ideas and concluded that the composer 'has really something of his own to say'. Bridge alighted on a palindromic ABCBA structure for the piece, which opens (after a short, stormy introduction) with a lilting, barcarolle-like section, quite Fauré-like. The following sections (B and C) form a scherzo and trio, the former with the hint of a sinister *danse macabre*, and the latter starting with an ardent song-like violin tune. According to Britten (a pupil of Bridge), the calming coda suggested 'the deep red afterglow of a sunset'.

Born in Pontypool in South Wales, **Huw Watkins** has maintained a dual career as both composer and pianist, and he is no stranger to Wigmore Hall in either guise. Just this month the Nash Ensemble gave the first performance, here at Wigmore Hall, of his *Aria for oboe and string trio*. Almost exactly a decade ago in March 2015, it was the Nash that gave the première (also in this Hall) of Watkins's String Trio No. 1. The String Trio No. 2 was premièred last year by tonight's performers (who also comprise husband, wife and daughter) at the Penarth Chamber Music Festival. The piece falls into seven short movements, 'each one,' says Watkins, 'picking up an idea, or a note left hanging from the preceding one, and taking it in quite different directions'. This continues, he says, until the last two movements, which are joined together, and which 'revisit much more thoroughly the athletic, fanfare-like material heard right at the beginning of the first'. It's a fanfare of wit, verve and not a little folk-like spirit, with writing (which we hear across the piece) in which the string instruments, often in pairs, echo each other at close quarters, to create an effect that is at the same time interlocking and finely fragmented. And there is music of time-arresting beauty, in the *Adagio* (movement 5) and in the intimate *Lento* (movement 2), with gentle, slow-moving harmonies and wide-contoured melodic line.

Mel Bonis is among a number of French women composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – others including Augusta Holmès, Marie Jaëll and Charlotte Sohy – whose works are beginning to receive critical and public attention. Born 'Mélanie', though she chose the less gender-specific 'Mel' as her *nom de plume*, she became one of the few female students at the Paris Conservatoire, where her organ teacher was César

Franck, and Debussy was a fellow composition student. However, her parents withdrew her from the Conservatoire after they had refused permission for her to marry a fellow student. She was forced to marry an industrialist 25 years her senior. They had three children together and after a decade she had another, illegitimate, child, having rekindled her Conservatoire romance. This she struggled to reconcile with her Catholic faith.

The Piano Quartet reveals a number of facets of Bonis's work and inspiration. There's a hint of the Paris salons, for which many of her smaller pieces were written, a surging Romanticism and the influence of her teacher, Franck. The first movement's opening theme, with its sighing falling interval, is suavely lyrical while a triple-time metre offers a lilting movement, filled with a rippling piano accompaniment. With a relaxing of tempo comes a second theme (marked *tranquillo, con sentimento*), first on violin, then cello. This builds to a climax before the first theme returns. Staying in triple time, the second movement has a dance-like lilt. The twilit middle section, with muted strings, is a dream-like diversion before the first music returns briefly to close the movement. The third movement opens with a rich, Romantic, chromatically winding theme on violin, contrasting with a more straightforward cello theme. This is the most obviously Franckian of the movements, and the end retreats gradually into the distance. The brief finale is vigorous and full-blooded, rounding off a work that Bonis's great-granddaughter Christine Géliot has said reflects four qualities of the composer: 'A hypersensitive temperament, a studious, headstrong nature, a keen intelligence, and a destiny both brilliant and tragic'.

By the time **Gabriel Fauré** began work on his first Piano Quintet, in the 1880s, he had been assistant organist at Saint-Sulpice in Paris and deputised for Saint-Saëns at the Madeleine. He had fallen in with the composers d'Indy, Lalo, Duparc and Chabrier, with whom he formed the Société Nationale de Musique, met Liszt, and travelled to Germany and England to hear Wagner's operas. With his first engagement having been broken off by his fiancée Marianne Viardot (daughter of the famous singer and composer Pauline Viardot), Fauré in 1883 married Marie Frémiet. But the Piano Quartet was to have a long gestation, and it was completed only in 1905.

For Fauré's biographer Jean-Michel Nectoux, the Piano Quintet's first movement is 'perhaps the most beautiful in the whole of his chamber music'. It floats in with gentle harp-like figurations in the piano and a remote melody. Two further themes follow, the former dense in texture and deeply passionate, the latter (first heard on second violin) delectably serene. Noting the difficulty this movement caused him, Fauré himself acknowledged it had a 'deceptive air of spontaneity'. The dreamy *Adagio* proceeds with diaphanous chromaticism until the piano and viola reach the second theme, when the texture suddenly clears. As the movement continues Fauré's gift for lofty expression – for rising beyond the earthbound – is clear. The third movement opens with a theme disarming in its simplicity though it alternates with more dynamic episodes. Louis Vierne noted that Fauré was recalled to the stage five times at the work's première. We are not told how he reacted. We can only imagine, given that the famously modest composer once confided to a friend: 'I'm not in the habit of attracting crowds.'

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