

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 31 May 2023  
7.30pm

## Rebecca Clarke - A Musical Odyssey

Lawrence Power viola  
Simon Crawford-Phillips piano

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1525-1594)	Ricercar del primo tuono
Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979)	Impetuoso from <i>Viola Sonata</i> (1919)
Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)	Lento from <i>Suite for viola and piano</i> (1919)
Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)	Allegro non troppo from <i>Viola Sonata</i> (1955)
Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585)	Come, Holy Ghost (pub. 1567)
Rebecca Clarke	Passacaglia on an Old English Tune (?1940-1)
	<i>Interval</i>
Frank Bridge (1879-1941)	Allegro appassionato (1908)
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)	Romance for viola and piano
Rebecca Clarke	Vivace from <i>Viola Sonata</i>
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor (1897)
Rebecca Clarke	Chinese Puzzle (1921)
Béla Bartók (1881-1945)	Romanian Dances (1915) <i>arranged by Zoltán Székely</i> <i>Stick Dance • Sash Dance • In One Spot •</i> <i>Horn Dance • Romanian Polka • Fast Dance</i>
Rebecca Clarke	Adagio from <i>Viola Sonata</i>

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If **Rebecca Clarke** had only enjoyed one of her two careers as a composer and viola player, she would still deserve a place in British music history. She was one of the 20th-century pioneers who established the viola as a solo instrument, performing with celebrated musicians including Myra Hess, Pablo Casals, and Arthur Rubinstein (who described her as 'glorious'). As a composer, Clarke was hailed in both the US and UK as 'really brilliant'. Her corpus of nearly one hundred works firmly established her among Britain's leading modern composers in the 1920s. Among her larger pieces were her Piano Trio (1921), Rhapsody for cello and piano (1923) and the piece that launched her to fame — the Viola Sonata, which underpins today's programme.

In 1919, the patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge ran a competition for a new viola work, to be premièred at her Berkshire Music Festival. Clarke entered her Viola Sonata — which tied for first place with Ernest Bloch's Suite for viola and piano. All competition entries had to be submitted anonymously, which no doubt helped Clarke's music to be judged for its own merits. Some of the judges had speculated that Maurice Ravel might be the composer; Coolidge told Clarke that she would have been amused to witness their faces 'when they saw it was by a woman.'

The Sonata opens with a virtuosic flourish that allows the soloist to immediately place their stamp on the work. This fanfare provides the work's main thematic content, before moving to a lyrical second theme. Clarke calls back the original material after the development by sounding the fanfare in the piano's upper registers, *pianississimo*, as though heard from afar. This kind of dramatic technique is characteristic of Clarke, and she additionally uses evocative harmonies and timbres to give the sonata a theatrical quality. The *Vivace*, for example, makes use of *pizzicato* (plucked strings) and piano *glissandi* (slides), deemed to be 'the elfish, tricky sort of thing the moderns like to do' (*Musical America*).

Clarke wrote the sonata shortly after a performance tour to Hawaii, and the influence of Chinese music she heard there is present in her use of pentatonic scales and parallel harmonies. These also appear in *Chinese Puzzle* (1921), her most explicitly Orientalist work and the only piece in which she attempted to mimic the sound of Chinese music. Her use of musical exoticism in the sonata, though, most obviously demonstrates her sympathies with French composition, which critics remarked on extensively. They particularly liked the *Adagio*, the *New-York Tribune* judging that Clarke showed 'her greatest genius' in this movement. Clarke fully exploits the richness of the viola's range, before closing the sonata with a triumphant reprise of the first movement's opening theme.

**Bloch** was a crucial influence for Clarke, and she frequently expressed admiration for his music. The affinity between their sound worlds is audible in this *Lento*; both composers tend towards theatricalism, and share a similar harmonic palette. He said of this Suite

that 'a vision of the Far East ... inspired me', and that he originally thought to subtitle the movement 'Nocturne'.

Renaissance and Tudor works were a recurring source of inspiration for Clarke. While studying at the Royal College of Music, she developed a keen interest in historic music and set up a Palestrina choir with fellow student Beryl Reeves. They asked Ralph Vaughan Williams to conduct, and he responded characteristically, saying that although he knew little about **Palestrina** he would be happy to 'make up a tradition of our own!' Here, Clarke explored the Renaissance composer's masses and motets, providing a foundation for her later choral music.

Clarke's earliest known piece engaging with this period dates from around 1912, and her latest was the 1941 *Passacaglia on an Old English Tune*. The melody comes from the hymn 'Come, Holy Ghost', believed to be by **Thomas Tallis**. The hymn is a simple song of praise, but what Clarke does with it is extraordinary. In the third variation the viola part bursts into an enthralling set of chords, and the theme is then fragmented as Clarke transforms Tallis's tune into something wholly new. The hymn's text offers a plea for 'peace at home', which takes on particular poignance given that Clarke was composing during World War Two in America, having been denied a visa to return home to England.

Both **Vaughan Williams** and **Frank Bridge** were among the more influential of Clarke's British colleagues. Vaughan Williams's *Romance* was not discovered until he died, so the circumstances of its composition are unknown — it may have been written around 1914. Bridge, like Clarke, was a violist. They performed together, and she regularly played his *Allegro appassionato* (1908). It opens with a flamboyant gesture in a similar style to Clarke's Sonata, developing into a rhapsodic, free-flowing work.

Clarke was also deeply involved with modern European music. She played a vast variety of repertoire including works by **Ravel**, **Béla Bartók**, and **Bohuslav Martinů**. Martinů's 1955 Viola Sonata was commissioned and premièred by the American violist Lillian Fuchs, who played a formative role in raising the instrument's profile in the States. Bartók's six *Romanian Dances* (1915) are based on folk tunes from Transylvania. It was perhaps Bartók's innovative rhythms that appealed to Clarke, given that she commented in 1922 that 'the future development of music' lay in rhythmic more than harmonic innovation. As for Ravel, Clarke performed his music extensively, and his approach to both harmony and timbre is an audible influence in her works. This incomplete Violin Sonata (1897) was an early student work, composed between being ejected from the Paris Conservatoire and returning to Fauré's composition class. Clarke was one of the performers for Ravel's 1928 visit to England, and rather unnerved him by reading his fortune at the after-party — apparently producing an unsettlingly accurate assessment!

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