

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 3 February 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by The Tertis Foundation in memory of Lillian Tertis

Timothy Ridout viola
Frank Dupree piano

George Enescu (1881-1955) Concertstück (1906)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) Elégie Op. 24 (1880)

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) Viola Sonata (1919)
I. Impetuoso • II. Vivace • III. Adagio

Interval

Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962) Praeludium and Allegro in the style of Pugnani (pub. 1905)

York Bowen (1884-1961) Viola Sonata No. 1 in C minor Op. 18 (1905)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Poco lento e cantabile •
III. Finale. Presto - Allegro molto*

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George Enescu – a virtuoso violinist and pianist, conductor, composer and teacher/mentor to many – noted wryly that some people ‘weren’t able to catalogue and classify me in the usual way’. Romanian by birth, educated in Vienna and a long-term resident of Paris, he considered himself ‘international’, grounded in the Austro-German tradition but fascinated by Romanian folk music and an important contributor to musical life in France.

In 1904, at the invitation of friend and former tutor Gabriel Fauré, he began sitting on the judging panel for the Paris Conservatoire’s auditions and competitions. Two years later he composed his ‘Concert Piece’ as a test item for students at these events. Here, Enescu’s Romanian hat is firmly on his head, and the music is suffused with the spirit of the free-form, soulful *doina* style of folk melody. That said, the composer remains ‘international’: the work is in sonata form, with touches of French fantasy tempered by Teutonic rigour.

Fauré’s *Élégie* was first heard in 1880 in the home of Camille Saint-Saëns. Originally written for cello and piano, it was intended to be the slow movement of a complete sonata. However, Fauré decided to publish it as a free-standing entity, dedicating it to the cellist Jules Loëb, who gave the official première in December 1883. It was a popular success from the start; the composer later arranged the piano part for orchestra, and viola players and violinists have been happy to adopt the ‘top line’ as their own.

Around this time, Fauré’s music was becoming more delicately withdrawn and emotionally elusive. This work, however, is in his candidly expressive former style. Though its middle section recalls times of happiness, a nostalgic pang soon turns to a cry of pain. Fauré’s deep admirer, the composer Charles Koechlin, remarked that grief was ‘not far’ from this music, and it was heard at Fauré’s state funeral in November 1924 at the Eglise de la Madeleine.

In 1919, American newspapers carried an advertisement offering a \$1,000 prize for the ‘Best Piano and Viola Work’ entered for a competition. The organiser of the contest was Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a generous and discerning patron of chamber music in the United States. 72 compositions were submitted; the judges whittled these down to two, but were unable to decide between them. It was left to Mrs Coolidge to adjudicate, and she awarded the prize to Ernest Bloch’s *Suite* for viola. The runner-up was a Sonata for viola and piano by Anthony Trent.

When it was revealed that ‘Anthony Trent’ was actually the British-born viola player and composer **Rebecca Clarke**, there was shock and disbelief. ‘You should have seen their faces when they saw it was by a woman!’ Coolidge told Clarke. The reaction would not have surprised the composer. The previous year

she had presented a concert of music under her own name, with one item attributed to her fictitious male alter ego; the piece by ‘Trent’ was favourably reviewed, while the others were patronisingly dismissed.

The Sonata is prefaced by a quotation from the French poet Alfred de Musset, which translates as: ‘Poet, take up your lute; the wine of youth ferments tonight in the veins of God.’ Though Clarke was the daughter of an American father and German mother, the musical language occupies a place between English modality and French impressionism. A scherzo full of dazzling effects is surrounded by two inter-related movements of dreams and drama.

The Austrian-American violinist **Fritz Kreisler** was another musician who found it advantageous to adopt a different name when introducing his own compositions. He claimed to have found a collection of old manuscripts by obscure composers from the past, pieces which he had arranged for violin and piano. Thus the *Praeludium and Allegro* was published in 1905 as being by the 19th-century violinist-composer Gaetano Pugnani. After these ‘arrangements’ had gained popularity, Kreisler revealed that they were all his own work. This one is appreciated by string players both as a showpiece and as a thorough work-out for their technique.

By 1909, when Schoenberg had only just started to experiment with atonal music, and four years before Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* would be premièred, the 25-year-old **York Bowen** had composed three piano concertos and was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music in his birth city of London. Saint-Saëns hailed him as ‘the most remarkable of the young British composers’. In later years, however, critical opinion gravitated steadily away from the melodic, late-Romantic, tonally centred idiom that he never felt the need to abandon.

Bowen’s Viola Sonata No. 1 was completed when he had just turned 20 (a second sonata followed soon after). He was a regular accompanist for Lionel Tertis, who was on a mission to establish the viola as a solo instrument. The duo gave the first performance at the Aeolian Hall in London on 19 May 1905.

It has been remarked that Bowen’s viola sonatas have echoes of Brahms’s two Op. 120 works (which are transcriptions of clarinet sonatas), but that is mainly because there were few alternative comparisons at the time they were written. It is more pertinent to note how boldly Bowen leads the way in giving the viola its own, confidently expressive voice. Tonight’s work is also entirely characteristic of its composer in its ebb and flow of gathering tension and moments of comparative reticence.

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