

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 28 March 2022 1.00pm

Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective

Elena Urioste violin

Tim Crawford violin

Rosalind Ventris viola

Juan-Miguel Hernandez viola

Laura van der Heijden cello

Tom Poster piano

BBC
RADIO



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Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

Phantasie Piano Quartet in F sharp minor (1910)

Andante con moto - Allegro vivace - Andante con moto

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Suite for violin and piano (1943)

Mother and Child

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quintet in E flat Op. 97 (1893)

*I. Allegro non tanto • II. Allegro vivo • III. Larghetto •
IV. Finale. Allegro giusto*

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Among British chamber music of the early 20th Century, there's a curious prevalence of works called 'Phantasy'. These were the brainchild of Walter Willson Cobbett, a wealthy chamber music enthusiast. Dissatisfied with the strange lack of any single-movement form in the chamber canon (equivalent to the orchestral overture, for instance) he decided to incentivise composers to create one. So he set up 'Phantasy' competitions - the title alluding to the fantasias for viol consort that had flourished during the English Renaissance.

The young composer **Frank Bridge** took to his idea more than most. He won a prize in Cobbett's 1905 Phantasy String Quartet competition, and in 1907 his Phantasy Piano Trio was awarded first place. Cobbett then commissioned him to compose a Phantasie Piano Quartet in 1910.

Bridge's third solution to Cobbett's single-movement challenge would prove to be his most enduring. It has an elegant symmetry: lyrical outer sections surround two scampering scherzos and a dreamy central episode. The opening sets a tone of high drama, with a muscular ensemble outburst, giving way to a piano theme of tumbling, autumnal melancholy. Bridge develops his material through gorgeous modulations and dance rhythms, relishing the sustained warmth of strings against the piano's flighty sparkle. 'Brahms happily tempered with Fauré' is how Benjamin Britten would later describe this attractive musical language.

Most skilful is the fact that Bridge plots a convincing emotional arc through his design. The final return of the main theme achieves a climactic intensity and wilting catharsis, as it gradually dies away to a tranquil coda. A listener at a performance told Cobbett that this Phantasie was 'among the most thrilling pieces of chamber music she had heard'. It remains one of Bridge's most popular chamber works, and among the most highly-regarded responses to Cobbett's initiative.

The African-American composer **William Grant Still** was born in Woodville, Mississippi. In his homeland he's remembered for achieving several 'firsts' for Black composers during an age of deep racial prejudice, but his distinguished musical legacy is increasingly catching attention abroad too. A multi-instrumentalist who turned his hand to oboe and cello among others, his formal studies included a stint at Oberlin Conservatory and private lessons with the modernist composer Edgar Varèse. He also benefited from involvement in the fast-paced world of commercial music, playing in dance bands and radio orchestras while making a name for himself as an arranger.

Still's pioneering reputation among Black composers is owed to mainstream performances of large-scale works such as the 'Afro-American' Symphony No. 1 and the opera *Troubled Island*. But one of his most popular works today is much smaller: *Mother and Child* from the 1943 Suite for violin and piano, a movement which he later orchestrated.

This suite is inspired by three African-American artists, and *Mother and Child* refers to the work of Sargent Johnson, who made a number of figurative sculptures and drawings with that title. Still's father had died when he was just a few months old, so it's not hard to imagine that this theme would have had a particularly strong resonance for him.

The piece starts in the rich lower register of the violin - which most closely resembles the human voice - with the gentleness of a lullaby. The piano part rocks supportively, but is never too forthright. Still lets the violin's easy expressiveness bloom, taking it up higher and, at the end, enriching it with double-stopping. A contrasting section develops a greater sense of motion, but overall the mood is affectionate and heartfelt.

We end the concert with another 'American' work, only this time by the Czech composer **Antonín Dvořák**. His String Quintet in E flat was composed during his three-year stay in New York, when he composed the celebrated 'New World' Symphony. But in the summer of 1893, Dvořák swapped the city for the small settlement of Spillville in Iowa, which had a substantial Czech community. Here he composed his 'American' string quartet, and just a few days after finishing it, he began work on a new String Quintet, scored with two violas.

Much has been speculated about the possible influence of Spirituals and Native American music on Dvořák during his sojourn in the US. What's certain is that the highly singable, pentatonic melodic shapes that abound in the quintet make for a melodic style that's evocative of various folk traditions, from either side of the Atlantic.

This is a sunny, optimistic piece - three of its movements are marked *Allegro*. The second viola leads a tentative introduction, but the music soon picks up pace to a brisk 3/4, with a rhythmic propulsion and melodic expansiveness that could bring to mind a train rolling through wide American plains. The second movement transforms this momentum into a four-square rustic dance, and those who know the 'New World' Symphony's famous *Largo* may find something familiar in the plaintive melody that forms the central section.

The third movement is an elegant set of variations in a more Classical vein, a study in textural variety that's stately and occasionally grave. Dvořák's consistent alternation between minor and major recalls the bitter-sweet stoicism of Schubert, but a rousing finish is never in doubt. A sprightly theme dominates the *Finale*, with a galloping energy that brings the quintet to its inevitable happy close.

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