



Leicester  
International  
Music  
Festival

## Lunchtime Concert: Thursday, 14th March 1pm



Hélène Clément (viola) & Alasdair Beatson (piano)

Frank Bridge: Cello Sonata in D minor H125 (arrangement for viola and piano)

Benjamin Britten: Elegy for solo viola

Bridge arr. Britten: There is a Willow Grows aslant a Brook H173

Imogen Holst: Suite for Solo Viola

Benjamin Britten: Lachrymae, Reflections on a Song of Dowland, Op. 48a



Born in France in 1988, **Hélène Clément** has learned to combine her proud love for French wine with the cheese delicacies found in England since she moved to London in 2013. Her fierce enthusiasm and thirst for the chamber music and the viola repertoire leads her to constantly expand her musical horizons by performing with a wide range of different partners, playing in the most prestigious concert halls in Europe and around the World.

She has performed at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Wigmore Hall in London, Carnegie Hall in New York, the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, the Salle Cortot and Cité de la Musique in Paris. Her chamber music partners have included Nicolas Altstaedt, Jonathan Biss, Benjamin Grosvenor, Elisabeth Leonskaja, Alexander Melnikov, Mitsuko Uchida, and Peter Wispelwey, as well as the Brentano String Quartet and the Nash Ensemble. Hélène is a frequent guest at the prestigious Marlboro Music Festival in America and Prussia Cove in England.

Since September 2013, Hélène has been the viola player of the Doric String Quartet, fulfilling her appetite for deep explorations of the repertoire, from Haydn String Quartets to newly commissioned pieces. Recent highlights include recitals at the Amsterdam Muziekgebouw, Vienna Musikverein, Frankfurt Alte Oper, Hamburg Laeiszhalle and De Singel, and regular performances at the Wigmore Hall. Further afield, they have toured to Japan, Israel, Australia, America, Asia, and New Zealand.

The Quartet has released a wide range of recordings, working exclusively with Chandos Records. Their most recent releases include works by Haydn, Britten, and Mendelssohn.

As Principal Viola Player of the innovative Aurora Orchestra based in London, Hélène takes part in their exhilarating performances of major works from memory.

She teaches viola and chamber music at the Royal Academy of Music of London: mentoring and coaching young talents is taking up an ever-growing place in her life. With the Doric Quartet, she is the Artistic Director of the Mendelssohn on Mull Festival, a position that sees her play a key role in providing young professionals in the field of chamber music with a week of intensive mentoring, coaching and development.

Hélène is the current holder of the viola previously owned by both Frank Bridge and Benjamin Britten. Her ambition, quickly formed once she first played the instrument, was to create a testament to both composers and to the instrument that binds them together. Hélène writes: 'Frank Bridge owned and played the beautiful viola made by Francesco Giussani, in Italy, in 1843. Benjamin Britten was Frank Bridge's most beloved pupil, and Bridge gave him the viola as a parting gift when Britten had to embark on a ship's journey to the United States at the outbreak of the Second World War. The composers were never to see each other again. I had the privilege to play the viola for the first time in Suffolk in 2018, when Sarah Bardwell, from Britten Pears Arts, custodians of the instrument, kindly brought it with her when she drove over to meet me at a concert venue where I was about to perform. As soon as my bow touched the strings, I knew something very special was happening. That voice felt so unique, so personal and inspiring, that I played the viola in the concert that very evening. From then on, I could not separate myself from this voice. It had incredibly quickly become my own. I set out on a long and fascinating journey of exploration, the dialogue between the instrument and myself becoming every day more personal, the relationship more intertwined, my own expressivity forever changed by the exchange. I wanted to share the intimacy of that sound and the inherent relationship it has with the musical worlds of both Frank Bridge and Benjamin Britten. To record the viola repertoire of both composers, producing the very sound that they would have had in their ears, the sound that inspired their love for the instrument and its special language, became a priority for me.'

Scottish pianist **Alasdair Beatson** works prolifically as soloist and chamber musician, adept on modern and historical instruments, and renowned as both performer and pedagogue. Notable performances in 2024 include multiple appearances at Wigmore Hall, in concert with Steven Isserlis, Viktoria Mullova and Alexi Kenney, as member of the Nash Ensemble, and in festivals including Bath Mozartfest, Ernen, Lewes, Megaron Spring Festival, Peasmarsh, Resonances, West Cork and Yellowbarn.

Alasdair is renowned as a sincere musician and intrepid programmer. He champions a wide repertoire with particular areas of interest: Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Schumann; the solo and chamber music of Gabriel Fauré, Bartók and Janáček; concertos of Bach, Bartók, Britten, Fauré, Hindemith, Messiaen, and Mozart; and contemporary works, including the piano quintet of Thomas Adès, George Benjamin's *Shadowlines* and Harrison Birtwistle's *Harrison's Clocks*.

Recent recordings include a solo piano recital *Aus Wien* on Pentatone, featuring music of Schumann, Schoenberg, Ravel, Korngold and Schubert, and Schubert works for violin and fortepiano with Viktoria Mullova on Signum. These join an acclaimed discography of solo and chamber recordings on BIS, Champs Hill, Chandos, Claves, Evil Penguin, Onyx, Pentatone and SOMM labels.

Alasdair teaches solo piano at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and regularly mentors for the London-based Chamber Studio. From 2012 to 2018 Alasdair was founder and artistic director of *Musique à Marsac*, and since 2019 is artistic director of the chamber music festival at Musikdorf Ernen in Switzerland.

The music of today's recital can thus be found on a very fine recording for Chandos by Hélène and Alasdair. Not only does it satisfyingly link the Giussani viola with the music of both Frank Bridge and Benjamin Britten, but reflects the way those two composers responded to profound feelings of loss. For the listener, this can at times be challenging, yet we experience a certain *schadenfreude*, rewarded with music of 'exquisite despair'.

### **Frank Bridge: Cello Sonata in D minor H125 (arranged for viola and piano by Hélène Clément)**

**I Allegro ben moderato**

**II Adagio ma non troppo - Molto allegro agitato**

The first performance of Bridge's Cello Sonata, by two of his musician friends, the cellist Felix Salmond and pianist Harold Samuel, took place at London's Wigmore Hall in 1917, four years after work on it was begun. It seems probable that the first movement was completed relatively quickly, but the outbreak of war affected Bridge so profoundly that he found composition difficult. The cellist Antonia Butler, who gave the French premiere in 1928, reported:

'I first played the Sonata with a contemporary pianist of his called Ada May Thomas. She told me that during the First World War, when Bridge was writing the slow movement, he was in utter despair over the futility of war and the state of the world generally and would walk round Kensington in the early hours of the morning unable to get any rest or sleep, and that the idea of the slow movement really came into being during that time.'

The lyrical beauty of the opening movement reflects the pastoral idiom of his pre-war music, with soaring instrumental lines over shimmering piano.

The main melody arrives with a feeling of forward movement, beginning as it does on the second beat of the bar, and with recurring triplets. This is followed by a brief interlude in Gb major, before the players set off again with the melody played in its purest form. A reflective passage, with the piano to the fore, precedes a more agitated section, marked *con passione*, and we then hear the extended melodic idea twice, each time with more energy, before the movement ends quietly.

Bridge's original intention was to write a slow movement followed by a scherzo and an independent finale, but he merged those into a more complex and multi-faceted structure. After an introduction which has an ambiguous tonality and a feeling of timelessness, a new melody moves us forward again. This is followed by a beautiful *andante con moto* section, but the ensuing bars are marked *Molto allegro e agitato*, full of chromatic energy. The passionate music which follows reaches a climax, before another gentle moment of repose. Finally, the Sonata revisits its first ideas, ending with what seems a defiant D major chord.

### **Benjamin Britten: Elegy for solo viola**

Benjamin Britten's *Elegy* was written the day after he left Gresham's School at the age of sixteen and only discovered later, being first performed at the 1984 Aldeburgh Festival. Britten had been a pupil at the school for two unhappy years, and the young composer's emotional turmoil is revealed in the *Elegy*.

### **Bridge arr. Britten: There is a Willow Grows aslant a Brook H173**

Bridge wrote the original short orchestral poem in 1927, described by the composer as an 'impression' of the poignant account of Ophelia's drowning given by Queen Gertrude in the fourth act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By this time, his style had developed further still in the direction of European 'modernism' and away from the English pastoral idiom. It was arranged for viola and piano by Britten five years later, while he was still a pupil at the Royal College of Music. Like the preceding work, this piece remained undiscovered until the 1980s.

## **Imogen Holst: Suite for Solo Viola**

### **I Prelude, II Cinqupace, III Saraband IV Gigue**

Imogen Holst, the daughter of Gustav Holst, was a prodigious musical talent, excelling in conducting and composition at the Royal College of Music, where she was awarded the Morley Scholarship for the best all-round student. After graduating, she earned a living through educational work, with Dartington established as centre of musical excellence during WWII, largely as a result of her efforts. In the early 1950s Holst became Benjamin Britten's musical assistant, moving to Aldeburgh, and helping to organise the Festival, subsequently becoming joint artistic director. In 1964 she gave up her work with Britten to resume her own compositional career and to concentrate on the preservation of her father's musical legacy. Her own music is not widely known and has received little critical attention; much of it is unpublished and unperformed. However, the first recordings dedicated to her works, issued in 2009 and 2012, were warmly received by critics. The Suite for Solo Viola received its first recording in 2023 to great acclaim. Imogen Holst was awarded the CBE in 1975 and received numerous academic honours. She died at Aldeburgh and is buried in the churchyard there.

Imogen Cooper wrote her Suite for Viola in 1930. It was first performed on 14th December 1931 at the Ballet Club Theatre, 2a Ladbroke Road, London W11, by Violet Brough, the viola player with the Macnaghten String Quartet. In this concert the Quartet and others performed Elizabeth Maconchy's Quintet for Strings, a Haydn String Quartet, songs by Patrick Hadley and Philip Rosseter and also gave the first performance of a string quartet by Betty Lutyens.

In June 1932, Imogen Holst specially wrote out a fair copy of the work and gave it to her schoolfriend Leila Andrews as a wedding present. It bore the dedication 'For Leila with love from Imo. June 1932'. It seems as though it was the copy of the work that was given as the gift, rather than the work itself. In the case of her solo suite for violin, Imogen Holst appears to have given a number of copies of the work to different people with individual dedications on each. However, with the Suite for Viola, only Leila Andrews' copy has come to light with a dedication, so it is that dedication that appears on the published edition.

## **Benjamin Britten: *Lachrymae*, Reflections on a Song of Dowland, Op. 48a**

In 1950, while working on the opera *Billy Budd*, Britten composed *Lachrymae*, his only mature piece for viola and piano, for the distinguished viola player William Primrose whom he had met the previous year when touring the United States. Primrose gave the first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival with the composer at the piano. Britten subsequently made an arrangement for viola and string orchestra, a version premiered in 1977 after Britten's death.

*Lachrymae* is a series of variations based on the opening phrase of John Dowland's song, *If my complaints could passions move*. Interestingly and unconventionally, the original melody only appears in the last section, being alluded to in various ingenious ways previously. Britten used this device again in his *Nocturnal* for guitar and in his *Cello Suite No. 3*.

There is a feeling of mystery throughout, with Britten delighting in teasing the listener with illusive fragments and textures. In the introduction, the song is quoted in the bass of the piano part, and this is followed by a number of atmospheric and contrasting reflections. The first four notes - the tonic, the minor third, and the minor sixth, falling to the fifth - are used as a recurring motif. Another song by Dowland, *Flow my tears*, based on the *Lachrymae Pavane*, is quoted in the sixth section, giving the work its slightly perverse title, which reflects the overall mood rather than the actual musical theme.

### **Future Concerts**

11<sup>th</sup> April: Theo Platt (baritone) & Keval Shah (piano)

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