EVENT THREE

VIOLA RECITAL

Saturday 20 September 1:00 – 2:00pm
Unitarian Chapel, St Saviourgate.

Hélène Clément (viola)
Katya Apekisheva (piano)

YORK CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL 2025

Frank Bridge*
Two Pieces for Viola and Piano: *Pensiero and Allego Appassionato*

Before the slaughter of World War One changed everything for Frank Bridge he wrote beautiful pastoral music in the English tradition. Like his near contemporary, Elgar, he came from a relatively humble background (his father was a printer) and was from his earliest years by necessity a practical musician. He made his way as a professional violinist and violist and a skilled conductor. As a composer he combined the thorough compositional training by Stanford (from his days at the Royal College of Music) with a profound understanding of developments on the Continent. Indeed, there is much Gallic grace in Bridge's early chamber music, notably an influence from Fauré. Bridge learned from the French tradition how to integrate his melodic ideas by melding themes through graceful harmonic shifts.

Among Bridge's early miniatures *Pensiero and Allegro Appassionato* were written specifically for viola and piano. Lionel Tertis asked Bridge to compose some new works for the initial issues of the 'Tertis Viola Library', an effort to establish a new repertoire for the instrument. Written around 1906, they were published in 1908 and provide a lovely showcase for Bridge's early style. Very much a reflection of their time and place, both pieces evoke a haunting mixture of French impressionism, English folk modality and an atmosphere of wistful reverie that graces the music of Elgar, Delius and Vaughan Williams among others.

Pensiero ('thinking') is restrained and elegiac. *Allegro Appassionato* is exuberant and expansive.

** Hélène plays on the viola that used to belong to Frank Bridge (and then Benjamin Britten) so what could be better than to hear her play these beautiful pieces on his very own instrument?*

Dimitri Shostakovich
Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147

The Viola Sonata was Shostakovich's last work, and there is good reason to suppose that he knew it would be. He composed the greater part of it in June and July 1975 and died, of lung cancer, on 9 August. Following his own wishes, the Sonata was first performed by its dedicatee Fyodor Druzhinin, violist of the Beethoven Quartet who played it in private on 25 September, which would have been the composer's sixty-ninth birthday, and in public on 1 October to a packed audience in the Small Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic. On that occasion Druzhinin acknowledged the standing ovation by holding the score aloft.

In consultations with Druzhinin during the process of composition, Shostakovich described the first movement of the Sonata as a 'novella', perhaps in recognition of its free-flowing three-part form. Here, as in many of his late works, atmosphere and tension are generated by the friction

between twelve-note themes (as at the piano's first entry) and music that is purely diatonic (composed in the conventional keys that pervade most Western music) such as the bare perfect fifths of the viola's opening statement.

The scherzo-like second movement recycles the opening music from Shostakovich's abandoned wartime opera on Gogol's *The Gamblers*, a tale of card-sharps duped by their intended victim. In character this movement begins halfway between a polka and a quick march; the later stages are newly composed.

Most thought-provoking of all is the Adagio finale, which takes as its starting point the bleak viola lines from the middle of the second movement. As the finale gets under way Shostakovich paraphrases the famous opening movement of Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata, drawing attention to the kinship between its repeated-note motif and his own favourite funereal intonations. At the heart of this movement is a passage of extreme austerity built on note-for-note quotations, mainly found in the piano left-hand part, from Shostakovich's Second Violin Concerto and all fifteen of his symphonies in sequence. There could scarcely be a clearer indication that he knew—or at least suspected—that this would be his last work.

The mood of the sonata is difficult to define: not angry, not optimistic, but certainly not despondent either—perhaps weary, perhaps even consoling because on the last page the clouds clear, allowing yet another self-quotation to come through; this is the main theme of the early Suite for two pianos, Op 6, a work dedicated by its sixteen-year-old composer to the memory of his recently deceased father. The 'radiance' (the composer's own description) of this transfigured C major, with its strong autobiographical associations. In this way, in the final notes that he was ever to write, Shostakovich left us music of the calm acceptance of life's last, inevitable experience.

Rebecca Clarke

Sonata for Viola and Piano

Impetuoso; Vivace; Adagio - Allegro

With Rebecca Clarke's Viola Sonata we return to the English pastoral vision of Vaughn Williams and Elgar. As a student at the Royal College of Music, she switched to the viola, a not unusual path to follow on the advice of her composition teacher, the renowned Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, which was shrewd advice because she became one of the first women to support herself as a professional viola player.

Easily Clarke's most impressive and well-known of her works the sonata was written in 1918/19. She entered it in an American competition under a *nom de plume,* 'Anthony Trent', but when it was revealed the composer was a woman, overnight Clarke became a cause célèbre both in England and America. It is a passionate three movement sonata which roves across the viola's whole range, making the most of its intense sound in the upper reaches and the huskier tones on its lowest string. Clarke's voice is distinctive, rooted in the Austro-German tradition but is also steeped in a love of the English pastoralists, especially Vaughan Williams and Frank Bridge (also a professional violist) Her music has strong influences from French 'impressionist' composers Ravel and Debussy. On a visit to Hawaii, Clarke heard a gamelan orchestra, and these sounds also echo in the sonata.

The first and third movements are large in scale with a clear thematic link between them, and the second is a brilliant but delicate scherzo in compound time. The language has a somewhat ambiguous quality where Debussy and Ravel (particularly of the Piano Trio) mix with the Englishness - represented by modality and the flexibility of melody inspired by folksong. It is very

much of its period, and the fantasy-like character of the outer movements places it firmly in the style of music favoured by English composers of the time, especially as encouraged by the Cobbett Competitions.

In 1939 Rebecca Clarke visited America, and was there when war was declared. She was denied a return visa and thus forced to stay in the USA. She worked as a nanny to a family in Connecticut for a while, but visiting New York in 1944 she met James Friskin with whom she had been a student at the Royal College of Music and who was now teaching at the Juilliard School. They were both unmarried and in their late fifties and decided to marry, which put the seal on Clarke's decision as to whether or not to return to England. She remained in New York until her death in 1979.

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