

The music

Errollyn Wallen *Lavinia*
Rebecca Clarke *Viola Sonata*
Dmitri Shostakovich *Sonata for viola and piano op147*

Errollyn Wallen (b1958) *Lavinia* for solo viola (2021)

Errollyn writes: “My new work for solo viola was inspired by the character of Lavinia, daughter of Latinus and Amata and the last wife of Aeneas the Trojan hero. Lavinia appears as a minor character in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In my most recent opera, *Dido’s Ghost*, the sequel to Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (and which also folds the Purcell opera into my own), Lavinia is a central character.

In *Lavinia*, my music seeks to convey the overwhelming and consuming nature of jealousy which most often grows out of pain at the prospect of loss. Composing this piece for Stephen Upshaw was a wonderful way of contemplating Lavinia in a different work. The viola perfectly captures the spirit of Lavinia which is sung by a mezzo soprano in my opera.”

Lavinia was commissioned for Stephen by Riot Ensemble, with funds from the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation.

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) *Viola Sonata* (1919)

1 *Impetuoso* ~ 2 *Vivace* ~ 3 *Adagio – Allegro*

Rebecca Clarke had a long life but virtually all her music had been composed by the time she came to live permanently in the USA from 1939 onwards. Born and raised in England, she attended the Royal Academy in 1903, where she was Stanford’s first female student of composition. At his suggestion she shifted her focus from the violin to the viola and studied with Lionel Tertis. She then embarked on a career as a professional musician and in 1912 was admitted to Henry Wood’s Queen’s Hall Orchestra as one of only a handful of female players.

In 1916 Clarke left for her first visit to the USA, where she played on tour, visited her two brothers, and worked on her compositional skills. Her *Viola Sonata* caused a sensation when it tied for first place in a 1919 competition sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Some judges apparently mistakenly identified her work as written by Ravel, while *The Daily Telegraph* supposed ‘Rebecca Clarke’ to be a pseudonym for Ernest Bloch (who was in fact declared the winner).

Although an immediate success, the *Sonata* gradually disappeared from the repertoire, and Clarke’s name faded from

view. Since its rediscovery in 1976, however, it’s become one of the most frequently performed large works for viola and piano.

The *Sonata*’s three movements are prefaced by a quotation from Alfred de Musset’s poem *La Nuit de Mai*:

*Poète, prends ton luth; le vin de la jeunesse
Fermente cette nuit dans les veines de Dieu.*

*(Poet, take your lute; the wine of youth is fermenting
tonight in the veins of the Deity)*

Impetuoso is an apt description for the **1st movement**. It opens vigorously and there’s a distinct air of Vaughan Williams. But the melody which soon emerges then brings to mind Clarke’s other avowed main influence, Debussy, as do the mysterious probings of the middle section. The whole work is in fact a wonderful fusion of late 19th/early 20th-century English and French musical traditions.

The **2nd movement** *Vivace* is a brilliant but delicate scherzo. It goes off at full speed – skipping along to a sparkling piano accompaniment – but the opening tempo finds itself interrupted twice by further mysterious interludes before marching to its somewhat enigmatic ending.

The longest and the slowest of the three movements, the ***Adagio-Allegro***, is pensive throughout. The piano introduces a simple, folk tune-like melody, which the two instruments then develop and play with for the rest of the movement.

Midway through, the dynamic increases and repeated *tremolos* from the viola build the tension. Strong passions seem to emerge from simple melodies. After a section justly marked *agitato*, the piano returns briefly to the pastoral mood, before the *Sonata* ends with a display of virtuosity from both instruments, taking us back to the main theme of the opening *Impetuoso*.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75) *Sonata for viola and piano op147* (1975)

1 *Moderato* ~ 2 *Allegretto* ~ 3 *Allegro*

The *op147 Viola Sonata* is Shostakovich’s last work, completed weeks before his death. It was premiered to a private gathering on 25th September (which would have been the composer’s 69th birthday) and in public a few days later. After that performance, *Izvestia* wrote that the music was “like the catharsis in a tragedy; life, struggle, overcoming, purification by light, exit into immortality.”

While he was writing the *Sonata*, Shostakovich called Fyodor Druzhinin (violinist for the Beethoven Quartet and the dedicatee)

to ask whether certain double stops played in rapid succession were possible on the viola. The reply came that violists would stretch their techniques to play whatever he asked them to. The technical demands indeed turned out to be formidable – but the work was immediately seen as a masterpiece and continues to stand at the summit of the viola’s repertoire.

The **first movement** is in sonata form. It begins with an unaccompanied *pizzicato* figure in the viola, followed shortly after by an austere piano line. The tempo is steady and measured and the mood mysterious. In the middle section the pace increases and the viola becomes more frantic, as if it’s struggling with some unseen force. The movement then calms down again and the viola closes by returning to *pizzicato* and a long open C, recalling the opening bars.

The scherzo-like material for the **second movement** was borrowed from Shostakovich’s unfinished 1942 opera *The Gamblers*, a tale of card-sharps outwitted by their intended victim. It begins with a simple, jaunty, polka-like dance on the viola, the piano bouncing along underneath. Quite soon, the viola starts some darker explorations – trying, and seemingly failing, to reach some kind of conclusion. The movement ends suddenly and leads directly into...

... the ***Adagio finale***, the longest, slowest and darkest of the movements, which starts with the bleak lines on the viola previously heard in the middle of the second movement. After some *pizzicato* chords, the piano enters and begins to paraphrase the opening movement of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, with the viola playing slowly over the top.

At the heart of the movement is a passage of extreme austerity built on note-for-note quotations from the composer’s *2nd Violin Concerto* and all 15 of his symphonies. A summation of a life’s work in miniature. After this, on the last page, the clouds clear into the ‘radiance’ (the composer’s own description) of C major, though whether this succeeds in dispelling the previous introspective bleakness is for the audience to judge.

Notes by Dick Ware

The artists

Stephen Upshaw *viola* Sam Armstrong *piano*

The violist **Stephen Upshaw** regularly appears in festivals around the world including the BBC Proms. He’s much in demand as a chamber musician and is a member of the Solem Quartet. Recent recital and chamber music engagements have taken him to Boston’s Jordan Hall, London’s Barbican and

Wigmore Halls, Tokyo Opera City, New York's Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall and Vienna's Konzerthaus.

A noted interpreter of contemporary music, Stephen is also a member of London's Riot Ensemble, whose recent disc *Speak Be Silent* was selected as one of *New Yorker Magazine's* Best Recordings of 2019. Expanding the repertoire of the viola by commissioning new music has always been important to Stephen. He's taken part in over 300 world premieres including chamber music of Georg Haas and Sally Beamish (alongside the composer) and solo works of Mark Simpson, Michael Finnissy and Errollyn Wallen.

A native of Atlanta, Stephen studied with Dr Marilyn Seelman before earning a BMus (Hons) from the New England Conservatory in Boston under the tutelage of Carol Rodland and Martha Strongin-Katz. He then completed his postgraduate studies in the class of David Takeno at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where he was elected a Junior Fellow and won a Guildhall Scholarship. In 2016 Stephen was awarded a prestigious soloist Fellowship from Trinity Laban College of Music and Dance.

Stephen has also toured regularly to the USA, Europe and Asia with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and its music director, Joshua Bell and works with the Chineke! Orchestra as principal viola and as a member of the chamber players. He plays a 1715 Daniel Parker school viola currently made available to him by Nigel Brown and the Stradivari Trust.

Hailed as "a major new talent" (*International Piano*) and a "pianist of splendid individuality" (*Arts Desk*), **Sam Armstrong** has made solo recital debuts at the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall as well as at Wigmore Hall in London.

He studied with Helen Krizos in Manchester at the Royal Northern College of Music and subsequently in New York with Richard Goode at Mannes College of Music, winning the most important awards for piano in both institutions.

He has appeared at festivals including Aldeburgh, Cheltenham, Krzyzowa Music, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Prussia Cove Open Chamber Music, Ravinia and in venues such as Seoul Arts Centre, Esplanade Singapore, Kumho Art Hall Seoul, and Manchester's Bridgewater Hall.

Sam was a prize winner in the Porto International Piano Competition, the Brant Piano Competition, Beethoven Society of Europe Competition, and was also laureate of the Epinal International Piano Competition in France.

www.stephenupshaw.com www.samarmstrongpianist.com

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61st Little Missenden Festival



STEPHEN UPSHAW & SAM ARMSTRONG

8pm, Thursday October 14th 2021
Little Missenden Church

Programme Notes