

An impressionistic painting in shades of blue, green, and white, depicting a boat on a choppy sea. The style is reminiscent of J.M.W. Turner's 'Rain, Steam, and Great Bridge'.

Solo
MUSICA

L'heure bleue

BR
KLASSIK

CO-PRODUCTION



1. Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

Heart's Ease for Piano Solo
[2:01]

2. Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

Chanson de nuit, Op. 15/1
for Viola and Piano [3:26]

3. Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

In Smyrna for Piano Solo [3:56]

4. Ernest Chausson (1855–1899)

Pièce in C-Major, Op. 39 for
Viola and Piano [6:33]

5. Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

Pensiero in f-minor, H 53 for
Viola and Piano [4:08]

6. Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

Allegro appassionato
in b-minor, H 82 for Viola
and Piano [2:46]

7. Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

Dusk from *The Hour Glass*,
H 148 for Piano Solo [4:21]

8. Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

The Dew Fairy from *The Hour
Glass*, H 148 for Piano Solo
[2:56]

9. Louis Vierne (1870–1937)

Le soir for Viola and Piano
[3:47]

10. Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Pièce en forme de habanera
for Viola and Piano [2:53]

11. Jules Massenet (1842–1912)

Méditation from *Thais* for
Viola and Piano [4:39]

12. Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962)

La Gitana for Viola
and Piano [3:17]

13. Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Après un rêve, Op. 7/1 for
Viola and Piano [2:46]

14. Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979)

Lullaby for Viola and Piano [3:53]

15. Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979)

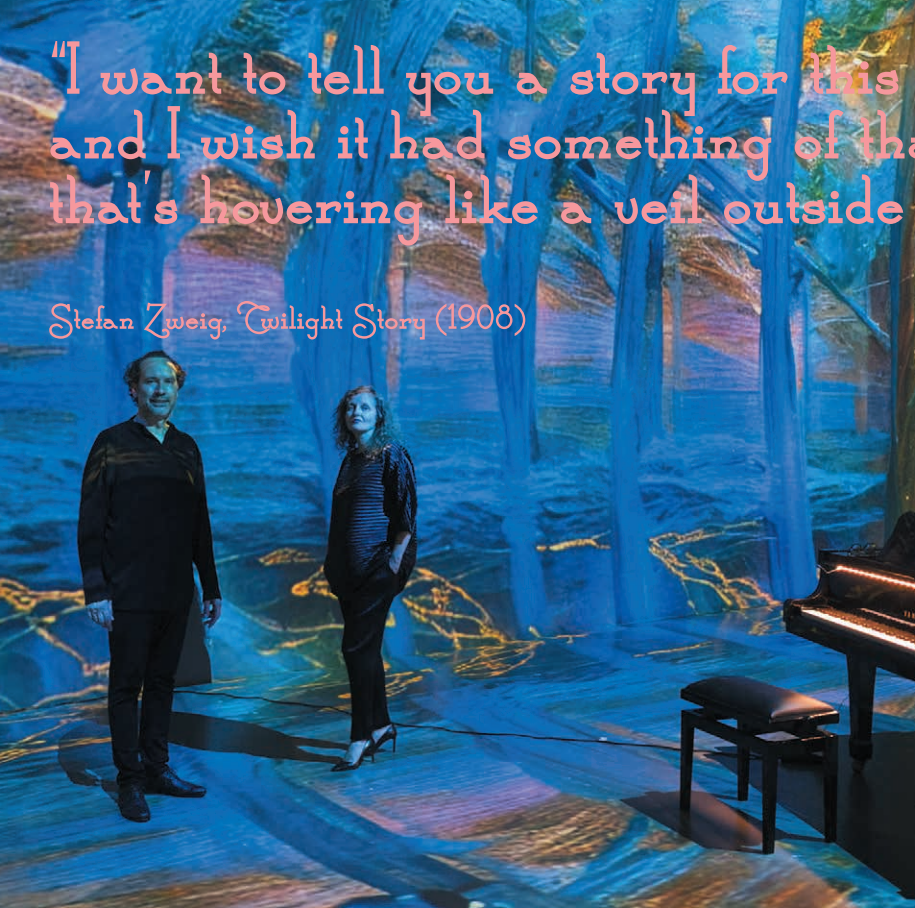
Morpheus for Viola and Piano
[7:16]

Total time 58:44

Razvan
Popovici
Viola Diana
Ketler
Piano

"I want to tell you a story for this time of night that loves silence,
and I wish it had something of that warm, soft, flowing dawn light
that's hovering like a veil outside our windows"

Stefan Zweig, *Twilight Story* (1908)



What is the thread that binds together poets, composers, painters of that particular period we have come to call La Belle Époque? How might we, as performers, step into their mysterious world of half-tones, noble expression, and quiet sounds as tender as Pan's flute, and into the consoling effects of colour and light? These artists are perhaps not links in a single chain, but rather a brilliant constellation in an endless mosaic of the sky, illuminated by the serene light of the blue hour, *L'Heure Bleue*. They find themselves bound together, but only because the map of the sky was invented for our earthly convenience of navigation, and its two-dimensional surface is defined by country and language. The deeper, uncharted layers, however, are inevitably determined by the scale of each artistic personality. In recording this album, we tried to gaze into the worlds of Fauré, Elgar, Bridge, Ravel, Chausson, Clarke, Massenet, Kreisler, Vienne - through the pearlescent foam of evening clouds that floated above Paris and London in the blissful pause between two cataclysms of the passing and arriving centuries. Their music offered respite from the trauma of recent events, an escape, and even remedy for the anxieties of living at the threshold of the modern age.

Le Soir by Louis Vienne is a perfect example of just such music. Serene viola lines rest on a lulling accompaniment evoking the dreamy calm of the evening hour, its cool air carrying the gentle perfume of invisible blossoms. It is a perfect 'song without words' and it is

almost impossible to imagine that Vierne, who served as an organist at Notre-Dame, would later forge a complex, tragic, chromatic style shaped by a difficult fate and the turns of history. Few instruments are better suited to expressing half-tones and words whispered in the blue dusk than the viola. It is no coincidence that it was precisely at the end of the 19th century that the composers began to regard it as a solo instrument, rather than merely an important part within the ensemble. This change coincided with the emergence of the famous viola schools, whose leading figures included Hermann Ritter (1849–1926) in Germany, Théophile Laforge (1863–1918) and Maurice Vieux (1884–1951) in France, and Lionel Tertis (1876–1975) in England. Both Frank Bridge and Rebecca Clarke studied under Tertis in London, and both left an indelible mark on the history of the instrument.

The flourishing of salon chamber music-making during this period also played its part in establishing the viola as an indispensable instrument. The legendary evenings held in the homes of music lovers and patrons in Paris, London, and Brussels were a wonderful and vital part of the cultural landscape of the age. It was at one such gathering that the young Rebecca Clarke first heard Brahms's 2 Songs Op. 91 for Alto Voice, Viola and Piano, and they made such a profound impression on her that she fell completely in love with the warm voice of the viola. Even the great violinist Fritz Kreisler would sometimes take up the viola at these musical evenings, playing alongside George Enescu, Jacques Thibaud and Pablo Casals, and found it "a joyfully happy experience."

Let us now transport ourselves to one such salon, overlooking St James's Park at 22 Old Queen Street in London. This was the home of the music patron Leo Frank Schuster (1852–1927), who throughout his life remained a close friend and loyal supporter of both Edward Elgar and Gabriel Fauré. Fauré was a frequent and cherished guest at this address and premiered his arrangement of *La bonne chanson* at one of Schuster's soirées. He composed many of his songs while staying at Schuster's beautiful Thames-side house, "The Hut," during the summers of 1906 and 1907. His famous song *Après un rêve* was composed earlier, in 1877, yet it already bears the hallmarks of his sophisticated mature style. The melody is endlessly unfolding over a subtly

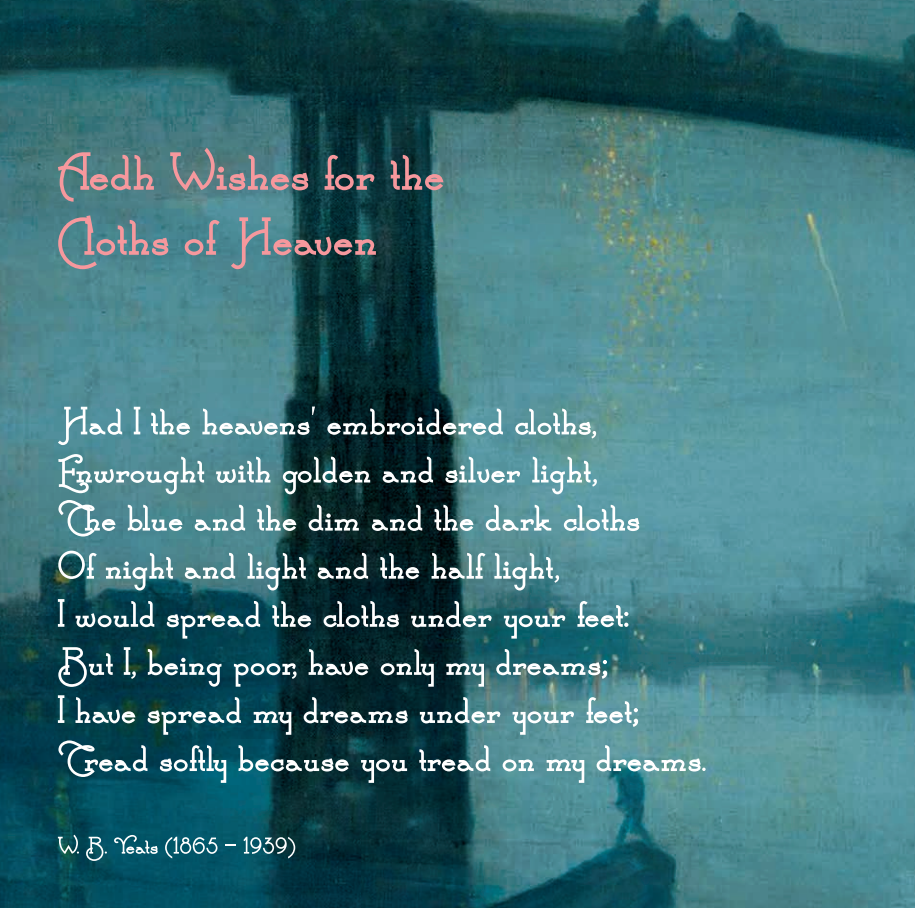
harmonised "magic carpet" of piano chords. The poem's original source is Niccolò Tommaseo's *Levati, sol — Rise, o Sun, from Canti Popolari* (Venice, 1841), later reinterpreted by Romain Bussine, a singer, teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, and friend of Fauré. The melody is remarkably devoid of any sentimentality, elegantly reserved, with a certain quiet affinity to Fauré's famous cello *Élégie*. Pablo Casals's transcription of 1910 proves that the melody needs no words to hold its emotional power. Since then, it has been arranged for a vast range of instrumental and vocal combinations, including *One Golden Dream* (1954), dedicated to Frank Sinatra.

But let us return to 22 Old Queen Street, where the indefatigable Schuster arranged a meeting between Fauré and Elgar in December 1908, in the wake of the triumphant premiere of Elgar's First Symphony at the Queen's Hall, with Hans Richter conducting the LSO. Fauré was visiting London that week to perform at Buckingham Palace. Both composers held each other's work in deep respect, and although the language barrier left little room for conversation over dinner, the evening deepened their mutual admiration.

Elgar's music – noble and unselfish, celebrating all that is good in the human soul – has an almost uncanny ability to touch people across every level of musical sophistication. He always wanted "to reach the hearts of people." Late in his life, he wrote to his friend Sidney Colvin: "I am still at heart a dreamy child who used to be found in the reeds by Severn side with a sheet of paper, longing for something very great." Alongside his symphonic works and oratorios, Elgar became an unrivalled master of the miniature — the fleeting sketch, drawn as if straight from nature. The sheer quality of his musical impulses produced some of his most loved and remembered melodies. One of them is *Chanson de Nuit*, originally titled *Evensong*, or *Vespers*. Listening to this solemn yet intimate piece, one recalls his words during a walk: "If ever you are walking on the Malvern Hills and hear this" — and he whistled the theme from his Cello Concerto — "it is only me, don't be frightened." His melodies have become inseparable from the landscape itself.



Elgar's finest music holds both unbearable poignancy and healing solace. It has a truly universal human appeal. Many great performers recognised that: Yehudi Menuhin, Hans Richter, Jacqueline du Pré, among others. One of his greatest admirers was the legendary Fritz Kreisler, who said in an interview in 1905: "If you want to know whom I consider to be the greatest living composer, I say without hesitation, Elgar. I place him on an equal footing with my idols Beethoven and Brahms. It is all pure, unaffected music. I wish Elgar would write something for the violin." Elgar's Violin Concerto had long been promised to Kreisler, and he achieved a complete triumph when he premiered the work under Elgar's baton in 1910. Yet there was some friction between the composer and the soloist. Kreisler tried to "improve" the material and to make it more "playable" - and later confessed: "When the Elgar Concerto was dedicated to me, I never put a finger on a fingerboard. Then, I saw a passage I thought I could improve and spent six hours on it. " Famously, Kreisler believed that long hours of practice and rehearsal kill the bloom of musical imagination. "I have hypnotised myself into the belief that I do not need practice, and therefore I do not. " His marvellous spontaneity, imagination and unmatched flair as a performer were world-famous and his legendary compositional "hoaxes" remain inspired in their inventiveness and charm.



Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Fg wrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W. B. Yeats (1865 – 1939)

He presented his own compositions as transcriptions of other composers' works. The musical world was divided — Misha Elman, for example, found it bewildering. Others, like Enescu, Menuhin and Zimbalist, were delighted and supportive. Kreisler himself was in all likelihood greatly amused by the whole affair and the stir it caused.

La Gitana was presented as an "Arab-Spanish Gypsy Song of the 18th Century." It was written around 1900 and breathes the sultry, sun-drenched atmosphere of Spain.

The flashy virtuosity of *La Gitana* gives way to a different evocation of Spanish dancing rhythms — Maurice Ravel's *Pièce en forme de Habanera*. It was the first of the works that would come to define Ravel's "Spanish Year" of 1907. Originally titled *Vocalise — étude en forme de Habanera*, it was written for a collection of vocalises assembled by the singing teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, A. L. Hettich. One might think of it as a charming study for the great works of 1907 — the opera *L'heure espagnole* and the *Rapsodie espagnole*. But it is more than just a study — the Habanera has a very distinctive character, described by the French musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch as "nostalgic and haunting." It is another great "song without words" and has since been transcribed for a variety of instruments, including Ravel's own version for cello and piano, the cello being a perfect substitute for the richness of the baritone timbre.

Few pieces, however, have inspired quite as many arrangements as the *Méditation* from Jules Massenet's *Thaïs* – transcribed for every conceivable kind of instrument, from ocarina to harmonium, and at one point even popular as a foxtrot. Paul Taffanel conducted the premiere of the opera in Paris on the 16th of March 1894. The libretto was based on Anatole France's sensationally popular novel, the story of a courtesan turned saint. Whether the real *Thaïs* ever existed remains a mystery – the only *Thaïs* known to history is the mistress of Alexander the Great. Charles Darcours, in his *Le Figaro* review, questioned whether Massenet, for all his perfect craftsmanship, had allowed his inspiration to repeat itself over and over, leaving the audience with nothing memorable. Yet at least one moment of true musical magic emerged – the orchestral Interlude, destined to become famous as *Méditation*.

Massenet conceived the Interlude not as a maudlin salon piece, but as a compelling portrait of a powerful and attractive woman caught in moral struggle between her old ways and a new spiritual calling. Sometimes the fate music does not follow its composer's original intention, and this is perhaps the case with *Méditation*, which hasn't always escaped the air of superfluous sentimentality. The dark voice of the viola lends the piece a more solemn quality, and the struggle between light and darkness becomes perhaps a little more legible.

Thaïs is set in Alexandria, in an imaginary, idealised Egypt of the 4th century. The 19th century's fascination with the Orient became one of its great cultural preoccupations, and the public obsession was fuelled by the works of Victor Hugo, Lord Byron, Walter Scott, Eugène Delacroix, and Gustave Flaubert. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 redrew the map and opened up fascinating new possibilities for travel. By the close of the 19th century, the modern idea of a cruise had been born. Alexandria, Constantinople, Athens — the appetite for adventure was insatiable. In the autumn of 1905, following the vogue, Edward Elgar set sail. In the company of Leo Frank Schuster and two friends, he voyaged through the Mediterranean with the Royal Navy aboard H. M. S. *Surprise*.

On the 1st of October the party arrived in Smyrna, modern-day Izmir. They went to watch dancing dervishes in a mosque, and Elgar noted in his diary: "Music by five or six people very strange and some of it quite beautiful." Under the impression of that visit, and of certain unforgettable sunsets, Elgar wrote a short piano piece, *In Smyrna*, first published in a charity anthology. It has the character of free and spontaneous improvisation – a perfect souvenir of the sea voyage.

Back in London, in June 1914, a small Festival was held at the Bechstein Hall in Wigmore Street in honour of Gabriel Fauré and his deep ties to England. One evening, Fauré himself took his place at the piano to perform his First Piano Quartet. The viola part in that memorable concert was played by Frank Bridge. Bridge's most celebrated composition student Benjamin Britten, once described his teacher's and friend's style as: "Brahms happily tempered by Fauré"

– a statement which captures something essential. Frank Bridge was indeed one of the finest and most versatile musicians in the history of British music: a gifted violist, member of celebrated ensembles, pedagogue, conductor, and above all a highly original composer whose style underwent a complete transformation – from the lyrical clarity of his early works to the highly chromatic and dissonant language of his later years. His splendidly logical technique was rooted in the German tradition, yet enriched by French lightness and a refined harmonic sensibility. In texture and spirit, at least in his important early chamber works, the composer he stands closest to is Fauré himself.

Bridge is not widely known as a composer of solo piano works, yet he left behind some extraordinarily poetic miniatures. The *Heart's Ease*, from *Three Lyrics* (1921), is an example of his wistful lyricism. It is a simple melodic formula wreathed in garlands of quiet bells, evoking the stillness of a summer evening.

The two pieces from *The Hour Glass* (1920), *Dusk* and *The Dew Fairy*, inhabit a similarly poetic world, with distant echoes of Debussy's landscapes. The language of these miniatures is pure, airy, gently flowing and delicate – as if each note were drawn by the finest of brushes, the music seeming to shine softly from within.

The young Rebecca Clarke met Frank Bridge at the Royal College in London, where both were composition students of Charles Stanford (1852–1924), "the father of modern British music," whose pupils included Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, and Arthur Bliss, among others. It was there that Clarke's exceptional compositional talent began to blossom. She came into contact with the complex language of Ravel and Debussy through her close friendship with Vaughan Williams, who had studied with Ravel. She also developed a deep love for the folk music of the British Isles and the English modal style. After her years of study with Lionel Tertis, Clarke became one of the most celebrated violists of her time, both as an ensemble player and as a soloist. She toured Europe and the USA with her colleagues, tirelessly promoting and championing modern English music and her fellow composers.



One such concert took place on the 13th of February 1918, at the Aeolian Hall in New York, where the programme included Frank Bridge's *Allegro Appassionato*. Clarke's admiration for Bridge was profound: "He was one of the finest viola players I've ever heard. He was without a doubt the most talented musician I've ever met." Bridge's *Pensiero* and *Allegro Appassionato* had been published in a Viola Library series edited by Lionel Tertis in 1908. In the New York concert of 1918, this work was followed by *Morpheus* — one of Clarke's most poetic compositions for viola and piano - listed on the programme under the name Anthony Trent, a pseudonym she invented for the occasion and used again later. Her explanation was typically modest and practical: she felt it would be inappropriate to appear on the same programme three times, as soloist, as composer of *Lullaby* and *Grotesque*, which were also presented, and as the author of *Morpheus*. Ironically, it was *Morpheus* that received the best reviews, and Trent the composer was hailed in the press as a brilliant new star born in England. Clarke's mysticism and instinct for colour find their ideal expression here. We are transported into an evening world of tender, intoxicating happiness - one that stills the heart and draws it into a blissful sleep.

If we were to imagine the miniatures of the *L'Heure Bleue* album as a series of antique postcards in evening half-tones, one of them would be in sepia - someone waving goodbye, as if already sensing how soon everything would change. That postcard is Ernest Chausson's *Pièce*. It is not, formally speaking, his very last composition, yet a gentle air of farewell pervades it: the elegiac gracefulness, the autumnal C major, the distant bells, the last smile before drifting off into the night.

This small piece sounds like one of the final sighs of La Belle Époque - breathed just before the dramatic events of the new 20th century that would forever change the world, and with it, the history of art and music.



Razvan Popovici / Viola

Răzvan Popovici was born into a family of musicians and studied in Salzburg, Paris and Freiburg with Peter Langgartner, Jean Sulem, Wolfram Christ and Christoph Wyneken. He is founder and executive director of the Chiemgauer Musikfrühling Festival in Germany and of the SoNoRo Festival in Bucharest.

He has performed as a soloist in prestigious venues such as the Cologne Philharmonie, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest, Prinzregententheater in Munich and Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris alongside ensembles such as the Cologne Chamber Orchestra, Kobe Chamber Orchestra, Romanian Radio National Orchestra, George Enescu Philharmonic, Orchestra Comunale del Teatro di Bologna and Liszt Chamber Orchestra Budapest under Roberto Abbado, Christian Badea, Valentin Uryupin, Shlomo Mintz or John Axelrod.

He has collaborated with artists such as Juliane Banse, Shlomo Mintz, Konstantin Lifschitz, Natalia Gutman, Nobuko Imai, Elena Bashkistrova, Radovan Vlatkovic, Daishin Kashimoto, Olli Mustonen, Gilles Apap, Frans Helmerson, Mihaela Martin, Vladimir Mendelssohn, Louis Lortie, Patrick Gallois, Enrico Pace, Sergej Nakriakov or Giovanni Sollima.

He is a regular guest at festivals around the world including the Lucerne Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Spoleto Festival, George Enescu Festival, Jerusalem Chamber Music Festival, Mittelfest Cividale, Festival Academy Budapest, Intonations Festival Berlin and the festivals in Stavanger, Delft, Tallin, Rolandseck, Korsholm, Istanbul or Kuhmo. Among the concert halls he has performed in are Carnegie Hall in New York, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Konzerthaus and Musikverein in Vienna, Wigmore Hall in London, YMCA in Jerusalem, Philharmonie Berlin, Bozar in Brussels, Philharmonie de Paris and Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg.

He performs internationally as a member of Ensemble Raro and is a Professor of Viola at the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp.



Diana Ketler / Piano

Born in Latvia, Diana Ketler began studying the piano at the age of five, encouraged by her parents. Her father, an operatic baritone, and her mother, a choral conductor and voice teacher, nurtured her early love of opera and symphonic music. Diana embarked on her own musical journey at a remarkably young age, making her debut with the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra at just 11 years old.

Her career as a solo pianist, chamber musician, and conductor has taken her to numerous countries across Europe, Asia, and the United States. She has appeared at such distinguished venues as the Philharmonie in Berlin, the Musikverein and Konzerthaus in Vienna, Carnegie Hall in New York, Wigmore Hall in London, Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Bozar in Brussels, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Osaka Symphony Hall, Teatro La Fenice in Venice, and many others. She is also a regular guest at major European music festivals.

Diana is a founding member of the Raro Ensemble and, together with Răzvan Popovici, co-founded the SoNoRo Festival and cultural platform in Romania, as well as the Chiemgauer Musikfrühling Festival in Bavaria.

Diana is a professor of piano at the Royal College of Music in London and was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in 2016. Since autumn 2018, she has also served as Professor of Chamber Music at the Haute École de Musique in Geneva.

Diana has twice received the Great Music Award, Latvia's highest national honour in the field of classical music.

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Paintings

Jack B. Yeats – *St. Stephen's Green, Closing Time*

Edvard Munch – *The Kiss*

James Abbott McNeill Whistler – *Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old*

Battersea Bridge

Mikhail Vrubel – *Pearl Oyster*

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