

Clarion Call

Music for Septet and Octet



John Casken • Howard Ferguson • Michael Berkeley • Charles Wood

Berkeley Ensemble

Clarion Call

Works for Septet and Octet

Berkeley Ensemble

Kathryn Riley *violin*²⁻⁶

Sophie Mather *violin*

Dan Shilladay *viola*

Gemma Wareham *cello*

Lachlan Radford *double bass*

John Slack *clarinet*

Andrew Watson *bassoon*

Paul Cott *horn*

About Berkeley Ensemble:

'This talented group [...] is named after Sir Lennox Berkeley and his son Michael, and it champions music by them plus that of other British composers which in their view is unjustly neglected. [...] A stimulating evening.'

The Independent

'The refined playing had an impressive sense of style'

Leicester Mercury

Michael Berkeley (b. 1948)

1. **Clarion Call and Gallop** (2013) * [6:42]

Howard Ferguson (1908-1999)

Octet, Op. 4 (1933)

2. Moderato [5:34]

3. Allegro scherzoso [3:52]

4. Andantino [5:14]

5. Allegro feroce [6:01]

John Casken (b. 1949)

6. **Blue Medusa** (2000/2007) * [10:09]

Charles Wood (1866-1926)

Septet (1889) *

7. Allegro moderato [12:10]

8. Andante [8:20]

9. Scherzo [6:05]

10. With vigour [12:08]

Total playing time [76:15]

* *world premiere recordings*



Berkeley Ensemble
(Photography: Nigel Luckhurst)

Echoes of Beethoven

‘That damned thing! I wish it were burned!’ Thus Beethoven referred, with typical bluntness, to his own youthful Septet, the continuing popularity of which he felt to be overshadowing his subsequent work. Later composers would also feel its influence, although their responses to it were often more eloquent. Foremost amongst them was Schubert, whose Octet was reputedly commissioned by Ferdinand Troyer, the clarinettist who premiered Beethoven’s piece. Schubert added a violin to Beethoven’s ensemble, but in broad outline followed – and also perhaps outdid – his model.

The early-nineteenth century saw a brief period of interest in such large-scale chamber music with works by Kreutzer, Spohr and others aimed squarely at the kind of popular success that had so irritated Beethoven. None, however, achieved a significant place in the repertoire and Beethoven and Schubert’s works remained isolated examples of their type until the twentieth century, when composers would again look to harness their appeal with pieces of their own for the same ensembles.

In 1883 **Charles Wood** was amongst the

first intake of scholars at the newly instituted Royal College of Music (RCM) where he studied composition with Charles Villiers Stanford, one of the principal architects of the so-called English Musical Renaissance. Born to a tenor in the choir of Armagh’s Church of Ireland cathedral, and later a boy treble at the same church, it was perhaps inevitable that Wood would be remembered almost solely for his liturgical music. In a career that closely mirrored Stanford’s, Wood taught harmony at both the RCM and later Cambridge, where he continued his studies as an organ scholar in 1888 and eventually succeeded his teacher as professor following Stanford’s death in 1924.

Upon Wood’s own death two years later, an anonymous author writing in the *RCM Magazine* recalled the student composer’s deep regard for the music of Beethoven, which was apparently called upon by the then college principal, George Grove, during work on his celebrated book, *Beethoven and his Nine Symphonies*. Following in his hero’s footsteps, Wood completed eight string quartets at a time when the form was largely neglected by British composers, and a septet upon Beethoven’s instrumental plan.

The larger work dates from 1889, by which time Wood had completed his studies at

the RCM and enrolled as an undergraduate at Cambridge. As well as following Beethoven's instrumentation, Wood similarly casts the violin in a *concertante* role within the ensemble. However, Wood's piece is written to a more conventional four-movement plan rather than Beethoven's divertimento-like six. The first is a sonata allegro set out on a large scale. Following the prevailing fashion of the time, the music sounds a consciously Brahmsian note, both in its melodic materials and their treatment. Themes are closely related and continually developed; even the unassuming tread of the cello and bass at the opening is constantly reworked throughout the movement, to re-emerge triumphant at the coda with the horn's final heroic declamation.

Despite the antiquarian austerity of much of his church music, Wood retained a life-long interest in the folk culture of his native Ireland, and in 1904 he co-founded the Irish Folk Song Society in London. These activities left their mark on much of his secular music, and in the Septet this is most clearly heard in the second movement. It contrasts two themes, the first meandering yet gracious, the second more purposeful, Gaelic-tinted.

The third and fourth movements again hint at Wood's fondness for folk-inflected melodies. Whilst the scherzo is the most straightforward of the four, following the classical pattern closely, the finale illustrates Wood's frequently ingenious approach to issues of form. Its theme is carefully constructed so as to hover between duple and triple metres, and the variations that follow exploit this ambiguity fully. Following an extended variation for clarinet and strings alone, the triple time version makes a decisive and extended appearance to form a significant coda which, despite further Brahmsian touches, ends in a mood of playful repose unmistakably Wood's own.

Such was Brahms' standing in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century that Stanford (arguably unsuccessfully) challenged his pupils to write pieces that bore no trace of the elder composer. When **Howard Ferguson** came to write his Octet in 1933, this influence, although now questioned by some, was still widespread. Ferguson defended a cherished 'Brahmsian bit' of the work in a letter to a disapproving colleague, although taken as a whole, the piece owed more to the elder composer's ethos and techniques, rather than his sound world.

Ferguson was a famously meticulous composer, and work on his Octet took a



typically considered and circuitous route. The piece was originally planned as a clarinet quintet, but following the advice of R.O. Morris, Ferguson's erstwhile teacher and the work's eventual dedicatee, it was re-scored for the same group of instruments as required by Schubert's Octet, thereby guaranteeing it a life as a companion to the frequently-performed masterwork. Although prudent given the young composer's relative obscurity at the time, the piece quickly succeeded on its own merits, a favourable review of the premiere in *The Times* leading to a contract with the publisher Boosey & Hawkes. As he assisted with the work's editing prior to printing, Gerald Finzi later wrote to the composer '[...] the first movement, I think it's absolutely perfect, and without flattery, I think it's more likely that the Schubert Octet will be stuck-in to be played with yours rather than the other way round, as you originally intended.'

Fittingly, considering its origins, the piece opens with a theme perfectly conceived for the clarinet. Ferguson marks its first appearance as slightly held-back ('poco meno') before the music surges forward to the first of several climaxes. The horn announces the principal second theme, and the remainder of the movement is derived from these two ideas, inhabiting

a half-lit world of spidery counterpoint and bittersweet, sometimes bi-tonal harmony.

After the uneasy close of the opening movement, the second takes the form of a brightly-lit scherzo. Like Wood, Ferguson – an Irish-born composer who spent his working life in London and Cambridge – alludes to Irish folk music with the two violins required to play the lively theme in unison. Although it continues to develop previously heard material, the effect is of complete contrast with the foregoing music.

The finale follows a pastoral movement that comes close to the music of Vaughan Williams, another of Ferguson's teachers at the RCM. It unleashes the energies latent in the preceding movements in a demonic tarantella, the rhythm of which, cycled continuously and mesmerically around the winds, underpins a central, more lyrical section. Ferguson greatly admired Edward Elgar, and the final backward glance at the horn's theme from the opening movement recalls the one of his favourite devices. Redolent too is the mood of nostalgia that hovers over the passage, before a return of the tarantella leads to a triumphal conclusion.

John Casken's *Blue Medusa* is also scored for the performing group of Schubert's Octet.



In relation to its predecessor, however, the piece turns the instrumentation inside out, featuring a solo part for one of Schubert's most retiring participants. Originally a piece for bassoon and piano, Casken re-scored the work for chamber ensemble as an alternative, complementary version.

In common with much of Casken's music, *Blue Medusa* draws inspiration from both the natural and mythical worlds. In the composer's own words:

Medusa: creature of the sea, beautiful in form and movement, but dangerous to the touch.

Medusa: one of the three Gorgons, her hair a crown of writhing snakes, whose gaze turned men and beasts to stone, and from whose neck sprang the winged horse Pegasus when Perseus cut off her head with a single sweep of his sword.

Blue Medusa: a creation, aquamarine, with an energetic sting; a creation, nearing the surface, winging upwards.

The bassoon leads the discourse throughout, the rest of the ensemble trailing countless jellyfish's tentacles of teeming, seething activity beneath it. Despite being cast in a dense – although eloquent – post-tonal language, the piece broadly follows a traditional and viscerally effective dialectic arch, contrasting the propulsive opening

material with a more pensive, lilting idea. A central accompanied cadenza leads to further turbulent development before a calmer reprise of the main elements and a final sting in the tail.

Written specially for the Berkeley Ensemble, **Michael Berkeley's** *Clarion Call and Gallop* was completed during the composer's residence at the Trasimeno Music Festival, Italy, in 2013. Whilst it is tempting, and not entirely misguided, to hear echoes of the work's festive and sunny birthplace in the largely buoyant and high-spirited music, melodic elements of the piece are actually based on material taken from Berkeley's anthem, *Listen, Listen, O My Child*, which was commissioned for the enthronement of the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby.

The opening clarion call, using the anthem's leitmotif, quickly gives way, via tumbling figurations, to the gallop. Although initially well-behaved, instrumental high jinx invade, most notably from the clarinet, which for the first portion of the piece uses the raucous and high-pitched E-flat instrument.

After a brief return of the clarion call, the anthem material makes its most extended appearance before one final, frantic gallop to the finish, led by the viola and this time

recalling the tarantella finale from the Sinfonietta of Berkeley's godfather, Benjamin Britten.

Writing to offer the Septet to his publisher, Beethoven drew attention to a noteworthy feature of its scoring: 'A septet per il violino, viola, violoncello, contra basso, clarinet, corno, fagotto – tutti obbligati (I cannot write anything that is not obbligato, for I came into the world to obbligato accompaniment.)' Despite the years separating Beethoven's work from these that followed, his example has held sway in that each uses its large performing forces to the full, even those where the original conception was a smaller work. The famous piano-vandal would surely approve of the diverse range of colours and effects that later composers have wrung from his original ensemble. It is a line-up that has proved surprisingly adaptable.

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Berkeley Ensemble

The Berkeley Ensemble takes its name from two British composers of the last hundred years, father and son Sir Lennox and Michael Berkeley. It was formed in 2008 by members of Southbank Sinfonia, Britain's young professional orchestra, with the aim of exploring the wealth of little-known twentieth- and twenty-first century British chamber music alongside more established repertoire. It now enjoys a busy concert schedule performing throughout the UK and abroad, and is also much in demand for its inspiring work in education.

Finalists in the 2009 Royal Over-Seas League competition and selected by Making Music for the Concert Promoters' Network in 2010 and 2013, the ensemble has performed with leading musicians including Sir Thomas Allen, Richard Sisson and Gabriel Prokofiev. The group is an enthusiastic champion of new music and has worked with composers John Casken and Robin Holloway. It was proud to premier its first commission, Michael Berkeley's *Clarion Call and Gallop*, in 2013.

The ensemble is rapidly building a reputation for innovative and thought-provoking programming, aided by its flexible configuration and regular collaboration

with leading young guest artists. Equally at home on the summer festival circuit as in the concert hall, the group has performed at the Latitude and Greenbelt festivals. In 2012 the opening concert of *Stealing, Borrowing, Remembering*, its series exploring the links between composers Igor Stravinsky and Lennox Berkeley, was awarded a four-star review in *The Independent*.

Taking its music to new audiences, most importantly through education, is central to the ensemble's activities. Its work in this area includes self-directed projects in addition to collaborations with Southbank Sinfonia, Merton Music Foundation and Pan Concerts for Children. The ensemble regularly coaches students in chamber performance at the University of York, is ensemble-in-residence at Queen Elizabeth School in Cumbria and runs an annual residential chamber music course in Somerset.

www.berkeleyensemble.co.uk



Berkeley Ensemble
(Photography: Nigel Luckhurst)

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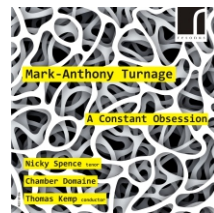


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