

SU ZHEN
SIMON LEPPER

british rhapsody

*Music for viola and piano
by Bowen, Coates, Delius,
Richardson & Samuel*





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ERIC COATES (1886-1957)

1 *First meeting* (souvenir) 7'03

ALAN RICHARDSON (1904-1978)

2 *Rhapsody for viola and piano* 9'13

FREDERICK DELIUS (1862-1934) arr. **LIONEL TERTIS** (1876-1975)

3 *Violin sonata no.2 adapted for viola* 13'09

RHIAN SAMUEL (b.1944)

Blythswood

4 i *Tangled webs* 4'18

5 ii *Gannets diving* 1'53

6 iii *To become the song* 5'11

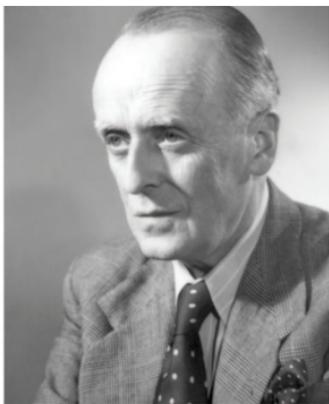
YORK BOWEN (1884-1961)

7 *Phantasy for viola and piano, Op.54* 15'44

56'50

SU ZHEN *viola*

SIMON LEPPER *piano*



Eric Coates, Lionel Tertis



Frederick Delius

first meeting and beyond

When was your “first meeting”? We met as postgraduate students at the Royal Academy of Music in 1996. Su Zhen came from China where, at the age of 23, she had been assistant principal viola in the China National Symphony Orchestra. Simon had completed a music degree at King’s College, Cambridge and was studying piano accompaniment with Michael Dussek. One of the first pieces we performed together was the York Bowen *Phantasy*.

You chose to record this CD in the Duke’s Hall. Does this have a special association for you? Yes, some of our first performances together were in this hall as well as some of our student competition successes. It made sense to return to the place where our duo relationship began. Nowadays, Su Zhen is more likely to be watching her own students in the hall, as she is a visiting professor to the Royal Academy of Music.

Why did you choose to focus on British music? Su Zhen’s teacher was Professor John White, who had a great passion for British viola music (and cricket). He encouraged us to explore the wealth of repertoire available. As a performer, he had commissioned works by Alan Richardson amongst others and edited the viola works of York Bowen.

What is your connection with the composer Rhian Samuel? We met Rhian whilst studying at the Royal Academy of Music. We were fortunate enough to give the first performance of her work *Blythswood* in 1999. As students, the middle movement *Gannets diving* became a firm favourite of ours, which we included in many recital programmes.

What influence did Tertis have on this programme? *First meeting* by Eric Coates was written for Lionel Tertis and he also premiered the Bowen *Phantasy*. We were lucky enough to perform his arrangement of the Delius *Violin sonata no.2* to his widow Lillian at her home in Wimbledon. Su Zhen has also been involved with the Lionel Tertis Competition as both a prizewinner and jury member.

Is your viola British? Yes, it was made by William Luff in 1966.

viola britannica

Before making his name as a celebrated composer of light orchestral music, Eric Coates (1886-1957) spent seven years as principal violist with the Queen's Hall Orchestra. **First meeting (souvenir)** stands as a rare chamber work from a composer best known for his orchestral miniatures as commandeered by generations of BBC producers, Coates' much-loved *Sleepy lagoon* still ushering in Desert Island Discs. Composed in late 1941, *First meeting* was written on the request of Coates' past viola teacher at the Royal Academy, the esteemed performer and near-evangelical champion of the instrument, Lionel Tertis. Having enrolled in Trinity College of Music in 1892, Tertis was eager to commemorate his fiftieth anniversary as a viola player and invited his erstwhile student to compose a work in celebration, Coates responding with a tender vignette of their first encounter. According to Coates' son Austin, the informal 'premiere' play-through of the work drew a warm reception from the elderly Tertis: 'after lunch we went into the drawing room, and Tertis and my father played the work... Tertis played as if he'd known the work all his life... He was so delighted that he insisted on their doing it again.' Yet curiously Tertis never further performed the work. While there is understood to have been no rift between the pair, when the piece was published in 1943 it was transcribed for violin and piano – presumably as a more marketable duo amid war-straitened times – and newly inscribed with a dedication to Coates' son "on his twenty-first birthday".

Still bearing the hallmarks of Coates' warm, lyrical style, *First meeting* nonetheless marked a shift in the composer's approach, moving away from the easy sparkle of his many orchestral miniatures to a more complex, rigorous composition style. Composed in ternary form, the delicate brooding of the nocturne-like opening gives way to a more spirited central section. The work's closing reprise sees the viola line floating across the top register of the instrument, aloft two final pentatonic spreads in the piano.

Scottish composer and pianist Alan Richardson (1904-1978) is perhaps best remembered for his many works for both solo piano and oboe, with many of the latter dedicated to his wife, acclaimed oboist Janet Craxton. Yet Richardson's catalogue also includes a number of fine chamber works for viola, reflecting his close collaboration with Scottish viola player Watson Forbes (1909–97). With Forbes he completed an ambitious set of classical and baroque arrangements for viola, also composing several

new works for the player, including a substantial *Sonata* in 1949 and several shorter works: *Sussex lullaby*, *Autumn sketches* and *Intrada*. The **Rhapsody for viola and piano** of 1977 was the composer's last composition for the instrument, completed only shortly before Richardson died, and aptly illustrates the composer's rhythmically robust and rich, tonal style. Eclectic and episodic in character, the work ranges from the biting C-minor 'con fuoco' opening motif to passages of contemplation and snaking counterpoint, alongside an extended song-like 'moderato' passage in B minor. The work builds to an extended viola cadenza peppered with Hungarian modal inflections, before closing with a mercurial coda that darts between celebration and turbulence, eventually landing on an emphatic C-major flourish.

The 1920s were much blighted for Delius by his syphilitic infection, and the **Violin sonata no.2** of 1923-4 was one of the last pieces the composer completed before his sight failed. Composing between bouts of illness, Delius began its first sketches while convalescing in Norway and completed the manuscript in his French home in Grez-sur-Loing. Albeit a difficult period for Delius, the sonata was composed in the same year as he finished his celebrated score for James Elroy Flecker's verse drama, the oriental adventure *Hassan*, and similarly belies the physical trials surrounding its composition. The sonata's successful premiere took place at the Wigmore Hall in October 1924 and the work was then arranged for viola five years later by Lionel Tertis, who premiered and recorded the new transcription in 1929. By all accounts Delius was delighted with both the arrangement and recording, writing to Tertis: 'it is marvellously beautiful, and I am overjoyed. I cannot imagine it better played. You have got so inside the music'.

Composed across a single, arching movement, the sonata is divided internally into a fast-slow-fast tripartite form. The opening 'con moto' is characterised by shifting moods, darting from passages of utmost tenderness to flashes of turbulence and passion, with strong echoes of Fauré in the viola's gliding, ever-extending melodic phrases. The 'lento' that follows opens with an elegiac viola melody set across a stately, tolling piano line, duly interrupted by a brief surge of storm and unrest. A series of twinkling whole tone scales in the piano concludes the lento section, leading to an angular yet fiery 'molto vivace'.

Blythswood by Welsh composer Rhian Samuel was composed in 1996. The three short pieces were written while Samuel was resident in Glaick, a tiny Scottish Highlands village that looks out to the

mountains of Skye, and the composer notes that each movement 'evokes, in terms of seascape or memory, the idea of the 'distant view''. *Tangled webs* opens to a sparse, cautious dialogue between the viola and piano. Cascades of agitated counterpoint are eventually brought to rest by a contemplative if fragmented viola solo, before the concluding piano phrase draws together the jagged falling fifths and tritone inflections of the opening into a warm, Bacchian harmonic resolution. *Gannets diving* captures the scurry and glitter of birds' wings and salt spray in its skittish rising and falling motifs and frantic ripples in the piano. The concluding *To become a song*, opens with a controlled lament that perhaps recalls Messiaen's *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus* in the viola's pleading, almost speech-like intensity of line heard across steadily chiming tones in the piano. The movement builds to an aggressive clamour only to dissolve into an extended viola cadenza and a subsequent reprise of the soft but insistent pulse of the opening.

Born in Crouch End in 1884 and son to partner of the prized whiskey distillers Bowen & McKechnie, York Edwin Bowen forged his earliest musical success as a pianist, making his concerto debut when just eight years old. Forging a path as a composer while still a teenager, Bowen attended the Royal Academy of Music and enjoyed the enthusiastic patronage of Sir Henry Wood, with Bowen's *The lament of Tasso* being presented at a Promenade Concert at the Queen's Hall while the composer was just nineteen. It was at the Academy that Bowen met Lionel Tertis, the violist then at the height of his spirited campaign to champion new viola repertoire. Bowen became a regular accompanist of Tertis and began to compose a sequence of rich, expressive chamber works for viola that would span two world wars.

The **Phantasy for viola and piano** (Op.54) was composed in 1918, six months before the end of the Great War; and went on to win first prize in Walter Willson Cobbett's annual chamber music "Phantasy" competition. Premiered that same year at the Wigmore Hall by Tertis, it was considered vertiginously difficult to perform, the work's intense use of the upper reaches of the instrument often seeing it paired in difficulty with Bliss' fiendish *Viola sonata* of 1933. Composed across a single movement, the *Phantasy* stands as a profound, introspective work despite its many brighter, more puckish episodes. Much of the work is constructed around a rocking, sighing theme first heard in the piece's hesitant solo opening and reprised with Rachmaninov-like luxuriance at the work's close.



Alan Richardson, York Bowen



Rhian Samuel

Produced, engineered and edited by Kirsten Cowie.

Recorded 30 September; 1, 3 & 4 October 2012 at Duke's Hall, Royal Academy of Music,
London, U.K.

Steinway technician: Clive Ackroyd.

Publishers: Josef Weinberger Limited (tracks 1 & 7); Comus Edition (track 2); Hawkes & Son Ltd
(track 3); Stainer & Bell (tracks 4-6).

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Design: Red Engine Design.

Printed in the E.U.

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