

NOTES FROM A SMALL ISLAND

A trio of lunchtime concerts
showcasing major works for
piano by British composers of
the 20th and 21st centuries

MARK BEBBINGTON
PIANO



ST JOHN'S SMITH SQUARE

FRIDAY 1ST OCTOBER 2021

1pm

Mark Bebbington, piano Principals of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

IRELAND:

Fantasy-Sonata for Clarinet and Piano

Mark Bebbington, piano
Katherine Lacy, clarinet

PETER DICKINSON:

Lullaby

Five Forgeries

Mark Bebbington, piano
Mark Bebbington
with Irene Loh, piano

ELGAR:

**Quintet in A minor for
Piano and String Quartet, Op.84**

Mark Bebbington, piano
Tamas Andras, violin
Andrew Storey, violin
Abigail Fenna, viola
Richard Harwood, cello

JOHN IRELAND (1879–1962)

Fantasy-Sonata for Clarinet and Piano

John Ireland wrote music in many fields but seemed to channel his deepest thoughts into its more intimate forms, be it piano, song or chamber music, a reflection maybe of his introspective personality. The Fantasy Sonata dates from 1943 and was dedicated to the distinguished English clarinettist Frederick Thurston who premièred it with Ireland at the piano at the start of the following year. Earlier in World War II, the composer had of necessity abandoned his idyllic retreat on the island of Jersey, a circumstance that may well

have informed this emotionally charged work. As might be anticipated by the word 'Fantasy' in its title, the sonata form, implying as it does a certain formality of construction, is only loosely adhered to: rather, the three distinct sections become the umbrella for a concise work of freedom, imagination and considerable daring, yet one crafted with meticulous care. The Fantasy-Sonata is arresting right from its haunting opening, with the clarinet entering in its upper 'altissimo' register, to its dramatic concluding section, with the pounding piano set against the frenzy of the clarinet. It holds the attention through the engaging dialogue between the two instruments and by its frequent changes of tempo and of mood, now dreamy, now destabilising, now vibrant and life-affirming. The work encompasses the whole spectrum of the clarinet's voice but the virtuosity of the two instrumental parts is at all times subservient to the higher ideal of art.

Programme note © John Brain

PETER DICKINSON (b.1934)

Peter Dickinson is a British composer of the senior generation, and his music has been much recorded by leading performers. Dickinson had a twenty-five-year recital partnership with his sister, the mezzo-soprano Meriel Dickinson. They gave recitals and broadcasts in the UK and Europe and made first recordings of works by American and British composers, including Dickinson's own song cycles. He is an Emeritus Professor of two universities (Keele and London), has given many BBC broadcasts, and has written widely with books on Lennox Berkeley, Billy Mayerl, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Lord Berners and Samuel Barber. A collection of Dickinson's writings over a fifty-year period was published as *Words and Music* in 2016. He is chair of the Rainbow Dickinson Trust.

Lullaby from 'The Unicorns'

The Lullaby from 'The Unicorns' comes from an abandoned opera in the late 1960s. In the story two unicorns are discovered in a remote part of Africa. Both the East and West want to obtain a specimen for research, so they send out rival expeditions. The Western technique was to lure the unicorn with a young girl singing this lullaby. Both East and West capture unicorns but the two mythical animals escape in the end. I never completed the opera, but I made a six-movement suite from it called The Unicorns. There is also an orchestral suite - unperformed. Initially there were three songs and three instrumental numbers, and the first performance was given with Elisabeth Söderström and Solna Brass under Lars-Gunnar Björklund at Ekensbergskyrkan, Solna, Sweden on 31 October 1982. There are many other versions and recordings. This is the premiere performance of the solo piano piece.

Five Forgeries

Poulenc – Hindemith – Stravinsky – Delius – Bartok

The Five Forgeries were written in 1963 and published the following year. They are simply party pieces taking off aspects of the styles of the composers indicated. Poulenc is dedicated to Sir Lennox Berkeley, who was a close friend of the French composer; Hindemith to my tutor at Cambridge, Philip Radcliffe, who took Hindemith rather seriously; Stravinsky to the painter and later business consultant Harold Lewis, who shared my admiration for the composer; Delius to my father Frank Dickinson, the contact lens pioneer, who loved his music; Bartok to Dinos Constantinides, the Greek-American violinist and later composer who was my chamber music partner in New York.

Programme notes © Peter Dickinson

SIR EDWARD ELGAR (1857–1934)

Quintet in A minor for Piano and String Quartet, Op.84

Moderato - Allegro; Adagio; Andante – Allegro

Elgar penned his memorable Piano Quintet in 1918/19, following in the footsteps of Schumann, Brahms, Franck, Dvorak and Fauré who had produced masterworks for this combination of instruments. One wonders whether Schumann foresaw that writing his exuberant Piano Quintet in 1842 (and, in so doing, effectively creating a new genre) might be the catalyst for so many great compositions in this idiom to follow in the Romantic era. Elgar's work is one of four he composed over a couple of years at Brinkwells, a secluded cottage in Sussex, the other three being his String Quartet, his Violin Sonata and, most famously, his Cello Concerto. All are in the minor key and together they represent a twilight flowering of the composer's creative genius. The spectral fragmentary opening of the Piano Quintet – on strings, set against a plainchant figure on the piano – is pivotal to the whole work as is a sorrowful sighing motif soon introduced on violins and viola and answered imploringly by the cello. There are three primary ideas and these are wonderfully developed in the music's course: they all reappear in the Finale, though in different form. At the close of the movement, the mood of the opening is restored and the sound fades away. This is music on a grand scale which carries with it an underlying restlessness. After the tension of the first movement, the Adagio, in many ways the emotional heart of the Quintet, presents an oasis of calm, though one tinged with melancholy. Tender, dream-like and texturally varied, it evolves so naturally from its hushed opening on strings – the main theme being presented on the viola – and the piano's ceremonial tread. Though there are moments of more overt passion, its stillness most notably disrupted in an impassioned climactic passage, nothing threatens its essential character. A quotation from the beginning of the work (the sighing motif) introduces the final movement and from this emanates a theme of great energy and purpose. As the movement proceeds, an assemblage of material heard earlier reappears but now subtly presented in a new guise, bearing testimony to the cyclical nature of the Quintet, before the triumphant conclusion brings to an end one of the great chamber works of the 20th Century.

Programme note © John Brain

MARK BEBBINGTON, PIANO

The critical plaudits which have greeted Mark Bebbington's performances and recordings have singled him out as a British pianist of the rarest refinement and maturity ("Bebbington is without doubt one of Britain's finest pianists." wrote Michel Fleury recently in *Classica*).

Internationally recognised as a champion of British music, in particular, Mark has recorded extensively for the Somm label to critical acclaim, with no fewer than nine of his recent CDs awarded 5* by BBC Music Magazine. Recent CDs include three British Piano Concertos with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, an all-Gershwin album with Leon Botstein and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra ('Recording of the Month' from MusicWeb International). A CD of Concertos by Grieg (including the premiere of his sketches for a Second Piano Concerto, edited by Robert Matthew-Walker) and Delius with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Jan Latham-Koenig was released in April 2018 and became 'CD of the Week' in *The Times* and *Mail on Sunday*. Most recently, Mark's new recordings on Resonus Classics of works by Francis Poulenc with conductor Jan Latham-Koenig and the Royal Philharmonic

Orchestra (featuring Poulenc's Piano Concerto, the rarely-recorded piano version of the *Concert champêtre*, the Trio for Piano, Oboe & Bassoon, and the Sonata for Oboe & Piano) have received glowing reviews and a short-listed nomination for a Gramophone award.

Mark's premiere recordings include an Arnold Bax's Piano Concertino coupled with John Ireland's Piano Concerto and *Legend*, and premieres of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia* and William Mathias's first two Piano Concertos (Ulster Orchestra). In addition to concerto recordings, Mark completed his John Ireland and Frank Bridge solo piano series and released a CD of piano works by William Alwyn in 2017. As well as his BBC Music Magazine success, he has won Gramophone Magazine's 'Editor's Choice' International Record Review's 'Outstanding' accolade and many others. International Piano Magazine wrote of him, "Bebbington's revivals of British piano music are second to none; he could well be dubbed the concert pianists' Richard Hickox. Bebbington has almost single-handedly demonstrated that 20th-century British piano scores have an exciting role to play in the concert hall and recording studio".

Over recent seasons Mark has toured throughout Central and Northern Europe and in the United States (both as recitalist and as soloist with some of the world's leading orchestras), as well as the Far East and North Africa. In 2017 he made his Carnegie Hall debut with Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra and also appeared with the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra and on tour with the Israel Camerata and Czech National Orchestra. Within the UK, he has appeared in concertos with the London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic and Philharmonia Orchestras, Flanders Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, Orchestra of the Swan and BBC Concert Orchestra. He has featured both as soloist and recitalist on BBC Television and Radio and also on major European Television and Radio networks.

Mark studied at the Royal College of Music where he was a recipient of numerous international awards and prizes, including a Leverhulme Scholarship, a Winston Churchill Fellowship and the Ivan Sutton Recording Prize – the latter awarded to the one outstanding graduate of the combined London Music Colleges. He later studied in Italy with the legendary Aldo Ciccolini.

Mark's programming demonstrates a commitment to the music of our time and he regularly includes contemporary composers as diverse as Takemitsu, Julian Anderson, John McCabe, David Matthews, Pierre Boulez and Elliot Carter in his recital series.

www.markbebbington.co.uk

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC STRING QUARTET

Katherine Lacy (clarinet), Tamas Andras and Andrew Storey (violins), Abigail Fenna (viola) and Richard Harwood (cello) are all principal players in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

www.rpo.co.uk

Mark Bebbington returns to St John's Smith Square for the final concert in the *Notes from a Small Island* series on **Friday 4th February 2022** www.sjss.org.uk

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