



# THE THURSTON CONNECTION

English Music for Clarinet and Piano

Bax • Fiske • Hamilton • Wood • Bennett

Nicholas Cox, Clarinet

Ian Buckle, Piano



## The Thurston Connection

### English Music for Clarinet and Piano

After starting the clarinet with his father at the age of seven, Frederick Thurston (1901-1953) went on to study with Charles Draper at the Royal College of Music on an Open Scholarship. In the 1920s he played with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Orchestra of Covent Garden and the BBC Wireless Orchestra, becoming Principal Clarinet in the newly formed BBC Symphony Orchestra under Adrian Boult. He left the BBC in 1946 to devote more time to performing chamber music. He was also Principal Clarinet in the Philharmonia Orchestra when Toscanini conducted and recorded the four Brahms *Symphonies*. Frederick ('Jack') Thurston was Professor of Clarinet at the Royal College of Music from 1930 until his death from lung cancer in 1953, a few months after his marriage to one of his pupils, Thea King.

Thurston did a huge amount to encourage composers of the day to write for his instrument. He gave the first performances of Arnold Bax's *Clarinet Sonata*, Arthur Bliss's *Clarinet Quintet*, John Ireland's *Fantasy-Sonata*, Alan Rawsthorne's *Clarinet Quartet*, Gerald Finzi's *Clarinet Concerto* and Gordon Jacob's *Clarinet Quintet*. Works dedicated to him also include Malcolm Arnold's *First Clarinet Concerto*, Iain Hamilton's *Three Nocturnes*, Herbert Howells's *Clarinet Sonata*, Alan Rawsthorne's *Clarinet Concerto* and Elizabeth Maconchy's *Clarinet Concertino*. He also gave the UK premières of concertos by Copland, Hindemith, Strauss and many others. In 1952 he was awarded the CBE and the Cobbett Gold Medal for services to chamber music.

According to Pamela Weston, Thurston was a 'natural comedian', the centre of a large circle of friends and well-known for his high spirits. Occasionally this inherent ebullience could get the better of him. For instance, as a student at the RCM Thurston once went a bit too far in an orchestral rehearsal being taken by the young Adrian Boult, who completely lost his temper and insisted Thurston leave the rehearsal. However, by the time the BBC Symphony Orchestra came to be formed and it was given to Boult to choose his players, this

episode appears to have been forgotten, for he immediately summoned Thurston to join the orchestra.

Thurston made a 'beautiful firm sound' on his Boosey and Hawkes wider 10-10 bore clarinets, with which he could project pianissimo 'to the back of the Royal Albert Hall'. He made relatively few recordings, but those we have suggest that Thurston had a fine rhythmic sense, a natural sense of phrasing, and a rubato that was more subtle and integrated than that of his teacher Charles Draper. Unlike his near contemporary Reginald Kell, he did not use vibrato. His playing of the Bliss *Clarinet Quintet* in a 1935 recording with the Griller Quartet was described as 'exquisite' by the critic Alec Robertson, and his performance was noted for its virtuosity and brilliant staccato technique.

### Arnold Bax (1883-1953): Clarinet Sonata

Frederick Thurston gave the première of Bax's two-movement *Clarinet Sonata* with Harriet Cohen at a London Contemporary Music Centre concert at the Cowdray Hall on 17th June, 1935. According to Graham Parlett, the *Sonata* had to be played twice in the concert, the second time in place of Lennox Berkeley's *Sonatina* which had been lost in the post. Completed the previous June, Bax's *Sonata* quickly became one of his most performed pieces and was published in 1935. It is dedicated to Hugh Prew, an industrial chemist and amateur clarinetist who was a fellow member of the Old Broughtonians, an amateur cricket team to which Bax's brother Clifford also belonged.

Bax was no stranger to the clarinet, and his acquaintance with the instrument from an early age should not be underestimated. He chose clarinet as a second-study instrument alongside piano and composition while an undergraduate at the Royal Academy of Music; and in early 1901 he wrote a *Sonata in E major* and an *Intermezzo for clarinet and piano*, the manuscripts of which were both recently rediscovered.

The *Clarinet Sonata*, written in 1934, is in two contrasting movements, with a cyclical return of the *Sonata's* opening material at the end of the second movement. Opening in D major with a sumptuous clarinet melody played over a sonorous piano chord, the initial fourteen bars of the *Molto moderato* first movement seem to encompass so much harmonically and melodically that one wonders where Bax will subsequently take the listener. As in many of his chamber works with piano, Bax seems to reserve his most intense level of expression for the passionate piano interludes, which are often taxing in their use of wide-spread chords and intricate, sometimes tortuous, harmonic progressions. Is Bax perhaps encapsulating here his long-term affection for the *Sonata's* first pianist, Harriet Cohen?

The second movement, a sprightly and powerful *Vivace*, inhabits an altogether different territory. The movement's *moto perpetuo* semiquavers eventually yield to the clarinet's fervent middle-register, *alla breve* melody. With this melody's accompanying minim chords, Bax briefly transports us to a more naive landscape; and in the concluding coda we enter a refuge where a door magically opens and allows the composer to revisit the aural indulgence of his first movement: it is as if we have rounded a corner and entered a Celtic fairy-tale world where everything has been transformed.

The phrase markings in Bax's *Clarinet Sonata* have long fascinated clarinetists, and have been the subject of considerable scholastic speculation. At some stage before the *Sonata* was engraved, Bax seems to have deferred to what were probably Thurston's ideas about phrasing the work, and an examination of differences between the printed clarinet part and Bax's manuscript suggests the need, long overdue, for a new comparative edition of the work, one that takes into consideration not only the evidence of Thurston's well-meaning if sometimes cavalier attitude to the composer's text, but also revisits Bax's original manuscript markings and phrasing. In line with Lewis Foreman's observation that 'Bax's first ideas were often his best', an attempt has been made in this recording to restore the manuscript's original phrasing and thus reveal the composer's original intentions.

### Roger Fiske (1910-1987): Clarinet Sonata

Roger Fiske was an English musicologist, broadcaster, author and composer. After taking a BA in English at Wadham College, Oxford in 1932, he studied composition with Herbert Howells at the Royal College of Music in London. Awarded an Oxford Doctorate in Music in 1937, he subsequently joined the staff of the BBC where he produced educational programmes for the armed forces (1948-53) and talks on music (1953-59). He left the BBC in 1959 and was subsequently editor-in-chief of Eulenberg scores (1968-75). Fiske wrote several books on music including *Beethoven's Last Quartets* (1940), *Chamber Music* (1969), the important *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (1973), and *Scotland in Music* (1983), as well as many articles and reviews for magazines and journals. Prominent among his original music manuscripts held at the Bodleian Library are the present *Clarinet Sonata* and a *Clarinet Sonatina* dating from 1941 and 1951 respectively.

The *Clarinet Sonata* was dedicated to Frederick Thurston in March 1941, and first played by him in a private performance accompanied by the composer. According to the composer's widow Elizabeth, Thurston is known to have visited the Fiskes at their rooms in Ashburnham Road, Bedford, to discuss and play the work with the composer. It is perhaps not surprising that Thurston declined to take up the work and play it publicly, as it was not commissioned from a composer of the stature of, say, Bax or Ireland. In fairness, Fiske did very little to promote his own works; and indeed they lay largely undiscovered until after his death.

Two copies of the manuscript of the *Clarinet Sonata* are extant: one left to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and one made available by Thea King to the editors of the work's published second edition. Although clearly revealing a debt to his teacher Herbert Howells, Fiske's *Clarinet Sonata* predates Howells's masterpiece by five years.

While the relaxed opening movement and the perhaps rather naive *Variations* which form the second movement reveal an English pastoral character, the

*Sonata's* finale is altogether more upbeat and rhythmic, in 3/4 + 3/8 time, with the composer making occasional shy glances over his shoulder at more jazz-derived idioms. Fiske reveals his stylistic sophistication in a clear understanding of structure – notably, the first movement's recapitulation reverses the order of the main themes, with the opening theme reprised in a dreamy coda – together with the sensitive nature of his clarinet writing and his use of advanced piano sonorities and harmonies.

Like Howells, Fiske makes regular use of harmonic false relations derived from English polyphonic choral music, but more often in his case with added and more modern bitonal astringency, e.g. the second themes of the first and third movements. The second movement *Variations*, based on an affectingly simple theme, are first pastoral in character, then by turn playful, rhapsodic and elegiac. If the work occasionally reveals the naivety of a part-time composer, notably in the coda of the first movement, Fiske also shows he is capable of truly Elgarian moments of reflection and repose (in the first and second movements) as well as more daringly original moments of almost Honegger-like bitonality, for instance in the partly-unaccompanied end of the second movement which segues neatly into the finale.

The revised, second edition of Fiske's *Clarinet Sonata*, edited by Nicholas Cox and Susanna Westmeath, has been used for this première recording.

### Iain Hamilton (1912-2000): Three Nocturnes

Born in Glasgow, Iain Hamilton was educated at Mill Hill School after his family moved south when he was seven years old. In 1947, after an apprenticeship and seven years' work as an engineer that saw him through the war years, he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music where he studied under Harold Craxton and William Alwyn. Although Hamilton consequently decided to devote his life to composition, his former profession continued to exert an influence on his compositions, not least in his ability to structure larger-scale musical forms. A host of prize-winning compositions announced

Hamilton's arrival at the forefront of British musical life. For much of the 1950s he taught at Morley College and London University, and also served as a member of the BBC Music Advisory Panel and chaired the Music sections of both the ICA and the Composers' Guild. As a result of his study of the music of Webern, his music from this period demonstrated the radical way in which he had integrated the ideas of European serialism. In 1961, partly as a reaction to European modernism and to the lack of popular reception of his works in Britain, Hamilton moved to live in New York City, commuting to North Carolina where he was Mary Biddle Professor of Music at Duke University. During this time he began writing the first of his twelve operas, arguably the most important of his major works. He spent the last twenty years of his life living in London's Chelsea, in relative obscurity.

Hamilton's *Three Nocturnes* were awarded the Edwin Evans Prize in 1951, the year after his graduation from the RAM, and were first performed by their dedicatee Frederick Thurston in the same year. In the opening *Adagio mistico*, Hamilton's undulating alternation of triplets and duplets in the piano part creates a mesmeric effect over which the clarinet line gently rises and subsides. A brief middle section raises the emotional temperature with its clarinet tremolandi and ascending scales, before the opening melody briefly reappears. In the *moto perpetuo* second movement, *Allegro diabolico*, it soon becomes clear that what is being depicted is more 'nightmare' than 'nocturne', the clarinet's ghostly figures and ghoulish outbursts leaping out of every shadow and propelling the music forward to an exciting climax.

In the final *Lento tranquillo* Hamilton finds simplicity worthy of his older contemporary Benjamin Britten. Here the clarinet's opening unaccompanied melody displays the instrument's ability to cross the widest intervals with ease. A simple rising melody, first on clarinet then on piano, frames a curious polytonal passage of eerie bell-like textures where clarinet scales rise like wisps of smoke. The music resolves into a suitably nocturnal ending, the clarinet fading away into nothingness.

### Hugh Wood (b. 1932): Paraphrase on 'Bird of Paradise'

Hugh Wood was born in Parbold in Lancashire in 1932. The son of musical parents, he was educated at Oundle School and New College Oxford where he read History. Moving to London in 1954 he studied music with W.S. Lloyd Webber, Iain Hamilton, Anthony Milner and Mátyás Seiber. Like several of his fellow composers in London he started teaching at Morley College. Later he held teaching posts at the Royal Academy of Music, at Glasgow and Liverpool Universities, and later Churchill College, Cambridge where I encountered him as an excellent lecturer on Beethoven, Brahms and Schoenberg. In particular, I found him a great communicator about German music, and it was his lectures on the Second Viennese School that in no small way encouraged my own studies of Webern and my eventual decision to learn German and study the clarinet in Germany.

When I returned to the United Kingdom I was delighted to find Hugh Wood agreeing to write the *Paraphrase* for me. I gave the first performance with Vanessa Latache at the Wigmore Hall on 4th March, 1985. The composer has provided the following short programme note:

'This piece is a paraphrase of a song that I wrote in early 1983 to a poem by Robert Graves called *Bird of Paradise*. The music is continuous, but falls into five sections, of which the first three are variations on the emerging material of the song. In the fourth (which is the loudest), the original vocal line may most clearly be heard: it has been somewhat extended both in length and register. In the fifth and final section, the piano plays the song line in the manner of a chorale; and later the clarinet recapitulates the closing phrase of the song fairly exactly. The opening of the song is heard in the highest register of the clarinet before the close.'

Nicholas Cox

Hugh Wood has composed several sets of songs on words by Robert Graves (1895-1985), starting with *Set 1* (his Op. 18) in 1966-67. *Set 3* (Op. 25), completed in 1983, incorporates material going back as far as 1966. Graves's poem *Bird of Paradise*, from his poetic cycle *Man Does, Woman Is*, provided the text for the fourth and last song of *Set 3*, completed on 1st February, 1983, and Wood's setting in turn provided the basis for the *Paraphrase for Clarinet and Piano*, completed on 11th January, 1985, which is a fantasy in variation form. Graves's poem floridly describes the mating display of the male Bird of Paradise who, in opening his wings, is 'Displaying emerald plumage shot with gold / Unguessed even by him' – and the effect of this 'glory' on the awed and somewhat fearful female. Just beneath its surface the poem is a metaphor for Graves's view of sexual relations between male and female in all or any species, especially the human. But Graves was not the only poet who contributed inspiration to the piece, for the score also bears, as epigraph, two lines of Spanish verse that view the male-female polarity in altogether less triumphant vein:

*Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa,  
y éstos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo.*

*(Although this may be the last pain she causes me,  
and these may be the last verses I write for her.)*

Though unattributed in the score of *Paraphrase*, these are in fact the final lines of the tragic poem *Puedo escribir ('Tonight I can write the saddest poem')* by Pablo Neruda (1904-73) – the final poem, evoking the end of a love affair, of his collection *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* which he wrote in 1923 at the age of twenty. Neruda is a poet whom, in 1973, Wood set to memorable effect in his *Song Cycle on Poems of Pablo Neruda, Op. 19* for high voice and ensemble, presenting seven poems from that collection in a version by Christopher Logue; the cycle concludes with a setting of this very poem. There is thus – if one includes Wood's quotations from Schubert and Wolf to which he draws attention in the score (see below), along with the B-A-C-H motif which appears

emphatically, though in transposed form, as the clarinet's first specifically melodic statement – a veritable web of associations to this work. Perhaps another aspect is the way it appears sometimes like a parody of Messiaen's 'style oiseau', spinning an evocative landscape out of a 'birdsong' that is anything but an accurate transcription of any actual living bird.

*Paraphrase* consists of a single movement, but it has five numbered sections, during the first three of which the material of the song 'emerges'. The clearest statement of it is given in the fourth section, though even here the material is varied, and the vocal line (played on the clarinet) is lengthened and also widened intervallically to span the full register of the instrument. The oscillating, accelerating clarinet trills in the opening *Very Slow* section suggest birdsong without any hint of literalness. They begin to outline portions of whole-tone scale, and trace an elegantly-spun melodic curve with an intense climactic point. In section II (*Con moto*) the trills are more prominent in the piano, as are the whole-tone elements, the clarinet breaking in upon this with disruptive, emphatic upward gestures.

A brief, stuttering third section (*scorrevole*) leads to Section IV (*declamato*), the focus and climax of the piece as well as its most substantial section, where the song melody is heard in long sustained phrases against surging piano arpeggios whose initial chromaticism melts more and more into diatonicism. A strident climax, with the clarinet swooping up to the top of its register, gradually relaxes into meditative recitative, leading to Section V. This – marked, like the first section, *Very Slow* – is an almost Brahmsian lyric effusion, with the piano playing the song melody in the style of a chorale and the clarinet gliding off into rising scalic patterns as if ascending on an updraft. A rapt transition leads into a *molto adagio* coda beginning with a quotation of the opening bars of *Phänomen*, one of Hugo Wolf's *Goethe-Lieder*, in the piano. The first three notes of the quotation themselves outline a fragment of whole-tone scale, and quiet whole-tone ascents are the clarinet's response, which it follows with the melody of *Der greise Kopf* from Schubert's *Winterreise*:

*Der Reif hat einen weissen Schein mir über's Haar gestreuet. Da glaubt' ich schon ein Greis zu sein und hab' mich sehr gefreuet.*

*(The frost had cast a white sheen over my hair. I thought I'd already gone grey, and was very pleased).*

The end of the quotation evokes, through similarity of shape and interval content, the 'Bird of Paradise' melody, which in the closing bars is heard for the last time high in the clarinet, while the opening trills of *Paraphrase* shimmer quietly in the piano.

The Schubert and Wolf songs both speak of the grey (or white, in Wolf) hairs of old age. In Schubert, the frost brings only a presage of them, which reminds the singer of his mortality; in Wolf, they are directly contrasted with the many colours of the rainbow. The contrast could equally well be with the fantastic colours of the Bird of Paradise, and though Goethe's poem affirms that even an old man can experience love, Wood seems to suggest – for both quotations are choked off, unresolved – that the ecstatic love of which the bird is an image remains in fact an unattainable dream. Wood had just turned fifty when he completed the third group of Robert Graves Songs; perhaps he was meditating, as one does around that landmark, on the ageing process, the shortening of days, the circumscribing of the future and the pain of memory.

Malcolm Macdonald

#### Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012): Duo Concertante

Richard Rodney Bennett was born on 29 March 1936 in Broadstairs, Kent. There have been few musicians who excelled in so many different musical genres. He was equally celebrated for his classical works for the concert hall, his film scores, and his fine abilities as a jazz pianist and cabaret chanteur. A composer from a young age, he seemed to learn more about the European avant-garde from his time attending summer courses in Darmstadt and

during the two years he spent studying in Paris with Pierre Boulez than he did from his studies at the Royal Academy of Music with Lennox Berkeley and Howard Ferguson. Moving to live in New York City in 1979, he found there greater acceptance for his creative eclecticism and a ready outlet for his abilities as a jazz musician. He was knighted in 1998 for his services to music. Of his *Duo Concertante* Bennett wrote:

'This piece was commissioned by Nicholas Cox and Vanessa Lataarche and first performed at the 1986 Cheltenham International Festival. The artists requested a brilliant *Duo Concertante* (as a companion piece to Weber's *Grand Duo Concertante*) and this is exactly how the piece turned out. It plays for about ten minutes and is in three linked sections: *Presto* – *Andante* – *Vivo*. There are short solo cadenzas for each instrument and a double cadenza before the last section. *Duo Concertante* was written in New York in August/September 1985.'

Nicholas Cox

#### Nicholas Cox



Gold medalist in the 1984 Royal Over-Seas League Competition in London, Nicholas Cox won international honours at the 1987 Jeunesses Musicales International Clarinet Competition in Belgrade. He studied at the Musikhochschule in Hanover with Hans Deinzer and at Cambridge University. He has since played Principal Clarinet with most of the UK's orchestras and appeared as soloist at festivals in Britain and abroad. He plays quintets regularly with the finest quartets such as the Brodsky, Danel, Endellion, Chillingirian and Skampa and concertos with several orchestras. His recording of Mozart's *Concerto & Quintet* (ClassCD1502) was *Record of the Week* on Classic FM on its release in 2003 and has become one of the most frequently broadcast and highly rated recordings of the *Concerto*. His recording of Richard Strauss's *Duet Concertino* (Avie 2071) is equally regarded as one of the finest versions in the catalogue. Nicholas Cox has been Senior Tutor Clarinet at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester since 2003.

## Ian Buckle



Ian Buckle enjoys a varied freelance career working as soloist, accompanist, chamber musician, orchestral pianist, teacher and ABRSM examiner. As concerto soloist he has appeared with orchestras including the Royal Philharmonic, Opera North, Sinfonia Viva and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. Committed to contemporary music, he has been the pianist in Ensemble 10:10 since the group's inception, and his piano duo with Richard Casey specialises in music from the last and current centuries. He frequently collaborates with former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion performing recitals of piano music and poetry, and he is a member of both the piano-and-wind ensemble Zephyr and the Elysnan Horn Trio, formed when the group were students at the Royal Northern College of Music. He regularly plays piano in the RLPO and the John Wilson Orchestra, and teaches at the Universities of Leeds and Liverpool.



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[www.britishmusicsociety.com](http://www.britishmusicsociety.com)

British music for the clarinet was hugely indebted to the elite interpreters who inspired this important repertoire. They included Frederick Thurston, who first performed three of the works on this recording. Bax's *Sonata*, much admired and imbued with Celtic folklore, is heard in a version that restores the manuscript's original phrasing. The pieces by Roger Fiske and Iain Hamilton are heard in première recordings, while Richard Rodney Bennett's *Duo Concertante* was commissioned by the eminent soloist in this recital, Nicholas Cox.



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**Arnold Bax (1883-1953): Sonata (1934) 14:02**

**1 I. Molto moderato 8:58**

**2 II. Vivace 5:04**

**Roger Fiske (1910-1987): Sonata (1941)\* 19:59**

**3 I. Andante con moto e rubato 7:27**

**4 II. Variations 7:54**

**5 III. Allegro molto 4:38**

**Iain Hamilton (1922-2000): Three Nocturnes, Op. 6 (1949-50)\* 11:22**

**6 I. Adagio mistico 3:46**

**7 II. Allegro diabolico 3:21**

**8 III. Lento tranquillo 4:15**

**9 Hugh Wood (b. 1932): Paraphrase on *Bird of Paradise*, Op. 26 (1985) 12:58**

**10 Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012): Duo Concertante (1985) 10:21**

**\*WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS**

**Nicholas Cox, Clarinet • Ian Buckle, Piano**

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