

The British Cello

SOMMCD 0175

Céleste Series

Alexander Baillie *cello*
John Thwaites *piano*

E J MOERAN (1894-1950)

1 Prelude for cello and piano (1941) 5:00

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)

Sonata in C for Cello and Piano, Opus 65 (1961)

2 I *Dialogo* 6:53

3 II *Scherzo-pizzicato* 2:20

4 III *Elegia* 5:42

5 IV *Marcia* 2:14

6 V *Moto Perpetuo* 2:42

FRANK BRIDGE (1879-1941)

7 *Élégie* for cello and piano H47 (1904) 4:45

RICHARD RODNEY BENNETT (1936-2012)

Sonata for Cello and Piano (1991)

8 I *Allegro* 6:57

9 II *Allegretto leggiero* 3:55

10 III *Feroce* 3:25

11 IV *Andante - Molto vivo* 7:07

JOE CUTLER (b.1968)

12 2016 was a Sad Year for Pop Music (2016) 3:32

JAMES MACMILLAN (b.1959)

13 Sonata No 2 in one movement 15:29

for cello and piano (2000)
*Senza misura - Andante - Senza misura -
Andante - Senza misura*

KENNETH LEIGHTON (1929-1988)

14 *Elegy* for cello and piano Opus 5 (1949) 7:36
Lento cantabile

Total duration: 77:45

Recorded at Birmingham Conservatoire on 17th – 20th December 2016

Recording Producer: Siva Oke

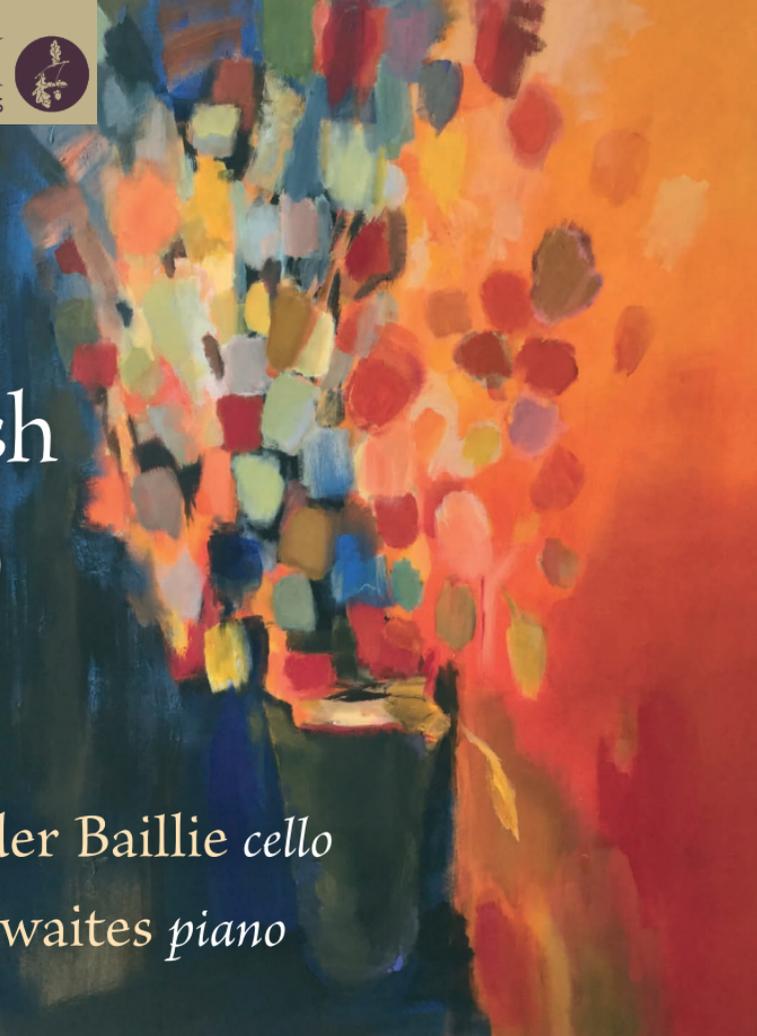
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The British Cello

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THE BRITISH CELLO

Alexander Baillie *cello* · John Thwaites *piano*

This programme of music for cello and piano by British composers concentrates upon significant works of the past sixty or so years, yet also contains several shorter pieces by notable figures of previous generations.

Our recital begins with one such earlier work, EJ Moeran's Prelude, which was composed in 1941. It is dedicated to the cellist Peers Coetmore, who became Moeran's wife in 1945 (his Cello Concerto of that year, and Cello Sonata of two years later, were both written for her).

Perhaps the nature of Moeran's Prelude indicates his affection for Peers; the work is essentially a continuously expressive melodic line (Adagio ma non troppo) for the cello, the piano providing simple yet subtle support throughout. Although ostensibly a relatively simple piece, the lyrical subtleties of Moeran's invention provide deeper qualities for the attentive listener.

Peers Coetmore (1905-1976) was one of a number of British female cellists from the inter-war and immediate post-war years, including Beatrice Harrison, Joan Dickson, Vera Canning, Jeanne Fry, Amaryllis Fleming and Florence Hooton, all of whom were positively inspirational for a number of composers, but it was the first appearance in London in 1956 of the Russian Mstislav Rostropovich which caused the biggest upturn in the fortunes of the instrument so far as British musicians and music-lovers were concerned.

Within a few years of his British debut, his first recordings in the West and televised live concerts, Rostropovich had brought about a seismic change in the acceptance and appreciation of the cello as a solo instrument. Add to this recent concertos for him by Prokofiev and Shostakovich meant that his British premiere in September 1960 of the latter's E flat Concerto Opus 107 ensured a sell-out at London's Royal Festival Hall.

Shostakovich himself was present, as was Benjamin Britten, whose *Young Person's Guide* was also on the programme. It was then that the two great composers met for the first time to hear Rostropovich play Shostakovich's new Concerto: it was no surprise that, on also meeting Britten for the first time, Rostropovich begged for a new work from him.

It took a year. The result was Britten's Sonata in C Opus 65, a work that in many ways redefined the genre. It goes to the heart of chamber music – the intimacy between the instruments; the revelatory tonal relationships until the final, remarkable cadence to C major (not unlike that astonishing final C major cadence that concludes Shostakovich's last work, the Sonata for Viola and Piano).

Britten's Opus 65 has five movements: Dialogo – Allegro; Scherzo-Pizzicato – Allegretto; Elegia – Lento; Marcia – Energico; Moto perpetuo – Presto. At first sight – perhaps at first hearing – it may appear to be less of a Sonata than a Suite, but closer acquaintance reveals the composer's profound subtlety in uniting the movements as 'cross-thematicism' in varying melodic cells to take on quite different characters. The Sonata begins with a 'dialogue' – as the

musicians 'get to know' one another (this Sonata was the first, and eventually the only, such work in Britten's entire output – we ought perhaps to expect a unique 'take' on the challenge), in the manner of a conversation.

Indeed, the musings over the 'dialogue' run deep throughout the work, as the manner by which they are addressed varies, each listening and responding to the other before the brief, civilised, coda momentarily ends the discussion.

The material having been laid out, the remaining four movements probe and expand its characteristics remarkably deeply, the while revealing new aspects of the Dialogue: the Scherzo, shot through with nervous energy; the Elegy naturally contemplative and inward-looking; the more purposeful March, before the catch-as-catch-can finale has the instruments at play (literally!) until C major finally brings closure – not before a subtle reference to Shostakovich's own DSCH musical epigram, as if thanking their now mutual friend for bringing them together.

By 1961, Britten had left his teachers far behind, but of the two with whom he studied – John Ireland, at the Royal College of Music (who exclaimed, when Britten applied there, 'Either you give him a scholarship or I resign') and, privately, Frank Bridge, both left significant works for cello (Ireland, a magnificent Sonata with piano, and Bridge, his Oration for cello and orchestra – a concerto in all but name).

Music for the cello is to be found much earlier in Bridge's output. In 1904, his *Élégie* in D flat for cello and piano appeared, one of several short chamber

works. Short it may be, but Bridge's grasp of the instrument's potential is apparent – the cello plays virtually continuously throughout, its line as expressive of degrees of the elegiac emotion as may be imagined; the piano the subsidiary, albeit not unimportant, supporting partner. The result is a work of no little subtlety – within the cello line, Bridge weaves an emotive succession of ideas that make a compulsively engrossing melodic contour.

Bridge died in 1941, so never witnessed – as Ireland did, who died in 1962 – the rise to pre-eminence of his most significant pupil. By the early 1960s, however, music in Britain had become a powerful social as well as aesthetic force. The very next work from Britten after the Cello Sonata was the War Requiem, which colossal masterwork made a cross-cultural breakthrough unparalleled in 'classical' music up to that time and unequalled since: the original Decca recording sold in sufficient quantities in the United States to enter the Billboard best-selling pop album charts, and a song from Britten's 'The Little Sweep' was arranged as a pop single, the *Daily Mirror* headlining the story 'Mr Britten writes a popera'.

With the chief music critic of *The Times*, William Mann, waxing lyrically over the Beatles and the Moody Blues at a time when the newspaper was the *ne plus ultra* of the Establishment, it was clear that demarcation lines between serious art music and music of ostensibly popular intent were being eroded. A younger composer, Richard Rodney Bennett, had already exemplified a degree of cross-musical-culture that was extraordinary in its range and depth: a fine composer for the opera house (five full-scale operas), concert hall (five concertos and three symphonies), film, television and pop music, pianist of all

styles, jazz singer and performer, an exhibited collage artist, he lived for the last 33 years of his life in New York, where his Sonata for Cello and Piano was composed in 1991 for performance by Alexander Baillie, who recalled:

“The work was written for me. I was in touch with the composer when we learned that the piece was to be commissioned by the Harrogate Festival. He had not heard my playing and I suggested he might like to listen in to a broadcast of the Dutilleux Concerto with me as soloist. He contacted me to tell me how much he loved the music and especially the sound of the cello at very high altitude with the orchestra very soft and far below. When he first showed me the new Sonata he waited till I had made my first acquaintance with it then asked me knowingly “Well?” – as though I might know to what it was he was hinting. He was assuming I had already noticed an exquisite phrase paying homage directly to a memorable moment in the Dutilleux. It is not a direct quote. It is more like one great composer tapping into the same elixir which has nourished another.

The Sonata is a rarity – it’s a fantastic piece. I wish I could adequately convey how refreshing it is to encounter a thoroughly unself-conscious piece of music, cheekily evading being pigeon-holed as any genre in particular, successful ‘absolute music’ while being a veritable Pandora’s box of wit, sarcasm, joy, elation, lyricism, impressionist rapture, pagan ritual or simple fun.

The composer starts from the riddle of a disarmingly plain tune which gives away no hint of the multitude of ideas born of it during the course of the four movements. It is impossible to pin down Richard Rodney Bennett’s

inexhaustible source. The worlds of jazz improvisation, the rich exotic flavour of polytonality, his very personal gift for cabaret song can be heard in this spontaneous combustion. Wisps and barbs of melody and rhythm, colliding, challenging, dancing, mocking, chase each other through a timeless vaudeville of theatre and dreaming. Every last drop of the listener’s attention and imagination has been wrung out of that simple melody. But if this degree of operatic melodrama should seem to prevail then follow the underlying seriousness of tightly-wrought musical arguments which inevitably lead back home to a cyclic conclusion and earn the work’s title of Sonata.

I am deeply honoured to have been associated with Richard Rodney Bennett and the creation of this as yet all too little known and treasured Cello Sonata.’

During the 1960s Richard Rodney Bennett was no follower of fashion; in 1959 he had written a minor pop hit ‘Lonely man in a lonely room’ from the film *Blind Date* starring Hardy Kruger. Indeed, one might cite his career as the exemplar of taking pop music seriously as is followed by some composers today, including Joe Cutler, whose short piece for cello and piano ‘2016 was a sad year for pop music’ was also written for the artists on this CD.

The composer explains: ‘*2016 was a sad year for pop music* was written in the autumn of 2016, at the request of Sandy and John, and is dedicated to them. It’s a short piece, less than five minutes, and draws upon material from three great artists who very sadly passed away in 2016. Onwards from seeing the video of *Ashes to Ashes* on Top of the Pops when I was about 10, the songs of David Bowie and Prince were constant presences in the listening of my childhood,

and I've always admired how lyrics and music entwine and coalesce in the songs of Leonard Cohen.

In this small homage, the quiet block-like chords that form the piece's introduction are loosely taken from Prince's *1999*. Then, in the main body of the piece, the 'verses' use the chord sequence of Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne* whilst the harmonic material of the 'choruses' come from David Bowie's *Space Oddity*. Throughout, the cello line floats over these harmonies with free-flowing melodic material.'

Half-a-century and more after the social and aesthetic revolutions of the 1960s, the reactionary nature of some later music has also produced several notable examples, such as drew Arnold Whittall's comment on Sir James MacMillan's work as exhibiting a 'determination to give ethical and religious topics special prominence.' It is perhaps those aspects of MacMillan's work which are better-known, but not all of his output – nor each of his significant contributions to the cello repertoire – has such acknowledged inspiration, as we may discern in the composer's note for his Second Cello Sonata, where extra-musical connotations have no place:

'The second Sonata is written in one movement, in a seven sectioned palindromic arch. The first three sections present different materials and culminate in a mysterious central section after which the materials go into reverse and retreat back to the opening idea through sections 5, 6 and 7. The work opens with the cello on a high trill under which the piano presents a series of fragmented chords, clusters and single tolling tones. Section two

is given over to a rollicking dance-like theme on unaccompanied solo cello, before being joined by delicate, glistening, scurrying material on piano. Section 3 is based on a melody of 50 notes of different durations on the cello, accompanied by some of the previous glistening material – but the piano now introduces its own rhythmic dance fragments. The middle section brings back the opening fragmented material on the piano but now the cello takes up the piano dance music on ethereal high harmonics.

'The retrograde, from section five to the end, is not a literal one, but rather the roles of the two instruments are swapped. The dance music ideas previously played by one instrument are given to the other, the long spaced out durations on the cello are given to the piano, and the piano's earlier glistening and scurrying are transformed to the cello. In the final section we hear the cello sustain double-stopped octaves while the piano's isolated chords from the opening go into a literal retrograde. The work ends with an abrupt, aggressive codetta on low piano.'

As a main source of Britten's inspiration came from the East Anglian coast abutting the North Sea, so MacMillan has drawn much of his inspiration from his native Scotland, his Catholic faith and his political beliefs. Yet it is interesting to note that a number of English-born composers have travelled north to settle and make their homes in Scotland – Peter Maxwell Davies, Ronald Stevenson and Kenneth Leighton among them, although it is not always possible to discern a specifically Scottish change of musical language for these émigrés. Nonetheless, even in Leighton's very early (yet wholly individual) *Elegy* – the one surviving movement from a tripartite Sonata with piano (the

outer movements were withdrawn after just one performance) – there is a curious Scottish connection: following Leighton’s early death at the age of 58, the *Elegy* inspired his colleague at the University of Edinburgh, the composer Edward Harper, to arrange a version with orchestral accompaniment.

Leighton’s *Elegy*, is – like Bridge’s similarly-entitled work – notable for its long-breathed melodic line, one which has not-so-distant affinities with the folk-like nature of our opening work by EJ Moeran, with Leighton’s early ‘Englishness’ of lyrical expression placing his musical nationality beyond dispute.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2017



Alexander Baillie

Described once as “Britain’s best kept secret” Alexander Baillie has become internationally recognised as one of the finest cellists of his generation. He began playing the cello aged twelve inspired by the late Jacqueline du Pré having seen Christopher Nupen’s BBC documentary about her. He studied at London’s Royal College of Music with Joan Dickson and Anna Shuttleworth and then won a Sir James Caird scholarship to continue studies in the class of André Navarra in Vienna. He later studied with William Pleeth, Fournier and Rostropovich and with Jacqueline du Pré herself.

Since then his career has taken him all over the world. He has appeared with many British and European orchestras and has worked with Sir Simon Rattle, Sir John Eliot Gardiner and appears regularly as soloist in concertos, recitals and festivals. He has given notable first performances at the BBC “Proms” of works such as “Sieben Liebeslieder” by Hans Werner Henze, Takemitsu’s “Orion and Phaëdes” and Colin Matthews’ First Cello Concerto, which is dedicated to him. Recordings include the Tippett



Triple Concerto with the composer conducting and the Shostakovich First Concerto with Benjamin Zander and the Boston Philharmonic. His version of the Britten Cello Suites achieved the highest acclaim in the New York press.

He features in Jan Harlan’s film “Dvorak...who?” about the motivation for young people falling in love with classical music. He is Professor of Cello at the University of Bremen Hochschule für Künste, founder member of “Gathering of the Clans” Cello School and Honorary Doctor of Music at Hertfordshire University. His own cello festival at Carteret, Normandy recently celebrated its tenth year.

John Thwaites



Professor John Thwaites is best known for his collaborative work with strings and as a founder member of the Primrose Piano Quartet. The Primrose have commissioned and recorded important new work by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Anthony Payne, Sally Beamish, Steve Goss and John Casken, and have recorded the earlier twentieth century repertoire for Meridian, including a Five Star Choice for *Classic FM Magazine* of Bridge and Howells. They have an annual Festival at West Meon.

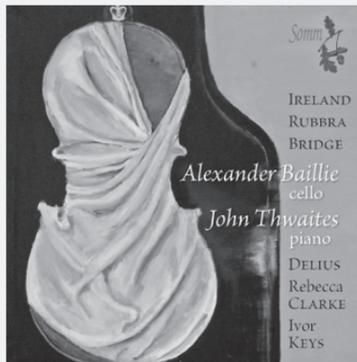
He has worked over decades with cellists Alexander Baillie and Johannes Goritzki, and appeared with Pierre Doumenge, Louise Hopkins, Natalie Clein, Alexander Ivashkin, David Cohen, Oleg Kogan, Li Wei and others. A string of recordings with Alexander Baillie for the SOMM label include a Five Star Chamber Music Choice of the Month for *BBC Music Magazine*. He has played quintets with the Martinu, Maggini, Dante (their recording of the Lyapunov Piano Sextet in B flat minor for the Dutton label was also a BBC Chamber Music Choice of the Month), Schidlöf, Emperor and Aurea String Quartets. Theatrical collaborations have included work with Simon Callow, Tony Britton and Tim Piggott-Smith, and he has also performed with Michael Collins, Thomas Riebl, Ian Bostridge, Toby Spence and Louise Winter.

His research focus is on Brahms (symbolism and allusion in the chamber music, and historically informed performance practice) and British Chamber Music.

He has appeared in the major British and many International Festivals, the major London concert halls, and on British and other radio and television channels, including BBC Radio Three Lunchtime broadcasts and appearances for “In Tune”.

John’s teaching career includes posts at Christ’s Hospital, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Purcell School. He is Course Director of the Cadenza International Summer Music School, a piano and strings festival resident at the Purcell School, and Head of Keyboard Studies at Birmingham Conservatoire, where he has directed major Festivals of Ireland, Delius, Bax, Skryabin and Brahms as well as directing a celebrity-studded All Night Gala at Birmingham Town Hall.

Also available on SOMM Recordings:



Twentieth-Century British Sonatas for Cello and Piano

Alexander Baillie *cello*
John Thwaites *piano*

SOMMCD251-2

This 2 CD release boasts the well-loved Cello Sonatas of Bridge, Delius, Ireland and Rubbra as well as two world premieres, the Cello Sonatas by Rebecca Clarke (1919) and Ivor Keys (1960).

Clarke was Stanford's first female pupil at RCM and became a professional violist, having taken lessons with Lionel Tertis. Listening to her Viola (or Cello) Sonata, described as "sensuous, Bacchanalian and intoxicating and languid" by turns, reminds us that she felt closest to the music of both Debussy and Ravel.



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