

THE KING'S ALCHEMIST: BRITISH STRING TRIOS

Finzi | Wood | Beamish | Moeran

**EBLANA
STRING
TRIO**



THE KING'S ALCHEMIST: BRITISH STRING TRIOS

Finzi | Wood | Beamish | Moeran

GERALD FINZI (1901–1956)

Prelude and Fugue for string trio,

Op. 24 8:45

1. Prelude: Lento 3:40
2. Fugue: Poco più mosso,
ma non troppo 5:05

HUGH WOOD (b. 1932)

3. Ithaka, Op. 61* 9:40

SALLY BEAMISH (b. 1956)

The King's Alchemist* 10:45

4. I. Cantus 2:51
5. II. Aquam Vitae 2:08
6. III. Pavane 3:08
7. IV. Avis Hominis 2:38

**ERNEST JOHN MOERAN
(1894–1950)**

String Trio in G major, R.59 21:07

8. I. Allegretto gioiale 8:26
9. II. Adagio 4:38
10. III. Molto vivace – Lento sostenuto 3:02
11. IV. Andante grazioso – Presto 5:01

Total time: 50:17

*world premiere recording

The sheer wealth of string trio repertoire by British composers made programming this album a real challenge! In the end, we chose to record four works that we love, and that we feel both complement and illuminate each other. Although diverse in style and substance, the four works are bound together by the common strands of vivid storytelling and a shared musical language.

The works by Finzi and Moeran are very close to our hearts, having been with us since the very beginning of our journey as a trio. We're also excited to have made the world premiere recordings of two incredible works by Sally Beamish and Hugh Wood.

We are indebted to Mark Hartt-Palmer at Willowhayne Records and City Music Foundation, without whom this album would not have been possible. We are grateful to the Maria Björnson Memorial Fund and Finzi Friends for their grants to CMF for this recording. Huge thanks also go to Oscar Torres, Sally Beamish and Hugh Wood.

EBLANA STRING TRIO

Jonathan Martindale VIOLIN | Lucy Nolan VIOLA | Peggy Nolan CELLO

GERALD FINZI: Prelude and Fugue for string trio, Op. 24

Gerald Finzi's love of Bach's music was doubtless nurtured when he was a pupil of Edward Bairstow at York Minster between 1917 and 1922; his enthusiasm is also reflected in the concerts he went to after moving to London in 1926. Bach's influence indeed permeates Finzi's music, as exemplified by the piano accompaniments of his songs, the *Grand Fantasia and Toccata*, and *Farewell to Arms*, which is cast as a Bachian recitative and aria.

The *Prelude and Fugue* is a further example, composed in 1938, and conceived as a tribute to the renowned teacher R.O. Morris with whom Finzi studied 16th century counterpoint in 1925. Dedicated to Morris, it was first performed in Birmingham, on 13th May 1941, at Queen's College Chambers, by leading string players of the day - Bretha Graham, Vincent Groves, and Lillian Warmington. At its London premiere, the same year on 11 September, it was played by the Philharmonic String Trio in a National Gallery lunchtime concert.

The Prelude, played with muted strings, comprises two ideas, the first, Finzi wrote in his analysis of the work, is 'of a tenuous nature', the second 'more clearly defined in rhythm.' For the fugue, which follows without a break, the instruments are unmuted. The viola introduces the Fugue subject, which is derived from the Prelude's second idea, and continues immediately with the countersubject. In the middle section, 'fragments of preceding material are developed', as well as being combined with entries of the subject as the music passes through different keys, and 'becomes more lyrical in mood'. A 'pulsating figure leads up to a climax', with the fugue subject stated affirmatively in octaves fortissimo. In the brief coda, the beginning of the Prelude reappears 'in a mood fitting it to be the climax of the whole work.' Despite its formal Bachian structure, the character of its themes ensures it is quintessentially Finzi through and through.

© 2021, Andrew Burn

HUGH WOOD: Ithaka, Op.61

Cavafy's poem, Ithaka, is a meditation on Ulysses' homeward voyage. It promises him adventures and discoveries, but also dangers; the Laistrygonians, the Cyclops, and the sea god Poseidon himself. These can be overcome by keeping his spirits high – for perhaps they only exist in his own soul. Sensual delights and intellectual feasts also wait for him on the way. But the journey must not be hurried: better to be old and full of experience when it is concluded.

I've always loved and learnt from this poem; and once read it at a friend's funeral. I suppose this piece is a sort of mini-symphonic poem – it is at least programme music. The invocation of Ithaka itself (and of its differently accented name in Greek – Itháki) occurs early on, and returns at intervals as the island draws nearer. The long journey there is represented by two fugal expositions. The first one grows towards an aggressive confrontation with the Laistrygonians. Ithaka is heard, still far off. The second fugal passage then gives way to two lyrical sections, the later one featuring a viola solo. Rhetorical fanfares now show Ithaka to be in full view, and we reach the climax of the piece. After arrival, the music is at last calmly lyrical, with solos for the violin and eventually the cello.

But the aftermath, with its last invocation of Ithaka (Itháki) is tragic in tone. Cavafy's conclusion – and the whole point of the poem – is best expressed in his own words:

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

© 2016, Hugh Wood

SALLY BEAMISH: The King's Alchemist

In 2013 I wrote a piece for soprano Shuna Scott Sendall and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, to commemorate the tragic Battle of Flodden Field in 1513. The subject was dark, and the resulting music an outcry against the devastation of war. While researching the work, I visited Stirling Castle, the home of James IV. James led the Scottish army to disaster, and was the last British monarch to die on the battlefield. At the castle, I gained a vivid picture of the young king – who was highly cultured, with a passionate commitment to his country. He also, unfortunately, had a young man's sense of invincibility.

The court of King James IV was home to some extraordinary individuals, including the brilliant composer Robert Carver; but none so bizarre as John Damian, a European alchemist who charmed the King with promises of creating gold from base metals. Damian, known to many in the court as the 'French leech', was not only given the post of Abbot of Tongland, Galloway, he also had his experiments, along with copious amounts of 'aqua vitae', supposedly for these experiments, financed by the King. John also took a hand in court entertainments, and organised the dances for New Year and weddings.

In 1507, possibly to distract the King's attention from his failed attempts at alchemy, Damian tried to fly to France from the battlements of Stirling Castle, and landed in the midden (rubbish tip) below, fortunately only breaking his thigh. He blamed his failure on the fact that he had not been granted the eagles' feathers he ordered, but instead too many hens' feathers, which were attracted to the ground rather than to the sky. There are also accounts of the 'flying abbot' being attacked by birds. John Damian is still recorded at court a few months before the Battle of Flodden.

I was enchanted by this colourful figure, and the trio reflects some aspects of his story. It takes the form of four variations on the French folksong *L'homme armé* – a theme used by Carver in one of his masses; and perhaps appropriate to the court of the high-living James IV, who was fond of holding shooting competitions in the beautiful Great Hall of Stirling Castle.

In the first movement, *Cantus*, the theme is stated as sustained harmonics. The second, *Aqua Vitae*, is an unstable scherzo. There follows a *Pavana* – a courtly dance which originated in Italy. Lastly, after a brief reference to the harmonics of the opening, the fourth movement, *Avis Hominis* ('Bird Man') builds from overlapping ostinati into a counterpoint made from imagined bird calls and the flapping of wings. The piece ends with an unresolved ascent into the stratosphere.

The King's Alchemist was commissioned by Britten Sinfonia and Wigmore Hall, with funding from Arts Council England. The first performance was given by Jacqueline Shave, Clare Finimore and Caroline Dearnley, at Wigmore Hall, London, on 11th December 2013. The commission was made possible by the generous donations of 21 people as part of Britten Sinfonia's Musically Gifted campaign.

© 2016, Sally Beamish

ERNEST JOHN MOERAN: String Trio in G major, R.59

Written in 1931 and dedicated to the famous Pasquier Trio, **Moeran's** String Trio is deservedly counted amongst his finest works. It is no surprise that the piece should have such an instant appeal for audiences, as it dates from a particularly fertile period in Moeran's career that produced not only the *String Trio*, but also the masterly *Sonata for Two Violins* (1930). Moeran's considerable achievements at this time can be attributed to a reinvention of his compositional style. This seems to have resulted from an intense feeling of dissatisfaction with his compositions up to this point.

One clear feature of this new style seems to have been a desire to write more polyphonically, allowing for greater independence of the individual parts and a clearer musical texture. Significantly, Moeran had begun to compose away from the keyboard at this time, a method that most likely began during his lengthy recovery from a motorcycling accident in September 1929. He wrote to his friend Peter Warlock in November 1930:

'I have started a string trio and if I can keep it up I hope the purgative effect may prove permanently salutary... It is an excellent discipline in trying to break away from the mush of Delius-like chords... perhaps some good has come of being abed and unable to keep running to the keyboard for every bar.'

Moeran's new polyphonic approach can be clearly heard throughout the trio's ebullient first movement, with the three parts often moving independently of each other. This lyrical movement is also striking in its use of the 7/8 (seven-in-a-bar) meter that sets up a lilting combination of duple and triple time. A prominent feature of the movement, this combination provides the rhythmic basis for much of the musical material, none

more so than in the dissonant, brooding central section. Built upon a cello ostinato marked *minaccioso* (menacing), here the music builds to a shattering climax with disturbing insistence.

Just one month after he had written to Warlock about the trio, Moeran would hear the devastating news of his great friend's death, plunging him into a deep despair. It is not difficult to imagine that such intense grief may have found an emotional outlet in the deeply sorrowful music of the slow movement. Here we hear the three instruments really singing as one for the first time, their lamenting phrases unfolding in a seemingly unbroken line. The bleak atmosphere of the movement is truly unrelenting, with limited consolation offered by the modal final cadence.

The third movement begins with a bustling viola theme reminiscent of an Irish jig. The other instruments then take turns to join in and the music begins to develop with a relentless, almost bitter intensity. Later on, feverish semiquavers give rise to a climactic passage of resounding chords for all three instruments. Eventually the music begins to wind down and the cello whispers the theme of the last movement, beginning an inspired bridge passage in the key of E minor.

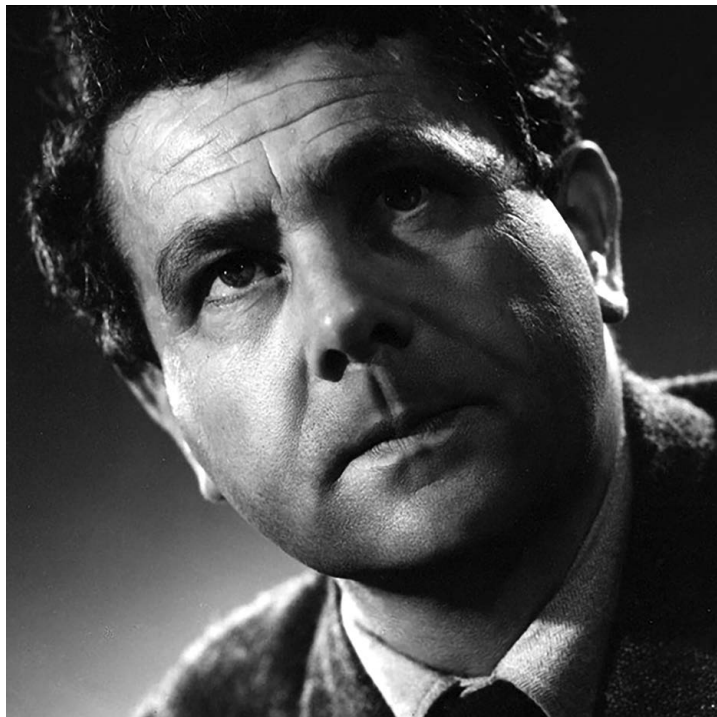
The final movement then begins with the violin taking up the theme, this time in the 'home' key of G major. The ardent lyricism of this music strongly recalls the pastoral atmosphere of the first movement, although now tinged with a sense of wistful nostalgia. It is just when this beautiful music is beginning to wind down that the viola suddenly strikes up an Irish reel, taking flight in a whirlwind of semiquavers. The other instruments join in and the music hurtles onward with great abandon and excitement before an ecstatic final cadence brings the movement to a satisfying close.

GERALD FINZI:

Gerald Finzi holds a unique place in twentieth century music. His music resonates with that of those influenced by folk song though this was not a key element in his musical language. He certainly moved in musical 'circles' in which Vaughan Williams was a significant figure but in no sense can he be seen as a 'disciple' musically. He had close musical friendships with figures such as Howard Ferguson, Herbert Howells and Edmund Rubbra and was instrumental in sustaining musical interest in Ivor Gurney. He also supported younger composers and performers including Kenneth Leighton and Julian Bream.

Born in 1901 and brought up largely in Harrogate, Finzi experienced the ravages of the First World War: his first teacher Ernest Farrar died in the conflict. Finzi developed musically after moving to London, where he studied with R.O. Morris, during the uncertain times of the 1920s and '30s. He found peace personally and musically at Church Farm in the village of Ashmansworth, on the Berkshire/Hampshire border. Here, with his wife Joy, an artist, and later his sons, Christopher and Nigel, Finzi settled in 1939 and his musical talents found space to develop into a mature style, sadly cut short by his early death in 1956. At Church Farm, Finzi pursued his musical, literary and horticultural interests, stimulated by many and diverse visitors from across all creative spheres.

An important hallmark of Finzi's musical life was his integrity. He was no follower of fashion but rather he responded individually to music he came across. Likewise, his music provokes a personal private response rather than large-scale adulation. All Finzi's music is characterized by an emphasis on melody which is never unadventurous or derivative and which inhabits a harmonic world which is tonal but idiosyncratic. In a period which was a maelstrom of social change and global conflict, both of which tore at the previously accepted norms of musical language, Finzi found an individual voice which continues to provoke interest and admiration today



HUGH WOOD:

Born in Lancashire in 1932, **Hugh Wood** initially studied history in Oxford, before taking up his musical studies with Anthony Milner, Iain Hamilton and Mátyás Seiber. He subsequently held various music teaching posts throughout his career: at Morley College, the Royal Academy of Music, as well as at Glasgow, Liverpool and Cambridge Universities. A prolific broadcaster and writer, Hugh Wood's collected writings *Staking out the Territory* was published in 2008.

As a composer, Wood has written a number of works for chamber ensemble, including an early string quartet (premiered at the Cheltenham Festival in 1959) followed by a further five string quartets throughout his career.

Wood's orchestral output began with his symphonic cantata *Scenes from Comus* (1962-1965); concertos for piano, violin and cello; a symphony; and Variations which was performed at the *Last Night of the Proms* in 1998. The *Serenade and Elegy* for string orchestra and string quartet was written in memory of his daughter and premiered in 1999. His work, *An Epithalamion, Or Marriage Song*, was premiered at the BBC Proms in 2015 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus under the baton of Sir Andrew Davis.

Wood has written many songs to poems by Laurie Lee, Robert Graves, Ted Hughes, Pablo Neruda, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence. He won a British Composers Award in 2006 for *Wild Cyclamen*, commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society and the BBC for Andrew Kennedy.

The music of Hugh Wood is published exclusively by Chester Music Ltd.



SALLY BEAMISH:

Sally Beamish was born in London. She studied viola at the RNCM with Patrick Ireland, and in Detmold with Bruno Giuranna, and was a founder member of the Raphael Ensemble. She also performed regularly with the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields and the London Sinfonietta, and was principal viola in the London Mozart Players and Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

She moved from London to Scotland in 1990 to develop her career as a composer. Her music embraces many influences, particularly jazz and Scottish traditional music. She has recently moved to Brighton, and is married to writer Peter Thomson. She still performs regularly as violist, pianist and narrator, and as a presenter and contributor on TV and radio.

Since 1999 her music has been championed by the BIS label, who have recorded much of her work. In February 2012, Beamish was BBC Radio 3 *Composer of the Week*, and this was repeated in 2015.

Her ballet *The Tempest* for Birmingham Royal Ballet and Houston Ballet, with choreographer David Bintley, was premiered in October 2016 at Birmingham Hippodrome and Sadler's Wells, London, with the US premiere by Houston Ballet in May 2017. Her second ballet, *The Little Mermaid* (choreographer David Nixon), was premiered in September 2017 by Northern Ballet, and toured the UK with 75 performances.

In 2018 she was featured composer at the Ryedale and Trondheim festivals, performing with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment as narrator, and with the Elias and Chilingirian Quartets on viola, as well as several appearances as pianist. She is now composer-in-residence with the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, for which she has



written a string octet, *Partita*, and an orchestral piece, *Hover*, which was featured at their 60th anniversary gala concert at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall in November 2019.

The *Judas Passion*, with libretto by David Harsent, was jointly commissioned by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Baroque, and was performed in London and San Francisco in 2018, conducted by Nicholas McGegan, with soloists Mary Bevan, Brenden Gunnell and Roderick Williams.

Sally Beamish is the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow, a Creative Scotland Award, and a Paul Hamlyn Award, and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In 2018 she was awarded the Inspiration Award at the British Composer Awards, in recognition of lifetime achievement.

Current projects include a concerto for violinist Janine Jansen and clarinettist Martin Fröst, commissioned by the Concertgebouw and Swedish Radio Orchestra, with the London Symphony Orchestra. Her music is published by Edition Peters and by Norsk Musikforlag. She plays on a viola made by her daughter, Stephanie Irvine.

In 2006 the Scottish National Portrait Gallery purchased a portrait of Sally for their permanent collection. The screenprint was made by printmaker-artist Shelagh Atkinson (www.shelaghatkinson.co.uk).

ERNEST JOHN MOERAN:

Born in 1894 into an Anglo-Irish family, **Ernest John Moeran** received his early education at Uppingham School before going on to the Royal College of Music. He studied for one year with Charles Villiers Stanford before the First World War intervened. While serving on the Western Front, Moeran was badly wounded when a piece of shrapnel became lodged in his brain. This was a horrific injury and a deeply affecting experience that may have contributed towards the eccentric behaviour and alcoholism of his later life.

Following the war, Moeran resumed his studies at the Royal College of Music, this time with John Ireland, who along with Frederick Delius and Peter Warlock would remain a strong influence on his work in years to come. By this period Moeran had also begun to delve into his Irish heritage, his interest piqued whilst posted in Boyle, County Roscommon towards the end of the war. Alongside the folk song and landscape of his native Norfolk, this Irish heritage would become a strong influence upon his work and personal life throughout his career.

Moeran was an enthusiastic song composer and also wrote a large number of chamber works. These include two string quartets and the string trio heard on this disc, as well as sonatas for cello and violin. The second half of his life would see an increasing interest in larger-scale works with his *Symphony in G minor* (1934-7) and *Cello Concerto* (1945) being particularly successful.

In many ways Moeran's music can be seen as typical of a British composer writing in the first half of the twentieth century. However, he is often unafraid to imbue his music with a darker, almost astringent hue when expression demands. This distinctive characteristic is certainly responsible for some of the most memorable and affecting moments in his work.

Towards the end of his life, Moeran would begin to spend more and more time in Ireland, living in a cottage near Kenmare, County Kerry. He would eventually die there in 1950 and is buried in the churchyard.



EBLANA STRING TRIO

Jonathan Martindale **violin** | Lucy Nolan **viola** | Peggy Nolan **cello**

Since its formation in 2006, the **Eblana String Trio** has given countless performances throughout the UK and beyond, winning praise from audiences and critics alike for their powerful interpretations of this often-neglected repertoire.

Recent concert highlights include Wigmore Hall, St John's Smith Square, and the Purcell Room, as well as the Bridgewater Hall and Symphony Hall Birmingham. The trio has also made appearances at major festivals such as Salisbury, Lake District Summer Music, Stratford-Upon-Avon and Musikfest Goslar. Their many performances at the annual RNCM Chamber Music Festivals include a critically acclaimed performance of the Schoenberg String Trio – "...the late, mercurial, if elliptical, String Trio, a sort of 12-tone divertimento, was brilliantly undertaken by the Eblana String Trio." Paul Driver – Sunday Times. The trio has also been invited to play on BBC Radio 3 on several occasions.

City Music Foundation Artists, the trio are passionate about championing new repertoire and have worked closely with many of the leading British composers on their works. These include David Matthews, Hugh Wood, Robin Holloway and James Francis Brown. They have also given the world premieres of works written for them by Joel Rust, Grace-Evangeline Mason and Rhiannon Randle.

In addition to their studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, the trio attended the International Musicians' Seminar in Prussia Cove, as well as sessions of the European Chamber Music Academy. From 2013 until 2015 they held a Junior Fellowship in chamber music at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and now continue their association as visiting tutors in Chamber Music.





Lucy Nolan – viola, Jonathan Martindale – violin, and Peggy Nolan – cello



City Music Foundation is proud to have funded production of this album with support from the Maria Björnson Memorial Fund and Finzi Friends.

City Music Foundation (CMF) is a UK charity based in the City of London. CMF's mission is to turn exceptional musical talent into professional success by equipping outstanding musicians with the tools, skills, experience, and networks they need to build and sustain rewarding careers. We believe that by investing in these talented musicians early in their professional careers we can not only secure their employment, but help to ensure the future of quality music in the UK and beyond. To find out more or to apply, please go to our website.

“The City Music Foundation's unique blend of artistic opportunity and professional mentoring has been invaluable to us in taking our career to the next level.”

Eblana Trio (2017 CMF Artists)

Recorded at 24-bit 192KHz
Recorded in the Recital Hall, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, UK
on 24th–26th April 2019
Design: Hannah Whale, Fruition Creative Concepts
Recording Engineering: Oscar Torres
Recording Editing: Oscar Torres & Mark Hartt-Palmer
Recording Production: Mark Hartt-Palmer
© & © 2021, Willowhayne Records Ltd, Funtley, Hampshire

<https://willowhaynerecords.com>

All rights of the manufacturer and of the owner of the recorded work reserved.
Unauthorised hiring, lending, public performance, broadcast and copying
of this recording prohibited. MCPS. Manufactured by Golding Replications, UK.