

Fenella Humphreys & Nicola Eimer with Leah Broad

Start time: 4pm

Approximate end time: 6pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Ethel Smyth 'Allegro moderato' from Violin Sonata

Doreen Carwithen 'Allegro con moto' and 'Vivace' from Violin Sonata

Rebecca Clarke *Midsummer Moon*

Rebecca Clarke Sonata Movement in G major

Dorothy Howell *The Moorings*

'Andante' from Violin Sonata

Ethel Smyth 'Finale' from Violin Sonata

Today's concert shines a light on four remarkable female composers who overcame considerable odds – and social pressure – to make their mark in a man's world. Presenting their music is a trio of equally remarkable women: Fenella Humphreys, Nicola Eimer and Leah Broad.

Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) 'Allegro moderato' and 'Finale' from Violin Sonata, Op 7

As Ethel Smyth tells it in her (many) memoirs, she had to fight tooth and nail to study at Leipzig Conservatory. Coming from the upper middle-class, her father was strongly opposed to her having any kind of career, and composition was considered especially improper for women to pursue. Ultimately Smyth did get her way – after refusing to eat, leave her room or participate in any family activities. In Leipzig she met many figures who would shape her music and her career, chief among them Brahms, Clara Schumann, Grieg and Tchaikovsky, who thought she 'gave promise in the future of a serious and talented career'.

Smyth's Violin Sonata dates from 1887 and was dedicated to Felix Mendelssohn's daughter, Lili, who was one of Smyth's closest friends alongside the musician Elisabeth von Herzogenberg. Much influenced by Brahms, it is a serious and profound work, full of intense motivic development and rich harmonic colour.

Doreen Carwithen (1922–2003) 'Allegro con moto' and 'Vivace' from Violin Sonata

Doreen Carwithen's Violin Sonata did not have the most auspicious of starts. When the BBC Music Panel considered it for broadcast in 1952, they rejected it as 'poverty-stricken', one reader lamenting condescendingly that 'it is rather sad to observe that this young composer ... is just not good enough'. It fell into obscurity in the later 20th century, but since being recorded has fared rather better – when Fenella Humphreys and Nathan Williamson recorded the piece in 2017, *BBC Music Magazine's* review thought it revealed a 'striking creative personality'.

Carwithen had a real flair for the dramatic. The opening of the tumultuous first movement is remarkably restrained but blossoms into passionate climaxes, with the violin soaring above the piano's chords, eventually concluding serenely. The second-movement 'Vivace' is a virtuoso showcase for both players. It is driven by a ferocious repeated-note motif, mellowing into a melodic central section that demands great expressivity from the string player. Carwithen returns to the first theme to propel the movement to its close, concluding with a playful flourish.

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Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979) *Midsummer Moon*; Sonata Movement in G major

Although the British-American Rebecca Clarke was best-known as a viola player, she started out playing the violin. Chamber music was her natural home; she grew up playing it with her family, and later toured Britain, Europe, America and Asia as a much sought-after chamber musician. It's obvious from her compositions that she knows the violin intimately. She writes idiomatically, and always give the performer a chance to shine.

The Sonata Movement is one of her early works, written when she was studying with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music in London. Even so, it bears many of Clarke's hallmarks – such as a bold opening passage for the soloist – if not the rhythmic and harmonic innovation that characterises much of her mature music, such as *Midsummer Moon*. This was written in 1924, by which point Clarke was an established composer and performer with multiple high-profile successes behind her. It is a much more modernist piece than the sonata, and is dedicated to the violinist Adila Fachiri, who both commissioned and premiered the work.

Dorothy Howell (1898–1982) *The Moorings*; 'Andante' from Violin Sonata

Dorothy Howell wrote extensively for the violin, being both a violinist and pianist herself (indeed, alongside her composition she had a burgeoning career as both a concert pianist and piano teacher). Her style is extremely evocative, and many of her instrumental works have illustrative titles, such as *The Moorings* (1924). Here, she conjures up the water in calm mood, the rocking piano part perhaps suggesting the lapping of ripples against the tethered boats.

The Violin Sonata is a much later work, penned at a difficult time in Howell's life. Composition was interrupted by the Second World War – and by the deaths of Howell's mother, with whom she was extremely close, and her best friend Elsie Owen, who was murdered by her husband in 1941. Owen was a violinist, and when Howell finally completed her sonata in the late 1940s, she dedicated the score to her. The 'Andante' is one of Howell's most heartfelt movements, shifting between hope and wistfulness before closing in a mood of profound melancholy: perhaps it was in some ways an elegy for Owen.

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Performers

Fenella Humphreys violin

Nicola Eimer piano

Leah Broad narrator

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