

Total performance time: approximately 50 minutes, with no interval

Sphinx Virtuosi

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Alex Gonzalez leader

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Simple Symphony, Op.4 (1934):

i. Boisterous Bourrée

3'

Philip Herbert (b.1960)

Elegy: In memoriam Stephen Lawrence (1999)

9'

Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (1932–2002)

Sinfonietta No.2 'Generations' (1996):

Finale

6'

Carlos Simon (b.1986)

Between Worlds (2019)

4'

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

Phantasy Quintet (1912):

8'

iii. Alla Sarabanda: Lento

iv. Burlesca: Allegro moderato

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Violin Sonata No.9 in A, Op.47 'Kreutzer' (1803):

Finale: Presto

10'

Njioma Grevious violin

In an interview of 1957, **Benjamin Britten** revealed: 'I've got a list somewhere which says in great detail all the works I wrote until about the age of 13, when I left school, and it included something like 12 piano sonatas, four or five string quartets, dozens of songs, two enormous symphonies, a tone poem called *Chaos and Cosmos*, etc, etc.' He went on to explain that he'd kept them all and later recycled some of those early ideas: 'Oh, they're sitting in a cupboard. Actually there are some quite nice little tunes – very derivative of course as you might imagine, and a few years later I arranged some of these tunes into a little work for strings which I called *A Simple Symphony*'.

Britten wrote the *Simple Symphony* between 1933 and 1934, using eight of those childhood themes – two per movement. The work begins with a 'Boisterous Bourrée' based on the second movement of his Piano Suite No.1 and his setting of Tennyson's poem *The Foresters*, called *A Country Dance ('Now the King is home again')*. Britten was still only 20 when he completed the piece.

It is a tragic waste that Stephen Lawrence never reached the same age. Lawrence was murdered in Eltham in southeast London at the age of 18, in 1993, and the case continues to highlight issues of racism within communities and institutionalised racism within the police. **Philip Herbert's** *Elegy: in memoriam Stephen Lawrence* cuts through the brutality of the attack to the humanity and compassion of Lawrence and his family. Herbert is a musical polymath who combines composition with prominent roles in education, writing and research.

Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson was an African-American composer named after the British conductor and composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912). Raised and educated in New York before becoming a faculty member of Brooklyn College, Perkinson wrote concert works, film scores, and arrangements for Marvin Gaye among many others, blending romanticism and neoclassical counterpoint with the blues, spirituals and folk music. Perkinson wrote his Sinfonietta No.1 in 1953; his Second Sinfonietta, 'Generations', followed much later, in 1996, its title referring to the work's dedications to the women in Perkinson's family and to his grandson. We hear the jazzy finale, full of syncopated 'pizzicato' (plucked) strings and slapped basses.

Carlos Simon, from Atlanta, Georgia, is a Grammy-nominated composer and activist 'with an ear for social justice' (NPR Music). Drawing on diverse influences including gospel, jazz and romanticism, Simon has, like Herbert, sought to highlight issues of injustice and shine a spotlight on marginalised figures. For the bluesy, virtuoso *Between Worlds*, Simon was inspired by Bill Traylor, who was born a slave in Alabama in 1853 and died in 1949 – during which time he saw radical political and cultural changes in the United States. Traylor was a self-taught visual artist whose works reflect contrasting worlds: Black and white, old and new, rural and urban, often expressing his bid for self-definition in a segregated, dehumanising society via references to folklore, race and religion. Simon wrote his piece as a response to the

Smithsonian exhibition and book *Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor*, writing that he conceived the work as 'a musical study; hopefully showing Traylor's life between disparate worlds'.

Ralph Vaughan Williams' Phantasy Quintet was commissioned by Walter Willson Cobbett, a businessman and amateur musician from southeast London who devoted much of his energy to writing about and championing chamber music and early music. He wrote the comprehensive *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, and said of discovering the genre that 'there opened out before me an enchanted world ... I became a humble devotee of this infinitely beautiful art, and so began for me the chamber music life.' The Cobbett Association remains devoted to rediscovering neglected works. Cobbett's love of Elizabethan music was particularly piqued by the free-flowing, episodic, spontaneous-sounding 'fantasy' (or phantasy, fancy, fantasia, fantaisie), a form described by Spanish composer Luis de Milán in about 1535–6 as stemming 'solely from the fantasy and skill of the author who created it'.

Vaughan Williams shared Cobbett's interest in Renaissance music and built upon these precedents in his *Phantasy Quintet*, for which he added a viola – an instrument he himself played and of which he was particularly fond – to the standard string quartet. We hear the beautifully wistful 'Alla Sarabanda', from which the cello is omitted, with the remaining instruments playing muted. This is followed by the last-movement 'Burlesca', a fantasy in several sections, including a characterful cello solo, a lively, intricate dance – interrupted by music that comes from the opening Prelude – and a gentle coda.

Ludwig van Beethoven composed his Violin Sonata No.9 in A major for African-European violinist George Bridgetower, who had recently arrived in Vienna. Bridgetower and Beethoven gave the premiere of the work on 24 May, 1803, but fell out soon afterwards. Beethoven then shifted the dedication to Rodolphe Kreutzer, partly in the hope of ingratiating himself in France; Kreutzer had visited Vienna in 1798, accompanying the French ambassador General Bernadotte and impressing Beethoven as 'a good, amiable man who in his stay here gave me much pleasure. His unaffectedness and natural manner are more to my taste than all the "extérieur" or "intérieur" of most virtuosos.' Yet Kreutzer never acknowledged nor publicly performed the work and, according to Berlioz, found it 'outrageously unintelligible'.

Beethoven described the 'Kreutzer' Sonata as 'written very much in a *concertante* style, almost like a concerto'. This indicated his intention to introduce a degree of conflict into the work, as well as giving equal weight to both instruments. The witty Presto finale sets off at a frantic pace in a dancing, Italianate tarantella style. The opening material is treated fugally (in imitation), and playful textures are woven into the fabric of the whole movement.