



# The Rebecca Clarke Society

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## Newly Discovered Works Premiered in London

**Prelude, Danse Bizarre, and Nocturne, for two violins and piano, and Theme and Variations for Piano given first performance; Two Violin Sonatas in European Premiere**

Ian Jones, piano; Lorraine McAslan, Violin; David Juritz, Violin  
March 24, 2003  
Lauderdale House, Highgate, London

A world premiere of a piece of music is a rare thing. A world premiere in 2003 of music written ninety-five years earlier is curious and even unique. And that this music should be of stunning quality made the concert of March 24, 2003, nothing short of an historically monumental occasion. Some of Rebecca Clarke's music, in particular the viola sonata, has become part of the standard repertoire in the last two decades. But a great deal of her music remains unknown, because she did not publish it

in her lifetime and the scores have remained inaccessible in private hands. The two violin sonatas (ca. 1907-9) were given their world premieres in September 2000 in Boston, by Joanna Kurkovicz (violin) and Vivian Chang (piano), in a concert organized by the Rebecca Clarke Society.

(see <http://www.rebeccaclarke.org/violin.html>)

The success of that event prompted the Clarke Estate to look through its materials, and four works were discovered. The opportunity to hear this music is truly cause for celebration.

On March 24, 2003, four works – Prelude, Danse Bizarre, and Nocturne, for two violins and piano (these were presumably intended as a set), and a lengthy Theme and Variations for piano – received their first performance. The two violin sonatas received their European premiere. These pieces all date from

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## CALL FOR SCORES: The Rebecca Clarke Prize in composition

What Clarke described as “that one little whiff of success,” and “really, in a way, my start” (in a 1976 interview with Robert Sherman), was the well-known 1919 competition for the Berkshire Festival of Chamber Music, which called for a work for viola and piano. Clarke was encouraged by the format in which the works were judged anonymously, but nevertheless the prejudice of gendered expectations entered in. In a famous decision, the six judges chose a tie between Clarke's Viola Sonata and Ernest Bloch's Suite for Viola. Although the judges considered the works without knowing their authors, the tie-breaking voter, contest sponsor Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge herself, was aware of the identities of these finalists, according to Coolidge biographer Dr. Cyrilla Barr. Coolidge's conservative sensibilities suggest that she would have hesitated at giving the prize to a woman, and thus there is the likelihood that gender was a factor in giving Bloch the prize. And while coming in second place was helpful to Clarke, we can imagine that winning (and getting the \$1000 prize) would have been even more so.

These thoughts went through my mind when the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis began planning a Festival of Women Composers, which is to include a competition for a new piece of music. It would be fitting, I thought, to name the prize after Clarke – a recognition of the importance of a competition to her career and the role of gender in her not being awarded the first prize, in addition to gaining more fame for Clarke's music.

The competition is open to women composers of all ages and nationalities. The winning work will be premiered at the Gala concert at the Festival, Dec. 6, 2003, at Brandeis University. Compositions may be for any, or all, of the following instrumentation: string quartet, piano, soprano, and SATB chorus. Postmark deadline for the submission of scores is July 30. Please e-mail Liane Curtis ([Lcurtis@brandeis.edu](mailto:Lcurtis@brandeis.edu)) for application forms and other information, or see the Website of the Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc.

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## Review of REBECCA CLARKE. THE COMPLETE CHORAL MUSIC.

The Choir of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge/Geoffrey Webber. ASV CD DCA 1136. 2003.

1. He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High (Psalm 91) (1921).
2. Ave Maria for female voices (1937).
3. There is no rose (Anon., medieval) for male voices (1928).
4. Chorus from Shelley's Hellas for female voices (1943).
5. Come, O come, my life's delight! (Campion) (1911).
6. My spirit like a charmed bark doth float (Shelley) (1911).
7. Daybreak (Donne) for voice and string quartet (1940).
8. Music, when soft voices die (Shelley) (1907).
9. Now fie on love (Thomas Goffe) for male voices (1906).
10. A Lover's Dirge (Come away, come away, Death) (Shakespeare) (1908).
11. When cats run home and light is come (Tennyson) (1909).
12. Philomela (Sir Philip Sidney) (1914).
13. Weep you no more, sad fountains (Anon., 16th century) (1912).
14. Away, delights! (Fletcher) for high voices and piano (1912).
15. Nacht fuer Nacht (Richard Dehmel) for soprano, alto, and piano (1912).
16. Spirits (Robert Bridges) for high voices and piano (1912).
17. Take, O take those lips away (Shakespeare) for tenor, baritone, and piano (1926).
18. Sleep (Fletcher) for tenor, baritone, and piano (1926).
19. Hymn to Pan (Fletcher) for tenor, baritone, and piano (1912).



Clarke, ca. 1920

Soloists in the art song duets: Angharad Gruffydd Jones (soprano), Clare Wilkinson (mezzo-soprano), Mark Dobell (tenor), Timothy Mirfin (baritone). Additional Soloists: "He that dwelleth" Alexandra Kidgell (soprano), Carris Jones & Joanna Norman (alto), Andrew Griffiths (tenor), Jonathan Stainsby (bass). "There is no rose" Baritone soloist: James Collin; Vocal ensemble: Oliver Phillips (counter-tenor), Andrew Griffiths (tenor), Peter Wood (baritone), Jonathan Stainsby (bass). "Daybreak" Alexandra Kidgell (soprano), String quartet (undergraduates at Gonville & Caius College): Florence Cooke (violin 1), Louise Craigie (violin 2), Andrew Griffiths (viola), James Hopkins (cello).

In 1980, the then "new" Grove's entry on this composer, who had died the preceding year, was as follows. It is given in its entirety:

**Clarke, Rebecca** (b Harrow, 27 Aug 1886). English violist and composer, wife of JAMES FRISKIN.

Could neglect be more complete, short of there being no entry at all?

Now, nearly a quarter century later, we are beginning to form an impression of just what kind of composer Clarke was, even to recognizing – in piece after piece, through a wide range of genres, instrumental and vocal – the unmistakable features of a strong and very personal style. This CD expands our knowledge even further.

It's tempting to call that style – especially if one knows something of her life – Bronte-esque. Charlotte Bronte, in her Preface to *Wuthering Heights*, spoke of her sister Emily's "secret power that might have informed the brains and kindled the veins of a hero; but she had no worldly wisdom; her powers were unadapted to the practical business of life: she would fail to defend her manifest rights, to consult her most legitimate advantage. An interpreter ought always to have stood before her and the world." Matthew Arnold cited Emily's qualities of "might, passion, vehemence, grief, daring."

But one oughtn't to press this too far. Though she grew up during Victoria's reign, Clarke definitely "had a life," as we would say today. She earned her living as a first-class professional violist. She traveled. And – what concerns us here – she got for herself, as a composer, as fine and rigorous a training in technique as was available to anyone in Britain at the time, man or woman. This tells, in often startling ways, all throughout this collection of pieces, which run from 70 seconds to six minutes in length, and date from 1906 to 1943. All are recorded for the first time.

In a blindfold test, this reviewer sprang two of the pieces from Clarke's un-Bronte-esque side – the *Ave Maria* (1937) and *There Is No Rose* (1928) – on a musicologist friend. "This composer knows the Byrd and Tallis tradition," he said of the first. "Very accomplished. And not a pastiche. 20th-century. English. But who?" Of the second: "We're in an earlier century. Those fourths and fifths could be Machaut. But the harmonic underpinning -- shifting, unstable, 20th-century. Who?"

The superb *Ave Maria* could serve as a neat ploy for confusing anyone who thinks that by now they can spot the Clarke "style" from a county away. The sparseness and concentration of the writing for three-part female choir reveal the composer's subtlest

inflections of text and pacing. Listeners will also hear in this, but even more so in the late, big-canvassed Chorus from Shelley's *Hellas* (1943), a kind of soaring into the registral stratosphere that might have been intended for the spectacularly agile sopranos of the Tallis Scholars. If the *Ave Maria* fills its time-space beautifully, the Chorus transcends – as if magnifying – what turns out to be, according to the booklet, 5 minutes and 36 seconds in mere clock time. Here Clarke seizes you immediately. You think: It's as if she were hearing the choral texture from the middle, from the inside, as a violist hears an orchestral one. But we're not to be settled for long in that kind of lushness. The shifts in tone and harmony, from bar to bar, right up to the unearthly voicing Clarke gives to "the sapphire sea," are really quite astonishing. This is a masterpiece.

Another late piece, a Donne setting, *Daybreak*, from 1940, should exert an appeal for anyone who wishes the repertory for soprano and string quartet weren't so meager, and that one of its staples, Respighi's *Il Tramonto*, wasn't so prosaic. *Daybreak* surpasses it both as music and text-setting, and we can wonder that this work is not yet published.

The two long pieces from Clarke's early maturity differ from the *Hellas* Chorus not so much in technical ease as in simply being of their time. Granted, *He That Dwelleth In the Secret Place of the Most High* (1921) and *Philomela* (1914) never quite lapse into the creaky choir-festival rhetoric their dates might suggest. But you do sense that, in them, the

composer has been straining, consciously or unconsciously, not to assimilate the sorts of fusty influences that were all around her, inside the academy and out. In any case, these make for a good sing in the way that a novel makes for a good read. A quibble. Christopher Johnson's description of the 1921 piece's solos as "cantorial" seems fanciful. If they are, the cut-glass Anglo-Saxon delivery they get in this recording completely buries conceals it (That lapse aside, Johnson's notes are crisp, specific, helpful).

As must be obvious, there is much to hear – and re-hear – in this eventful hour's worth of music. For instance, how did Clarke approach *Weep ye no more, sad fountains* as compared with the masterly settings by John Dowland and Roger Quilter? Clarke's sly fun with strettis (the love part) and pictorialism (melting snowcaps) sound nothing like those composers. And there is much more.

The Choir of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, under Geoffrey Webber have put us all in their debt with their serenely beautiful and technically faultless singing on this disc. It's only in the handful of non-choral art songs – somewhat cautiously interpreted – that one fully realizes that they are so young. Their performances of everything else are not likely to be bettered, and the recordings are excellent.

**RICHARD BUELL**

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## New Sources for *Ave Maria*

Some new sources have come to light for Clarke's *Ave Maria* that shed light on the origins of the work. Letters from Clarke and pianist Kathleen Long to the Music Director at the London Oratory, reveal the piece may have been first performed there. Clarke sent two scores of the *Ave Maria* to the Oratory; the first score corresponds with that in the Clarke estate (which was used for the 1998 publication). The second score was revised and served as the basis for performance parts. In this revised score, Clarke made some small changes in the lower voices seven measures from the end, giving this passage more momentum. Deborah Phelan discovered these materials in the papers of the Director of Music at the London Oratory. We can be grateful that these materials are now safely housed in the British Library. ❀

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Ave Maria. It consists of three staves of music. The top staff is marked with a forte 'f' dynamic and the tempo 'allarg.' (ritardando). The lyrics 'Ut cum electis te vi-de-amus' are written below the staves. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The handwriting is in ink on a white background.

*Clarke made some revisions to this passage near the end of the Ave Maria.*

Newly Discovered Works – continued from p. 1

Clarke's years at the Royal College of Music, where she studied with Sir Charles Stanford. Clarke's wonderful memoir that she wrote very late in life (and that is still withheld from publication) offers fascinating insights. She mentions the Danse Bizarre in her memoir, although it had been thought that the work was lost. Clarke wrote:

*Stanford sent me in for another Exhibition with a piece I had just finished called "Danse Bizarre" for two violins – always referred to him as my Bazaar Dance – and I played it at the audition with one of the best violinists at college, a girl called Sidney Bostock, for whom I had a great crush at the time. We were both lucky: she and I were each awarded an Exhibition of twice the usual amount. And walking on air up Exhibition Road on our way home, we wondered jubilantly how many Exhibitioners had commented on the suitability of its name.*

The other two movements, Prelude and Nocturne, were completely unknown at the time of their discovery. The Prelude features luxuriant harmonies and boldly configured melodic lines; the descending leaps and occasional chromaticism adds a melancholy tinge. The Danse Bizarre emphasizes Clarke's interest in exoticism, with its thematic insistence on the tritone suggesting an east Asian scale; the work demands an exhilarating virtuosity. The center section contrasts with its tolling bell tones and lush rhythms. The Nocturne is the most Brahmsian of these three movements, with thick textures and arpeggiations, and a

dramatic melody in the violins.

According to her memoir, the Theme and Variations was her earliest major work. She wrote:

*For me the high point of each week was the composition lesson. Sir Charles began by making me write a few themes for variations, and after choosing the least feeble of the lot got me started on the variations themselves. It was hard work squeezing them out, and I remember little about them ... All the same, those variations (now lost, and a good thing too) did gain me at the end of the term an Exhibition - a sum of money covering half my fees for the year.*

Pianist Ian Jones writes of the Theme and Variations: *The simple, folk tune-like theme is followed by 16 variations arranged mainly as alternately quick and slow (playful and serious) miniatures. The influence of the great Variation composers of the 19th century looms large but Clarke has her own take on the form, with her interest in folk song providing the impetus for many of the variations. The Finale, which follows the 16 variations, is a passacaglia; in effect another more condensed theme and variations.*

Also on the program was the newly discovered arrangement, *He Hath Filled the Hungry*, from the Magnificat by Bach. Clarke probably arranged it for James Friskin, the pianist whom she married in 1944. He was especially known as an interpreter of Bach.

The performers offered sensitive interpretations of these works. We can look forward to the release of the CD on the ASV label in the fall. The review of the 2000 premiere of the violin sonatas is available in our Spring 2001 Newsletter.

<http://www.rebeccaclarke.org/6pagenewsletter> ❁

CALL FOR SCORES, continued from p. 1

It is no secret that women continue to face unique difficulties in the modern world of classical music. Among contemporary composers, a few female names have become prominent, in what might be described as tokenism – or “Condoleezza Rice” syndrome. The presence of women among the general ranks of employed composers remains surprisingly small. The College Music Society lists more than 1,900 names of University and College faculty who include music composition among their teaching specialty, but female names make up fewer than five percent. The reasons why are by no means simple – a few were addressed in a recent article on sexual harassment in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 7, 2002, p. A12). “Music’s Open Secret,” by Robin Wilson, examines why sexual harassment, particularly in music departments (where much training is one-on-one and the egos can be particularly fragile), goes unchecked and creates a hostile climate for women. As Wilson documents, given the preponderance of male faculty who teach composition, the environment in this specialty can easily become that of a “boy’s club” where women feel unwelcome. That 5% statistic? It struck me very vividly as I used the CMS mailing labels for composers to send out fliers about the Rebecca Clarke Prize. Women still need to make much more progress in this area. ❁ Liane Curtis

*The Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc. Newsletter -- edited by Liane Curtis, President*

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