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Rebecca Clarke’s neglected 1941 Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale for viola and clarinet is finally being published 20 years after the composer’s death. Liane Curtis predicts a rapturous reception.
Eighty years after the composition and premiere of her passionate Viola Sonata, it remains the work by which Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979) is known. In recent years it has become a mainstay of the viola repertoire, with over a dozen recordings issued to date on CD. In contrast, her Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale for viola and clarinet, written in 1941, remains all but unknown and represents a different side of the composer.

A Gramophone review in 1987 remarked on the 'stunning quality' of the Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale and expressed surprise that it was 'even now still unpublished'. Difficulty in obtaining the music (which required negotiating with her estate) meant that the work has remained a rarity, although a few enterprising performers have it in their repertoires, including the London-based Gemini Ensemble and the US Patricia McCarty (viola) and Peter Hadcock (clarinet), who have recorded it on the Northeastern label (available through McCarty's website at http://hometown.aol.com/pmcarty/evdmly.html).

Change is imminent, however, as Oxford University Press is releasing an edition of the work this month. It is the first instrumental work of Clarke's considerable unpublished legacy to be made available in print and is a suitable commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Clarke's death on 13 October.

Although born in Harrow (near London) and educated at the Royal College of Music, Clarke had an American father. Since both her brothers settled in the US around the time of World War I, she maintained close ties with the US, spending time there concertising and touring as well as vacationing. A high point of her life was her participation in the Coolidge competition (held in western Massachusetts) of 1919, which resulted in her Viola Sonata lying for first place with Bloch's Suite for Viola. Clarke's involvement in these competitions (she wrote her Piano Trio for the one in 1921) has been central to previous discussions.

Like the Viola Sonata, the Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale was written in the US but under very different circumstances. 'I came here in July 1939 to spend three months and have stayed three years,' wrote Clarke in 1942. What had started out as a summer visit became something different when war broke out. Since London was being evacuated she was discouraged from returning to her home. After a few months, I got awfully homesick, and went to the British Consulate to try and get a visa, and they wouldn't give it to me. They said I was an unproductive mouth,' recalled Clarke in an interview with Ellen Lerner in 1978.

This unplanned extended stay with her brothers' families, which each had four children, became awkward and uncomfortable for all involved, but it did stimulate Clarke's impulse to compose, which had been nearly silent during the 1930s. The Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale was written in 1941 and dedicated to Rebecca's brother Hans Clarke (a well-known biochemist) and his wife Frieda. Hans played clarinet and Frieda violin; both were good amateur musicians. Rebecca, however, wrote for her own instrument, the viola, resulting in a fine pairing of two instruments of similar range.

By 1942 Clarke was working in southern Connecticut as a children's governess, for the first time in her life in non-musical employment. She decided to submit the Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale to the 1942 Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), held at the University of California at Berkeley. Clarke's piece was one of 33 works accepted for the festival and was, as she and others observed, the only one by a woman and one of three by British composers. Her friendship with Albert Elkus, a music professor at the University of California, and his British wife Elizabeth probably played a role in her involvement, since Albert Elkus was one of the festival organisers.

Responding to a request for information about the piece and herself, Clarke sent a handwritten letter to the festival organisers that gives an apt and vivid description of her work, as well as a sense of her genial personality.

The whole thing is very unpretentious: a short unassuming little prelude; an Allegro which I originally thought of calling a Toccata - as it gives both the players plenty of chance to show what they can do... The subject is more or less 'mirror-writing,' and in the coda the instruments are, in addition, continually crossing one another. There is a long Haydn section in the middle of the movement, after a second subject in pizzicato chords on the viola. The whole of the second movement should sound very spirited, and I think, quite effectively written for both parts.

The third movement Pastorale is rather melancholy and nostalgic, ending in a very subdued way. The pieces, by the way, though designed to be played together, can all be played at separate numbers, if so desired. If you see the artists who will play them at the Festival will you kindly tell them that they are to be taken quite freely: I have under-marked them rather than over-marked them, and there will be several places - notably in the Allegro where it will be natural to make a slight stringendo, and so on.

(Collection of the Music Library at the University of California, Berkeley)

The Prelude begins with even and stately rhythms suggesting motion, perhaps a procession. Supporting the clarinet melody, the viola plays double-stop triads or open sonorities that alternate with the gentle quench of tritones or seconds (ex.1).

After a more spontaneous passage emphasizing parallel major thirds, the first material returns with the melody now in the viola. The movement ends with lyrical exchanges between the instruments and pizzicato chords in the viola, creating a subdued, hushed mood.

The Allegro is exhilaratingly relentless. Like a toccata, as Clarke had thought of calling it, it moves with endless drive and energy. Beginning with interlocking zigzags of fifths expanding to octaves (ex.2), its polytonality is as bold -
as that of Stravinsky's 'Petrushka' chord.
Clarke's second subject, the vigorous pizzicato chords, are accompanied with a regular pulse in the clarinet (later in the piece the instruments reverse roles) (ex.3).
The long fugato passage that follows begins with the two instruments exchanging subject and countersubject, building in intensity while ascending, jaggedly, in pitch. Then another motif, shorter and with staccato rhythms, is introduced and the build-up begins again. Since this motif is shorter there is a sense of compression that adds to the growing momentum. Then the momentary cessation is rather startling amid all this activity. It allows for the catching of breath before the return of the interlocking up-and-down fifths, recalled from the beginning, which are now subjected to the intensifying sequential treatment; the result is a powerful sense of arrival when the second subject returns with a new, swirling accompaniment gesture.
Another driving sequence follows with a further hushed, reflective pause before the piece splashes to a halt with the zigzagging fifths (ex.4).
If the Allegro is about the drive and exhilarating energy of counterpoint, the Pastorale is pure soliloquy, the inward expression of a single voice, with the two instruments exchanging melody and background roles or intertwining as equals. The viola begins alone in its lowest range. The clarinet enters and sustained lines unfold...
sawly, the painful edge of dissonance poignantly explored (Ex.5). The use of a lowered second degree of the scale provides a sombre modal flavour, adding to the music's quality of austerity and simple sorrow.

The melancholy of the Pastorale is powerful, even devastating — while Clarke gives no hint of a programme for the work, it is not hard to imagine that the pastoral setting she evokes is a desolate battlefield, grimly, hopelessly calm. Perhaps this is Clarke's war requiem, a powerful expression through a spare, restrained vocabulary.

The premiere of the Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale took place in one of the ISCM festival's chamber music concerts on 6 August in the University of California's Wheeler Hall. Clarinettist Rudolph Schmitt and violist Walter Herbert, both members of the San Francisco Symphony, were the performers.

Critics praised the work, one noting that it possessed 'the greatest individuality'. Another admired Clarke's 'ingeniousness and resource in developing intricate patterns from the two voices' and described the Pastorale as a 'singularly lovely example of the nostalgic English style'. Despite this positive interest, Clarke made no attempt to publish the work, perhaps because she was not there to be encouraged by its success first hand — the only work from this period that she did publish was her Passacaglia for viola and piano, which she herself premiered in New York City in 1941.

In 1944 Clarke married pianist James Fiskin, a member of the piano faculty at the Juilliard School in New York; they had first met while students at the Royal College of Music and kept up their acquaintance intermittently since then. It is sometimes stated that Clarke gave up composing at the time of her marriage, but that is not precisely true. She put it succinctly in the 1978 interview: 'I didn't do any composing at all after I got married — I'm sure that's a shock to you. It wasn't because I got married that I didn't; I had been writing much less in the years before I got married.' In fact Clarke wrote two pieces after her marriage and, when in her 90s, she returned to revise some of her earlier works.

The publication of Clarke's Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale broadens our understanding of this composer — the work's stark, neo-Classical flavour contrasts markedly with her earlier lush, post-Romantic works. It reveals her full maturity, exploring quite a different range of expressive language. Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale is also her only work written for a wind instrument (although she did arrange her Chinese Puzzle, originally for violin and piano, for an ensemble including flute). Clarke had a special empathy for the clarinet, both through years of recreational music-making with her brother and through her experience as a violist of having filled in playing the clarinet parts in works such as the Brahms Clarinet Quintet (as she noted in her diaries). Clarke writes idiomatically for both instruments, and, with its distinctive and unusual pairing of these two rich alto voices, the Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale will surely prove to be a favourite with performers and audiences.

We have ten copies of Rebecca Clarke's Prelude, Allegro, and Pastorale published by Oxford University Press, New York, to give away. To win one send a postcard before 12 November to Clarke Offer at the top address on page 1221 giving your name and address.