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A “virtual” Coffee Concert recorded at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford

Sunday December 20, 2020 at 11:15

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We very much hope you enjoy this concert. If you would like to become a patron of the Oxford Coffee Concerts or make a donation to help support our “virtual” concerts, please get in touch with us via the contact page at coffeeconcerts.com.

This is one of the virtual Coffee Concerts recorded and streamed from our YouTube channel at 11:15 on Sunday mornings throughout autumn 2020. (These concerts will be available for a limited time after release.)

Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective

- **Walker: Lyric for Strings**
- **Beach: Romance for Violin and Piano, op 23**
- **Elgar: Piano Quintet in A minor, op 84**

Savitri Grier (violin)
Elena Urioste (violin)
Rosalind Ventris (viola)
Laura van der Heijden (cello)
Tom Poster (piano)

“Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective is a flexible ensemble of wonderful, joyful, kind, passionate musicians who can’t wait to share chamber music with you.

“Like many musicians, we spend a lot of time worrying about the world – about inequality, prejudice, violence, bullying, divisive rhetoric. Chamber music has an extraordinary power to bring people together: it unites musicians as equals, and draws listeners in to its intimate, transportive world.

“We love to devise creative and innovative programmes, to curate multi-concert series and residencies, and to showcase great music both familiar and lesser-known. Our diverse and brilliant team hopes also to be able to inspire and educate audiences of all generations in the joys of chamber music, and ultimately to bring a bit of happiness and unity to our currently rather fractured-seeming world.”

Tom Poster and Elena Urioste

More information:
<https://www.kaleidoscopecc.com>
<https://www.savitrigrieviolin.com>
<https://www.elenaurioste.com>
<http://www.rosalindventris.co.uk>
<https://www.lauravanderheijden.uk/en>
<https://www.tomposter.co.uk>

Lyric for Strings by George Walker (1922-2018)

Born in Washington, DC, Walker had piano lessons as a child, and went on to study at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York, and the Curtis Institute, Philadelphia, from which he was the first black student to graduate. He also spent periods studying with Nadia Boulanger at the American Conservatory, Fontainebleau, and with pianists Robert Casadesus, Clifford Curzon and Rudolf Serkin.

Walker held a number of prestigious academic posts and received several awards, including in 1996 a Pulitzer Prize for *Lilacs*, a setting for soprano or tenor and orchestra of Walt Whitman's poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Other works include a symphony, a piano concerto; a trombone concerto; *Dialogues*, for Cello and Orchestra; vocal works, including a Mass for

Soloists, Chorus and Orchestra; and works for solo piano, including three sonatas.

In its original form, *Lyric for Strings* is the second movement from the first of Walker's two string quartets, which dates from 1946. He transcribed it for string orchestra the same year, and this version was premiered, under the title *Lament*, by the student orchestra of the Curtis Institute. It had its first public performance the following year as part of an annual American music festival in Washington. It is dedicated "to my grandmother". (She died while he was working on the string quartet version.)

The piece moves mainly in long contrapuntal lines, from its gentle beginning, through an impassioned central climax, to a quiet withdrawal at the end.

Romance, for Violin and Piano, op 23 by Amy Beach (1867-1944)

Born in Henniker, New Hampshire, into a long-established New England family, Amy Marcy Cheney showed extraordinary musical gifts at a very young age and had her first piano lessons from her mother when she was six. The family moved to Boston (where she made her professional debut as a pianist at age 16) and played Chopin's Piano Concerto No 2 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra two years later. At about the same time she began to make a name as a composer, having works performed by organisations in Boston and New York. She received several commissions, composing her *Festival Jubilate* for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

In 1885 she married Dr Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a lecturer on anatomy at Harvard University; from then on she signed herself simply 'Mrs HHA Beach'. At her husband's insistence she mostly gave up concert appearances, but this enabled her to concentrate on composition; she returned to performing after his death in 1910.

Her music includes sacred and secular choral works, including a large-scale choral and orchestral Mass, chamber music, works for solo piano, and orchestral pieces, including a piano concerto and the "Gaelic" Symphony, which was enormously popular in her lifetime

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and remains one of her best-known works. Like many of her fellow so-called “Boston romantics” she drew on European musical traditions, and her music echoes the work of Schumann, Fauré and, in her later works, Debussy and Strauss.

Romance was published in 1893, and dedicated to Maud Powell, one of the leading

American violinists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She and Beach gave the first performance during the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. The title implies a song-like piece, rather than “romance” in today’s commonly accepted sense. The piano’s lyrical opening phrase, quickly taken up by the violin, dominates the piece in one form or another, in both instruments, including the more animated (though not actually quicker) central section.

Piano Quintet in A minor, op 84 by Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

1. Moderato – allegro; 2. Adagio; 3. Andante – allegro

Elgar’s three major chamber works – the Violin Sonata, String Quartet and Piano Quintet – were written between 1918 and 1919 and belong, emotionally, with his cello concerto which followed immediately afterwards.

With worries over money and his health adding to the strain caused by the First World War, Elgar had been increasingly anxious to leave London and find seclusion in the country. In April 1917 his wife Alice began looking for a country retreat near to London, but remote enough to give Elgar the peace and quiet he so desperately needed. She quickly found and rented “Brinkwells”, a cottage near Fittleworth in Sussex, deep in the kind of wooded countryside Elgar had always loved. It was here that he conceived, and did most of the work on, the chamber works and the concerto. The four pieces have their own kind of enchantment, wistful and eerie by turns. The pre-war world of Edwardian opulence and swaggering self-confidence was now irretrievable. With Elgar’s response to his new surroundings comes a strain of deep longing – haunted,

sad, and resigned – which had always been present in his music, but which had not been quite so near to the surface before.

One feature of the landscape around Brinkwells particularly caught his attention – a group of dead trees with gnarled, twisted branches on a hilltop, which presented a particularly awesome sight against the evening sky. Add to this the knowledge that there was once a monastic settlement in the area, and the strange fascination with anything Spanish which Elgar felt throughout his life. All three elements came together in a supposed local legend that the trees were the remains of Spanish monks struck dead during a black magic ritual. Research, however, has shown that no such legend seems ever to have existed in the area; it appears to have been a product of Elgar’s imagination or, more probably, that of his friend the fantasy-writer Algernon Blackwood, who visited him at Brinkwells.

All the same, the tale exerts a powerful influence on the Quintet, especially what Alice called the “wonderful weird beginning”.

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Four distinct ideas are heard in quick succession – a chant-like phrase for the piano over a short, repeated jabbing figure for the strings; a kind of sighing motif for the strings, which recurs in one form or another in the other two movements, a vigorous allegro full of pounding piano chords; and, after a repeat of the sighing figure, a troubled, melancholy dance. The main body of the movement works up to a passionate climax before subsiding amid recollections of the opening. “Ghostly stuff”, as Elgar wrote to the Quintet’s dedicatee, the critic Ernest Newman.

The adagio has a haunted serenity which is repeatedly disturbed by a new version of the

first movement’s sighing figure, always heralded by an ascending pattern of spread chords on the piano. The finale begins by returning to the original form of this motif, working it up into an anxious, questioning introduction to the main allegro section. This sets off, initially, in a more positive mood, but a note of doubt enters with the more edgy second theme, and before long we are back in the first movement’s eerie half-light. Gradually the music begins to recover its confidence and energy until eventually the presences which have haunted the work are finally laid to rest.

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