Rory Boyle

Music for clarinet

FRASER LANGTON clarinet  JAMES WILLSHIRE piano

TRIO DRAMATIS
Sonatina for Clarinet and Piano
1. Fast [2.48]
2. II. Slow with tenderness [3.37]
3. III. Brightly [2.12]
4. Burble [7.12]
for solo clarinet

Four Bagatelles
for clarinet and piano
5. No. 1 [3.27]
6. No. 2 [3.18]
7. No. 3 [3.10]
8. No. 4 [1.30]
9. Tatty’s Dance [2.24]
version for clarinet and piano

Dramatis Personae
for clarinet and piano
10. 1. Rogue [3.12]
11. 2. Shadow [4.53]
12. 3. Fool [4.09]
13. Di Tre Re e io [18.10]
for clarinet, viola and piano

Delphian Records Ltd – Edinburgh – UK
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Delphian Records and the artists are grateful to the Hope Scott Trust and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland for their generous support in sponsoring the production of this recording.
Notes on the music

Craft and invention are indivisible attributes of Rory Boyle’s music, set to work in harness from the simplest to the most complex of his compositions. He learned of their mutual dependence as a boy chorister at St George’s Chapel, Windsor, and went on to develop the skills required to unite them, taking composition lessons from Frank Spedding at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. A postgraduate scholarship enabled Boyle to study with Lennox Berkeley, a master of formal technique and champion of its value as the bedrock of creative expression. This recording reflects the eloquence of Boyle’s mature musical language, with its striking rhythmic energy and refreshing absence of sentimentality. The composer’s lifelong feeling for melodic line and formal balance, the legacy of his youthful studies as clarinettist and pianist, and a readiness to collaborate with young performers are also among the hallmarks of the music recorded here.

The Sonatina for Clarinet and Piano was written in the opening months of 1979 as a present to Lennox Berkeley. The clarity of the work’s melodic ideas and the sophistication of its harmonic language project a touching work’s melodic ideas and the sophistication written in the opening months of 1979 as a

The slow movement’s lush sensuality, rich in whole-tone melodies and chromatic inflections, evokes pleasure and desire while transcending both with passing moments of profound spiritual reflection. The feisty, near-heroic writing of Boyle’s central section gives way to a mystical union of the profane and the sacred as the opening material is recalled and subtly modified. Introversion is blown away in the Sonatina’s finale by a counterpoint of contrasting phrase lengths, metrical ambiguities and, above all, the sheer rhythmic energy unleashed by both clarinet and piano. The two instruments negotiate a brief passage of calm, lyrical but never entirely tranquil, before setting off on their dash to the work’s neatly etched finishing line.

Burble was commissioned by and written for Fraser Langton while he was studying for a Master’s degree at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. The young clarinettist gave the work’s premiere in January 2012. ‘Two possible definitions of the word burble,’ notes Rory Boyle, ‘are a gurgling or bubbling sound and a rapid excited flow of speech both of which are portrayed in the music in various ways.’ The piece exploits the tonal and timbral possibilities of alternative fingerings, a technique first explored by the composer in his bassoon concerto, That Blessed Wood, and also used to great effect in the Shadow section of Dramatis Personae. Langton provided Boyle with a list of the alternative fingerings available across the clarinet’s full range; many of these find a home in Burble. ‘Extreme leaps and rapid figurations using a variety of articulations also feature extensively in the piece which falls into three main sections,’ the composer comments. The work’s title shapes the character of its contents, already clear in the low note repeated using alternative fingerings at the outset and in the opening sequence of mellifluous chromatic motifs. The soloist is instructed to sing while playing during Burble’s keening central section, which stands before the return of vigorous melodic activity and a thrilling final ascent to the clarinet’s altissimo register.

Four Bagatelles, like the Sonatina, dates from early 1979 and was revised thirty-five years later to create a collection of showpieces for clarinet in B flat and piano. The flamboyant Bagatelle No. 1 springs from the mix in its initial clarinet theme of close intervals and vaulting melodic leaps. Syncopations and metrical shifts give a ragtime feel to the score, but also call to mind the light-hearted spirit of nineteenth-century bagatelles; the piece, however, contains room for gallows humour and for an eerie clarinet cadenza before its course is run. Bagatelle No. 2 forms around a repeated D in the piano’s right hand. The clarinet engages in a duet with the piano’s left-hand part which breaks down to leave a meandering central section, improvisatory in style, before the heartbeat of recurring Ds is re-established to underpin the clarinet’s lyrical epilogue. Embodied energy and poetic reflection coexist in Bagatelle No. 3, which finds its feet as a dance in compound time before slipping into a trance-like reverie, the latter intensified by a severe-sounding canon at the unison between clarinet and piano right hand, more dark than light. Bagatelle No. 4 compresses into its brief span the expressionist turmoil of Schoenberg’s Pierrot Lunaire and all the fun of a circus populated by malevolent clowns.

Tatty’s Dance offers a prime example of its creator’s deep understanding of instrumental technique and its essential part in creating multiple shades of timbre. Boyle composed the work in 2010 as a solo piano piece, written in honour of his wife’s sixtieth birthday; he subsequently revised the score as a duet for Fraser Langton and James Willshire. Its main melody, like all the best tunes, sounds familiar yet unpredictable, a condition aided by its modified repetition and judicious
development. Everything flows in Tatty's Dance; nothing remains the same, even when a phrase or a fragment of a phrase is repeated. Bars of 7/16 unexpectedly divert the more conventional flow of 3/4 and 4/4, sufficient to blur the boundaries of metrical articulation and give the dance its individuality.

Langton and Willshire also became the first players to assume the identities of the archetypes portrayed in Dramatis Personae. The work, created in 2012, was written for and dedicated to them. In a short introductory note to the score, Boyle outlines the character of each movement. ‘In Rogue the music is both brash and persuasive, whilst Shadow presents a ghostly image. The final movement reveals the clownish and idiotic qualities of the Fool; but there is also an element of pathos in the music.’ According to Carl Jung, archetypal figures belong to the common stock of the human psyche, primordial entities inherited as part of the collective unconscious; Plato’s theory of forms presents a similar notion, that ideas present in the psyche’s dark side. Something of the Shadow’s complexity registers in the repeated clarinet notes that mark its opening and seeps into the disembodied sound-world that follows. Melodic echoes and reflections draw the two instruments into a dark network of fragmentary motifs, which arise and fall away like passing thoughts. Fool, quixotic and full of tricks, revels in an instant to create fresh patterns, their transformation accentuated by changes of metre, collisions of duple- and triple-time rhythms, head-spinning syncopations and vertiginous leaps across the clarinet’s full range. The Fool comes to rest in the movement’s middle section, pausing to play a disjointed, melancholy chorale – the clarinet directed to play into the piano’s strings – before dashing ahead once more with one last display of virtuoso clownery.

While lessons with Lennox Berkeley informed the thematic economy and expressive wealth of the Sonata in A, viola and piano, it flows from a formative experience in the composer’s musical education. During his mid-teens, he walked into his school’s gramophone library and made the random choice of an LP of Honegger’s Third and Fifth symphonies. Here, recalls Boyle, was ‘a composer I knew absolutely nothing about and whose music I had never heard before’. His first acquaintance with Honegger left a lasting mark. ‘I was instantly drawn to both works, but particularly to the 5th symphony which has intrigued me ever since and for which I have never lost that initial flame of fascination. It was only nearly fifty years later that I discovered a potential reason why this symphony has drawn me so much into its haunting sound world – it was premiered on the day I was born, March 9th, 1951. Somehow I wanted to mark my relationship with this work and its unjustly neglected composer, and this trio is my personal homage.’

Honegger subtitled his Fifth Symphony Di Tre Re, a reference to the D (or ‘re’ in sol-fa notation) played by timpani and basses at the end of each of the work’s three movements. Throughout his trio, Boyle alludes to and develops what he describes as ‘snippets of themes from all … movements of Honegger’s dark and restless symphony’, the three Ds of the title, however, are only stated at the work’s close, once by each instrument. The work begins with a duet for viola, playing harmonics, and clarinet, punctuated by piano chords, in which spectres from the opening of Honegger’s symphony arise to create an austere soundscape. A piano theme, related to what has gone before, emerges and is enlivened by flowing countermelodies from viola and clarinet; the music’s yearning character is briefly settled by a return of the opening viola melody before the clarinet strives on with fresh energy and the piano announces a new theme inspired by a prominent dotted rhythm from the first movement of Honegger’s Di Tre Re. Boyle heralds a change of tempo and mood by setting a scurrying viola melody beneath a sustained clarinet cantilena, preparing the ground for a swifter, more intense interlude reminiscent of the bustling second movement of Honegger’s Symphony. The section’s reiterative
motif is explored by each member of the ensemble: clarinet and viola engage in a canon at close quarters against the piano's subversive sequence of syncopated triplet chords, which together creates a rhythmically complex structure of contrapuntal imitation and leads to a restatement of the prevailing semiquaver motif, spurred on by viola tremolos and flutter-tongued answering notes from the clarinet.

The work's neurotic energy dissipates with the arrival of its slow central section. Although calm, the music is never at peace; rather, Boyle sets out two highly expressive melodies for clarinet and viola, decorates both with bell-like piano outbursts, and develops them over the course of a rhapsodic extended duet. The viola intervenes with a return of the work's opening, this time accompanied by a low, sombre clarinet counter-melody. A variation of the first section's mechanistic interlude, complete with clarion calls from the clarinet, signals the beginning of the end. Melodic and rhythmic motifs from earlier in the composition are marshalled together before the clarion sounds again, its call underlined by the emphatic energy of repeated piano chords and a wild, ascending viola melody. Everything is stripped down to bare essentials, exposing a minimalistic riff of piano triplets juxtaposed with a mantra of sustained viola and clarinet triads. The trio's long final section appears to evade the steady measure of clock time, projecting fragments of Honegger's symphony and themes of Boyle's making into a dream-world in which past and present merge.

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Andrew Stewart has been a freelance writer since 1989. He studied historical musicology at King's College London, was artistic director of the Southwark Festival, and is an experienced choir trainer and choral conductor.
Clarinettist Fraser Langton is active as a soloist and chamber musician, having recently given recitals at St John's Smith Square and the Wigmore Hall in London. He has worked regularly with the pianist James Willshire since 2012 and often performs as part of numerous festivals in the UK and abroad including the BBC Proms, St Magnus, Harrogate and Edinburgh International festivals and the Banff Summer Arts Festival in Canada. In 2015 Fraser was appointed as Principal E-flat and Sub-Principal Clarinet with the BBC Philharmonic and has since taken part in many recordings and international tours with the orchestra. He has played as guest principal with several of the country’s leading orchestras including the CBSO, RSNO and the John Wilson Orchestra.

Fraser studied clarinet under the tutelage of John Cushing at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland where he won most of the college prizes. He has since won an impressive list of other awards including the Yamaha Music Foundation of Europe Scholarship and the Prince’s Prize and Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. Fraser is increasingly interested in commissioning living composers to write for the clarinet and by doing so expanding the repertoire for the instrument. Notably he has championed the clarinet music of Scottish composer Rory Boyle who is a long-term collaborator.

Biographies

Formed in 2015, Trio Dramatis came into being when duo Fraser Langton (clarinet) & James Willshire (piano) sought a violist to explore the existing repertoire for clarinet, viola and piano with a goal of expanding it by commissioning new music for the ensemble. Fraser met violist Rosalind Ventris in 2012 whilst attending masterclasses at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Canada. In their first performance the trio gave the world premiere of Rory Boyle’s Di Tre Re e io at St John’s Smith Square, London. They have also recently appeared on BBC Radio 3’s In Tune. Forthcoming highlights include recitals at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Cheltenham Music Society’s contemporary concerts series and at the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester. Other future plans include a recording of newly commissioned trios for clarinet, viola and piano.
John McLeod: Moments in Time
Red Note Ensemble
DCD34155
Increasingly acclaimed at home and abroad, Aberdeen-born John McLeod’s music bears all the hallmarks of exuberant colour and precisely imagined fantasy that his early associations with Lennox Berkeley and Witold Lutosławski would lead one to expect. Recorded during the composer’s eightieth birthday year and released to mark Red Note Ensemble’s new recording partnership with Delphian, this landmark collection brings together McLeod’s four mythological ‘songs’ – powerful dramatic scenes in which instruments are elevated to voice-like expression – and a further work which crystallises the theme of a single moment with a long expressive ‘shadow’. The extraordinary chamber musicians gathered here, two of them Delphian solo artists of long standing, display unequalled virtuosity and passion on a disc which is sure to confirm Red Note as among the UK’s premier contemporary music ensembles.

‘Five arresting and resourceful works … This music, in turn dramatic, serene and – in The Song of Phryne – thoroughly erotic, is brilliantly performed’
— Sunday Times

Eddie McGuire: Entangled Fortunes
Red Note Ensemble
DCD34157
Eddie McGuire is one of Scotland’s greatest living composers. A renaissance man, his compositional voice is informed by a broad wealth of cultural experience and by an unlimited melodic creativity. In this intensely beautiful and unpretentious music, folk-like tunes appear naturally, taking their place in a world of invention large enough to contain minimalist gestures, intense romanticism, meditative silence and sudden drama. In the second of two discs programmed to initiate their new recording partnership with Delphian, Red Note Ensemble bring passion and care to this music – a token of the regard in which McGuire is held by Scottish musicians of all generations.

‘Red Note is the ideal ensemble to champion McGuire’s folk-rich music: the players shift between silvery laments, robust dances and angular squalls in a blink’
— The Guardian

William Sweeney: Tree o’ Licht
Robert Irvine, Erkki Lahesmaa cellos, Fali Pavri piano
DCD34113
Both musically impassioned and socially engaged, William Sweeney’s music is at its most eloquent when voiced by that most human of instruments, the cello. The player navigates a stormy electronic landscape in the Borges-inspired The Poet Tells of his Fame, while Schumann lies behind the powerfully argued Sonata for Cello and Piano, recipient of a 2011 BASCA British Composer Award. The Sonata bears a joint dedication to Delphian artists Robert Irvine and to Erkki Lahesmaa – ‘keepers’, as Sweeney calls them, ‘of the cello’s inner voice’ – and Irvine is joined by his Finnish colleague here in the 2008 duo The Tree o’ Licht, in which Gaelic psalmody is transmuted into deepest instrumental expressivity.

‘luminous … an intriguing combination of exploration and introspection’
— The Independent

Rory Boyle: Music for solo piano; Phaethon’s Dancing Lesson
James Willshire piano, Bartholdy Trio
DCD34098
In Rory Boyle’s sixtieth year, virtuoso pianist James Willshire’s debut recording pays birthday tribute, exploring the full gamut of Boyle’s compositional personality – from the cragginess of his finely wrought Sonata to the intensely human lyricism of Tatty’s Dance, itself a sixtieth-birthday present for Boyle’s wife. Dancing is also the subject of Boyle’s Piano Trio No 2 (Phaethon’s Dancing Lesson), in which Willshire is joined by his fellow members of the Bartholdy Trio.

‘brilliantly sustained by [pianist] James Willshire … compelling listening’
— The Arts Desk

‘a vibrant, all-consuming insight into a composer whose music, with its worldly scope, extends way beyond mere craftsmanship’
— The Scotsman, FIVE STARS

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Luminate: Live Music Now Scotland celebrates 30 years
Spencer-Strachan Duo, Emma Versteeg & Maryam Sherhan, Astrid String Quartet, Wildlings, Laura Margaret Smith & Geoffrey Tanti
DCD34153

In 2014, Live Music Now Scotland – an organisation that promotes the work of stellar young artists – celebrates its 30th birthday. A blazing trail of commissions has followed in the charity’s wake. In recognition of these three decades’ achievements, Delphian has taken a snapshot of LMN’s activity, itself a miniature picture of the wider cultural endeavours taking place in Scotland. Some of the country’s shining young artists have recorded recent works commissioned or co-commissioned by LMN, including several works developed in conjunction with innovative community projects. A broad canvas of activity, flecked with intriguing and beautiful details.

‘Lots of Celtic influences, astringently reimagined and atmospheric.’
— The Times

Ronald Stevenson: Passacaglia on DSCH; Bax & Pizzetti Variations; etc
James Willshire
DCD34119

Music of extraordinary range and power composed at the dawn of the Space Age, Ronald Stevenson’s Passacaglia on DSCH was long claimed as the biggest single stretch of music ever written for piano. It is a veritable world tour of styles as well as a single-minded exploration of its generating motif, and rising star James Willshire has the technique and vaulting ambition to match both the work’s grandeur and its immense wealth of detail. Willshire gave the 1955 Variations on a Theme of Pizzetti its belated concert premiere in 2012, while the later Fugue, Variations and Epilogue on a Theme by Arnold Bax crystallises Stevenson’s lifelong devotion to a Celtic aesthetic as well as his innovative approach to variation technique. A clutch of shorter works completes the picture, foregrounding aspects of Stevenson’s charm, wit and grace.

‘Willshire’s performance is magisterial … Stunning sound and good notes too’
— The Arts Desk

Songs and Lullabies: new works for solo cello
Robert Irvine
DCD34173

Inspired by the plight of disadvantaged and mistreated children around the world, Delphian artist Robert Irvine has commissioned 18 new pieces for solo cello. As a musician who works at the heart of the English and Scottish scenes, he is able to draw on an impressive roster of friends and colleagues that includes some of the UK’s leading composers. Each of them has contributed a short solo piece, drawing out the cello’s most lyrical aspects, while Irvine’s own startling alertness to the finest expressive nuance further enhances this unique recording project.

‘Irvine responds to each piece with the same sincerity, imagination and technical assurance.’
— Gramophone

Purcell’s Revenge: Sweeter than Roses?
Olivia Chaney, James Bowman, Ana Silvera, Jim Moray, Concerto Caledonia / David McGuinness
DCD34161

Delving into the past is never a simple matter for David McGuinness and his indomitable Concerto Caledonia. But the present venture, even more than most, eludes verbal description. The group return – in the company of some starry guests – to the territory of their 2011 Britten tribute Revenge of the Folksingers, now engaging with music by Henry Purcell in a tapestry of arrangements and creative responses which is never less than surprising. Variations by eighteenth-century Scot James Oswald rub shoulders with the Purcell tunes they are based on, while original songs by Olivia Chaney and Ana Silvera and some literally ‘electrifying’ instrumental contributions add to the general air of expectations confounded.

‘veers between maddening and utterly joyous … well ahead of the curve’
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Also available on Delphian

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