

## RESEARCH REPORT

# The Up-hill Fight for the Viola: Two Different Strands of Development of the Viola in Britain from 1885 to 1960, and a Recently Discovered Work

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My research began with an interest in finding new viola repertoire. Realising that there was a wealth of British viola music that didn't get much attention, and finding it often to be out of print, I started to become interested in researching this field. Being British myself, and having studied with Cecil Aronowitz, one of Britain's finest viola and chamber music players, I have a natural connection with this music and have become quite passionate about this research and am excited by every new discovery.

The research will look at the difficulties facing British viola players and composers in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries; how performers and composers worked together to raise the standard of viola playing in Britain, inspiring and encouraging writing for the viola, both as a solo instrument and as a more prominent orchestral instrument; and how they brought about a change of attitude in the musical community towards the viola. The leading figures, Lionel Tertis and William Primrose, are well known. Their autobiographies and the writings of scholars such as John White, David Dalton and Maurice Riley, give insight into the plight of the viola at this time. British viola repertoire went through a stage of being neglected until only fairly recently. Some of today's foremost viola soloists—Roger Chase, Lawrence Power, Martin Outram, Sarah Jane Bradley, Simon Rowland Jones and others—have lately revived some of this beautifully lyrical and passionate music. Walton's *Concerto for Viola* was one of the few viola works that continued to be played throughout the century; there are many other significant works that have slipped into oblivion.

The initial stages of this research project involved finding out what repertoire had been written for the viola, whether it was still in print, when and by whom it was first published

and who now has the publishing rights. The information about repertoire came from various sources, including John White's *An Anthology of British Viola Players* (Colne, Lancs: Comus, 1997) and *Lionel Tertis: The First Great Virtuoso of the Viola* (Woodbridge, Suff.: Boydell Press, 2006) and *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* (ed. W. Cobbett with C. Mason, London: OUP, 1963). This has resulted in a list of about three hundred British works for viola dating from 1885 to 1960.

The next stage of the project is to trace two strands of development of the viola as a solo instrument, the viola in chamber music and the viola as a concerto instrument. I will then analyse the difficulties faced and investigate how these were overcome, to show how the distinctive attributes of the viola were used to enhance and develop a unique style of writing. How the viola developed depended on performers, composers, the availability of quality instruments, attitudes of other musicians and the public towards the viola and its players, and opportunities for publishing and performing works written for the viola. I plan to look at the music itself and to analyse how the viola developed technically and musically.

### **The Main Players in the Development of the Viola as a Solo Instrument**

The performers whose playing influenced the development of the viola and its repertoire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were Emil Kreuz, Émile Férir, Alfred Hobday, Lionel Tertis, William Primrose, Bernard Shore, Rebecca Clarke and Cecil Aronowitz. The earliest significant viola players, of this time, were Emil Kreuz, Émile Férir and Alfred Hobday.

Alfred Hobday (1870–1942) the most widely known British violist before Lionel Tertis and William Primrose, was on good terms with Lionel Tertis. He received an acknowledgement in *The Strad* in a 1905 article that reflects on the attitude of the day:

the delightful viola is quite absurdly neglected ... Yet what a beautiful instrument the viola is when played by a genuine viola player, by which I mean a player whose first love is the viola. Listen to Mr Alfred Hobday ... and say if there is anything in the whole range of the modern orchestra more throbbing with human feeling. (White, *Anthology*)

Émile Férir (1873–1949) a Belgian viola player, a pupil of Ysaye, who worked in London from 1897 to 1903, played with the Kruse String Quartet and the Queen's Hall Orchestra. Férir first played at the Proms in 1897, when he played the second movement of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*. He was a frequent performer at the Proms and also performed the Viola Concerto by Cecil Forsyth at the 1903 Proms.

Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979) was recognised as a composer, and was also England's leading female viola player. She became a great ambassador for the viola, being well acquainted with other great musicians of the day. She wrote one of the most beautiful and romantic viola sonatas, and also performed in Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* at the Proms in 1927.

It was against this historical backdrop that Lionel Tertis (1876–1975) came to advocate for the viola in his career as a soloist and teacher, and as an inspirer of many composers. He was appointed Professor at the Royal Academy of Music in 1900, and brought about many changes in viola teaching and performance. He worked with luthiers to create modified designs for the viola that would provide the greater tonal capacity of a larger instrument whilst still being a reasonable size for most players. He comments in his book *My Viola and I* that, 'It was pure generosity in those days to write for the solo viola. Publishers would not consider anything of

the sort, to them it was a distinctly bad commercial proposition.<sup>1</sup> Yet his colleagues continued to write for him. There were no viola teachers at the Royal Academy of Music in 1897, so Tertis decided to study by himself, listening to virtuosi—he heard Sarasate play the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto ‘most marvellously.’ He also states that when he first began to play the viola as a solo instrument, prejudice and storms of abuse were his lot. Generally in England the viola was not regarded as an instrument suitable for playing solos. Its cause was not helped by the ‘wretchedly low standard of viola playing.’ Lionel Tertis taught many viola players, amongst them being Bernard Shore, Rebecca Clarke, Eric Coates, Winifred Copperwheat and Harry Danks. These have, in turn, influenced the next generation of players.

William Primrose (1904–1982) was a very significant figure in the history of viola playing. Like Tertis he had a deep impression made on him early in life by hearing Fritz Kreisler play. He also started out as a violinist and was greatly influenced by his contact with the Belgian violinist Ysaye who suggested he change to viola. In 1928 a performance of Mozart’s *Sinfonia Concertante* with Tertis was the turning point in his career. From 1941 he pursued a solo career as a violist.

Cecil Aronowitz (1916–1978), mainly known as a chamber music player, was associated with Benjamin Britten and the Aldeburgh Festival. Although Britten never wrote a concerto for him, the three Church Operas, *Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son* are scored with no violins, but a single viola part written for Aronowitz. Britten also dedicated the re-arrangement of his *Lachrymae* for viola and orchestra in 1976 to Cecil, who gave the first British performance the following year at Aldeburgh.

The nineteenth-century tendency of the British musical public to favour visiting foreign musicians was, in some ways, detrimental to the development of English music, although it has to be said that European musicians were often a great source of inspiration. Both Lionel Tertis and William Primrose in their autobiographies describe the impact that violinists such as Ysaye and Kreisler had on them. The twentieth century saw a gradual change in attitudes towards the native British composer and performer, a change in which the viola had its role to play.

The composers who had a significant impact on the development of the viola were Charles Villiers Stanford, Emil Kreuz, John B. McEwen, Cecil Forsyth, Frank Bridge, William Alwyn, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Granville Bantock, Arnold Bax, Benjamin Dale, York Bowen, Malcolm Arnold, Edward Elgar, Edmund Rubbra, William Walton and Benjamin Britten.

The earliest British viola concertos are by Emil Kreuz (1885, published by Augener; now out of print), Sir John Blackwood McEwen (1901, privately published), Cecil Forsyth (1903), and York Bowen (1906/7). Other composers who have written works for viola are Edgar Bainton, Stanley Bate, W.H. Bell, Arthur Benjamin, Lennox Berkeley, Arthur Bliss, Eric Coates, Percy Grainger, Kenneth Harding, Gustav Holst, Imogen Holst, Herbert Howells, Gordon Jacob, Ebenezer Prout, Alan Rawsthorne and William Henry Reed.

Emil Kreuz (1867–1932) was a German violinist and violist who studied composition with Stanford at the Royal College of Music until 1888. He made his debut as a viola soloist with the London Symphony Orchestra, playing Berlioz’s *Harold in Italy*, and continued to work in Britain as a violinist/violist with the Halle orchestra under Richter, and as a conductor. As far as can be ascertained, Kreuz’s *Viola Concerto*, op. 20, is the earliest British viola concerto.

<sup>1</sup> Lionel Tertis, *My Viola and I: A Complete Autobiography* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1991).

Cecil Forsyth (1870–1941) wrote a viola concerto in 1903, which was premiered by Émile Férir. It is remarkable that he wrote this concerto for the viola when you consider his statements about the viola in his *Treatise on Orchestration* published in 1914. The chapter on writing for the viola as an orchestral instrument makes interesting reading.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), a violist himself, showed a great understanding of the instrument's tonal qualities in his orchestral works and solo repertoire. One of his most beautiful works including a prominent viola part is *Flos Campi*, a suite for solo viola, small, wordless mixed chorus and chamber orchestra.

Frank Bridge (1879–1941) was a student of Stanford and himself the teacher of Benjamin Britten. Bridge was an outstanding violist who played with professional chamber ensembles. He wrote a few very characteristic works for the viola, including the *Lament* for two violas.

Arnold Bax (1883–1953) and York Bowen (1884–1961) were both at the Royal Academy while Tertis was there. Bax was a prolific composer, and his *Phantasy* for viola and orchestra is extraordinary music, being well orchestrated and ideally suited to the viola. His many works for viola include a *Fantasy Sonata* for viola and harp. Bowen was a pianist and an accomplished viola player, accompanying Tertis on many occasions. His *Fantasie* for four violas, written in 1907, is well worth listening to.

In 1929, William Walton (1902–1983) offered the premiere of his *Viola Concerto* to Lionel Tertis, who declined. Tertis later confessed:

With shame and contrition I admit that when the composer offered me the first performance I declined it. I was unwell at the time; but what is also true is that I had not learnt to appreciate Walton's style. (White, *First Great Virtuoso*, 105)

The concerto had been inspired by having heard Lionel Tertis play, however, as he had declined the work, the first performance was given by Paul Hindemith, and the second by Bernard Shore. Tertis did eventually perform this concerto in 1930, and Walton expressed his gratitude for everything he had done for the work.

### **Confronting the Difficulties in Writing for the Solo Viola**

The greatest problems in writing for the viola as a solo instrument are encountered in the concerto form. The sound of the viola, having a middle pitch range, can easily be lost in the sound of the orchestra, so that orchestration and balance have to be very carefully considered. In the late nineteenth century, composers were starting to ask more of the viola player in the orchestra. In 1914 Cecil Forsyth in his book on orchestration stated:

In more modern times the composer has begun to ask of the viola player much of the same extension and perfection of technique as he asks of the Cellist or Violinist. Strauss in particular treats the instrument with a freedom and plasticity quite unknown before his day.<sup>2</sup>

Few viola players, however, were used to the increased technical demands of this style of writing, and new ground had to be broken in developing technical facility on the viola. The upper register on the viola, which has its own particular tone colour, is generally used, in order

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<sup>2</sup> Cecil Forsyth, *Orchestration*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

to project the sound above the orchestra. The resulting style of concerto writing was unique in its orchestration and its use of the solo instrument.

It can be understood that some composers and performers thought that the viola was more suited to chamber music, and some of the prominent composers of viola music did not write concertos, for example Frank Bridge, Rebecca Clarke and Benjamin Dale. Whilst the viola is very suited to the chamber music idiom, the new possibilities of composing for the viola, with extended technical skills, emerged largely through the concerto. There are some really fine examples of less well-known viola concertos and works for viola and orchestra written by British composers, which compare very favourably with the more well-known concertos by Walton, Bartók and Hindemith, notably, the Emil Kreuz *Viola Concerto*, Cecil Forsyth's *Viola Concerto*, Vaughan Williams's *Flos Campi*, York Bowen's *Viola Concerto*, Arnold Bax's *Phantasy* for viola and orchestra, and Rubbra's *Viola Concerto*.

My research has recently led me to the Royal College of Music, London, where I found some interesting correspondence from musicians of the time, including that by Frank Bridge, Edmund Rubbra, Herbert Howells, Charles Villiers Stanford, Hans Richter and Granville Bantock. This has given me more insight into the musical climate in the first part of the twentieth century. The most exciting find was a manuscript of an unpublished viola concerto written for Bernard Shore by Oscar Parish. There appears to be scant information available on this composer, and there does not seem to be any record of him apart from a note with the concerto dated 14 April 1938, and stamped 'O. Parish, Musical Instruments, Violin Expert & Valuer.' The note gives an indication that Oscar Parish was reasonably well acquainted with Bernard Shore, as he says, 'Perhaps it may interest you to know, that the whole work represents a picture of your up-hill fight since the late war.'

I also found some unpublished works by W.H. Reed, W. L. Reed, Bernard Shore and Philip Sainton in the RCM library. I am planning to pursue editorial work on these manuscripts. The aim of this research is to preserve the viola repertoire by bringing this somewhat neglected music to the attention of other musicians through editions, articles and performances.

But while cousins Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and Britain's King George V were described as close friends, their relationship ended in ruthless circumstances. As head of an empire that was waning, where many citizens experienced extreme poverty and autocratic rule, Nicholas II found himself caught between a world war and the discontent of his own people. The pictures hint at a close bond, which makes suggestions that Nicholas II's relatives in Britain refused or were passive in trying to save him all the more intriguing. Did the king of England sell the tsar and his family down the river to preserve his own power base, or was he put under pressure by a government to ignore an SOS in the midst of the more pressing matter of fighting World War I? Research Report The Up-hill Fight for the Viola: Two Different Strands of Development of the Viola in Britain from 1885 to 1960, and a Recently Discovered Work Valerie Dart

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