

Program Notes by Chris Darwin. Please use freely for non-commercial purposes.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Phantasy for oboe and string trio in F minor Op. 2 (1932)

Andante alla marcia - Allegro giusto - Con Fuoco - Andante alla marcia

Around 1900, the composition of English chamber music was not flourishing; audiences subscribed to the Vaughan Williams 'cigar theory' – that music was a luxury that should be imported. Walter Willson Cobbett was determined to make it home grown. Amongst many other effective activities, he instituted a competition for new chamber music. The first competition in 1905 required a 'Phantasy' String Quartet. A Phantasy was Cobbett's reinvention of the Fancies and Fantasias of Purcell, Byrd and Gibbons. It was to be short (<12 mins), treating the instruments equally, played continuously and with contrasting sections. That, Cobbett thought would appeal to the 'untrained listener'.

Frank Bridge, who later taught the young Benjamin Britten, came second to William Hurlstone in the 1905 competition, but won the 1907 competition for a Phantasy Piano Trio, and in 1910 was commissioned by Cobbett to write a Phantasy Piano Quartet. So Britten would have been familiar with the Phantasy form both from Bridge and from his own admiration of Purcell. In 1932, the year that he completed his Phantasy oboe quartet, Britten himself won the Cobbett prize for his Phantasy in F minor for string quintet. Though the oboe quartet is a mere Op 2, it follows over a hundred schoolboy compositions, some of which had impressed Bridge to take on the 14-year-old Britten. Bridge instilled into the young Britten a strict technical discipline, which brings a satisfying structure to the free form of the Phantasy.

Britten writes ingeniously for the strings in combination with the oboe. The piece starts with a barely perceptible solo cello gradually approaching, introducing a march (illustrated) somewhat reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* (which had had its London premier in 1927). The march turns into a lively *Allegro giusto* (strict) with contrasting episodes for solo strings and then an oboe cadenza before the march returns and the solo cello leads us away into the distance.

