

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956): Five Bagatelles for clarinet and piano, Opus 23 (1945)

Prelude: Allegro deciso

Romance: Andante tranquillo

Carol: Andante semplice

Forlana: Allegretto grazioso

Fughetta: Allegro vivace

Better known for his vocal music, Finzi also wrote well for the clarinet: these *Five Bagatelles* and his later *Clarinet Concerto* are frequently played. Born to a German/Italian Jewish family in London, the teenage Finzi was taught composition in Harrogate by Ernest Farrar, a pupil of Stanford, and by Edward Bairstow, Master of Music at York Minster. His subsequent friends and colleagues included Vaughan Williams, R.O. Morris, Holst, Bliss, Rubbra and Howard Ferguson; his music is firmly within this English tradition. He was attracted to the beauty of the English countryside and to the poetry of Traherne, Hardy and Christina Rossetti.

The *Five Bagatelles* had a tortuous birth. In the summer of 1941, increasingly confident in his powers as a composer, Finzi completed three character pieces for clarinet and piano before being drafted into the Ministry of War Transport. He used “20-year-old bits and pieces”, which he had been working on since 1938. A fourth was added in January 1942 and the whole group performed at a wartime National Gallery lunchtime concert. Leslie Boosey wanted to publish the pieces separately, but in July 1945 Finzi persuaded him to publish them as a group, together with an additional fast finale. Somewhat to Finzi's chagrin, they became his most popular piece: *‘they are only trifles... not worth much, but got better notices than my decent stuff’*.

The first movement shows Bach's influence on Finzi and contains a slow central section with characteristically wistful falling minor 7ths. The third piece started out as a little carol for Herbert Howell's daughter Ursula, setting a poem by Ivor Gurney *‘Winter now has bared the trees’*. The title of the fourth piece *Forlana* is puzzling. The original *Forlane* is a fast 6/8 dance from Slav immigrants to 16th century Italy but Ravel used the title in his *‘Tombeau de Couperin’* for a slower piece that is closer to Finzi's. The final piece returns to Bach for its inspiration and a rousing finish.