

Melrose Music Society

SCOTTISH CHARITY NO. SC005891

Sunday 19th July 2026, 3pm

Simon Callaghan, Piano



Rebecca Clarke
Cyril Scott

Theme and Variations
Sonata No.1

Interval

Franz Schubert

Sonata in B-flat major, D. 960

Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979) - *Theme and Variations* (1908)

Rebecca Clarke is remembered today chiefly as a violist and the composer of a handful of remarkable chamber works, above all the *Viola Sonata* of 1919, which tied for first place in Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge's composition competition that year before losing out on the casting vote to Ernest Bloch. Born in Harrow to an American father and German mother, Clarke entered the Royal Academy of Music as a violinist before being persuaded by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, her composition teacher at the Royal College of Music, to take up the viola instead. She became Stanford's first female composition student, and it was during these student years - around 1908 - that she wrote the *Theme and Variations* for solo piano.

The piece predates the harmonic boldness of Clarke's mature style, but it already shows a composer with an unusually sure sense of structure and keyboard colour. A spacious, lyrical theme is followed by a sequence of variations that explore contrasting moods and textures - by turns reflective, agitated and brilliant - without ever losing sight of the theme's underlying shape. There is an assurance to the writing that belies the composer's youth: the variations are laid out with a clear dramatic trajectory, building from intimacy towards a more declamatory close, and the piano writing already shows the colouristic imagination that would later flower in works such as the *Viola Sonata* and the *Piano Trio*.

Clarke's career as a composer was brief but distinguished, hampered by the limited opportunities available to women composers of her generation and by her own demanding career as a performer - she was a member of the all-female English Ensemble piano quartet and performed widely with leading musicians of the day, including Myra Hess and May Mukle. Like much of her output, the *Theme and Variations* went unpublished in her lifetime; it appeared in print only in 2022, as part of Nimbus Music Publishing's edition of her complete works for solo piano (released alongside Simon Callaghan's recording), finally making this early and engaging piece available to performers and audiences nearly a century and a half after Clarke's birth, and more than four decades after her death in 1979.



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Cyril Scott (1879–1970) - Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 66 (1908–09, rev. 1927)
Allegro con spirito – Adagio ma non troppo – Scherzo – Fugue

Cyril Meir Scott was, for a time, one of the most talked-about composers in England, hailed by some as “the English Debussy”. Born in Oxtou, Cheshire, he studied piano from the age of 12 at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, becoming part of the so-called Frankfurt Group of English composers studying there in the 1890s alongside Percy Grainger, Roger Quilter and Balfour Gardiner. Grainger remained a lifelong champion of Scott’s music.

The *Piano Sonata*, composed in the summer of 1908, was Scott's first major essay for the instrument and remains among his most ambitious works. Cast in four continuous movements, it is unified by themes that recur and transform across the span of the piece, and is notable for its restless, shifting metres, a feature said to have caught the attention of Stravinsky. The first movement sets out two contrasting ideas - a forthright opening gesture and a more lyrical, subdued idea that goes on to generate much of the thematic material heard later in the sonata. The slow movement is more harmonically adventurous still, its chromatic, often ambiguous tonal language owing something to Scott's admiration for French impressionism as well as to his own occult and mystical preoccupations, which he believed music could express directly.

The Scherzo brings a lighter, more capricious tone, before the sonata closes with a Fugue - an unusual choice for a finale in this idiom, and one that allowed Scott to draw together the work's recurring motifs within a rigorously contrapuntal frame. The sonata was revised by Scott in 1927, and it is this later version that is most commonly performed and recorded today; it was followed many years later by two further numbered piano sonatas, though neither displaced the first in the affections of pianists drawn to Scott's music.



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Franz Schubert (1797–1828) - Sonata in B flat major, D. 960 (1828)

Molto moderato - Andante sostenuto - Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza - Allegro, ma non troppo

Schubert composed his final three piano sonatas – D. 958 in C minor, D. 959 in A major and D. 960 in B flat - in the space of a few weeks in September 1828, just two months before his death. Sketches suggest they were conceived together, even on shared pages of manuscript, and unusually, in the case of the B flat Sonata, Schubert appears to have sketched the finale before he had finished the first movement. He intended to dedicate the set to Johann Nepomuk Hummel, but by the time they were published in 1838–39, a decade after his death, the publisher Diabelli had redirected the dedication elsewhere - to Robert Schumann, who had championed Schubert's music in print. Neglected for much of the 19th century, the three works, and D. 960 above all, are now regarded among the summit of the entire piano repertoire.

It is tempting to hear in these last works a conscious farewell, written by a composer who knew his time was short. However, despite declining health for several years, there is little evidence Schubert expected death to come so soon; the final, fatal illness struck only in the last weeks of his life. What the sonatas do capture, perhaps, is something more universal - a composer at the height of his powers, working with complete freedom and ambition, unconcerned with the public neglect his piano sonatas had generally received during his lifetime.

The first movement opens with a theme of extraordinary serenity, twice interrupted by a quiet, ominous trill in the bass on notes foreign to the home key - a moment of harmonic shadow that recurs throughout the movement, including at the hushed return of the opening material after an expansive development that journeys as far as the remote key of C sharp minor before finding its way home. It is a movement of vast scale, built from material that seems modest on first hearing but proves capable of sustaining an entire world of feeling.

The Andante sostenuto is one of Schubert's most desolate creations, its sparse, hymn-like outer sections framing a warmer central episode in the major before the opening mood returns, now scarcely more than a whisper. Relief comes with the Scherzo, light-footed and good-humoured, its trio passing briefly into shadow before the dance resumes; after the weight of the first two movements, its brevity and charm come almost as a release.

The finale begins, unexpectedly, with a single octave G sounding over a chord of C minor before settling into the genial rondo theme in B flat that gives the movement its character, its tonal identity remaining teasingly ambiguous at first hearing. The music moves through moments of turbulence before each time finding its way back to good humour and momentum. At the close, that same octave summons returns one last time, now sounded on G, G flat and F in quick succession, before a brief and brilliant coda brings to an end not only the sonata, but Schubert's entire catalogue of works for solo piano: a conclusion of genuine exuberance from a composer who, for all the pathos that colours these last pages of his output, never lost his appetite for life.

Simon Callaghan performs internationally as a soloist and chamber musician, alongside a highly successful career as a recording artist. He appears regularly in the UK's major concert halls and on tours to Asia, North America and Europe. Callaghan's release of Bennett Concertos with the Royal Northern Sinfonia and Martin Yates was Gramophone Editors' Choice, receiving high critical acclaim.

He has collaborated as concerto soloist with BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Ulster Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia and the Sinfonieorchester St Gallen, and conductors including Jac van Steen, Martin Yates, Modestas Pitrenas and Martyn Brabbins. Recital partners include Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Jack Liebeck, Coco Tomita, Nicholas Daniel, Julian Bliss, Adrian Brendel, Ben Goldscheider, Feng Ning, Raphael Wallfisch, and Ruth Rogers. He is a founding member of the London Piano Quartet, with its focus on revivifying works that have fallen into obscurity. Callaghan's extensive discography is complemented by a strong profile on BBC Radio 3 and on several streaming platforms, as a social media enthusiast both for promoting classical music in general and as a tool in his advocacy of the rare and unexplored.

Simon's repertoire encompasses standard works of the 19th and 20th centuries, increasingly focusing on little known composers such as Bernhard Scholz, Josef Rheinberger and Carl Reinecke. His commitment to British music is reflected in an ongoing series on Lyrita recording world premieres of British concertos with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. He has made first recordings of the complete piano music by Rebecca Clarke, George Dyson and William Busch. He has recorded four albums for Hyperion's *The Romantic Piano Concerto* series.

Simon is Artistic Director at London's Conway Hall. He is Professor of Piano at the Royal Northern College of Music, and was elected a Steinway Artist in 2012.

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Our Next Concerts

Sunday, Aug. 16th at 3:00pm

Maria Waszyrowska, soprano & Harris Playfair, piano

This recital, exploring links between Europe and Broadway, begins our celebration of Bruno Walter. Weill was another refugee who achieved fame in America; Gershwin sought classical respectability; Rodgers mimicked Viennese operetta. Maria, accompanied by the majestically versatile Harris, will also sing songs from her native Poland, and two of Tchaikovsky's most delightful melodies.

Sunday, September 6th at 3pm

Boglárka György, violin & Amy Butler, piano

The duo that played Beethoven's "Spring" so memorably in 2024 return with his passionate "Kreutzer", which was the model and inspiration for Walter's neglected but beautiful sonata. Boglárka and Amy also play melodious works from the two composers Walter most admired. He made the first commercial recording of Mahler's Symphony No.5 with the NYPO in 1947. Its poignant Adagietto sounds wonderful as a delicate duet. Mozart's K301 is his first masterpiece in the genre, famous for its lilting waltz finale.

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