



**City of Birmingham**  
Symphony Orchestra

# CENTRE STAGE

## BRITTEN, CRUSELL AND GIPPS

CBSO Centre, Birmingham

**Friday 1 October, 2.00pm**

**Emmet Byrne** – Oboe

**Oliver Janes** – Clarinet

**Kirsty Lovie** – Violin

**Jess Tickle** – Viola

**Helen Edgar** – Cello

**Britten** Phantasy Quartet

**Crusell** Clarinet Quartet

**Gipps** Quintet for Wind and Strings

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**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976)

### **Phantasy Quartet Op.2, for oboe and strings**

*Andante alla Marcia – Allegro giusto – Andante – Andante alla marcia*

By the age of 19, Benjamin Britten was already a seasoned composer. He had asserted his individuality and self-confidence with an Opus 1 (his *Sinfonietta*) inspired by the most modern European trends, now his Opus 2 followed in a more established English tradition – to outward appearances, at any rate. The *Phantasy Quartet* (1932) is a late product of a particular genre of English chamber music founded by the wealthy amateur violinist and leather-merchant W.W. Cobbett (1847-1937), who had in 1905 instituted a composing competition designed to revive the 17th Century form of the single-movement “Fantasia”. Herbert Howells, Vaughan Williams, Stanford, and – significantly – Britten’s teachers John Ireland and Frank Bridge had all at various times won the Cobbett competition. As well as a cash prize – then, as now, a substantial incentive to a student composer – it offered Britten a rapid route to recognition amongst some of the most distinguished British composers of the day.

But a talent as individual and as strong-willed as Britten was never going to play it entirely by the book. Naturally, Britten’s Quartet displays the typical single movement, slow – fast – slow layout of the *Phantasy* genre, and hints occasionally at the English Pastoral style characteristic of the Cobbett composers in general and the early music of his mentor Bridge in particular. But the teenage composer subverted expectation by writing an extended developmental section, the second *Andante*, in which the oboe is completely silent; and he showed, throughout the work, the same preoccupation with exploring and exploiting specific intervals that had been such a feature of the *Sinfonietta*, and which he had learned from Schoenberg and Alban Berg – in this case the minor third and fifth, both heard prominently in the opening *Andante alla Marcia*.

The 1933 competition was sponsored by *The Daily Telegraph* and the Quartet was Highly Commended, but there was a more-than-satisfactory consolation prize: the Quartet was selected for the April 1934 ISCM Festival in Florence, where it was performed by its dedicatee, the oboist Eugene Goossens and the Griller Quartet. “Goossens & the Grillers played my Quartet very well, and it was very well received...” wrote a delighted Britten to the composer Grace Williams. “It is original in design, and at the same time unpretentious” reported the critic of *The Times* “... which is more than can be said of all the works heard at the Florence Festival”.

**Bernhard Crusell** (1775-1838)

### **Quartet No.1 in E flat for clarinet and strings, Op.2**

*Poco adagio – Allegro | Romanze (Cantabile) | Menuetto (Allegro) | Rondo: Allegro vivace*

In the little town of his birth there was only one person who had an active interest in music: a shop assistant who could be heard in the evenings playing the flute for his own pleasure. One night, the four-year-old Berndt was sitting in the street, leaning against a wall, overcome with love for the sweet melodies. His parents, who had been looking for their son for a long time, scolded him

severely, but they couldn't stop the boy from returning to his favourite spot the next evening. This time he got a beating for his disobedience, but as it was to no avail, they left him to his "craze", confident that he would come back home as soon as the flute went silent...

The little town was Nystad, now Uusikaupunki in Finland, and four-year old Berndt would grow up to be known to the world as Bernhard Crusell: a clarinet virtuoso of Europe-wide renown (not a single bad newspaper review survives), the best-paid bandsman in the King of Sweden's service, and the first composer of Finnish birth (although born under Swedish rule, Crusell always considered himself a Finn) to have his music published. And if that little anecdote from his own memoirs is to be believed, his passion for wind instruments dated from early childhood. That was a useful attribute in a musical director of military bands – and Crusell wrote effective and enjoyable works for bassoon, flute and horn as well as the numerous entertaining and characterful concertos and that chamber pieces he wrote for his own instrument, the clarinet.

Crusell knew his classics – he travelled to France, Germany, Austria, England and Russia and was an early Scandinavian champion of Beethoven; he also made the first Swedish translation of *The Marriage of Figaro*. His first clarinet quartet, Op.2 – composed in 1802 but not published until 1812 – moves effortlessly and elegantly in the same musical circles as Haydn and the young Beethoven. Crusell wanted to showcase his own talents as a player and a chamber piece like this, which could be performed in salons and private houses without the need for a full orchestra, was one way of opening doors (it's surely significant that he composed it just as he was about to set out to study in Paris). Naturally, the clarinet takes a leading role – engaging in lively conversation in the first movement (after waiting in silence through a stately introduction), dancing in the *Menuetto* and joking cheerfully in the playful final *Rondo*. And in the second movement – a *Romanze* – it breathes pure tenderness, in music clearly inspired by Mozart but glowing with Crusell's own personal charisma and charm.

**Ruth Gipps** (1921-1999)

## Quintet for oboe, clarinet and strings, Op.15

*Allegro* | *Adagio* | *Energico* | *Allegro moderato*

When the City of Birmingham Orchestra became a full-time ensemble in the summer of 1944, one of the first appointments was a new second oboe and cor anglais player: the 23-year-old Ruth Gipps, known to her friends as "Wid", and already carving a path as a pianist and a strikingly original composer. Born in Bexhill, the daughter of a Swiss piano teacher, she had played her first concerto in public at the age of four. After graduating from the Royal College of Music, Gipps launched herself into a freelance career as an orchestral oboist in a wartime Britain, where opportunities for female musicians were in generous supply.

Gipps played in the Hallé, the London Symphony and the Liverpool Philharmonic before being headhunted for the CBO by its new music director, her college friend George Weldon. On 25 March 1945 she played in the orchestra in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol*, appeared as soloist in Glazunov's First Piano Concerto, and finally played cor anglais in the premiere of her own First Symphony. "How often does musical history show a case of so remarkable a symphony written by a girl of twenty-one – or for that matter, by a boy?" asked the *Birmingham Post*.

But her Quintet Op.15 for oboe, clarinet and string trio dates from even earlier in her composing career; the spring of 1941, when she was still a student. Gipps' approach to her education was highly individual. Having trained as a pianist before taking up the oboe in 1937, she made a practice of offering her services as a piano accompanist to student woodwind players – then dropping them as soon as she had learned all that she needed to about their instrument. Dissatisfied with the standard of teaching at the RCM, she enrolled on a second (postal) degree course at Durham University, which proved scarcely more satisfactory.

Her outlook was transformed when, in 1940, she entered the 67-year old Vaughan Williams' composition class, around the same time that she was growing close to a clarinet student, Robert Baker. The Quintet – originally intended (and submitted) as a course requirement for her Durham degree – was, on a deeper level, a response to both these relationships. Vaughan Williams encouraged Gipps and Baker to become engaged; they married in March 1942, and after being demobbed from the RAF Robert would go on to be the CBSO's principal clarinet for nearly a decade. In the Quintet, meanwhile, oboe and clarinet play as partners and as equals, in a pastoral landscape laid out by the string trio, and evocative both of Vaughan Williams' own style and the Sussex-born Gipps's own lifelong love of the English countryside.

The result is something entirely distinctive – translucent, lyrical and written with a profound understanding of the textures and colours of all five instruments. While the two woodwind lovers clearly take the foreground, they never dominate; throughout the rhapsodic first movement Vaughan Williams' presence is unmistakable and benign (Gipps later described him as one of the few completely good individuals she had ever met). From an austere opening, the *Adagio* second movement gradually blossoms; there's an earthy vigour about the dance-like third movement. (Gipps didn't use folk tunes, but she insisted that "the actual music I write is obviously and incurably English"). And there's a controlled energy about the finale – which pushes its way through increasingly restless weather to a final defiant assertion of confidence and hope. Baker played in the first performance – at the Wigmore Hall on 2 July 1941 – though the oboe part was taken not by Gipps herself, but her friend Marion Brough.