Passacaglia on an Old English Tune
for Viola (or Cello) and Piano

Program Notes:

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) is now recognized as a significant composer of the first half of the twentieth century. Born in Harrow, England, to an American father and a German mother, she was educated at London's Royal College of Music, where she was the first woman composition student of Sir Charles Stanford. She achieved fame as a composer with her Viola Sonata (1919) and Piano Trio (1921), both written for competitions sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Throughout the 1920s Clarke continued to write chamber music and songs, much of it for her fellow performers. Clarke also had a long career as a professional violist; in 1913 she was one of the first women to be admitted to the Queen's Hall Orchestra. Based in London from 1924 to 1939, she toured extensively, performing with a number of ensembles, and broadcasting on the BBC. The onset of World War II in 1939 found her visiting in the U.S., where she remained. By 1942 she had completed ten more compositions, and in 1944 she married pianist James Friskin, who had been a fellow student at the Royal College, and settled with him in New York City where she lived until her death at age 93.

While she achieved some recognition as a composer in her lifetime, Clarke often felt conflicted about composing. Her use of the pseudonym “Anthony Trent” in 1918 for her (still unpublished) piece Morpheus for Viola and Piano, and her difficulty in finding publishers for her music (even after the success of her Viola Sonata) illustrate some of the many ways that gender affected her career trajectory and her self-image as a composer. Her life story, in many ways a poignant one, offers insight into this creative woman. While we have much to learn from her biography, the focus of interest must be her music, even though a large portion of her oeuvre remains unpublished and controlled by her estate.

Of the 10 works written during 1939-1942, the Passacaglia for Viola and Piano (1941) was the only one to be published. It is likely that Clarke received direct encouragement when she herself premiered the work. The premiere took place on March 28, 1941 at Temple Emanu-El in New York City, as part of series of concerts called The Three-Choirs Festival (confusingly, since there is a famous British festival of the same name). She may even have received an invitation at the time from a publisher to submit the work for consideration, for it was published two years later by G. Schirmer, New York, in 1943.

From 1939 to 1941, Clarke lived in New York City, shuttling between the homes of her two brothers and their families. As each brother had four children, some of what she wrote probably contributed to the home music-making of the families. When the Passacaglia was published in 1943, it was dedicated “to BB.” In a family replete with often obscure nicknames, “BB” was Clarke’s niece Magdalen. In an interview with Magdalen Madden (nee Clarke) on November 7, 1994, she told me that while her aunt had indeed said she was dedicating the work to her, she (Mrs. Madden) had never believed the sincerity of the dedication. She did not know why the piece would be dedicated to her -- as opposed to her sisters or cousins.

While I do not wish to refute the surface meaning of this dedication, since Clarke did indeed tell Magdalen that the piece was dedicated to her, I would like to speculate on an underlying layer of meaning: that Clarke may have written the work as a response to the sudden death of her friend and colleague Frank Bridge on January 10, 1941.

The title of the original publication reads Passacaglia/on an Old English Tune. The piano part includes the footnote “attributed to Thomas Tallis.” “English tune” is significant here, because at the time of writing this work Clarke was, by all accounts, upset and depressed at her separation from her home in London, and filled with
anxiety about the war. Bridge’s death may have symbolized for her the passing of an era, a sad farewell. And “BB”? Bridge’s student Benjamin Britten had a role in organizing the memorial concert for Bridge. The concert was sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who had long been Bridge’s patron; but Coolidge, of course, was also a friend and patron of Clarke. A letter survives in which Britten suggests to Coolidge that Clarke would be willing to be involved in the memorial event. Britten’s inclusion of Clarke in these plans may have been part of the incentive for her to write the work. Ultimately, the Passacaglia was not included in the service, but Clarke was involved as a performer in Bridge’s Sextet for Strings (Washington D.C., March 11, 1941. Tape at the Library of Congress). Therefore, if Clarke wrote the Passacaglia specifically with the idea that it might be included in the memorial service, she may have suggested it to Britten. If she wrote it simply as a response to Bridge’s passing, it is possible that she labeled it with her niece’s nickname as a decoy for other “B”s that were resting heavily on her consciousness at that time: Bridge, her homeland Britain, and Benjamin Britten, a symbol of the next generation of British composers and the future of British music - - whatever that might be.

The Passacaglia can be seen as Clarke’s meditation on things British, her friends and colleagues, and the musical life of London, the city she considered her home. It is based on hymn 153, “Veni Creator,” in the English Hymnal of 1906. This is one of the pieces added to the hymnal by its editor, Ralph Vaughan Williams. The hymnal notes that it is attributed to Thomas Tallis, another connection with Vaughan Williams, since it suggests comparison with his famous orchestral setting of a theme by Tallis.

The Passacaglia is a powerful and somber work with an unusual structure. The pre-existent hymn melody creates a rigid organizing element, but one that is often underlying rather than in the foreground. It consists of four phrases (which repeat in four stanzas), plus two additional phrases which occur only at the end. In this formal outline, Clarke’s work follows the original hymn.

The harmonic language is modal and diatonic, with none of the lush impressionist chordal motion or chromatic harmonies of Clarke’s better-known works such as the Viola Sonata. The mode is C-Dorian, and thus the sixth degree of the scale suggested by the C-minor key signature is frequently raised to A-natural instead of A-flat. Frequent cross-relations, evocative of English music of the 16th century, give an antique flavor, as does Clarke’s use of Phrygian, the most pungent of the modes, with its lowered 2nd scale degree (see the viola part, mm. 18-23). The Passacaglia begins with the viola stating the melody straightforwardly, while the piano elaborates contrapuntally. The theme is embedded in the texture, where it accompanies other shifting melodies. The shape and momentum of the phrases often develop independently of the structure of the theme. Sometimes the interweaving melodies seem loosely constructed, but melody is only one element of a carefully planned larger structure. In mm. 24-26, the piece builds to an emphatic point of arrival, but this is not the beginning of a new statement of the theme; rather the theme is moving subtly as an internal line. The music grows in tension and weight, then eases and relaxes (m. 41), and drops to a quiet hush (m. 50). The texture thins to sustained low supporting tones, while the theme (piano, R.H.), entwined with a spontaneous melody in the viola, becomes more and more rhapsodic, with its dramatic upward run in mm. 64-65 arriving at fortissimo. A powerful shift in harmony to a brighter major key takes place as the final two phrases of the hymn (that occur only at the end) are stated. Since these phrases (mm. 74 to end) are built on steadily ascending lines, the conclusion is dramatically uplifting and transcendent, with the warm Picardy third of the final chord an unmistakable expression of hope.

As in her only other published piece for viola and piano, the 1919 Sonata, Clarke also published this work in an edition for cello. She had an empathy for the cello, not only through her close work with the instrument as a chamber musician, but also through her long and intimate friendship with the cellist May Mukle. A copy of the published edition of the Passacaglia is in the Mukle estate, signed “With love, Becca” (thanks to cellist Catherine Wilmers for information about the Mukle estate). A draft of an arrangement for a violin part also survives in her estate, on the last page of the score of her unpublished Dumka for Violin, Viola, and Piano. These arrangements reveal Clarke’s wish for her music to be heard by the widest possible audience.
I would like to thank the estate of Rebecca Clarke for access to unpublished materials, and in particular, I would like to thank her six nieces who all generously offered their recollections of their aunt as well as sharing materials in their possession. They are Mrs. Ann Thacher Anderson, the late Mrs. Josephine Braden, Mrs. Rebecca Clarke Evans, Mrs. Magdalen Madden, Mrs. Heidi Schultz, and Mrs. Mary Grey White.

A search conducted by the Library of Congress, Register of Copyrights, on October 17, 1996, determined that G. Schirmer had not renewed their original copyright of 1943. As the copyright expired after 28 years, the work is now in the public domain. I am happy that it can now be more easily accessible to all who appreciate her music.

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