

Williams Chamber Players  
September 10th, 2021  
Notes compiled by Stephen Tian-You Ai '18

Four Imaginary Folk Songs for Cello and Harp (2018)  
Allen Shawn (b. 1948)

“Four Imaginary Folk Songs” (2018) was composed for, and is dedicated to, Ronald Feldman and Elizabeth Morse. The four brief movements, alternately fast-slow-fast-slow, explore dovetailing modes between the instruments. The pieces have a vaguely Eastern European air about them.

— Allen Shawn

Three Salt Water Ballads (1919)  
*text from John Masefield (1878-1967)*  
Frederick Keel (1871-1954)

Great Britain, coming off a generally optimistic period in the mid 19th century as the world's premiere industrialized nation, began to feel a general air of apprehension by the end of the century as it faced growing economic and cultural pressures from Germany. This *fin-de-siècle* English inferiority complex is summed up in an address by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1881 at the Royal College of Music: “At midnight your wife comes home from an opera that was made in Germany, has been here enacted by singers and conductor and players made in Germany, with the aid of instruments and sheets of music made in Germany.” In an attempt to search for a British music that was unique and separate from the continental European style, many composers, music lovers, and academics soon turned towards folk music, an impulse that resulted in the founding of the Folk-Song Society in 1898, a group dedicated to the collection, preservation, and performance of British folksong. They hoped that a British sound could be excavated from the pre-industrial past, refurbished, and performed to provide a soundtrack for a nostalgic English nationalism.

Frederick Keel, a professor and scholar-performer at the Royal Academy of Music, was a pivotal figure of the Folk-Song Society, alongside household names such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Grainger, and Cecil Sharp. Setting a text from John Masefield that imitates the rough dialect of English mariners to upbeat minor-mode piano accompaniments, Keel evokes a simpler and more sincere Britain, away from the industrial noise of London and on the decks of boats. In particular, “Trade Winds,” with its gently swaying piano accompaniment mimicking the pleasant breezes of English coastal towns, became Keel's most popular melody.

“The Last Rose of Summer” from *Folksong Arrangements*, vol. 4, no. 9 (1957)  
text from Thomas Moore's (1808-1834) *Irish Melodies*  
Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Britten's folksong arrangements, coming several decades after Keel's ballads, also seek to evoke a pre-industrial Britain, but with a musical language infused with the new modernist styles from continental Europe. By the publication of his first volume of arrangements, settings of British folksongs by composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams and Charles Villiers Stanford were dominated by what Britten had identified as an undesirable Brahmsian harmonic language, a style that he sought to strike from his compositions. Vaughan Williams himself was very supportive of Britten's new directions, writing, “Are we old fogeys of the folksong movement getting into a rut? If so, it is very good for us to be pulled out of it by such fiery young steeds as Benjamin Britten...they probably think our point of view hopelessly dull and stodgy, but that is no excuse for us to label them self-conscious or deliberately freakish.”

This simultaneously nostalgic and forward-looking attitude towards song arrangement is immediately audible in Britten's setting of “The Last Rose of Summer.” Stretching above gently peeling chords, the well-known melody feels at once comfortable and never fully steady; Britten's collision of the familiar and unfamiliar lends the tune a buoyant quality that poignantly belies any tidy resolutions, in music or in text. (Who would inhabit this bleak world alone?)

Phantasy Quartet for Oboe, Violin, Viola, & Cello, op. 2 (1932)  
Benjamin Britten

Although now known primarily for his operas such as *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), Britten was also an accomplished chamber pianist and collaborator, playing piano trios regularly as an adolescent while enrolled as a student at the Royal College of Music. It was during this time that Britten cultivated a close mentoring relationship with composer and violist Frank Bridge. Britten remained grateful throughout his life, noting much later that “I badly needed his type of strictness...[Bridge] taught me to think and feel through the instruments I was writing for: he was most naturally an instrumental composer, and as a superb viola player he thought instrumentally.” Britten's admiration for Bridge is forever immortalized in his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, op. 10, paying homage to his teacher through a variety of textures and styles, old and new.

The Phantasy Quartet comes early in Britten's career at only nineteen years of age during his studies with Frank Bridge. The quartet is part of a larger movement within early twentieth century England to assert a new, uniquely British chamber genre called the “phantasy,” a

charge taken up by composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Arnold Bax, and Frank Bridge himself. Spearheading this movement was wealthy businessman and patron Walter Willson Cobbett, who defined the phantasy during an address to the Royal College in 1905, declaring that “the parts must be of equal importance, and the duration of the piece should not exceed twelve minutes...the Phantasy is to be performed without a break.” Within these fluid compositional bounds, Britten’s quartet marches in from the distance before embarking on a series of vivid vignettes: undisturbed pastoral bliss, scintillating interplay, and cresting strings. And just as we return to stable footing from these dreamscapes, we are promptly marched back into the horizon, perhaps in search of dreams to come.

Piano Quartet in C Minor, op. 60 (1875)  
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

In a letter to his publisher regarding this quartet, Brahms writes, “You might display a picture on the title page. Namely a head – with a pistol pointing at it. Now you can form an idea of the music! I will send you my photograph for this purpose! You could also give it a blue swallow-tail coat, yellow waistcoat, and riding boots, since you appear to like color printing.” Here, Brahms sardonically alludes to the iconic dress of Goethe’s Werther from *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a novella detailing a disturbed young man’s unrequited love with an older, married woman, a series of events that eventually drive him to suicide. One cannot help but to immediately make connections with Brahms’ biography, particularly in regard to his romantic entanglements with Robert and Clara Schumann, leading many to interpret this quartet as autobiographical in nature. Some scholars have also identified Brahms’ pointed quotation of Robert Schumann’s five-note “Clara motif” from his Fourth Symphony as further evidence, suggesting that Brahms employed musical ciphers as a means to express his unspeakable and taboo feelings for Clara in music.

Whether one buys into these conjectures or not, the tragic character of this quartet is unmistakable. The first movement opens with a striking octave on the piano, a death knell that causes the strings to shudder in falling semitones before twisting slowly in agony. Soon, the music bursts out with vigorous, angular passages, echoing the portentous two-note semitone motif. The frenetic scherzo drives ever forward with stilted rhythms, ending on C major; far from a triumphant arrival, Brahms’ major color is almost too bright, possessing a harsh, acrid bite that foreshadows the turbulence to come. After an almost delusional retreat into the optimistic E major of the Andante, the finale returns to the agitated mood of the first two movements, opening with the pianist nervously pacing about the middle register of the keyboard. By the end of the movement, the music descends catatonically into two strokes of C major, putting a final, sarcastic bow on this quartet.

— Stephen Tian-You Ai

## Texts and Translations

SALT-WATER BALLADS (1902)

John Masefield (1878-1967)

### 1. PORT OF MANY SHIPS

It's a sunny pleasant anchorage, is Kingdom Come,  
Where crews is always layin' aft for double-tots o' rum,  
'N' there's dancing 'n' fiddling of ev'ry kind o' sort,  
It's a fine place for sailor-men is that there port.

'N' I wish –  
I wish as I was there.

The winds is never nothin' more than jest light airs,  
N' no one gets belayin' pinn'd, n' no one never swears,  
Yer free to loaf 'n' laze around, yer pipe atween yer lips,  
Lollin' on the fo'c'sle, sonny, lookin' at the ships.

'N' I wish –  
I wish as I was there.

For ridin' in the anchorage the ships of all the world,  
Have got one anchor down 'n' all sails furl'd.  
All the sunken hookers 'n' the crews as took 'n' died  
They lays there merry, sonny, swingin' to the tide

'N' I wish –  
I wish as I was there.

Drown'd old wooden hookers green wi' drippin' wrack,  
Ships as never fetch'd to port, as never came back,  
Swingin' to the blushin' tide, dippin' to the swell,  
N' the crews all singin', sonny, beatin' on the bell

'N' I wish –  
I wish as I was there.

### 2. TRADE WINDS

In the harbour, in the island, in the Spanish seas,  
Are the tiny white houses and the orange trees,  
And day-long, night-long, the cool and pleasant breeze

Of the steady Trade Winds blowing.

There is the red wine, the nutty Spanish ale,  
The shuffle of the dancers, and the old salt's tale,  
The squeaking fiddle, and the souging in the sail  
Of the steady Trade Winds blowing.

and o' nights there's the fire-flies and the yellow moon,  
And in the ghostly palm trees the sleepy tune  
Of the quiet voice calling me, the long low croon  
Of the steady Trade Winds blowing.

### 3. MOTHER CAREY

Mother Carey? She's the mother o' the witches  
'N' all them sort o' rips;  
She's a fine gell to look at, but the hitch is,  
She's a sight too fond of ships;  
She lives upon an iceberg to the norred,  
'N' her man he's Davy Jones,  
'N' she combs the weeds upon her forred  
With pore drowned sailors' bones.

She's the mother o' the wrecks, 'n' the mother  
Of all big winds as blows;  
She's up to some deviltry or other  
When it storms, or sleets, or snows;  
The noise of the wind's her screamin',  
'Tm arter a plump, young, fine,  
Brass-buttoned, beefy-ribbed young seam'n  
So as me 'n' my mate kin dine.'

She's a hungry old rip 'n' a cruel  
For sailor-men like we,  
She's give a many mariners the gruel  
'N' a long sleep under sea;  
She's the blood o' many a crew upon her  
'N' the bones of many a wreck,  
'N' she's barnacles a-growin' on her  
'N' shark's teeth round her neck.

I ain't never had no schoolin'  
Nor read no books like you,  
But I knows 't ain't healthy to be foolin'  
With that there gristly two;  
You're young, you thinks, 'n' you're lairy,  
But if you're to make old bones,  
Steer clear, I says, o' Mother Carey,  
'N' that there Davy Jones.

THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER (1805)  
Thomas Moore (1779-1852)

'Tis the last rose of summer,  
Left blooming alone;  
All her lovely companions  
Are faded and gone;  
No flower of her kindred,  
No rose-bud is nigh,  
To reflect back her blushes  
Or give sigh for sigh!

I'll not leave thee, thou lone one.  
To pine on the stem;  
Since the lovely are sleeping,  
Go, sleep thou with them;  
Thus kindly I scatter  
Thy leaves o'er the bed,  
Where thy mates of the garden  
Lie scentless and dead.

So soon may I follow,  
When friendships decay,  
And from love's shining circle  
The gems drop away!  
When true hearts lie withered,  
And fond ones are flown,  
Oh! who would inhabit  
This bleak world alone?