

## Frank Bridge (1879–1941) — Piano Sonata, H. 160 (1924)

I — *Lento ma non troppo* – *Allegro energico*

II — *Andante ben moderato* – *Andante espressivo*

III — *Lento* – *Allegro non troppo*

A powerful essay and milestone in British piano music, Frank Bridge's Piano Sonata is the embodiment of a transitory period of turmoil in Bridge's life.

The Piano Sonata was the emergence of Bridge's full creative powers which he wrestled with for over ten years. It is Bridge's first work to exhibit his mature, post-tonal language on a large scale. By that time, perhaps the most intensified emotional and technical demands on the performer, by a British composer.

Begun in 1922, Bridge struggled with the architecture and harmonic language of the sonata for two years before its completion. In a letter to his friend and benefactor, Elizabeth Coolidge, Bridge described his difficulties as "tying my brain into triple cord knots, untying them, retying them, wrestling with them, fighting them hard". Following the composition of this Sonata, Bridge continued his unique compositional language, which was further refined in his 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> String Quartets.

Like many of the celebrated founding composers of the 20th century, such as Scriabin, Bartók, and Schoenberg; Bridge's early style is in the post-romantic fashion, and the expressive use of harmony and melody grew out of the expressive qualities found in romantic music.

As a committed pacifist, the First World War undoubtedly unhinged sombre thoughts in Bridge's initially light-hearted idiom, and sparked a cause for a development in style. The sonata is by far the most significant piece he wrote for the piano, contrasting to his previous output for the piano, which is largely limited to modest miniatures and character pieces no more than a few pages in length.

Intended to be premiered by British pianist, Harold Samuel—a J. S. Bach specialist—who refused the opportunity, stating that he "found it bewildering"; later premiered in 1925, by the younger Dame Myra Hess. From this premier, Bridge received the most scathing criticism of his career. Critics dismissed the sonata as 'disappointing', 'inclined to dourness throughout' and 'best features derived straight from John Ireland'. Nevertheless, the Sonata is now respected as one of the finest British works for the piano.

The Sonata was composed as one large structure of three movements, to be played *attacca* (without a break). The first movement begins with a hypnotic tolling of bells, underneath which creeps a progression of uneasy chords. Later to return at the end of the movement, in full fury.

The second movement could be compared to 'no-mans-land'; often bleak, brooding and meditative, this movement is almost completely separated from tonal harmony and bears closest resemblance to late Scriabin.

The third movement contrasts war-like march rhythms of block chords, with softer more nostalgic moods. Later, Bridge scatters this with a reprise of the haunting material from the first movement, culminating in a cataclysmic bitonal presentation of the opening motif.

Bridge dedicated the sonata to Ernest Bristow Farrar, composer and teacher of Gerald Finzi. Farrar was killed aged 33 at the Battle of Épehy, on the Western Front of WWI, having been at the front line for two days.