

# YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



## A Piece for an Alien World

by **Lola Frisby Williams** (age 16) – Second Prize

on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's Clarinet Quintet

The clarinet quintet is an intimidating setting for any composer. Not only are there the challenges of writing for an intimate chamber combination, coupled with the extra considerations of writing for both wind and strings, but the shadows of a select few masterpieces, namely those of Brahms and Mozart, seem to overshadow the entire repertoire.

In 1895, Charles Villiers Stanford remarked upon this in the presence of one of his students, the then nineteen-year-old Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: that after Brahms it was impossible to compose a clarinet quintet that didn't bear the marks of his influence. Young Coleridge-Taylor took this as a challenge - and the result of this is, I believe, one of the greatest and most underappreciated works in the clarinet's repertoire.

It begins with a burst of pizzicato and an inescapable sense of momentum that underpins the whole work. Aptly, the tempo marking is *allegro energico*, and the listener is plunged into a constantly driving movement, interspersed with reflective periods accompanied by softer pizzicato in the strings. The clarinet is never a solo instrument for long - this is one of the reasons why I adore this piece so much - it's an equal component of the ensemble.

The following *larghetto affettuoso* is utterly beautiful. The clarinet floats above the effortless satiny sound of the strings, drifting in and out of conversations between the quartet, or murmuring gently beneath the melody. With a final sigh of the theme, the instruments seem to reconcile, and the brief tranquillity of this movement fades away like a dream.

The third movement is a *scherzo* switching between two contrasting characters. The first is animated and brings to mind images of galloping horses. The second is nostalgic and pensive, a brief respite from Coleridge-Taylor's boundless energy.

The final movement hurries through a kaleidoscope of different moods. Here the strings shine, with the clarinet often just chiming in or humming along beneath them. The initial driving dotted rhythm crops up throughout and propels the music forward - through exchanges between the instruments, each line tumbling over the next. We are left to wonder how this will all end as the vivacity grinds to a halt and the spirited rhythm from before becomes laboured and awkward. But the clarinet floats above the uncertainty with the theme of the second movement, and we can breathe a sigh of relief. The tranquillity Coleridge-Taylor so expertly crafted is cast over us once more, before we are flung into the home stretch of the whole piece, its perpetual energy pushing us all the way to the finish line.

A few months later, Stanford heard the quintet and exclaimed "You've done it me boy!" Coleridge-Taylor really had. At just nineteen, he'd produced a chamber work of such brilliance and originality, a testament to the talent of composers of colour like himself who faced, and still face, racial prejudice.

The past year has highlighted many fields where racism is still prevalent in today's society, and classical music still has a long way to go when it comes to inclusivity, but pieces like this show that exceptional Western classical music can come from anybody with the drive to create it.

The inscription on Coleridge-Taylor's grave always stays with me:

*He lives while music lives  
Too young to die -  
his great simplicity,  
his happy courage  
in an alien world,  
his gentleness,  
made all that knew him  
love him.*

Even though Samuel Coleridge-Taylor is long gone, his clarinet quintet just seems to radiate his 'happy courage' and, in a world that really does seem alien at the moment, I think we could all do with a little of that.

*Lola Frisby Williams*