

Arthur Bliss: *Viola Sonata Op. 91* (1933)

Last summer, I started trying to piece together a suitably interesting programme for my final recital. I had originally intended to play one of the Hindemith sonatas, but as I began to research my options and listen to various recordings, it struck me that this would be the perfect opportunity to perform a lesser-known work. It still surprises me how much viola repertoire I have yet to discover, and learning this mysterious work has been a complete pleasure. If you haven't heard the piece before, I would highly recommend listening to both Martin Outram's and Roger Chase's recordings. I had the privilege to work with Martin on the Pro Corda Viola course in February, and his guidance has been crucial in my understanding of the work. I hope you enjoy listening to this whilst reading through my notes.

Sir Arthur Bliss (1891-1975)

I had never heard of Sir Arthur Bliss before playing this viola sonata. He is an interesting composer, clearly influenced by both the traditional and unconventional. It seems that Bliss, who favoured the romantic style, is often overshadowed by the more forward-thinking music of his contemporaries, most especially Britten. I was perhaps subconsciously drawn to this sonata for its similarities to the Walton Concerto, completed four years in advance of the Bliss sonata, for the very same Lionel Tertis. There are specific features that echo the concerto, such as the long lines of double stopped sixths, and step-wise chordal progressions. When I initially began to play the piece, I struggled to decipher the dense writing and lengthy phrases. However, as I have worked through the sonata, I have discovered the many subtle shades to Bliss' writing, and his capacity for both wit and emotional integrity.

Movement I

"It needs more fantasy". This was one of the first things Louise Lansdown said to me when I brought the piece to her in September. There is certainly no shortage of fantasy in the opening of the first movement, with its sweeping gestures, expressive intervals and the push and pull between the major and minor third in the main theme. Creating fantasy in music has always been a personal frustration of mine. It suggests something very free and wandering, yet it requires meticulous decision-making and care in regards to bow use and vibrato.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the first movement of Arthur Bliss's Viola Sonata Op. 91. The score is written on four staves, with the first two in bass clef and the last two in treble clef. It includes tempo markings 'Moderato' and '♩ = circa 96', dynamic markings like 'mf dolce e sonore' and 'mp', and various performance instructions such as 'open out', 'Rich', 'direction', 'pulse', 'heel', and 'slow'. The score is heavily annotated with fingerings, bowings, and other performance details.

A wandering fantasy

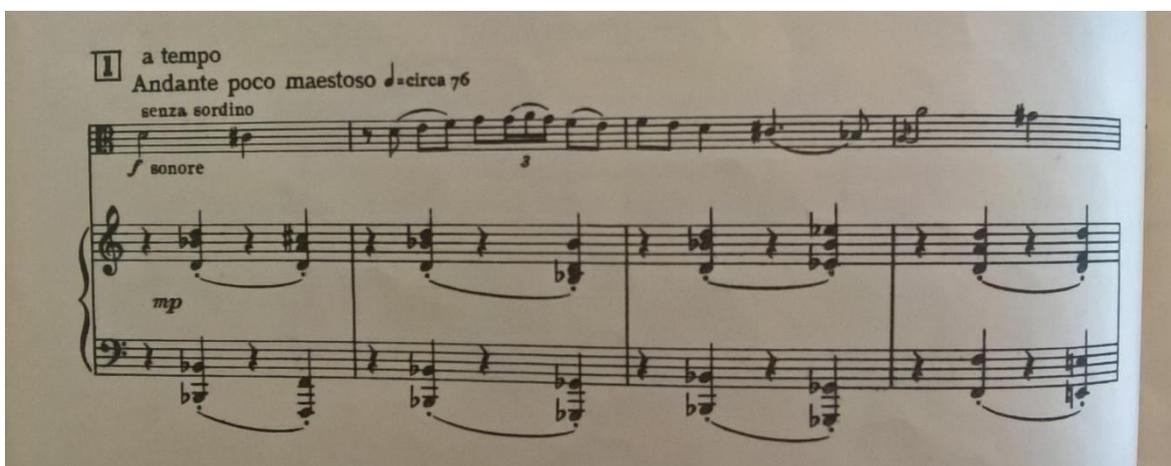
Creating the push and pull motion between the major third and the minor third has also been an interesting task. This motif occurs so often in this movement, in various keys and voices. One suggestion was to try and match the bow use and vibrato to the timbre of the string I'm playing on. In other words, when playing on a lower string I could create a richer, warmer sound by using a wider vibrato with a flatter finger, and on a higher string I could speed up my vibrato and use more bow to create a more open, singing sound. There are so many possible combinations, but I have found it is important to think about what I'm trying to say through the music, and then work out the optimum combination.

Bliss' romantic writing calls for expressive choices in fingering, and frequent use of higher positions. Part of the drama of this movement is the large intervals of 7ths and 9ths that are littered throughout the score. The melody writing is disjunct in motion, which is not ideal when trying to create a legato line. It has been challenging to move across strings, whilst shifting and retaining continuous vibrato.

Movement II

I adore the ominous opening to the second movement. Pizzicato can be incredibly expressive and warm when given enough care, and here Bliss has specified *ma marcato*. I have found that the best sound comes from using a flatter finger, and really feeling the resistance of the string before plucking.

Martin told me to "think of a Shakespearean tragedy" when playing this movement. The sombre *sonore* viola line requires a heavy bow, but not one that will crunch and kill the sound. The key is to keep the right shoulder as relaxed as possible and let the natural weight of the arm hang from the bow. It is surprisingly effective and makes a huge sound with much less effort, which is particularly useful if you need to conserve energy for later, faster movements! (Spoiler alert: Movement III)



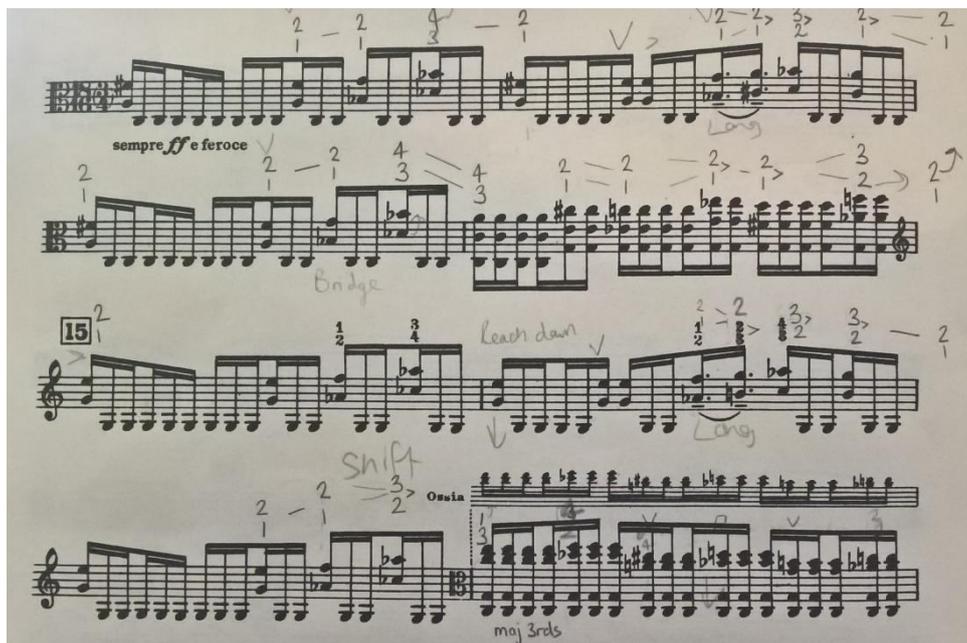
A funeral march?

Movement III 'Furiant'

In stark contrast to Movements I and II, the 'Furiant' opens in a rumbling 6/16 metre. This fast-paced movement requires a lot of physical and mental choreography but is incredibly fun to play! When I first played this movement in a performance class, a lot of my feedback hinted that I was consistently too loud, and needed to find more variation in character. There are moments of tenderness in this movement, and they need to be savoured and cared for. One of my main focuses

has been over-exaggerating the different articulations. Creating volume in a movement like this does not come from using more bow, rather the natural weight of the arm and a firmness in the wrist. To achieve clarity in the stroke, it is important that the wrist isn't too floppy, and the main movement comes from the forearm. One suggestion I found helpful was to practise the basic stroke and the different rhythms whilst holding the bow in a fist.

The ending of this movement is often compared to the fourth movement of Hindemith Opus 25 No. 1, because of its wild and ferocious double stops. My best piece of advice for this section came from the wonderful Lucy Nolan, and that was to keep the movement as casual as possible! It's understandable to think that this passage needs tons of energy and movement, but it is so tiring to keep this up at the end of a thirty-minute sonata. By staying at the heel and using less bow, a lot more sound is produced with far less effort.



Yikes!

Coda

The Coda takes the listener back to previous movements, but the character is somehow changed; a reflection on the rest of the sonata. Starting the high Bb with a good sound has proved to be a big challenge, especially after the adrenaline rush of the third movement. To finish, Bliss expertly layers the theme from movement one over a piano line echoing the arpeggiations from the third movement. The theme slowly emerges, expanding, ascending and pushing forward before crashing down in a devastating *fff* finish.

I hope you have enjoyed reading my musings on this beautiful but underplayed sonata. I have thoroughly enjoyed learning this piece and performing it will be a wonderful way to finish off four fantastic years at Birmingham Conservatoire.

Here's to more blissful viola playing! (Pun entirely intended.)

Rebecca Stubbs