

York Bowen's Viola Sonatas

No. 1 in C minor, opus 18

1. *Allegro Moderato*
2. *Poco lento e cantabile*
3. *Finale: Presto – Allegro Molto*

No. 2 in F major, opus 22

1. *Allegro assai*
2. *Grave – Allegro – Tempo I – Tranquillo*
3. *Finale: Allegro giocoso*



York Bowen (1884-1961) is known as one of the UK's greatest composers, and was in particular noted by Saint-Saëns as "the finest of English composers" in the early 1900s. Despite writing few orchestral works, his compositions were known for their traditional structures, distinctive instrumentation and texture, and extraordinary harmonic language. Bowen often combined traditional (classical/romantic) diatonic harmony with the chromaticism that hinted at the future work of some of his contemporaries.

Bowen supposedly said that the tone quality of the viola was in many ways "superior" to that of the violin (who could blame him?). He has been one of the most frequent contributors to the viola repertoire, additionally writing a Fantasy Quartet, a Concerto and a Phantasy. Bowen's concerto was performed in 1908 by his colleague Lionel Tertis, who also performed the sonatas in the early 1900s. Bowen was an excellent pianist and accompanied Tertis in recitals.

The two sonatas, No. 1 in C minor (opus 18) and No. 2 in F major (opus 22) were composed in the very early 1900s, for Lionel Tertis. It is clear to the listener that the late Brahms opus 120 Clarinet Sonatas were a key influence on these works, especially in their lyricism and instrumentation. Both of these sonatas were performed as part of a concert series at London's Aeolian Hall in 1905 and 1906, and the 1st Sonata also went on to be performed in Berlin in 1907. The 2nd sonata, however, was not fully complete until 1911 due to additional editing and a subsequent delay in publishing. Nevertheless it was worth waiting for, as the third movement was engineered as a showpiece for Tertis' remarkable technique.



It is interesting to note the differences between both sonatas: the first is without doubt more dramatic, especially from the start, whereas the second sonata retains a more relaxed character

overall. It is certainly possible to hear influences of key British composers such as Vaughan Williams and Delius, but thankfully the sonatas rarely represent the Great British Hedgerow.

Timothy Ridout and Anthony Hewitt's Wigmore Hall performance of the 2nd Sonata is available in its entirety on YouTube, and is definitely worth a watch. Tim combines a sweet, often powerful and unique sound from his Italian viola, in keeping with the long musical lines of the piece. His choices of expressive intonation and carefree approach in bowing technique are interesting, and add character and gravitas to the sonata.

There are many other recordings available as CDs and on YouTube, and it is worth watching a variety in order fully to comprehend the scale and virtuosity of the sonatas. I particularly enjoyed Lawrence Power and Simon Crawford-Phillips' CD of York Bowen's complete works, and Doris Lederer and Jane Coop's 'Music of Arnold Bax and York Bowen' is highly expressive.

In the 1980s, a renewed attentiveness to Bowen's music occurred due to numerous new recordings of his works and the book "*York Bowen: A Centenary Tribute*" (Thames, London, 1984) by Monica Watson. Despite this, his viola sonatas still remain relatively underplayed and many of his works remain unpublished.

Sources:

<http://www.yorkbowen.co.uk/life.htm>

https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W11268_67651

https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W11273_67651