

Ensemble Jackalope II

Charlotte Spruit violin

Edgar Francis viola

Hugh Mackay cello

Junyan Chen piano

Anna Thorvaldsdottir (b.1977)

Shades of Silence (2012)

8'

Frank Bridge (1879–1941)

Phantasy Piano Quartet in F sharp minor (1910)

13'

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

Piano Quartet in E flat, Op.47 (1842)

27'

i. Sostenuto assai – Allegro ma non troppo

ii. Scherzo: Molto vivace

iii. Andante cantabile

iv. Finale: Vivace

Ensemble Jackalope is a Britten Pears Young Artist for 2025/26, here for a two-week residency on the Chamber Music in Residence course.

Following their residency, Ensemble Jackalope will perform at the Leeds International Chamber Music Festival, where Junyan Chen is serving as guest artistic director, before embarking on a concert tour of Scotland.

Violinist Charlotte Spruit is a passionate chamber musician and soloist. In 2023, she won the Young Classical Artists Trust International Auditions held at Wigmore Hall.

Welsh violist Edgar Francis won first prize in the 2021 Cecil Aronowitz International Competition. His debut album will be released on the Champs Hill label.

Scottish cellist Hugh Mackay was a finalist and Special Prize winner at the 2025 Royal Overseas League Strings Competition, and is a chamber-music scholar in Germany.

Junyan Chen won Second Prize at the 2024 Leeds International Piano Competition, along with the chamber music prize and the award for a work by a woman composer.

Ensemble Jackalope is supported by The Barbara Whatmore Charitable Trust.

Anna Thorvaldsdottir: Shades of Silence

Anna Thorvaldsdottir has been called ‘one of Iceland’s most celebrated composers’ as well as ‘one of the most unique and expressive voices in the compositional world today’. Much of her inspiration comes from landscapes and nature and in *Shades of Silence*, which she wrote in 2012 for the Icelandic ensemble Nordic Affect, Anna Thorvaldsdottir explores an atmospheric and eerie sound world of delicate string textures and moments of stillness. ‘It is,’ says the composer, ‘an inwards and outwards escape to the subtle nuances of silence.’

At its premiere in 2013, the work was described as a ‘genuine delicacy’, with its ‘rapturous, starkly beautiful concatenation of drones, muted thwacks, and simulated inhalations and exhalations’. Anna Thorvaldsdottir, said one critic, writes with ‘cool calm, and flashes of geothermic fire’, while another felt that while listening to the work, he seemed ‘to be present at the birth of music itself’.

Bridge: Phantasy Piano Quartet

In 1905 a wealthy industrialist, Walter Willson Cobbett, announced a new, annual prize for music. He had come late to the world of music but after hearing one of Beethoven’s string quartets, he had become a ‘humble devotee’ of the ‘infinitely beautiful art’ of chamber music. He noticed, however, that although there were plenty of single-movement works for orchestra, few – if any – existed for chamber ensemble. The prize, therefore, would be awarded to a British composer for what Cobbett called a ‘Phantasy’ for string quartet. It should be no more than 12 minutes long, be played without a break and give equal importance to all four parts.

The young Frank Bridge won the second competition in 1907. His winning Piano Trio established him as one of the leading chamber-music composers of his generation and soon led to another Phantasy commission, this time for piano quartet. The result, declared Cobbett, was ‘among the most thrilling pieces of chamber music’ he had ever heard. A more considered testimonial came from Benjamin Britten, who had studied with Bridge and took the piano part himself when he included the work in the 1948 Aldeburgh Festival. The quartet, he said, was ‘sonorous yet lucid, with clear, clean lines, grateful to listen to and to play. It is the music of a practical musician, brought up in German orthodoxy, but who loved French romanticism and conception of sound – Brahms happily tempered with Fauré.’ He went on to describe the closing bars as akin to ‘the deep, red afterglow of a sunset’.

Schumann: Piano Quartet in E flat

Robert Schumann had a habit of concentrating, in any given year, on one particular type of repertoire. In 1840, his marriage inspired him to pour all his emotions into a ‘year of song’, before devoting the following months purely to orchestral works – in particular, his first two symphonies. Then, in 1842, partly as a distraction while his wife Clara was away on a concert tour, Schumann turned his attention to chamber music. Starting in June, he worked at a frantic pace and by the time he completed the Piano Quartet, he had produced no fewer than five large-scale chamber works in the space of six months. Small wonder that he ended the year suffering from what he described as ‘nervous weakness’ from which he took six months to recover.

Schumann had made an earlier foray into the piano quartet genre, with a student composition described as a ‘remarkably polished work for someone who was as yet without formal training in composition’. It is, however, the mature E flat quartet that is most frequently performed. The piano part dominates the ensemble and was written with Clara in mind: she described it in her diary as a ‘beautiful work, so youthful and fresh, as if it were his first’.

Although the Piano Quartet has never achieved the popularity of the Piano Quintet that Schumann wrote at around the same time, it is often regarded as the more subtle and refined of the two. The Andante offers one of the composer’s most beautiful and haunting slow movements, the fairy-like scherzo has echoes of Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the fugal finale must surely have its origins in Schumann’s lifelong study of Bach.

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