

Valencia & Clarinet Quintets

21 and 22 February 2026. The King's School,
Macclesfield.

Northern Chamber Orchestra

Clarinet **Julian Bliss**

Director **Sarah Brandwood-Spencer**



NØRTHERN
CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Biographies

Julian Bliss

Julian Bliss is recognized as one of the world's finest clarinetists, celebrated for his versatility as a concerto soloist, chamber musician, recitalist, jazz artist, and educator. He began playing at the age of four and honed his craft at Indiana University and under the legendary Sabine Meyer in Germany.

Bliss has graced prestigious venues such as Wigmore Hall, Verbier, Lincoln Center, and Gstaad and performed as a soloist with leading orchestras, including the London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Sao Paulo Symphony, and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. Recent highlights include a performance of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto with the Bournemouth Symphony and the world premiere of Ross Harris's Clarinet Concerto in New Zealand.

Bliss's recording portfolio showcases his artistry and range. His recent releases include John Mackey's Clarinet Concerto and a Schumann recital album, as well as collaborations with the

Carducci Quartet and James Baillieu. Past recordings feature works by Brahms, Mozart, and Reich, and his Gershwin-inspired album *I Got Rhythm* with the Julian Bliss Septet received glowing reviews. The Septet's vibrant performances of jazz and swing have thrilled audiences worldwide, from Ronnie Scott's to Jazz at Lincoln Center.

In addition to performing, Bliss is dedicated to expanding the clarinet repertoire. Through Bliss Music, he publishes arrangements such as Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata, which is now featured in the London College of Music syllabus.

Julian is proud to be a Buffet Crampon and Vandoren performing artist.

Sarah Brandwood-Spencer

Sarah Brandwood-Spencer was appointed as Associate Director of the Northern Chamber Orchestra in 2024. Since her debut in Paris she has enjoyed a busy career as a soloist, chamber musician and orchestral player. A graduate of the Royal Northern College of Music and the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, she has toured the world as principal and soloist with the European Union Chamber Orchestra, been guest associate concertmaster with the Canadian Opera Company, worked as a principal player with the prestigious Goldberg Ensemble and was a founder member, principal and soloist with the Lancashire Sinfonietta.

Sarah is a passionate chamber musician and performs regularly with her colleagues in the Chagall Ensemble.

Valencia, Saturday 21 February

Programme

Valencia, Caroline Shaw (1982 –)

Clarinet Concerto in A major, K.622, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio
- III. Rondo. Allegro

Symphony No. 8 in F major Op. 93, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

- I. Allegro vivace e con brio
- II. Allegretto scherzando
- III. Tempo di Menuetto
- IV. Allegro vivace

This concert is generously sponsored by The Friends of the NCO

Programme notes

Caroline Shaw is a composer, producer, violinist and singer from North Carolina, USA. She is the recipient of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Music, several Grammy awards, and an honorary doctorate from Yale. Shaw draws inspiration from the simplicity yet utter extraordinariness of nature. Her Valencia (2012) renders the sensation of eating an orange in music, depicting ‘hundreds of brilliantly coloured, impossibly delicate vesicles of juice, ready to explode.’ Shaw uses classical elements to create fresh, engaging contemporary music. In Valencia, major and minor triads are juxtaposed and overlaid to create intriguing harmonies, and stacked perfect fifths create the surging harmonics of the opening.

Written for his friend and fellow Freemason the clarinet virtuoso Anton Stadler, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto was his last major work, completed in October 1791 and premiered in Prague, where Stadler had embarked on a European concert tour. This is a landmark piece for the clarinet, an instrument that was still relatively new at the end of the 18th century. Its quasi-operatic writing for the soloist reminds us that the concerto was composed during the same period as Mozart's operas La Clemenza di Tito and Die Zauberflöte, both of which feature prominent clarinet parts. The falling third which begins the concerto’s first theme pervades the thematic material throughout. Mozart masterfully blends the solo part with a subtle orchestral palette, showcasing the clarinet’s lyricism as well as exuberant, virtuosic leaps and register shifts. The serene beauty and profound simplicity of the central Adagio recalls that of the motet Ave verum corpus, which Mozart had written a few months previously. The final movement’s happy, spirited rondo themes, with the added spice of sudden

interruptions and excursions into minor keys, bring this deceptively simple yet sophisticated masterpiece to its conclusion.

Just some 21 years later, in 1812, Ludwig van Beethoven wrote his penultimate symphony. He completed his first eight symphonies between 1800 and 1812; another 12 years would pass before No. 9 was written. Marked by good humour, musical jokes and classical elegance, Symphony No. 8 is Beethoven's shortest symphony, but no less compelling than his others. The terse vigour of the first movement's opening theme is contrasted by a graceful secondary theme, introduced by the strings in the 'wrong' key of D major, which the woodwinds soon rectify by playing it in the 'correct' key of C major. Energetic developments of the material follow, with sudden fortissimo interjections and syncopations. At one point the lower and upper strings seem to argue about the position of the first beat of the bar. Agreement is reached at the fortississimo (as loud as possible) climax. The movement ends with a most delightful and witty reappearance of the initial theme. In lieu of a slow movement, Beethoven gives us a jaunty Allegretto. Delicately humorous, verging on the burlesque, the theme (violins answered by lower strings) is set against a 'tick-tock' figure in the woodwind. The third movement is an elegantly flowing Minuet, with a trio section where the horns and clarinet evoke a pastoral scene. The finale is notable for being the first symphonic movement where the timpani are tuned in octaves. It opens with a whispered, bustling theme, startlingly interrupted by a fortissimo 'wrong note', then restated energetically, before seeming to happen upon a sunny second theme. There follow various surprises, rhetorical pauses, unexpected tonal shifts, dynamic contrasts before the music finds itself in an angry F sharp minor key, which it shakes off through insistent sforzandi to triumphantly regain the home key. This symphony's brevity, clarity, and exuberance make for a delightful musical journey.

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The orchestra

Violin I

Brandwood-Spencer

Midori Tramaseur

Paula Smart

Chris Karwacinski

Marino Capulli

Violin II

Simon Gilks
Louise Latham
Helen Brackley-Jones
Eleanor Shute

Viola

Benjamin Newton
Becky Gould
Benjamin Norris

Cello

Jennifer Langridge
Elliot Bailey

Double Bass

James Manson
Thomas Betts

Flute

Conrad Marshall
Nichola Hunter

Oboe

Alec Harmon
Jane Evans

Clarinet

Daniel Bayley
Helen Blamey

Bassoon

Georgie Powell

Horn

George Strivens
Alex Hocknull

Trumpet

Andy Dallimore
Graham South

Timpani

Harry Percy

Clarinet Quintets, Sunday 22 February

Programme

Clarinet Quintet in A major, K.581 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

- I. Allegro
- II. Larghetto
- III. Menuetto
- IV. Allegretto con variazioni

Clarinet Quintet B minor Op. 115, Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio
- III. Andantino
- IV. Con moto

This concert is generously sponsored by Caro Brown

Programme notes

The term 'clarinet quintet' is shorthand for an ensemble consisting of a clarinet, two violins, a viola and a cello. There is a rich and varied repertoire for this combination, of which the quintets by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Johannes Brahms are exemplars.

The clarinet is a relatively late addition to the standard orchestral woodwind section. Its invention is usually credited to Johann Christopher Denner, an instrument maker in Nuremberg, at the very end of the 17th Century. With technical improvements, widening the instrument's range and improving the sound and fingering system, composers like Haydn and Gluck started to include the clarinet in their compositions from the mid 1700's, and by the 1780's it regularly appeared in orchestral and chamber music. It was arguably Mozart, though, who first realised the expressive and virtuoso potential of the clarinet, and a breadth of chamber music for ensembles with clarinet ensued.

Composer-clarinetists were influential in the development of this repertoire, from Jan Václav Knéžek and Heinrich Baermann in the 19th Century, to Jörg Widmann and Mark Simpson today. Personal and professional friendships have also been of great importance. Written for his friend and fellow Freemason the clarinet virtuoso Anton Stadler, Mozart's Clarinet Quintet (1789) and Clarinet Concerto (1791) remain some of the finest works in the repertoire, as do those written about a century later by Brahms. Richard Mühlfeld's inspirational playing tempted Brahms out of self-imposed retirement, and resulted in his Clarinet Trio and Clarinet Quintet (1891), and two Clarinet Sonatas (1894).

The opening Allegro of Mozart's quintet is lyrical and conversational, with clarinet and strings sharing and developing the thematic material throughout. The blissfully poetic central Larghetto opens with a beautifully crafted clarinet melody, accompanied by gently rocking quavers, before a dialogue unfolds between first violin and clarinet.

The amiable Minuet has two contrasting trio sections. The first, for strings alone, is in a poignant minor key. The clarinet joins in with the second trio, which has the lilt of an Austrian ländler. The finale's perky theme is explored in a set of variations, each with its own character. Variation 1 features wide leaps for the clarinet. In Variation 2, the first violin melody is accompanied by bustling triplets in second violin and viola, with comments from the clarinet. Variation 3 turns to the minor mode and spotlights the viola in some eloquent soul-searching. The mood shifts again in the brilliance of Variation 4, with exuberant semiquaver passages shared between clarinet and first violin. Following a serene Adagio, the work returns to the opening theme and ends with a spirited Allegro.

Brahms's quintet is a richly coloured, elegiac and passionate work, showcasing the clarinet's lyrical and rhapsodic qualities. It shares some features of Mozart's: both begin with strings alone; the strings are muted in both slow movements; they each reference folk music and end with finales with sets of variations. The evocative opening of Brahms's quintet contains the seeds of the rest of work. The clarinet and strings are fully integrated in the lush textures and shifting moods of its first movement. The simple ternary design of the Adagio is filled with some of Brahms's most extraordinary music. Out of the mystical, otherworldly mood of the opening section arises a rhapsodic, minor-key central section, with improvisatory runs and florid arabesques that swirl over a string tremolo, inspired by Brahms's life-long fascination for the music of the Hungarian Roma. The gentle Andantino, with its fleet central section, resets the emotional equilibrium before the finale, a theme and five variations. A coda reprises the first movement's opening theme, clothed in more sombre colours, bringing Brahms's profound masterpiece to a close.

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Players

Violin I

Sarah Brandwood-Spencer

Violin II

Simon Gilks

Viola

Benjamin Newton

Cello

Jennifer Langridge

Clarinet

Julian Bliss

Upcoming concerts

Octet with NCO Soloists

St. Michaels Church, Macclesfield

Saturday 14 March, 5pm

Prince of Clouds with Zoë Beyers and Sarah Brandwood-Spencer

The King's School, Macclesfield

Saturday 11 April, 7.30pm

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