

# TIMES & SEASONS



The Passing of the Year	Jonathan Dove	Piano
Étude de Concert "Au Matin"	Marcel Tournier	Harp
Three Songs of Love	David Bednall	
To a Skylark	Becky McGlade	
The Birds' Lullaby	Sarah Quartel	
Wide Open Spaces	Sarah Quartel	Piano

## INTERVAL

A Fancy of Folksongs	Cecilia McDowall	Harp & Choir
Nocturnes	Morton Lauridsen	Piano
Sleep	Eric Whitacre	
With A Lily in your Hand	Eric Whitacre	

## NOTES

### Jonathan Dove (b 1959)

### *The Passing of the Year*

The English composer Jonathan Dove is best known for his operas, but he has also written instrumental music, church music, songs and, as here, choral music. *The Passing of the Year* is a cantata setting seven poems, which take us more or less through the year from spring to winter. The cantata is written for double chorus and piano. Musical techniques to listen out for include ostinato (use of repeated short phrases) and polyrhythm (different rhythms happening at the same time).

**Movement 1** features both of these, impressively. The only words are *O Earth, O Earth, return!* written by William Blake.

**Movement 2** takes us into spring with *The narrow bud opens her beauties to the sun* (also by Blake) in which the complex textures represent the burgeoning springtime. In the second half the composer adds the tune and words of *Summer is icumen in*.

**Movement 3** is summer: *Answer July* – words by Emily Dickinson. A light and energetic scherzo, hard to sing – you will realise why when you hear it.

**Movement 4:** *Hot sun, cool fire*, words by George Peele – Elizabethan poet and possible collaborator with Shakespeare. One of two poems in this evening's programme whose meaning is disguised by the lack of the original title (the other is *With a Lily in Your Hand*). Peele called this poem *Bathsheba's Song*: it depicts Bathsheba bathing naked in a spring, hoping that no one will see her and be enflamed by her beauty. For the rest of the story, see the Book of Samuel. High summer.

**Movement 5:** Autumnal in feel, even if it doesn't actually say so. Words *Ah Sun-flower!* by Blake. Listen for the shape: although the piece is quite calm, the texture gets more complicated to the point at which it simplifies towards the ending.

**Movement 6:** *Adieu! farewell earth's bliss!*, words by the Elizabethan writer Thomas Nashe. Heavily autumnal meditation on mortality. One choir sings a repeated *Lord have mercy on us!* while the other muses on the inevitability of death. The choirs swap over; then swap back. Sombre.

**Movement 7:** *Ring out, wild bells* by Tennyson. Until near the end this is an exuberant and characterful piece, with lots of energy, imitations of bells, and the above-mentioned polyrhythms. The final phrase – *Ring in the thousand years of peace* – is appropriately calmer. We have been through the year, and are looking forward to the next.

### **Marcel Tournier (1879-1951)**

### **Étude de Concert "Au Matin"**

One of several influential Parisian harpists of his time, Marcel Lucien Tournier was born in 1879 to an instrument-maker, one of eight children. At 16 he began studies at the Conservatoire de Paris with the great harpist, composer and pedagogue Alphonse Hasselmans, whom he would succeed as professor of harp in 1912 until 1948. Over this period he would compose many works for solo harp, chamber music featuring the harp, as well as works for the piano and orchestral compositions. Much of his work for the harp greatly developed both the technical and harmonic possibilities of the instrument — *Au Matin*, a concert study composed by Tournier in 1913, is one such work, with virtuosic flourishes and rich chromatic language showcasing the developments in harp-making technology over the preceding century.

### **David Bednall**

### **Three Songs of Love**

*Three Songs of Love* were commissioned by David Ogden and Exultate Singers in 2015. The selections of texts was the most critical part of the process, and one of the challenges was to avoid anything excessively sentimental, and whilst keeping to this maxim, finding anything positive! The three texts here represent various moods of love, from the thrill of its first appearance and the mini-death which this involves, through the devotion felt towards the beloved even if they are unaware of it, to the distant memories evoked by a return to an old haunt.

John Clare's 'First Love' is a well-observed emotional journey following the first fall, and the slight sting in the tale is an interesting and arresting counterpoint to the opening. W.B. Yeats's texts are some of the most exquisite in the language, and both suggest a great vulnerability which comes from love: in the first it is the object of desire who will gradually lose their appeal to the world but not for the devoted admirer; in the second it is the devotee who is vulnerable as they lay open their dreams and soul for the loved one in sumptuous imagery. John McCrae's poem is a wonderful mix of images, and there is something faintly uneasy about it – is she dead or merely someone from the past? The final lines breathe a great warmth of nostalgia into the atmosphere, and seemed to form the perfect end to this set. McCrae is most famous for his lines 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow' and at a time when WWI is very much in people's minds a poem from this casualty of that conflict seemed to be even more appropriate.

The texts spoke to me immediately, and I attempted to set them in a manner which communicated this emotional directness to singers and audience. The words seemed of such importance that I set them largely syllabically, with only occasional repetition and imitation.

### **Becky McGlade (b1974)**

### **To a Skylark**

The composer has written: 'Where I live [in Cornwall] there's a common which meets the sea, and when walking there he only birds I seem to hear are skylarks... It seems profound and wonderful to me that they hover high in the sky, far above the troubles below, constantly emitting beautiful song. Would that we could constantly sing or praise through the ups and downs of life!'

Four of Shelley's 21 verses have been set to music, for unaccompanied choir. The style is quite adventurous in places, with rhythms that follow the speech-patterns of the poem. Note the quiet ending, as the poet concentrates on his own feelings, and ends up listening to the skylark.

**Sarah Quartel (b1982)**

***The Birds' Lullaby***

Sarah Quartel is a Canadian composer best known for popular choral pieces such as these.

Writing programme notes, you never know what you're going to come across. It's one of the joys. This piece, with Canadian composer and lyricist, has a tenuous local connection, via a lady called Emily Susanna Howells, who was born in Bristol in 1824. She emigrated to Canada, where she married a Mohawk called Chief George Henry Martin Onwanonsyshon Johnson; their youngest child Emily Pauline Johnson (1861-1913) wrote the words for this piece. And a charming poem it is, addressed by the birds to the cedar trees in which they are roosting. It's just crying out for a musical setting such as this. Unaccompanied sopranos and altos.

**Sarah Quartel**

***Wide Open Spaces***

Back to the full choir for this one. The words of *Wide Open Spaces*, about a journey to self-fulfilment, were written by Sarah herself. The harmonic style is not challenging, and the melodies simple, but the whole piece is enlivened by an imaginative piano part, adroit changes of phraselength, and an endearing freshness. Listen to the ending: do you think it suggests that the journey is not yet over?

## INTERVAL

**Cecilia McDowall (b1951)**

***A Fancy of Folksongs***

Bristol Bach Choir have performed several of Cecilia McDowall's pieces, including *Shipping Forecast*, *Cecilia Busy Like a Bee*, and the Christmas set *Christus Natus Est*. Each has been imaginative and well written, and intriguing both for performers and listeners. *A Fancy of Folksongs* is an arrangement of four folksongs (using the traditional tunes) for choir and harp; the songs centre on themes of love and courtship. Folksong settings using the trad tunes are frequently dull, if worthy, but these are lovely, thanks to a light touch and the deft use of countermelodies.

In the first song, *Green Bushes*, a man meets a girl waiting for her lover; they go off together; the lover, arriving too late, is, as you might imagine, disappointed. Notice how McDowall cleverly extends the last line of each verse. The tune is modal – in the mixolydian mode, since you ask.

In the second song, *The Rambling Sailor*, a sailor leaves his ship for a life courting 'young girls and handsome', for which he claims to have royal permission. Harp with tenors and basses only.

Song three, *The Crystal Spring*, is a more standard profession of undying love. He's a young captain, and she's called Phyllis. Harp with sopranos and altos only.

Finally there is the boisterous *O No, John!* in which the suitor learns to phrase his questions suitably when the object of his affections always answers 'No'.

**Morten Lauridsen (b 1943)**

***Nocturnes***

Lauridsen was born in Colfax, Washington State. He studied at the University of Southern California, where he was for many years professor and Chair of the Department of Composition. His works are primarily vocal, and include *O Magnum Mysterium* (1994), performed several times by the Bristol Bach Choir over recent years.

*Nocturnes*, one of his best-known (and best) pieces, was written in 2005. It is scored for choir with piano, and consists of settings of three poems, followed by a short epilogue. All the poems reference night, with themes of love, summer and mysticism.

First movement: *Sa nuit d'été* (Its summer night). Lauridsen responds to Rilke's intense love poem with intense but stately music that grows to a climax before settling back to a quiet ending. Listen for the imaginative piano introduction, which comes back with an extra layer of choir at the end. Magical.

Second movement: *Soneto de la noche* (Sonnet of the night) is one of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's best-known poems, in which the poet wishes that when he dies, he will do so in the knowledge that what he loves will carry on living. Lauridsen sets the first two verses to variations of the same music; the second half of the poem is much faster, and ends with the repeated phrase *quando yo muero* - when I die. The music then repeats the words of the start, but with more intensity, ending on the words *te espero* – I wait for you. Unaccompanied voices.

The third movement sets James Agee's poem *Sure on this Shining Night*, perhaps best known from Samuel Barber's lovely song. The structure here is curiously like that of the previous movement – first verse – same again with countermelody – middle section, here to the words *The late year lies down the north* – another version of the beginning with even more intensity. See if you can follow this.

The short Epilogue – *Voici le soir* – follows without a break. The words are again from a French poem by Rilke, and the music quotes from the first movement. A serene ending.

## **Eric Whitacre (b1970)**

### ***Sleep***

Whitacre comes from Nevada. He studied in Las Vegas and New York, and now lives in Los Angeles. He is best known as a composer of choral, wind band and electronic music, and as an inspiring conductor of his own music and that of others.

Whitacre's style is generally recognisable by his signature "Whitacre chords", chords with sevenths and/or ninths, and sometimes with suspended seconds and/or fourths. A good example in *Sleep* is the chord on *moon* at the end of the first phrase – it's used again as the final chord of the piece. If this is too technical for you, just enjoy the sound of his music, with chords that are unusual but not normally too dissonant or harsh. Whitacre's music is often compared to that of Morten Lauridsen: the harmonies they use are often similar, but Whitacre uses more avant-garde techniques, and a greater variety of texture.

*Sleep* has an interesting history. In 2000 Whitacre set to music Robert Frost's famous poem 'Stopping by Woods', only to discover that he had not secured permission to use the poem. Rather than waste the music, he commissioned Charles Anthony Silvestri to write new words, and *Sleep* is the result. The most striking part of the setting is the final word, 'sleep' which repeats and fades to nothing. Note that the original also ended on the same word.

## **Eric Whitacre**

### ***With a Lily in Your hand***

*With a Lily in Your Hand* is the second of Whitacre's *Three Flower Songs*, and was written in 2001. The words are a translation of an oblique love poem by the great Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) by the American poet Jerome Rothenberg (1931-2024). Rothenberg's version manages to be as vivid as the original while retaining its meaning and structure. One difference: Lorca's original title is *Curva* (curve or curved line). *With a Lily in Your Hand* (the first line of the poem) is no doubt a better title for the song, but may miss a layer of meaning.

The piece is a virtuoso composition, in which an extraordinary choral version of Flamenco weaves in and out of richly-chorded slower music and more wistful melodic fragments. Interestingly, Whitacre's performance suggestions divide the music into 'water' – a fluid texture in the middle of the piece at the words *Tamer of dark butterflies* – and 'fire' - the rest of the music. Neither water nor fire are referred to in the poem.