

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 10 June 2022 1.00pm

Book Launch: *A Home for all Seasons* by Gavin Plumley

Gavin Plumley presenter

Alessandro Fisher tenor

Anna Tilbrook piano

Chloë Hanslip violin

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This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

The woods so wild

Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

The Wind from the West (1911)

Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

Pastorale Op. 28 No. 1 (1917)

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Is my team ploughing? from *On Wenlock Edge* (1908-9)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

The trees they grow so high (1941-2)

Ralph Vaughan Williams

The truth sent from above from *8 Traditional English Carols* (1919)

Benjamin Britten

Corpus Christi Carol (1961)

Ralph Vaughan Williams

The Lark Ascending (1914 rev. 1920)

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

Rhapsody from *Dies natalis* Op. 8 (1925-39)

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Sospiri Op. 70 (1913-4)

Programme interspersed with readings from *A Home for All Seasons*

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A Home for All Seasons is not a book about music, though music certainly runs through it. Throughout the writing process, I had several musical works in my head and this afternoon's programme presents a selection of those pieces and the composers to whom I returned time and again. Forefront among them is Vaughan Williams, who was as beguiled by Pembridge during the summer of 1909 as my husband Alastair and I were when we found Stepps House in the same Herefordshire village, four years ago.

The programme begins, however, in the 16th Century, when that building, along with many of its neighbours, was constructed – a period that likewise fascinated Vaughan Williams. **Byrd's** *The woods so wild* is a response to a popular song from the era, thought to have been one of Henry VIII's favourites. Byrd takes the bucolic original and runs with it, offering a sequence of variations that develop into rich polyphony, just as the carpenters of the age took the oaks from those 'woods so wild' and built our home.

Peter Warlock (the pseudonym of Philip Heseltine) was similarly drawn to the 1500s and the Welsh Marches. Although he was born at the Savoy, his family came from Llandyssil, near the border town of Montgomery, not far from Pembridge. 'The Wind from the West' was Warlock's very first song. Dating from 1911, it was likely written in Cologne, albeit pining for more local country and imbued with the spirit of Delius, a major point of influence at the time.

Herbert Howells likewise knew the area, having been born at Lydney in Gloucestershire, before training with Herbert Brewer at Gloucester Cathedral, where the young composer enjoyed its associations with the Three Choirs Festival. Like many of his contemporaries, Howells was given to idealising his native county and its neighbours, though the *Pastorale* from his 3 Pieces Op. 28 for violin and piano quietly acknowledges the fragility of such a vision, having been written during the First World War.

The juxtaposition of idyll and reality proves even starker in **Vaughan Williams's** setting of *Is my team ploughing?* from AE Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. Composed in 1909, the year the composer visited Pembridge, it forms part of *On Wenlock Edge*, originally for tenor, string quartet and piano, before the cycle was orchestrated in the 1920s. The composer's sublimation of folk material, as well as his recent studies with Ravel, is palpable, though Housman was unimpressed by the composer's decision to cut the poem's reference to football.

When Vaughan Williams visited Herefordshire in 1909, he was following in the footsteps of the folklorist Ella Mary Leather, who had been accumulating local songs since 1904. He was not, however, the first to visit Leather, with George Butterworth having travelled to her village of Weobley in 1906, though Vaughan Williams explored much further afield and found a greater wealth of material. The songs he notated included a version of 'Dives and

Lazarus', 'The Banks of Sweet Primroses', 'Sweet Polly Oliver' and 'The trees they grow so high', the text of which suggests the Scots pines that mark old drovers' routes through the area. We hear the song in an arrangement by **Britten**.

Also local, and recorded in Pembridge and at nearby King's Pyon, was 'The truth sent from above'. Frequently sung at King's College, Cambridge on Christmas Eve, *The Herefordshire Carol* tells of events in Eden, as well as humanity's consequent need for redemption. Likely dating to the 16th Century, the tune was also associated with the words 'There is a Fountain of Christ's Blood'.

No less complex is the text of the *Corpus Christi Carol*, first found in a grocer's commonplace book from the early 1500s. The words may well have been sung around the time of the eponymous feast (to be celebrated next week), though mention of an 'orchard brown' also suggests wintertime and Christmas. As a result, Britten set the text as part of *A Boy was Born* Op. 3 in 1933, before arranging a unison version (with piano or organ) in 1961, shortly before beginning work on the *War Requiem*.

The Lark Ascending is similarly associated with the Great War. Composed in 1914, Vaughan Williams's cherished Romance was not heard until 1920 – in this afternoon's version with piano – before the more famous orchestral arrangement followed in 1921. The idea, however, may well have originated during that crucial summer of 1909, when Vaughan Williams learned of the death of George Meredith, whose poem of the same name had been one of his childhood favourites.

Following the war, **Gerald Finzi** was in a state of shock, having lost both his mentor and a brother to the trenches. An introverted, poetic figure, Finzi decided to move to the land of the Three Choirs Festival in 1922, specifically to Painswick on the edge of the Cotswolds. Three years later, he was back in London, but had likely already begun a cantata for soloist and strings on texts by the Herefordshire priest and poet Thomas Traherne. The resulting *Dies natalis* was due to be performed in Hereford in 1939, but, again, war curtailed plans for the Festival and the première followed at Wigmore Hall on 26 January 1940.

No account of the Marches would be complete without **Edward Elgar**. *Sospiri* Op. 70 was written at the same time as *The Lark Ascending*, but managed to have its first performance in August 1914 at the Queen's Hall. I had only recently rediscovered the work when I was writing *A Home for All Seasons* and listened to Elgar's music repeatedly in the hope that its blend of melancholy and optimism might find its way into the final pages of my book.

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William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

The woods so wild for solo piano

Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

The Wind from the West (1911)

Ella Young

Blow high, blow low,
O wind from the West:
You come from the country
I love the best.

O say have the lilies
Yet lifted their heads
Above the lake-water
That ripples and spreads?

Do the little sedges
Still shake with delight,
And whisper together
All through the night?

Have the mountains the purple
I used to love,
And peace about them,
Around and above?

Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

Pastorale Op. 28 No. 1 for violin and piano (1917)

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Is my team ploughing? from *On Wenlock Edge*

(1908-9)

AE Housman

'Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?'

Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;
No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.

'Is my girl happy,
That I thought hard to leave,
And has she tired of weeping
As she lies down at eve?'

Ay, she lies down lightly,
She lies not down to weep:
Your girl is well contented.
Be still, my lad, and sleep.

'Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thin and pine,
And has he found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?'

Yes, lad, I lie easy,
I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

The trees they grow so high (1941-2)

Traditional

The trees they grow so high
And the leaves they grow so green,
And many a cold winter's night
My love and I have seen.
Of a cold winter's night,
My love, you and I alone have been,
Whilst my bonny boy is young
He's a-growing,
Growing, growing,
Whilst my bonny boy is young
He's a-growing.

O father, dearest father,
You've done to me great wrong,
You've tied me to a boy
When you know he is too young.
O daughter, dearest daughter,
If you wait a little while,
A lady you shall be
While he's growing,
Growing, growing,
A lady you shall be
While he's growing.

I'll send your love to college
All for a year or two,
And then in the mean-time
He will do for you;
I'll buy him white ribbons,
Tie them round his bonny waist
To let the ladies know
That he's married,
Married, married,
To let the ladies know
That he's married.

I went up to the college
And I looked over the wall,
Saw four and twenty gentlemen
Playing at bat and ball.
I called for my true love,
But they would not let him come,
All because he was a young boy
And growing,
Growing, growing,
All because he was a young boy
And growing.

At the age of sixteen,
He was a married man
And at the age of seventeen
He was a father to a son
And at the age of eighteen
The grass grew over him,
Cruel death soon put an end
To his growing,
Growing, growing,
Cruel death soon put an end
To his growing.

And now my love is dead
And in his grave doth lie.
The green grass grows o'er him
So very, very high.
I'll sit and mourn
His fate until the day I die,
And I'll watch all o'er his child
While he's growing,
Growing, growing,
And I'll watch all o'er his child
While he's growing.

Ralph Vaughan Williams

The truth sent from above from *8 Traditional English Carols* (1919)

Anonymous

This is the truth sent from above,
The truth of God, the God of love;
Therefore don't turn me from your door,
But hearken all, both rich and poor.

The first thing, which I do relate,
That God at first did man create;
The next thing, which to you I tell,
Woman was made with him to dwell.

Then after this, 'twas God's own choice
To place them both in Paradise,
There to remain from evil free
Except they ate of such a tree.

And they did eat, which was a sin,
And thus their ruin did begin;
Ruined themselves, both you and me,
And all of their posterity.

Thus we were heirs to endless woes,
Till God the Lord did interpose
For so a promise soon did run
That He'd redeem us with a Son.

Benjamin Britten

Corpus Christi Carol (1961)

Anonymous

Lully, lullely, lully, lullely,
The falcon hath borne my make away.

He bare him up, he bare him down,
He bare him into an orchard brown.

In that orchard there was an hall
That was hangèd with purple and pall.

An in that hall there was a bed,
It was hangèd with gold so red.

In that bed there lieth a knight,
His woundës bleeding, day and night.

By that bedside kneeleth a may,
And she weepeth both night and day.

And by that bedside there standeth a stone,
Corpus Christi written thereon.

Ralph Vaughan Williams

The Lark Ascending for violin and piano (1914 rev. 1920)

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

Rhapsody from *Dies natalis* Op. 8 (1925-39)

Thomas Traherne

Will you see the infancy of this sublime and celestial greatness? I was a stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys: my knowledge was divine. I was entertained like an angel with the works of God in their splendour and glory. Heaven and Earth did sing my Creators praises, and could not make more melody to Adam than to me. Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I. All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. All things were spotless and pure and glorious.

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The green trees, when I saw them first, transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things.

O what venerable creatures did the aged seem! Immortal cherubims! and the young men glittering and sparkling angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! I knew not that they were born or should die ; but all things abided eternally. I knew not that there were sins or complaints or laws. I dreamed not of poverties, contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes. I saw all in the peace of Eden. Everything was at rest, free and immortal.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Sospiri Op. 70 for violin and piano (1913-4)