WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 10 November 2026
1.00pm

Love at Last

Lara Downes piano

Jaroslav Ježek (1906-1942)	Dawn (1934) *arranged by Jeremy Siskind*
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme BWV645 (c.1748-9) *arranged by Ignaz Friedman*
Clarice Assad (b.1978)	A World of Change (pub. 2022)
Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)	Spiritual Suite (c.1930s/40s) *I. The Valley of the Bones • II. The Bells • III. Troubled Water*
Nyokabi Kariũki (b.1998)	It Only Ever Rains in November (2016)
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	Frühlingsglaube D686 (1820) *arranged by August Horn*
Elie Siegmeister (1909-1991)	III. Lusty and Joyous from *American Sonata* (1944)
Christopher Tin (b.1976)	Hope Is the Thing with Feathers (2018) *arranged by Austin Ali*
Hooshyar Khayam (b.1978)	Bright Night (2010)
Oscar Peterson (1925-2007)	Hymn to Freedom (1962)
Valentin Silvestrov (b.1937)	No. 1 Lullaby from *Four Piano Pieces* Op. 2 (2005)

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Pianist, presenter and curator Lara Downes leads a multi-pronged career in which community engagement figures prominently, but chief among her passions is expanding the classical repertoire to engage with music representing a richer mix of cultural and ethnic heritage. Born to a Jamaican-American father and an Eastern European mother, Downes describes herself as 'Jewmaican' and her project *Love at Last* – conceived in 2022 while reflecting on a slew of destructive world events, including the COVID-19 virus – is inspired by the idea that only through love and community can we reach a brighter future. The title comes from lines by the Russian-Jewish poet Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875-1943): 'Love at last shall bind all peoples / In an everlasting bond.'

Czech jazz bandleader and composer **Jaroslav Ježek** wrote *Svítá* (Dawn) in 1934, five years before he was forced to leave his homeland following the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. He is still remembered by his compatriots for his popular, jazz and cabaret songs, and *Svítá* was used in the 2001 war film *Dark Blue World* (named after another of his songs). Jeremy Siskind's arrangement preserves the song's jazzy nostalgia.

About 16 years after the composition of his Cantata No. 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (c.1731), **JS Bach** made an organ transcription of its fourth movement. This arrangement for piano by Ignaz Friedman – a Jew who fled Europe with the rise of Nazi power – preserves the original outline, with the hymn tune chiming in the tenor (middle) line, which sits in between the decorative upper melody and the walking bass below.

First performed in 2022 at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, *A World of Change* by Brazilian-American composer **Clarice Assad** was written for a concert highlighting the effects of climate change and, the composer says, 'reflects on global transformation, destruction and renewal through the metaphor of water, the element without which nothing we know could survive'. Highlighting her work at the intersection of the pop and classical idioms, the piece is a reminder of how in being 'so preoccupied with ourselves more than with the environment … we actually jeopardise our ability to live here'.

Chicago-born **Margaret Bonds** became the first African American soloist to appear with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933. As its title suggests, the three movements of Bond's *Spiritual Suite* are each based on an African American spiritual – of the kind she loved hearing at the end of concerts given by Black singers Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes and Abbie Mitchell. Harlem Renaissance figure Langston Hughes, writing in the *Chicago Defender*, recalled that, in Bonds's treatment of 'Wade in the Water', 'sounds … took on the force of the whole upward march of our people through bondage, trouble and sorrow to the light of day'.

The work of Kenyan composer and singer **Nyokabi Kariũki** is rooted in preserving African stories and languages, often incorporating electronics, body percussion and field recordings alongside voice and piano. *It Only Ever Rains in November* was written just after Kariũki had moved to the USA and reflects on the autumnal theme of transition and change: Kariũki was at the time experiencing her own first semester at college and her first autumn in New York. While composing the piece, she says, 'I reflected on watching the colourful leaves evolve and tumble; the swaying of the warm versus the cold; the light, and of course, the rain – but more largely, the complicated feeling of learning a new place.' The piece neatly captures a sense of reflection as well as of optimism and excitement for what the future might bring.

There's a seasonal connection too in **Franz Schubert**'s *Frühlingsglaube* (Faith in Spring), composed to a poem by Ludwig Uhland that describes the awakening of spring. Instead of inspiring direct exuberance, though, spring here is rather a symbol of inward, spiritual renewal.

Elie Siegmeister was one of the slew of American composers – along with Aaron Copland, Roy Harris and Elliott Carter – who during the 1920s studied in Paris with the demanding and revered teacher Nadia Boulanger. The first of his five piano sonatas, the 'American' Sonata, he said, represents 'an American panorama, blending jazzy and folk-like themes with purely classical forms'. The third movement's title, *Lusty and Joyous*, says it all, except that the spirit of the boogie-woogie falls over its first theme, and the second has been described as 'a leisurely cowboy song'.

Lara Downes gave the world première of double Grammy Award-winning California-born **Christopher Tin**'s piano concerto *The Pursuit of Happiness* in New York earlier this year. *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers* – originally written for mixed choir (and recorded by supergroup VOCES8) – is a setting of Emily Dickinson: 'a meditation,' Tin says, 'on the fragility of nature, as well as our own hand in its destruction'. The poem extols the tireless nature of hope, also observing that it 'never … asked a crumb of me'.

Bedford-born British-Iranian **Hooshyar Khayam** studied Western and Iranian music and originally wrote *Bright Night* as a love letter but now, years later, sees Lara Downes as giving it a greater cause with her message of unity through inclusion.

Oscar Peterson may have been revered for his dexterity and irresistible sense of swing, but his *Hymn to Freedom* displays other qualities such as melodic directness, harmonic richness and a warmth that emanates from the gospel tradition. Peterson wrote it in honour of Martin Luther King Jr, and it later became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement.

Ukraine's most famous living composer, **Valentin Silvestrov**, fled his native Kyiv aged 84 for Berlin following Russia's invasion of his country in 2022. This wistful *Lullaby* comes from a set of four pieces from over 15 years earlier but bears out the composer's later thoughts on music in a fragile world. 'Music cannot respond to that fragility by being forceful and pompous. That's why I compose the way I do. Less becomes more.'

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