

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 13 July 2024
7.30pm

A Most Marvellous Party! Songs of Coward, his friends and contemporaries

Mary Bevan soprano
Nicky Spence tenor
Joseph Middleton piano

Noël Coward (1899-1973)

Medley arranged by Stuart Calvert

Parisian Pierrot from *London Calling!* (1922) arranged by Stuart Calvert

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Hôtel from *Banalités* (1940)

Ned Rorem (1923-2022)

For Poulenc (1963)

Noël Coward

Mad About the Boy (1932) arranged by Stuart Calvert

André Messager (1853-1929)

De-ci, de-là from *Véronique* (1898)

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

Gnossienne No. 1 (1890-3)

Noël Coward

World weary from *This Year of Grace* (1928) arranged by Stuart Calvert

Twentieth Century Blues from *Cavalcade* (1931) arranged by Stuart Calvert

Any Little Fish (1931) arranged by Stuart Calvert

Ned Rorem

Now sleeps the crimson petal (1963)

Roger Quilter (1877-1953)

Now sleeps the crimson petal Op. 3 No. 2 (1904-5)

Noël Coward

Something To Do With Spring (1932) arranged by Stuart Calvert

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

The Man I Love (1924)

Noël Coward

If Love Were All from *Bitter Sweet* (1929) arranged by Stuart Calvert

Liza Lehmann (1862-1918)

Love, if you knew the light

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

When you're feeling like expressing your affection from *The Red Cockatoo & other songs* (1935-62)

Noël Coward

Mrs Worthington (1935) arranged by Stuart Calvert

The Party's over Now (1932) arranged by Stuart Calvert



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The imagined party of this concert shows the often-surprising web of composers that can be woven around the protean figure of **Noël Coward**, whose own music, astonishing in its range, moved easily between Edwardian musical comedy, European cabaret, Viennese operetta, jazz, blues, Gilbert-and-Sullivan patter and the world of the American musical. This was a figure who – alongside his enduring plays and poems – wrote both music and words for what is now thought to be some 675 songs, their lyrics as brilliant as their melodies are memorable. And all this from a lower-middle-class child actor from Surrey, who was an all but complete auto-didact. He learned to play the piano by ear and admitted to being at home only in a handful of key signatures. He did not know how to notate his melodies and relied instead on a series of amanuenses and orchestrators.

The well-known persona of Noël Coward (clipped diction, cigarette holder, dressing gown) was a mask for a sadder and more conflicted figure. One of the chief facets of his public character was a firm belief in his own easeful genius and he rarely admitted the many hours spent at desk or piano, fine-tuning his plays and songs with manic discipline. Disdaining the 'highbrow' or 'modernist', he made no secret of the fact that he wrote to entertain audiences and be well remunerated, and he left more than a few witticisms on the record about his disdain for classical music. His inveterate recoil from the avant-garde meant that even 'Mr B' (his nickname for Britten) wrote rather too few tunes for his taste. The music of Mozart, he once said, was like 'piddling on a flannel'. Legend has it that, introduced in Finland to Jean Sibelius, he was under the impression that he was speaking to Frederick Delius. Like most such stories, this is nonsense. Coward was a sharp operator and a knowledgeable musician, for whom accuracy and even intellect always took second place to the witty remark. Poking fun, for him, was a means of paying his respects. In quieter moments he would admit to being transported by the beauty of Mozart.

Beneath Coward's varnished wit lies a radicalism that does not make the company he keeps this evening (Satie, Poulenc, Britten) so very surprising. This is a man who worked with the Léonide Massine on ballets for revues and turned down a suggestion of collaboration from Stravinsky. One of the first songwriters to introduce this country to the American imports of jazz and blues, he inspired a teenage **Benjamin Britten**, who was in the audience of his smash-hit pageant *Cavalcade*. Coward even recorded the narration to **Poulenc's** *L'Histoire de Babar*. Like Poulenc, his devotion to romance was matched only by his mischief and cynicism. Depths and shallows are curiously intermingled in him. Working in gossamer, he achieved meaning on the sly. He imparted profound truths about love, sexuality, class, even politics – but it is hard to catch him in the act of profundity.

Coward's daring, as playwright and musician, was to introduce to British audiences a new and syncopated rhythm of modernity, just as classical music in this country, ignoring the chiefly urban concerns of modernism, often clung to the pastoral. Performing the lead role in his play *The*

Vortex, he included snatches of **Gershwin's** *Rhapsody in Blue* (picked up by ear in Manhattan) before the work had received its British première. His music appeared to its first audiences as the epitome of a new sound, torn with the blare of horn and engine, the swing and slither of jazz and blues.

But Coward paints – either with fatigue (as in 'World weary') or with out-and-out nihilism (as in 'Twentieth Century Blues', from *Cavalcade*) – the dangers as well as the excitements of life's new and hectic pace. A complementary pair from his 1920s revues is included in tonight's opening medley: 'Dance Little Lady' and 'Poor Little Rich Girl'. Both wag an admonitory finger at the archetypal partygoing flapper of his generation, so many of whom ended the decade in prisons or nursing homes, or died of botched abortions and drug overdoses. The dancing little lady, in her original staging, emerged from a crowd of eerily masked figures; the lyrics hiss with sibilance, the off-beat rhythm gives the dance a perceptible limp. His notes are often tied to lyrics of a fizz and dexterity that bely their fearful warning: 'You're weaving life into a mad jazz pattern... Cocktails and laughter, but what comes after, nobody knows.'

Above all he was a great, and bleak, chronicler of love. The clearest view of his philosophy, born from a series of traumatic (and at that time illegal) relationships with men, can be found in 'If Love Were All', from the operetta *Bitter Sweet*. The song's autobiography is not the famous protestation that Coward possessed 'a talent to amuse' (he had a higher estimation of his own talent). Soul-baring comes in the song's pining wistfulness: 'I believe the more you love a man... the more you're bound to lose'.

This concert situates such songs in their American context (with numbers by Gershwin and by **Ned Rorem**, who was briefly Coward's lover) while showing the influence of his European travels. Paris and Berlin inspired in him a passion for the light opera of figures such as **André Messager** but also introduced him to the world of Poulenc and **Satie**, alongside whom a song such as 'Parisian Pierrot' (his first smash, which Gertrude Lawrence performed holding a Pierrot doll) sits comfortably. As a composer he folded European and American novelty into a British tradition (the songs of **Roger Quilter** for example, beloved by Coward as composer of the score for *Where the Rainbow Ends*, a play for children that had launched Coward's career as an Edwardian child actor). Nor was he above pinching from anyone he admired, not least **Liza Lehmann**, from whom he brazenly stole the opening melody for 'Dance Little Lady'.

But, above all, Coward is funny. 'Mrs Worthington', written onboard ship when its author had got rather tired of approaches from ambitious stage-mothers as to the theatrical prospects of their unpromising offspring, remains one of the great comic songs. If the party was destined to end, it was fun while it lasted.

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Oliver Soden is the author of *Masquerade: The Lives of Noël Coward*.