

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 15 December 2023  
7.30pm

## Nordic Songs

Miah Persson soprano  
Magnus Svensson piano

Wilhelm Stenhammar (1871-1927)

Vandraren from *Visor och stämningar* Op. 26 (1906-9)  
I skogen from *Sånger och visor* (c.1888)  
Fylgia Op. 16 No. 4 (1893-7)  
I lönnens skymning Op. 37 No. 2 (1918)  
Flickan knyter i Johannenatten Op. 4b No. 2 (1893)  
Flickan kom ifrån sin älsklings möte Op. 4b No. 1 (1893)  
From *Visor och stämningar* Op. 26 (1906-9)

Gösta Nystroem (1890-1966)

Nattyxne • Jungfru Blond och Jungfru Brunett  
Själ och landskap (1952)  
*Vitt land • Önskan • Bara hos den*

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Våren flyktar hastigt Op. 13 No. 4 (1891)  
Den första kyssen Op. 37 No. 1 (1900)  
Bollspelet vid Trianon Op. 36 No. 3 (1899)  
Säv, säv, susa Op. 36 No. 4 (1900)  
Var det en dröm? Op. 37 No. 4 (1902)

### Interval

Emil Sjögren (1853-1918)

Klinge, klinge, mein Pandero Op. 6 No. 1 (pub. 1881)  
Jahrlang möcht' ich so Dich halten from *6 Lieder aus Julius Wolff's Tannhäuser* Op. 12 (pub. 1884)  
In dem Schatten meiner Locken Op. 6 No. 3 (pub. 1881)  
Ich möchte schweben über Tal und Hügel from *6 Lieder aus Julius Wolff's Tannhäuser* Op. 12 (pub. 1884)

Lars-Erik Larsson (1908-1986)

Serenad (1946)  
Skyn, blomman och en lärka (1946)  
För vilsna fötter sjunger gräset (1946)  
Kysande vind (1946)

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

To brune Øjne from *Hjertets melodier* Op. 5 (1864)  
Det første møde from *4 Digte fra 'Fiskerjenten'* Op. 21 (1870-2)  
Med en primula veris Op. 26 No. 4 (1876)  
Den aergjerrige Op. 26 No. 3 (1876)  
Modersorg Op. 15 No. 4 (1864-8)  
Et Håb Op. 26 No. 1 (1876)  
Ved Rondane Op. 33 No. 9 (1873-80)  
Tak for dit råd from *4 Digte fra 'Fiskerjenten'* Op. 21 (1870-2)

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*The programme has changed slightly since these programme notes were written.*

**Wilhelm Stenhammar** was the most important Swedish composer of the period straddling the turn of the 20th Century, even if his allergy to self-promotion saw him champion the music of countless other Nordic composers at the expense of his own. Stenhammar studied piano in Berlin but was effectively self-taught as a composer. He was influenced strongly by Brahms but his music carried with it a Nordic reticence, melancholy and thrift that all grew more pronounced with age.

Stenhammar often accompanied the baritone John Forsell at the piano and his many songs display both practical knowledge and fastidious craftsmanship. His setting of Runeberg's *Flickan kom ifrån sin älsklings möte* - made in 1893, long before Sibelius's version made the text internationally famous - was followed two years later by the Runeberg poem that completed his Opus 4b. Tonight we hear songs from throughout the composer's career, including excerpts from his most substantial cycle *Visor och stämningar* ('Visions and moods', 1906-9) and a song from the last decade of the composer's life: 'I lönnens skymning' ('In the maple's shade'), one of four Von Heidenstam settings from 1918.

**Gösta Nystroem** enjoyed a varied career as a gallery director, music critic, composer and singer. He studied in Copenhagen and Paris before returning to Sweden where he eventually settled in the coastal town of Sarö, just south of Gothenburg, from where he indulged his passion for the sea. That passion was reflected in Nystroem's love for Ebba Lindqvist's nautical poetry. Nystroem set three Lindqvist poems in 1950 as *Själ och landskap* ('Soul and landscape'), works in which music is entirely in service of text. The poems, allegorical visions of coast and expansive ocean, induced music of expressionistic power and harmonic richness.

**Jean Sibelius** used the folk singing techniques of his native Finland to transform the language of orchestral music. But Sibelius's songs predominantly set his mother tongue of Swedish. Stylistically, they grew from the soil of the Lutheran chorale before taking on elements of the salon romance, embracing magical modernity and emerging full circle with some of the mysterious power of Finland's rune singers.

Sibelius's Op. 37 set deals predominantly with death. Runeberg's *Den första kyssen* ('The first kiss') is fatalistic while 'Var det en dröm?' ('Did I just dream?') recedes into the sentiments of Josef Julius Wecksell's poem. Runeberg tended to draw direct melodies from Sibelius, as demonstrated by the seasoned-themed romance from his Op. 13 set, 'Våren flyktar hastigt' ('Spring is swiftly flying'). The Op. 36 songs heard tonight use words by Gustav Fröding; 'Bollspelet vid Trianon' is invested with cumulative foreboding and 'Säv, säv, susa' with strong musical imagery.

During **Emil Sjögren's** studies in Paris, the budding Swedish composer hosted an evening of song attended by Sibelius, who ranted ungraciously about the event in

his diaries. Sjögren may not have been a composer of major international significance but of his 200 songs, the best approach Grieg for freshness. His choice of poets was cosmopolitan. The *6 Tannhäuser Lieder* set Julius Wolff while the *7 Spanish Songs* Op. 6 set Emanuel Geibel and Paul Heyse (one of each here). The music betrays a strong German influence on Sjögren's work.

**Lars-Erik Larsson** is the only composer we hear from tonight born in the 20th Century, a biographical detail echoed in the eclecticism of his music and career. Larsson studied with Alban Berg in Vienna, worked as a producer at Swedish Radio and became the first professor of composition at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. His aesthetic underwent many metamorphoses, from Nordic-Romantic to serial and back again. In 1946, Larsson set nine poems by his beloved Hjalmar Gullberg, four of which we hear tonight. Occasionally, beyond the lyrical sweep and neo-classical poise, we can detect the harmonic edge and melodic angularity found elsewhere in Larsson's work.

**Edvard Grieg** was the first Norwegian composer to write locally distinctive but internationally relevant music. Song enjoyed a privileged place in his predominantly lyrical aesthetic (he was married to a renowned Danish soprano, Nina Hagerup). Grieg's songs are direct, often constructed in strophic verses with a dominant melody line laid over a deft piano accompaniment. The composer was influenced by the lucid, intimate constructions of Schumann, Mendelssohn and Wolf but invested them with fresh air using devices lifted directly from Norwegian folk music, including echo effects and pedal notes.

Grieg's vision as a songwriter was wide. Tonight we open with a song from the composer's Op. 5 - 'To brune Øjne' ('Two brown eyes') sets Hans Christian Andersen and earnestly captures the composer's love for Nina as their relationship blossomed in Copenhagen. Not long after their marriage the couple lost a daughter, the emotional residue of which might have made its way into 'Modersorg' ('A mother's grief') with words by Christian Richardt.

Grieg's Op. 21 drew on Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's novella *The Fisher Maiden* in 1870-2 and included the nature-idyll 'Det første møde' ('The first meeting') and the defiant 'Tak for dit råd' ('You may not approve'). Four years later the composer set five poems by his friend John Paulsen, the most celebrated being 'Med en primula veris' ('The first primrose') with its downward slipping chromatics. The galloping 'Den aergjerrige' is its predecessor in the set.

Poetry by Aasmund Olavsson Vinje inspired some of Grieg's greatest songs and in 1880 he completed his Op. 33 set of 12 Vinje settings, including the enraptured stillness of 'Ved Rondane', the text evoking hope and transported nostalgia.

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Andrew Mellor is author of *The Northern Silence - Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture* (Yale University Press)