

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 16 July 2023
7.30pm

This be her verse

Golda Schultz soprano
Jonathan Ware piano

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

Liebst du um Schönheit Op. 12 No. 2 (1841)

Warum willst du and're fragen Op. 12 No. 3 (1841)

Am Strande (1840)

Emilie Mayer (1812-1883)

Wenn der Abendstern die Rosen Op. 7 No. 3 (pub. 1848)

Du bist wie eine Blume Op. 7 No. 1 (pub. 1848)

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979)

Down by the Salley Gardens (1919)

The Tiger (1929-33 rev. 1972)

Cradle Song (1929)

The Seal Man (1922)

Clara Schumann

Lorelei (1843)

Emilie Mayer

Erlkönig II (1870)

Interval

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

La mer est plus belle (1910)

Prière (1909)

Elégie (1906)

Cantique (1909)

Kathleen Tagg (b.1977)

This be her verse (2020)

After Philip Larkin • Wedding • Single Bed

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'What's it like when women tell their own stories?' This question underpins today's recital of songs composed by women. Although song repertoire today tends to be dominated by male composers, song is a genre in which women composers have traditionally thrived. 'This Be Her Verse' illuminates this history of creative expression, bringing together two hundred years of women's songwriting with a new commission that explicitly foregrounds women's experiences - telling 'our stories in our own voices', as the composer puts it, 'not those of "women's stories" as told from the outside with the woman victimized or placed on a pedestal'.

The opening songs by **Clara Schumann** come from one of the rare instances of her collaborating on a joint publication with her husband Robert: the *Rückert Lieder* (1841). Written in the early years of their marriage, the set comprises 12 songs in total. The publication did not indicate who composed which pieces, but Robert contributed nine of the songs, and Clara three, of which we are hearing two today.

Given the origin of the songs and their focus on true love that overcomes all hardships, it's tempting to hear them biographically. The two composers had a tempestuous start to their relationship, having to defy Clara's domineering father to marry. The gentle lyricism of 'Liebst du um Schönheit' expresses a plea to love for love itself - not for beauty, wealth or youth. One reviewer judged this song to be 'especially lovely', because it was 'so pure, so truthfully felt, in every way so smooth and flowing, its form so consummate.' The style of both this and 'Warum willst du and're fragen' is tender and intimate, as the speaker compels the listener to listen only to them. 'Am Strande', however, written a year earlier and setting a translated text originally by Robert Burns, opens up a wider vista, with a restless piano part evoking the waves of 'the waters which separated us'.

Schumann's contemporary **Emilie Mayer** gained significant public recognition for her eight symphonies, concert overtures and chamber works. Mayer composed on a grand scale, as is evident in these songs whose style tends towards the operatic. The luscious 'Wenn der Abendstern die Rosen' is gently sensuous, the vocal line soaring as the singer is 'seized by an ardent longing', lying in their lover's arms. Heinrich Heine's 'Du bist wie eine Blume', comparing one's love to a flower, proved astonishingly popular among Romantic composers. To date, it has received over 400 settings, including by Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt. Mayer's setting has a sudden forcefulness when the singer appeals to God to protect their lover, almost transforming the text from a plea to a directive, before closing with a vocal flourish illustrating 'fair and sweet'.

In her lifetime, **Rebecca Clarke** was considered to be at the forefront of 1920s modernist composition. These songs demonstrate why, showcasing her sheer compositional range. 'Down by the Salley Gardens' is exquisitely simple, the stripped-back piano part allowing the singer's voice to shine. She penned it in a single day

while on a performance tour to Hawaii, and the delicate accompaniment may have been evoking the Chinese music that she heard there. 'The Tiger', by contrast, is perhaps best described as an expressionist work. Beginning with a bass growl in the piano, Clarke's setting of William Blake's famous poem is relentlessly intense. She wrote 'The Tiger' in the same year as 'Cradle Song', and although they are superficially different in style, they share a sinister and unsettling tone, and a lack of commitment to clear resolution. Clarke draws out the 'little sorrows' and 'dreadful lightnings' that lurk in Blake's poem, sounding doubly sinister in the context of what is ostensibly a lullaby.

From here, we move into songs peopled by dangerous, fantastical beings. Schumann's 'Lorelei' tells the familiar story of a woman luring sailors to their deaths. The opening is tense and agitated, which Schumann amplifies over the course of the song. In 'The Seal Man' Clarke inverts this gender dynamic, setting John Masefield's text about a *woman* who drowns after following her lover into the sea. In Clarke's hands the sea is mysterious, sensual, and brutal. The low piano part evokes the rumble of the rising ocean, and like Schumann she gives the final moments to the pianist as the waves roll away, having consumed their victim. Finally, Mayer tackles Goethe's popular 'Erlkönig', describing a father trying to hide his son from the Erlking who calls him away to die. She fully exploits the expressive opportunities offered by the text's changing scenarios and speakers. Both this and 'The Seal Man' are among the composers' most difficult and theatrical songs, requiring the singer to act the texts' different characters and moods.

Daughter of a composer and a singer, **Nadia Boulanger** grew up at the heart of *fin-de-siècle* musical culture in France - as can be heard in these songs composed between 1906 and 1910. Like her contemporaries Fauré and Debussy, Boulanger was drawn to the allusive, symbolist poetry of writers including Paul Verlaine. In 'La mer est plus belle', a hymn to the sea's beauty, her shifting harmonies and sparkling textures are characteristic of French musical Impressionism. 'Prière' and 'Cantique' are more introspective. Catholicism was extremely important to Boulanger, and she evokes cathedral bells through sonorous piano chords as the singer offers up a prayer in Henry Bataille's devotional 'Prière'. 'Elégie', meanwhile, laments loneliness, Boulanger conjuring up an ambivalent, detached atmosphere as the singer expresses pity for those without a lover to hold close.

Kathleen Tagg's *This Be Her Verse*, commissioned by tonight's artists, sets texts by Lila Palmer. 'We began the process by sharing stories deeply personal and mundane', Tagg writes. 'From there the works were written.' The songs mix humour with tragedy, vulnerability with strength and defiance, altogether creating a sonic portrait of resilience and endurance - 'not a pantheon to female perfection', in Palmer's words, 'but a mirror to everyday women's hopes and fears'.

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