

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 16 July 2025
1.00pm

Emma Johnson clarinet, director
Orchestra for the Environment

Peter Fisher violin I
Takane Funatsu violin I
Sophie Langdon violin I
Oleksandra Reshetilova violin I
Richard Milone violin II

Haim Choi violin II
Jane Carwardine violin II
Caroline Harrison viola
Garfield Jackson viola
Ariana Kashefi cello

Helena Binney cello
Chris West double bass
Celine Saout harp
Paul Clarvis percussion

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Brook Green Suite (1933)
I. Prelude • II. Air • III. Dance

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Crisantemi (1890)

Paul Reade (1943-1997)

Suite from *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* (1987)
*Prelude: andante pastorale • Spring: Allegretto •
Mists: Lento melancolico • Exotica: Allegro
ritmico • Summer: Flowing*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Fantasia on Greensleeves (1934)

Emma Johnson (b.1966)

Tree of Life (2020-1)
*I. In the Beginning • II. Bacchanalia •
III. The Truth of Things • IV. Resolution*



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How, this concert asks us to wonder, might music be green? Could something that sounds as fresh as a wild flower or a spring sky count as green music – something like the *Brook Green Suite* by **Holst**, with which the programme opens? The whole first phrase here, in C major, has just a couple of accidentals, to secure a brush with F major and therefore a plagal relationship suggesting folk song or English music of the Tudor period.

But look: the echoes are coming more from culture than nature and are as accidental, if you will, as the associations in the title. Brook Green, of course, is a district of London, and the brook that gave it its name has long been running under a pub. For the composer, it was where he worked, as music master at St Paul's School for Girls. He had written one suite for string-playing pupils there and named it after the school: *St Paul's Suite* (1913). This second, composed 20 years later for the junior orchestra, had to carry the name of its district. There are indications in the score of where woodwinds could take part in the outer movements.

Though Holst wrote it in the last months of his life, it certainly has nothing of final thoughts about it. The tarantella theme for the last movement came from a puppet show he witnessed on holiday in Sicily in 1929.

Holst's elder contemporary **Puccini** composed *Crisantemi* for string quartet as a memorial to Amedeo of Savoy, brother of the Italian king Umberto I. By Puccini's own account, the composition was all done in a single night, and it cannot have taken him much more than that because the first performance, given on January 26, 1890, by Leonardo Campanari's quartet, came only eight days after Amedeo's death. The piece is in C sharp minor, with a middle section that starts abruptly but slides back into the reprise. Puccini incorporated the music in the last act of *Manon Lescaut*, on which he was at work at the time. Chrysanthemums – specifically, white chrysanthemums – stand for death and mourning in Italian culture.

We move from Italian floristry to English horticulture for selections from the music **Paul Reade** wrote for the series *The Victorian Kitchen Garden*, which was broadcast on BBC 2 in the autumn of 1987, with Emma Johnson's clarinet on the soundtrack. As many in this audience will be aware, the series followed the partial restoration of the walled garden at Chilton Lodge, not far from Hungerford, using tools and plant varieties of the Victorian era.

Reade did not attempt to evoke that period but rather to convey atmospheres of Englishry and pleasantness. From the original score he created a short suite for clarinet with piano, harp or small orchestra. The clarinettist is asked in the *Spring* movement to 'mimic the chattering and singing of a bird' and in the following *Mists* to play 'with a lingering autumnal feeling'. Besides being picturesque, the suite is neatly developed out of the *Prelude's* melody, as is revealed most directly in the

finale. This is, one might say, green-fingered composition.

The melody 'Greensleeves', often but erroneously attributed to Henry VIII, brings us to another work with 'green' in its title – though we should be wary of going too far in this direction, since 'greensleeves' was an epithet aimed at women who got them by lying on the grass weighed down by someone else. As for the melody, that was enough known by Shakespeare's time for him to refer to it in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Taking his cue, **Vaughan Williams** used the tune in his Falstaff opera *Sir John in Love* (1929) for Mistress Ford to sing. Five years later (so very much at the same time as Holst was writing his *Brook Green Suite*), this setting was adapted, with a middle section based on the folk song 'Lovely Joan', by Ralph Greaves under the composer's supervision to make the *Fantasia on Greensleeves* that has become one of his most popular works, in many different arrangements.

Finally, **Emma Johnson's** concerto *Tree of Life* gives us much to ponder in matters of greenness: how biodiversity is threatened and how it may be encouraged. The work's four movements follow a regular sort of pattern – opener-scherzo-slow movement-finale – with links of birdsong played by the soloist. Intended by Johnson for herself and the players accompanying her today, the piece was first performed at the festival in the Wealden village of Lamberhurst just over two years ago.

To continue with Johnson's own note:

'The music traces a journey from *In the Beginning*, which shows a pristine, unspoilt world, via *Bacchanalia* where hedonistic, dancing inspires the clarinet to glissando in the style of 1930s jazz. Trouble is seeded when a jaunty middle section morphs into a combative duet for clarinet and drums turning the glissandos, when they return, into wails of distress.

'Realisation of the destruction wrought strikes in *The Truth of Things*, a contemplative reflection on a paradise now spoilt, but after a troubled start, the final movement, *Resolution*, conveys a sense of coming together and triumphing over disaster as harp and clarinet duet deliriously, their swirling configurations rising ever higher. However, there is still a note of doubt in the final chords over which the clarinet sings the song of the Ō'ō of Kauai, a bird that was native to this one Hawaiian island and has become extinct in recent times, undetected since the last recording was made, in 1987.

'The melancholy fate of a single species stands here as a symbol of greater dangers that, if they are to be averted, will certainly require humankind to show resolution.'

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