

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 October 2022
1.00pm

Christine Rice mezzo-soprano
Julius Drake piano

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Les nuits d'été Op. 7 (1840-1)

*Villanelle • Le spectre de la rose • Sur les lagunes •
Absence • Au cimetière • L'île inconnue*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Winter Words Op. 52 (1953)

*At day-close in November •
Midnight on the Great Western • Wagtail and baby •
The little old table • The Choirmaster's Burial •
Proud songsters • At the railway station, Upway •
Before life and after*

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Berlioz's summer nights and Britten's winter words take us on a journey through select seasons of the soul: the six songs of *Les nuits d'été* revolve around the beauty, fragility, and loss of love, while the eight of *Winter Words* thematise youthful innocence and the experience of age.

Les nuits d'été are 1840-1 settings of words by Théophile Gautier, who was a friend of **Berlioz** and moved in similar artistic circles. The texts were drawn from the 'Poésies diverses' section of Gautier's *La comédie de la mort*, which was published in 1838; Berlioz made light amendments to some of Gautier's titles, and changed the order of the poems. The set was published in 1841 by the Parisian firm Catelin, and dedicated to the composer and poet Louise Bertin. Performances, however, were scarce: it is believed that, with the exception of 'Absence', the songs weren't heard onstage in their voice-piano guise during Berlioz's lifetime.

From these inauspicious beginnings, *Les nuits d'été* evolved dramatically: between 1843 and 1856, Berlioz sporadically adapted individual songs for voice and orchestra. He varied the specified voice types, transposed 'Le spectre de la rose' and 'Sur les lagunes' into new keys, and dedicated each song to a different singer. The first orchestration, 'Absence', had a successful outing at a Leipzig charity concert in 1843 – Mendelssohn admired it, and Berlioz felt it 'ten times more effective than on the piano' – but it was 12 years before he orchestrated another ('Le spectre de la rose'). The final four were orchestrated rapidly in March 1856, but it is believed that Berlioz never heard a full performance of the cycle. When the publishers Rieter-Biedermann issued a complete orchestral score in 1856, they also provided an edition for voice and piano: these were reductions of the orchestral versions, rather than editions of Berlioz's original 1840-41 songs, leading to competing sources for early recitalists.

As an early and innovative example of the orchestral song cycle, there is no doubt that the orchestral songs have overshadowed their voice-piano counterparts in performance, on record and in the eyes of historians and musicologists. But, as with other dual-version songs by composers like Mahler and Strauss, the voice-piano *Les nuits d'été* makes its own valuable contribution to the song repertoire, and deserves to be heard and appreciated on its own terms – not least in the intimacy and intensity gained in the duo version, the differences in momentum and pace that ensue, and the capacity for the piano alone to conjure the details of Gautier's vibrant Romantic images every bit as evocatively as a full orchestra.

The cycle's unity comes not from a narrative progression, but from common themes, moods, and musical motifs that bind the songs together. The first and last songs are upbeat, with bucolic words and jaunty music, but the gravitas of the four central songs means that the optimism of the closing 'L'île

inconnue' may ring slightly hollow. Songs 2-5 contain some of Berlioz's most profound and affecting music, replete with melodic inspiration and harmonic depth, from the balance of ethereal whimsy and musical ecstasy in 'Le spectre de la rose', to the anguish of the death of a beloved in 'Sur les lagunes', the ardent summons to a distant beloved in 'Absence', and the crepuscular visions of 'Au cimetière'.

Britten never met Thomas Hardy, who died when the composer was a teenager, but the two shared several creative preoccupations and it is perhaps surprising that *Winter Words* was the composer's only sustained engagement with Hardy's poems. Britten selected the eight poems from a collected edition, so each has a different provenance, but the title for the set was adopted from that of Hardy's last volume, which was published posthumously following his death in 1928 at the age of 87. The songs were written in 1953, and originally composed for high voice and piano – specifically for the voice of tenor Peter Pears, who was Britten's partner and frequent collaborator – but versions for lower voice were later produced by Boosey & Hawkes.

While so much of Britten's inspiration came from his native coastal Suffolk, it was the rural West and South of England that permeated Hardy's literary imagination, and which infiltrate the poems of this set. No narrative is imposed by Britten upon his selected poems, but they are bound loosely by themes of childhood innocence and adult experience, and of reminiscence both bitter and sweet. Britten's operatic preoccupations shine through in the set: Hardy's detailed observations of everyday scenes, from which universal messages can be drawn, give rise to what are effectively miniature operas.

The songs are replete with vivid touches that bring Hardy's scenes to life: the piano is responsible for the creaking wood in 'The little old table', the chirruping and fluttering of the young birds in 'Proud songsters', and the virtuosic flourishes and double-stops of the boy with the violin (in 'At the railway station, Upway'). The convincing train-whistle triads and jolting rhythmic thrust of 'Midnight on the Great Western' remind us that the trains Hardy (and Britten) knew offered greater sonic spectacle than anything pulling out of Paddington today.

The emotional heart of the cycle is 'The choirmaster's burial': the soaring, angelic melismas, the lyrical piano transformation of the hymn-tune mentioned in the poem, and the concise narrative bracketing of the tale at the end are all paradigmatic of Britten's powerful vocal storytelling. The philosophical final song – with its beseeching final question ('how long? How long?') gives rise to further vocal intensity characteristic of Britten's writing for Pears's voice.

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Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Les nuits d'été Op. 7 (1840-1)

Théophile Gautier

Villanelle

Quand viendra la saison
nouvelle,
Quand auront disparu les froids,
Tous les deux nous irons, ma
belle,
Pour cueillir le muguet au
bois;
Sous nos pieds égrenant les
perles
Que l'on voit au matin
trembler,
Nous irons écouter les
merles
Siffler!

Le printemps est venu, ma
belle;
C'est le mois des amants
béni,
Et l'oiseau, satinant son
aile,
Dit ses vers au rebord du
nid.
Oh! viens donc sur ce banc
de mousse,
Pour parler de nos beaux
amours,
Et dis-moi de ta voix si
douce:
Toujours!

Loin, bien loin, égarant nos
courses,
Faisons fuir le lapin
caché,
Et le daim au miroir des
sources
Admirant son grand bois
penché;
Puis, chez nous, tout
heureux, tout aises,
En panier enlaçant nos
doigts,
Revenons rapportant des
fraises
Des bois!

Villanelle

When the new season
comes,
when the cold has gone,
we two will go, my
sweet,
to gather lilies-of-the-
valley in the woods;
scattering as we tread the
pearls of dew
we see quivering each
morn,
we'll go and hear the
blackbirds
sing!

Spring has come, my
sweet;
it is the season lovers
bless,
and the birds, preening
their wings,
sing songs from the edge
of their nests.
Ah! Come, then, to this
mossy bank
to talk of our beautiful
love,
and tell me in your gentle
voice:
forever!

Far, far away we'll stray
from our path,
startling the rabbit from
his hiding-place
and the deer reflected in
the spring,
admiring his great
lowered antlers;
then home we'll go,
serene and at ease,
and entwining our fingers
basket-like,
we'll bring back home
wild
strawberries!

Le spectre de la rose

Soulève ta paupière close
Qu'effleure un songe virginal;

Je suis le spectre d'une rose
Que tu portais hier au
bal.
Tu me pris encore
emperlée
Des pleurs d'argent de
l'arrosoir,
Et parmi la fête étoilée
Tu me promenas tout le
soir.

O toi qui de ma mort fus
cause,
Sans que tu puisses le
chasser,
Toutes les nuits mon spectre
rose
A ton chevet viendra
danser.
Mais ne crains rien, je ne
réclame
Ni messe ni *De
profundis*;
Ce léger parfum est mon
âme,
Et j'arrive du paradis.

Mon destin fut digne
d'envie:
Et pour avoir un sort si beau,
Plus d'un aurait donné sa
vie,
Car sur ton sein j'ai mon
tombeau,
Et sur l'albâtre où je
repose
Un poète avec un baiser
Ecrivit: Ci-gît une rose
Que tous les rois vont
jalouser.

The spectre of the rose

Open your eyelids,
brushed by a virginal
dream;

I am the spectre of a rose
that yesterday you wore
at the dance.
You plucked me still
sprinkled
with silver tears of
dew,
and amid the glittering feast
you wore me all evening
long.

O you who brought about
my death,
you shall be powerless to
banish me:
the rosy spectre which
every night
will come to dance at
your bedside.
But be not afraid – I
demand
neither Mass nor *De
Profundis*;
this faint perfume is my
soul,
and I come from Paradise.

My destiny was worthy of
envy;
and for such a beautiful fate,
many would have given
their lives –
for my tomb is on your
breast,
and on the alabaster
where I lie,
a poet with a kiss
has written: Here lies a rose
which every king will
envy.

Texts continue overleaf

Sur les lagunes

Ma belle amie est morte:
Je pleurerai toujours;
Sous la tombe elle emporte

Mon âme et mes amours.
Dans le ciel, sans m'attendre,
Elle s'en retourna;

L'ange qui l'emmena

Ne voulut pas me prendre.
Que mon sort est amer!
Ah! sans amour, s'en aller sur
la mer!

La blanche créature
Est couchée au cercueil.
Comme dans la nature
Tout me paraît en deuil!

La colombe oubliée
Pleure et songe à
l'absent;
Mon âme pleure et sent
Qu'elle est dépareillée.
Que mon sort est amer!
Ah! sans amour, s'en aller sur
la mer!

Sur moi la nuit
immense
S'étend comme un linceul;
Je chante ma romance
Que le ciel entend
seul.
Ah! Comme elle était belle,
Et comme je l'aimais!
Je n'aimerai jamais
Une femme autant qu'elle.
Que mon sort est amer!
Ah! sans amour, s'en aller sur
la mer!

Absence

Reviens, reviens, ma bien-
aimée;
Comme une fleur loin du
soleil,
La fleur de ma vie est
fermée
Loin de ton sourire vermeil!

Entre nos coeurs quelle
distance!
Tant d'espace entre nos
baisers!

On the lagoons

My dearest love is dead:
I shall weep for evermore;
to the tomb she takes
with her
my soul and all my love.
Without waiting for me
she has returned to
Heaven;

the angel who took her
away
did not wish to take me.
How bitter is my fate!
Alas! to set sail loveless
across the sea!

The pure white being
lies in her coffin.
How everything in nature
seems to mourn!
The forsaken dove
weeps, dreaming of its
absent mate;
my soul weeps and feels
itself adrift.
How bitter is my fate!
Alas! to set sail loveless
across the sea!

The immense night
above me
is spread like a shroud;
I sing my song
which heaven alone can
hear.
Ah! how beautiful she was,
and how I loved her!
I shall never love a woman
as I loved her.
How bitter is my fate!
Alas! to set sail loveless
across the sea!

Absence

Return, return, my
sweetest love!
Like a flower far from the
sun,
the flower of my life is
closed
far from your crimson smile!

Such a distance between
our hearts!
So great a gulf between
our kisses!

O sort amer! O dure
absence!
O grands désirs
inapaisés!

Reviens, reviens, ma bien-
aimée!
Comme une fleur loin du
soleil,
La fleur de ma vie est
fermée
Loin de ton sourire vermeil!

D'ici là-bas, que de
campagnes,
Que de villes et de
hameaux,
Que de vallons et de
montagnes,
A lasser le pied des chevaux!

Reviens, reviens, ma bien-
aimée!
Comme une fleur loin du
soleil,
La fleur de ma vie est
fermée
Loin de ton sourire vermeil!

Au cimetière

Connaissez-vous la blanche
tombe
Où flotte avec un son plaintif
L'ombre d'un if?
Sur l'if, une pâle colombe,
Triste et seule, au soleil
couchant,
Chante son chant;

Un air maladivement
tendre,
A la fois charmant et
fatal,
Qui vous fait mal
Et qu'on voudrait toujours
entendre,
Un air, comme en soupire
aux cieux
L'ange amoureux.

On dirait que l'âme éveillée
Pleure sous terre à
l'unisson
De la chanson,
Et du malheur d'être
oubliée
Se plaint dans un roucoulement
Bien doucement.

O bitter fate! O harsh
absence!
O great unassuaged
desires!

Return, return, my
sweetest love!
Like a flower far from the
sun,
the flower of my life is
closed
far from your crimson smile!

So many intervening
plains,
so many towns and
hamlets,
so many valleys and
mountains
to weary the horses' hooves!

Return, return, my
sweetest love!
Like a flower far from the
sun,
the flower of my life is
closed
far from your crimson smile!

At the cemetery

Do you know the white
tomb,
where the shadow of a yew
waves plaintively?
On that yew a pale dove,
sad and solitary at
sundown
sings its song;

A melody of morbid
sweetness,
delightful and deathly at
once,
which wounds you
and which you'd like to
hear forever,
a melody, such as in the
heavens,
a lovesick angel sighs.

As if the awakened soul
weeps beneath the earth
together
with the song,
and at the sorrow of
being forgotten
murmurs its complaint
most meltingly.

Sur les ailes de la musique On sent lentement revenir Un souvenir; Une ombre, une forme angélique Passe dans un rayon tremblant, En voile blanc.	On the wings of music you sense the slow return of a memory; a shadow, an angelic form passes in a shimmering beam, veiled in white.
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Les belles-de-nuit, demi- closes, Jettent leur parfum faible et doux Autour de vous, Et le fantôme aux molles poses Murmure, en vous tendant les bras: Tu reviendras?	The Marvels of Peru, half- closed, shed their fragrance sweet and faint about you, and the phantom with its languid gestures murmurs, reaching out to you: will you return?
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Oh! jamais plus, près de la tombe Je n'irai, quand descend le soir Au manteau noir, Ecouter la pâle colombe Chanter sur la pointe de l'if Son chant plaintif!	Ah! nevermore shall I approach that tomb, when evening descends in its black cloak, to listen to the pale dove from the top of a yew sing its plaintive song!
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L'île inconnue

Dites, la jeune belle,
Où voulez-vous aller?
La voile ouvre son aile,
La brise va souffler!

L'aviron est d'ivoire,
Le pavillon de moire,
Le gouvernail d'or fin;
J'ai pour lest une orange,
Pour voile une aile d'ange,
Pour mousse un séraphin.

Dites, la jeune belle,
Où voulez-vous aller?
La voile ouvre son aile,
La brise va souffler!

Est-ce dans la Baltique,
Dans la mer Pacifique,
Dans l'île de Java?
Ou bien est-ce en Norvège,
Cueillir la fleur de neige
Ou la fleur d'Angsoka?

Dites, la jeune belle,
Où voulez-vous aller?

Menez-moi, dit la
belle,
A la rive fidèle

The unknown isle

Tell me, pretty young maid,
where is it you would go?
The sail is billowing,
the breeze about to blow!

The oar is of ivory,
the pennant of watered silk,
the rudder of finest gold;
for ballast I've an orange,
for sail an angel's wing,
for cabin boy a seraph.

Tell me, pretty young maid,
where is it you would go?
The sail is billowing,
the breeze about to blow!

Perhaps the Baltic,
or the Pacific
or the Isle of Java?
Or else to Norway,
to pluck the snow flower
or the flower of Angsoka?

Tell me, pretty young maid,
where is it you would go?

Take me, said the pretty
maid,
to the shore of faithfulness

Où l'on aime toujours. – Cette rive, ma chère, On ne la connaît guère Au pays des amours.	where love endures forever. – That shore, my sweet, is scarce known, in the realm of love.
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Où voulez-vous aller? La brise va souffler.	Where do you wish to go? The breeze is about to blow!
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Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Winter Words Op. 52 (1953)

Thomas Hardy

At day-close in November

The ten hours' light is abating,
And a late bird wings across,
Where the pines, like waltzers waiting,
Give their black heads a toss.

Beech leaves, that yellow the noontime,
Float past like specks in the eye;
I set every tree in my June time,
And now they obscure the sky.

And the children who ramble through here
Conceive that there never has been
A time when no tall trees grew here,
That none will in time be seen.

Midnight on the Great Western

In the third-class seat sat the journeying boy,
And the roof-lamp's oily flame
Played down on his listless form and face,
Bewrapt past knowing to what he was going,
Or whence he came.

In the band of his hat the journeying boy
Had a ticket stuck; and a string
Around his neck bore the key of his box,
That twinkled gleams of the lamp's sad beams
Like a living thing.

What past can be yours, O journeying boy
Towards a world unknown,
Who calmly, as if incurious quite
On all at stake, can undertake
This plunge alone?

Knows your soul a sphere, O journeying boy,
Our rude realms far above,
Whence with spacious vision you mark and mete
This region of sin that you find you in,
But are not of?

Wagtail and baby

A baby watched a ford, whereto
A wagtail came for drinking;
A blaring bull went wading through,
The wagtail showed no shrinking.

A stallion splashed his way across,
The birdie nearly sinking;
He gave his plumes a twitch and toss,
And held his own unblinking.

Next saw the baby round the spot
A mongrel slowly slinking;
The wagtail gazed, but faltered not
In dip and sip and prinking.

A perfect gentleman then neared;
The wagtail, in a winking,
With terror rose and disappeared;
The baby fell a thinking.

The little old table

Creak, little wood thing, creak,
When I touch you with elbow or knee;
That is the way you speak
Of one who gave you to me!

You, little table, she brought –
Brought me with her own hand,
As she looked at me with a thought
That I did not understand.

Whoever owns it anon,
And hears it, will never know
What a history hangs upon
This creak from long ago.

The Choirmaster's Burial

He often would ask us
That, when he died,
After playing so many
To their last rest,
If out of us any
Should here abide,
And it would not task us,
We would with our lutes
Play over him
By his grave brim
The psalm he liked best –
The one whose sense suits –
'Mount Ephraim' –
And perhaps we should seem
To him, in Death's dream,
Like the seraphim.

As soon as I knew
That his spirit was gone
I thought this his due,
And spoke thereupon.
'I think', said the vicar,
'A read service quicker
Than viols out of doors
In these frosts and hoars.
That old fashioned way
Requires a fine day,
And it seems to me
It had better not be.'

Hence, that afternoon,
Though never knew he
That his wish could not be,
To get through it faster
They buried the master
Without any tune.

But 'twas said that, when
At the dead of next night
The vicar looked out,
There struck on his ken
Thronged roundabout,
Where the frost was graying
The headstoned grass,
A band all in white
Like saints in church glass,
Singing and playing
The ancient stave
By the choirmaster's grave.

Such the tenor man told
When he had grown old.

Proud songsters

The thrushes sing as the sun is going,
And the finches whistle in ones and pairs,
And as it gets dark loud nightingales in bushes
Pipe, as they can when April wears,
As if all Time were theirs.

These are brand new birds of twelve months' growing,
Which a year ago, or less than twain,
No finches were, nor nightingales, nor thrushes,
But only particles of grain,
And earth, and air, and rain.

At the railway station, Upway

'There is not much that I can do,
For I've no money that's quite my own!
Spoke up the pitying child –
A little boy with a violin
At the station before the train came in.

'But I can play my fiddle to you,
And a nice one 'tis, and good in tone!'

The man in the handcuffs smiled;
The constable looked, and he smiled, too,
As the fiddle began to twang;
And the man in the handcuffs suddenly sang
With grimful glee:
'This life so free
Is the thing for me!'

And the constable smiled, and said no word,
As if unconscious of what he heard;
And so they went on till the train came in –
The convict, and boy with the violin.

Before life and after

A time there was – as one may guess
And as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell –
Before the birth of consciousness,
When all went well.

None suffered sickness, love, or loss,
None knew regret, starved hope, or heart-burnings;
None cared whatever crash or cross
Brought wrack to things.

If something ceased, no tongue bewailed,
If something winced and waned, no heart was wrung;
If brightness dimmed, and dark prevailed,
No sense was stung.

But the disease of feeling germed,
And primal rightness took the tinct of wrong;
Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed
How long, how long?

*Translation of Berlioz by Richard Stokes from A French Song
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