

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 1 February 2024  
7.30pm

Brindley Sherratt bass  
Julius Drake piano  
Leon Bosch double bass

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

L'incanto degli occhi D902 No. 1 (1827)  
Fahrt zum Hades D526 (1817)  
Auf der Donau D553 (1817)  
Der Schiffer D536 (1817)

Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)

Songs and Dances of Death (1875-7)  
*Lullaby • Serenade • Trepak • The Field Marshal*

*Interval*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Per questa bella mano K612 with double bass obbligato (1791)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Mit vierzig Jahren ist der Berg ersteigen Op. 94 No. 1 (1883-4)

Steig auf, geliebter Schatten Op. 94 No. 2 (1883-4)

Mein Herz ist schwer Op. 94 No. 3 (1883-4)

Sapphische Ode Op. 94 No. 4 (1883-4)

Kein Haus, keine Heimat Op. 94 No. 5 (1883-4)

John Ireland (1879-1962)

Sea Fever (1913)

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

Fear no more the heat o' the sun from *Let us garlands bring* Op. 18 (1929-42)

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937)

By a Bierside (1916)

Michael Head (1900-1976)

Limehouse Reach from *6 Sea Songs* (1948)

Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

Captain Stratton's Fancy (1921)

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Both halves of this death-haunted recital begin with flashes of love, light and life. Where appropriate, **Schubert** often made tongue-in-cheek allusions to, and even light-hearted parodies of, other styles, and the poem *L'incanto degli occhi* by Pietro Metastasio – most famous for his opera libretti – must have proved irresistible: he turned it into a witty number that wouldn't be out of place in an opera buffa. The next three songs were all written in 1817, using poems by Schubert's friend, sometime housemate and collaborator Johann Mayrhofer. The three introduce a recurring sub-theme of this recital: water, in all its intrigue, danger, thrill and beauty. Schubert's boat journey through the underworld river ('Fahrt zum Hades') is lugubrious – 'heavy with death', in Mayrhofer's words – while the waves in 'Auf der Donau' ripple with a melancholy foreboding. The Danube boater sees castles and forests rise above him: these are both characteristic emblems of German Romanticism and local landmarks as the river runs through and beyond Schubert and Mayrhofer's city. 'Der Schiffer' plunges us into another awe- or terror-inspiring landscape, with a relentless piano part underlying the protagonist's resolve to submit himself to the elements, come what may.

Death appears in many forms in the *Songs and Dances of Death*, a four-song set written by **Musorgsky** in 1875-1877 to poems by Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov. In the first, Death sings a gentle lullaby with chilling persistence, eventually overcoming the mother's pleas for her child to live. In 'Serenade', Death seduces a young woman and claims her as his own, while in 'Trepak' a drunken peasant is danced to his death above a piano line inspired by the opening contour of the *Dies irae* plainchant. Military destruction unfolds in 'The Field Marshal', as Death surveys the scene victorious. The songs all present dramatic scenes inspired by the grim realities of life, and several composers have been inspired to orchestrate them, including Glazunov, Rimsky-Korsakov and Shostakovich.

**Mozart's** aria 'Per questa bella mano' was written in 1791 for bass singer, double bass and orchestra. It was first performed by the bass Franz Xaver Gerl, who was known for his operatic roles as Don Giovanni, Sarastro and Figaro, and the double bassist Friedrich Pischelberger. The obbligato double bass line that runs through the aria is showy and virtuosic – and is all the more difficult for today's players because the double bass of late-18th-century Vienna was tuned differently to the typical modern instrument.

**Brahms's** many songs were grouped into opus numbers for various reasons, often practical as much as musical. Despite including four poets (Rückert, Halm, Geibel, Schmidt), Op. 94 of 1883-4 is fairly

cohesive as a set, and is often understood as a miniature cycle of sorts: it showcases the low voice, has overarching themes of aging and the awareness of mortality, and predominantly uses related keys. The protagonist of the first song is a wanderer, contemplating his 40 years and what's yet to come through mountain metaphors (Brahms was 50 at the time); the second and third songs look backwards, seeking rejuvenation and wondering where the time has gone. 'Sapphische Ode' is the best-known song of Op. 94, and is more often heard apart from the set. Within it, however, it provides respite from its existential surroundings with a comforting pulse and gently unfolding melody. Brahms uses a strophic form that both enhances the sense of formal rigour followed by the poet, and allows us to enjoy twice the magisterial beauty of the music. After this, the abrupt and perfunctory 'Kein Haus, keine Heimat' is all the more startling – its pessimistic statement is over in a matter of seconds – but its imagery returns us to the theme of water for the closing group of English songs.

This time, the poems are inflected variously by aspects of docklands life and colonial seafaring. John Masefield was a sailor and prolific writer, whose poems have been set to music by many a British composer. The best-known of the bunch is **John Ireland's** 'Sea Fever', which uses one of Masefield's *Salt-Water Ballads* first published in 1902; Ireland composed his steely ballad in 1913 and it later found popularity over the airwaves, even topping a BBC poll of listeners' favourite songs. 'Sea Fever' is an ode to the excitement and promise of the sea, but the next two songs return to the theme of death. **Finzi's** Shakespeare setting 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun' is a lament that lilts with pathos; it is drawn from *Let us garlands bring*, which was written as a birthday present for Vaughan Williams in 1942 and first performed at a National Gallery concert that year as the war continued. Masefield's *By a Bierside* was set to music by **Gurney** in 1916, in the midst of his service in the French trenches during the first world war; it is a sombre and radiant paean to beauty, life and death. A voyage by boat to Canada so inspired Cicely Fox Smith that much of her literary output centred around seafaring; frequently writing insightfully and empathetically from a sailor's perspective, she was so often assumed to be male that she began publishing explicitly as 'Miss'. Her *Limehouse Reach* tells of a spurned lover setting sail from London, and was set to music by **Michael Head** as one of his *6 Sea Songs*. *Captain Stratton's Fancy* is another Masefield poem that captured the imagination of several composers, and **Peter Warlock's** setting is appropriately swash-buckling.

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