

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 1 June 2024  
7.30pm

## 12 Ensemble

Eloisa-Fleur Thom violin I  
Venetia Jollands violin I  
Ellie Consta violin I  
David López Ibañez violin I  
Alessandro Ruisi violin II  
Oliver Cave violin II  
Maria Gilicel violin II  
Luba Tunnicliffe viola  
Charlotte Bonneton viola

Max Ruisi cello  
Clare O'Connell cello  
Peteris Sokolovskis cello  
Stephanie Tress cello  
Colin Alexander cello  
Jonny Byers cello  
George Hoult cello  
Kirsten Jenson cello  
Yoanna Prodanova cello

Deni Teo cello  
Abi Hyde-Smith cello  
Hugh Mackay cello  
William Clark-Maxwell cello  
Felix Hughes cello  
Anna Menzies cello  
Philip Nelson bass

Fleur Barron mezzo-soprano

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (1910, rev. 1919)  
*arranged by Eloisa-Fleur Thom*

John Luther Adams (b.1953)

Canticles of the Sky (2015)

*I. Sky With Four Suns • II. Sky With Four Moons •  
III. Sky With Nameless Colors • IV. Sky With  
Endless Stars*

*Interval*

Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931)

Mirage: The Dancing Sun (2002)

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

Il tramonto (1914)

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Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* is an enduring favourite among his works. It was commissioned for the Three Choirs Festival in 1910 and premièred in Gloucester Cathedral, though Vaughan Williams later made revisions. While it was originally composed for double string orchestra, tonight we'll hear it in a less familiar garb: an arrangement for twelve strings by 12 Ensemble's Artistic Director **Eloisa-Fleur Thom**, supported by the Vaughan Williams Charitable Trust.

The music itself is highly suggestive of a resonant cathedral space, with echo effects and bold contrasts of light and dark. There are few openings as instantly magical as the soft halo of G major that transports us, via a mysterious progression, into another world. Tallis's theme, a short Psalm tune, enters with a ghostly tapping before two full statements successively grow in majesty. The dual character of this melody - first monkishly austere, then flowingly expressive - provides the elements of gothic mystery and deep feeling that pervade the entire fantasia, as the tune is deconstructed, its fragments re-examined.

Two musical activities in particular left a mark on this music: Vaughan Williams's editorship of the 1906 *English Hymnal*, in which he resurrected Tudor melodies, and his trips into the countryside collecting English folksongs. The central section of the piece introduces modal solos, and these folk-like variations suggest a bridge between music of the church and the common man, between past and present. As a composer concerned with creating a 'national' music, we can understand the *Fantasia* as an inclusive, open-ended, ever-questioning move towards that goal, a vision of England in which nothing is firmly settled, nor the past neatly mythologised.

**John Luther Adams** is an American composer whose music is inseparable from themes of nature and environmental advocacy - as he put it in a 2023 interview, 'for me, everything is an adoration of the Earth'. For nearly forty years he lived in the remote northern state of Alaska, before moving to several southern deserts. These highly contrasting environments are evoked in his *Canticles of the Sky* for 16-part cello ensemble. There seems to be a numerological aspect to this work too, which is divided into four 'choirs' of four cellos, and four movements that each run to approximately four minutes and 20 seconds in length.

The first two movements, *Sky With Four Suns* and *Sky With Four Moons*, represent illusions of light that occur in the Arctic, where ice crystals in the atmosphere create effects such as arcs, haloes and parhelia (also known as 'sundogs', in which there appear to be multiple suns). The following two movements, *Sky With Nameless Colors* and *Sky With Endless Stars*, refer to the skies of the Sonoran Desert, in their 'extraordinary depth and clarity'.

Each movement introduces a slow polyphony of held notes, gradually building from quietness and receding back again, and spreading in register from either low to

high, or vice versa. The result is a spectrally rich sense of suspended animation, without any strong rhythmic pulse, but rather a gradual shift in colour that invites us into a meditation.

A much more dramatic take on a solar theme comes from the Russian composer **Sofia Gubaidulina**, whose music has absorbed many influences and defies easy categorisation. Her 2002 piece *Mirage: The Dancing Sun* was commissioned for the International Cello Festival in Beauvais, France, and is scored for eight cellos. As she put it, she was particularly drawn to the potential of using 'glowing' natural harmonics - perhaps a sonic equivalent to the mirage's visual illusion, as it wrong-foots our expectation of how a cello sounds. These harmonics join a diverse set of musical elements, including lines of expressionistic intensity, resonant chords and *tremolando* and *glissando* effects.

In the last third of the work, the music comes to a frenetic climax, which in Gubaidulina's words represents the image of 'a solar disk rotating very rapidly, throwing arrows of flame in different directions ... everything that happened before is just a preparation for this moment'. After this culmination, the final passages of the music seem to vaporise into the solar haze.

**Ottorino Respighi** is perhaps best known today for colourfully triumphant orchestral works such as *Pines of Rome*. But the sensual late-Romanticism of his *Il Tramonto* of 1914 for soprano and strings shows a more introspective side of the composer. The text is Roberto Ascoli's Italian translation of Shelley's poem *The Sunset*, written in 1816. It tells a tale of two young lovers out walking in the countryside as night falls, and how, when the man mysteriously dies in the night, his lover Isabel lives out the rest of her days in mourning.

The poem reflects Shelley's fears for his own ill health, with the sunset a familiar metaphor for death. Notably, when it was written, unusually brilliant sunsets had recently been observed in England thanks to the massive eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, whose ash had travelled around the world in the stratosphere. *Il Tramonto* is through-composed, with wide-ranging music that nimbly responds to the text. It begins with a swooning romantic gesture in the strings, which quickly dies away, before the vocal line opens in a recitative style. When the words move to picturesque descriptions of the landscape, the soprano soars gloriously over grand harmonic progressions, seeming to anticipate the bittersweet sunset of Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, composed 30 years later. A series of grimly dark chords illustrates the moment of the lover's death, but it is in music of pastoral gentleness that the piece eventually dies away, much like the light it describes, as the bereaved Isabel makes a lament for peace.

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## Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

### Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis

(1910, rev. 1919)

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#### Interval

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## Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931)

### Mirage: The Dancing Sun (2002)

## Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

### Il tramonto (1914)

Roberto Ascoli, after Percy

Bysshe Shelley

### The Sunset

Già v'ebbe un uomo, nel cui tenue spirto,	There late was One within whose subtle being,
Qual luce e vento in delicata nube	As light and wind within some delicate cloud
Che ardente ciel di mezzo giorno stempri,	That fades amid the blue noon's burning sky,
La morte e il genio contendeano. Oh! quanta tenera gioia,	Genius and death contended. None may know
Che gli fè il respiro venir meno,	The sweetness of the joy which made his breath

Così dell'aura estiva l'ansia  
talvolta,

Quando la sua dama, che  
allor solo conobbe  
l'abbandono

Pieno e il concorde palpitar  
di due creature che  
s'amano,

Egli adusse pei sentieri d'un  
campo,

Ad oriente da una foresta  
biancheggiante ombrato

Ed a ponente scoperto al  
cielo!

Ora è sommerso il sole; ma  
linee d'oro

Pendon sovra  
le cineree  
nubi,

Sul verde piano, sui tremanti  
fiori,

Sui grigi globi dell'antico  
smirnio,

E i neri boschi  
avvolgono,

Del vespro mescolandosi alle  
ombre. Lenta sorge ad  
oriente

L'infocata luna tra  
i folti rami

Delle piante  
cupe:

Brillan sul capo languide  
le stelle.

E il giovine sussurra: 'Non è  
strano?'

Io mai non vidi il sorgere del  
sole,

O Isabella. Domani a  
contemparlo verremo  
insieme.'

Fail, like the trances of  
the summer air,

When, with the lady of his  
love, who  
then

First knew the unreserve  
of mingled  
being,

He walked along the  
pathway of a field

Which to the east a hoar  
wood shadowed o'er,

But to the west was open  
to the sky.

There now the sun had  
sunk, but lines of gold

Hung on the ashen  
clouds, and on the  
points

Of the far level grass and  
nodding flowers

And the old dandelion's  
hoary beard,

And, mingled with the  
shades of twilight, lay

On the brown massy  
woods - and in  
the east

The broad and burning  
moon lingeringly rose

Between the black trunks  
of the crowded trees,

While the faint stars were  
gathering overhead.

'Is it not strange, Isabel,'  
said the youth,

'I never saw the sun? We  
will walk here

To-morrow; thou shalt  
look on it  
with me.'

*Song continues overleaf. Please turn the page as quietly as possible.*

Il giovin e la dama giacquer tra il sonno e il dolce amor	That night the youth and lady mingled lay
Congiunti nella notte: al mattin	In love and sleep - but when the morning came
Gelido e morto ella trovò l'amante.	The lady found her lover dead and cold.
Oh! nessun credo che, vibrando tal colpo,	Let none believe that God in mercy gave
Fu il Signore misericorde.	That stroke. The lady died not, nor grew wild,
Non morì la dama, nè folle diventò.	But year by year lived on - in truth I think
Anno per anno visse ancora.	Her gentleness and patience and sad smiles,
Ma io penso che la queta sua pazienza, e i trepidi sorrisi,	And that she did not die, but lived to tend
E il non morir ma vivere a custodia del vecchio padre,	Her aged father, were a kind of madness,
Se è follia dal mondo dissimigliare,	If madness 'tis to be unlike the world.
Fossero follia. Era, null'altro che a vederla,	For but to see her were to read the tale
Come leggere un canto da ingegnoso bardo,	Woven by some subtlest bard, to make hard hearts
Intessuto a piegar gelidi cuori in un dolor pensoso.	Dissolve away in wisdom- working grief;
Neri gli occhi ma non fulgidi più;	Her eyes were black and lustreless and wan:
Consunte quasi le ciglia dalle lagrime;	Her eyelashes were worn away with tears,
Le labbra e le gote parevan cose morte tanto eran bianche;	Her lips and cheeks were like things dead - so pale;
Ed esili le mani e per le erranti vene e le giunture rosso	Her hands were thin, and through their wandering veins
Del giorno trasparia la luce.	And weak articulations might be seen
La nuda tomba, che il tuo fral racchiude,	Day's ruddy light. The tomb of thy dead self
Cui notte e giorno un'ombra tormentata abita,	Which one vexed ghost inhabits, night and day,
È quanto di te resta, o cara creatura perduta!	Is all, lost child, that now remains of thee!

'Ho tal retaggio, che la terra non dà:	'Inheritor of more than earth can give,
Calma e silenzio, senza peccato e senza passione.	Passionless calm and silence unreprieved,
Sia che i morti ritrovino, non mai il sonno!, ma il riposo,	Where the dead find, oh, not sleep! but rest,
Imperturbati quali appaion,	And are the uncomplaining things they seem,
O vivano, o d'amore nel mar profondo scendano,	Or live, a drop in the deep sea of Love;
Oh! che il mio epitaffio, che il tuo sia - Pace!	Oh, that like thine, mine epitaph were - Peace!
Questo dalle sue labbra l'unico lamento.	This was the only moan she ever made.

*Text of 'The Sunset' by Percy Bysshe Shelley.*