

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 22 January 2024  
7.30pm

Brett Dean: Composer in Residence

## Armida Quartet

Martin Funda violin  
Johanna Staemmler violin  
Teresa Schwamm-Biskamp viola  
Peter-Philipp Staemmler cello

Lotte Betts-Dean mezzo-soprano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Gedichte der Königin Maria Stuart Op. 135 (1852) *arranged by Brett Dean world première of arrangement*  
*Abschied von Frankreich • Nach der Geburt ihres Sohnes • An die Königin Elisabeth • Abschied von der Welt • Gebet*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 2 'Intimate Letters' (1928)  
*I. Andante • II. Adagio • III. Moderato • IV. Allegro*

Interval

Brett Dean (b.1961)

Madame ma bonne sœur for mezzo-soprano and string quartet (2020-1)

*Madame ma bonne sœur • In This Our Realm • The Power of the Evil • Nul autre royaume • Trois cents francs à Suzanne*

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This evening's concert pays homage through music and song to the notion of letter-writing, and to the formidably powerful writings of Mary Stuart in particular.

Mary, Queen of Scots spent much of her life writing letters. She was brought up in the French court, far from her mother, Marie de Guise, widow of James V of Scotland, who acted as Regent of the Scottish throne, so relied on epistolary communication from a very young age to express her thoughts or feelings.

Over the course of her 44-year life (1542-1587) Mary Stuart wrote thousands of letters. Her correspondents included most of the kings and queens of Europe (many of whom were related to her at various degrees of separation), a succession of popes, as well as numerous suitors, councillors, members of the Catholic aristocracy and more. Her final letter, to her brother-in-law, King Henri III of France, was written six hours before her head was chopped off, clumsily, in three blows.

In the 1830s the Russian prince Alexander Yakovlevich Lobanov-Rostovsky became obsessed with Mary Stuart, and alongside some 600 portraits of Mary and her entourage which he collected, he was able to locate and copy over 700 of her letters, many of which date from her 19 years spent in various English castle prisons at the behest of her cousin Queen Elizabeth I (or rather of Elizabeth's chief councillor, William Cecil, Lord Burleigh), many having also been written in various codes or at times using invisible ink.

Without these letters, the intimate and often gory details of a pivotal and highly dramatic episode in Tudor history would have been all but lost. We therefore owe a great debt to Prince Lobanov's obsession, as well as to collections such as the Cecil Papers Archive held in Hatfield House.

The ongoing preoccupation among historians for Mary's story, her imprisonment, stand-off and death at the hands of Elizabeth I has resulted in huge numbers of biographies and studies published over the ensuing four and a half centuries, while numerous film and television dramatisations and documentaries have added fuel to that fire of fascination.

Composers too have shown an interest in her life story across the ages; many would have been familiar with Schiller's verse play *Maria Stuart* from 1800, as well as Donizetti's opera setting of it (1835) and possibly also Richard Wagner's early scena *Les adieux de Marie Stuart* from 1840.

We open this evening's programme with one such example: **Robert Schumann's** Poems of Queen Mary Stuart' from 1852, his final song cycle and last published work.

Though it might seem tempting to draw parallels between the writings of the doomed 16th-century monarch with Schumann's own harrowing difficulties in later life, he composed the set of five songs before he became terminally ill and confined to the asylum in Enderich, offering them as a Christmas present to his wife Clara who had chosen the texts from a collection of English and Scottish poems translated into German by Gisbert, Freiherr von Vincke.

Schumann's cycle displays, if anything, a striking, somewhat unexpected sense of austerity given the dramatic subject matter. Free of excessive melodrama or histrionics, some of the songs seem almost skeletal in their settings; vocal lines with relatively unadorned piano accompaniment, stark, even lonely in their portrayal. This arrangement for string quartet, made especially for this programme, receives its première performance this evening.

From Prince Lobanov's extraordinary collection of Mary Stuart letters, librettist Matthew Jocelyn has cherry-picked and structured into song-form extracts of letters (in both French and English) from Mary to cousin Elizabeth to form the basis of our song cycle, *Madame ma bonne sœur*, originally composed for and premièred by tonight's performers at the 2021 Oxford Lieder Festival.

The core of this five-song cycle is three letters dating from Mary's return to Scotland: age 19, to take up her role as queen in 1561 ('In This our Realm'); her plea to Elizabeth, five years later, to disregard the fallacious claims of the Scottish rebel forces trying to disempower her ('The Power of the Evil'); and, in 1582, her cry of despair after more than 14 years of imprisonment in England ('Nul autre royaume').

To these have been added, at the beginning of this song cycle, a succession of introductory salutations from Marie's letters to Elizabeth over a 27-year period ('Madame ma bonne sœur', 1559-86) and, at the end, elements from her final will and testament, written in the wee hours of 7 February 1587 preceding her above-mentioned execution ('Trois cents francs à Suzanne').

Our cycle shares with Schumann's own five-song set a gathering of snapshots into Mary's life across several decades. Not a life portrait, nor a full depiction of Mary's complex and oft-changing relationship with Elizabeth I, but a small window onto the words so beautifully crafted by her, at various moments, to give shape to her quests. Words now begging to be sung.

Between these two Mary Stuart works comes another composition which found its inspiration in the private world of letter-writing, **Leoš Janáček's** Second String Quartet, better known as 'Intimate Letters'. This highly autobiographical work was completed not long before his death in 1928, the result of the strong emotional hold that a much younger married woman, Kamila Stösslová, had over him throughout the final decade of his life, resulting in him writing over 600 letters to her.

She must have been quite some muse for Janáček. On the quartet's completion, he wrote: 'You stand behind every note; you, living, forceful, loving. The fragrance of your body, the glow of your kisses. Those notes of mine kiss all of you. They call for you passionately.'

Its four movements might seem to fit the conventional form of the late Romantic string quartet, largely tonal and highly lyrical in nature. However, that's where those similarities end; this work's emotional field is fiery, raw, insatiable.

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