

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 October 2022
2.00pm

Ludlow English Song Day Lord, come away!

Claire Barnett-Jones mezzo-soprano
Nicky Spence tenor
Rosalind Ventriss viola
Iain Burnside piano

Erik Chisholm (1904-1965)

The Donkey (1923)
The Offending Eye (1926)
Sixty Cubic Feet
The Braw Plum
Home Sickness

Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012)

A History of the Thé Dansant (1994)
Foxtrot • Slow Foxtrot • Tango

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920)

3 Poems of Fiona MacLeod Op. 11 (1918)
*The Lament of Ian the Proud •
Thy Dark Eyes to Mine • The Rose of the Night*

Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986)

2 Sonnets by William Alabaster Op. 87 (1955)
*Upon the Crucifix •
On the Reed of our Lord's Passion*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

4 Hymns for tenor, viola and piano (1914)
*Lord! Come Away! • Who is this fair one? •
Come Love, come Lord • Evening Hymn*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac Op. 51 (1952)



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We open this recital with three curious tales by one of Scotland's leading modernist composers, **Erik Chisholm**, telling something of honour and nobility. In 'The Donkey' we meet again the 'tattered outlaw' that had its day, in Chisholm's setting of a poem heard earlier today. AE Housman's 'The Offending Eye' takes a Christian moral to its darkest extreme, while in 'Sixty Cubic Feet' Chisholm and poet Randall Swingler present an ironic commentary on a 'noble' life; the life of a man whose circumstances betrayed any potential that there might have been at his modest beginning. As these songs attest, honour and nobility are not necessarily honourable or noble, and might be found in even the humblest of places and beings.

The final two songs take their inspiration from a 1784 *Collection of Scottish Airs* that Chisholm was given as a child, and which remained close at hand for the rest of his life. In 'The Braw Plum', in which we meet a man 'puffed' and 'plum' from the exertion of walking, Chisholm matches an old Gaelic melody to words by another Scottish modernist, William Soutar; and in 'Home Sickness', Chisholm himself provides the words, after an old Gaelic poem, for this delicate, touching Scotch air.

Richard Rodney Bennett's *A History of the Thé Dansant* sets three poems by Bennett's sister, poet MR Peacocke. They were suggested to her by the discovery of a photograph of their parents on holiday in the south of France in the 1920s. In the first poem, Peacocke imagines 'two young people, who could have been my parents, buzzing fashionably off to the south of France on their honeymoon: she is scribbling a postcard as they await the departure of the Blue Train.' The second depicts a middle-aged couple who are on a 'Wicked Weekend', 'playing mutual seduction for all they were worth', while the third 'reflects the habit my mother had in old age [...] of fantasising about the days of her youth'. Their mother's accounts of her youth left poet and composer wondering 'What is fact and what is invention?'

The publication of Chisholm's 18th-century collection of Scottish airs was part of a movement in Scotland, and more particularly in Ireland, during the 19th Century, that sought to reclaim something of their nations' rich Gaelic heritage. Poets and artists were drawn to the medieval songs and tales attributed to Oiséan, and to the mysticism of a lost Celtic world. In three songs by New York composer **Charles Tomlinson Griffes**, we enter that world through the words of Fiona MacLeod, the adopted Celtic pseudonym of Scottish poet William Sharp. Like Chisholm, Griffes's first intentions were to become a pianist, before becoming sidetracked by composition. After exploring German Romantic, impressionistic and Oriental ideas in his work, these influences came together in around 1917 in a mature musical voice that was too short-lived. Composed in

1918, the *3 Songs of Fiona MacLeod* were completed just a year before his death at the age of 35. In the third song, 'The Rose of the Night', Griffes's music darkens to the more chromatic and dissonant. MacLeod prefaces that third poem with a note: *There is an old mystical legend that when a soul among the dead woos a soul among the living, so that both may be reborn as one, the sign is a dark rose, or a rose of flame, in the heart of the night.*

Beneath the surface of **Edmund Rubbra's** output, there is a deep religious and philosophical undertow; a strong sense of the spiritual and mystical that draws on elements of both Buddhism and Christianity, underpinning many of his symphonies, as well as his more overtly religious works. Rubbra's mysticism comes into the foreground in his 1955 setting of two 'intense' sonnets by the metaphysical poet William Alabaster (1568-1640), who was for a time Dean of St Paul's Cathedral. Rubbra remarked that Alabaster 'had the unusual distinction of being persecuted by the Protestants when a Protestant, and by the Catholics when a Catholic'. The resulting work is an intensely beautiful diptych meditating on the Cross and Passion, through which the poet gives himself humbly and absolutely unto Christ and to God.

Ralph Vaughan Williams's religious sensibilities were less certain, but in spite of his professed agnosticism, few composers have had such a marked impact on church music; not least in his work on *The English Hymnal* (1906), helping to shape the repertoire of hymns sung by every church in England and beyond. Of Vaughan Williams's *4 Hymns*, only two are hymns in the formal, metered sense; 'Evening Hymn', was used in *The English Hymnal*, while Isaac Watts's 'Who is this fair one?' was probably encountered during VW's work on the *Hymnal*. But all are poetic hymns of praise. Written for the 1914 Worcester Three Choirs Festival, the outbreak of war delayed its first performance until 1920.

We end this recital with a telling of the story of Binding of Isaac and testing of Abraham from the book of Genesis. The telling is not from the Bible, but is from the 15th-century 'Barbers and Wax-Chandlers Playe' in the Chester Miracle Plays. **Britten** composed his Canticle setting in 1952, shortly after completing his opera *Billy Budd*. At the end of that opera the eponymous hero is, in effect, sacrificed, and so there was perhaps some catharsis for Britten in taking up a story in which the endangered protagonist is spared. Ten years later, Britten wove the music of *Abraham and Isaac* into his *War Requiem*, setting a poem by Wilfred Owen that turns the tale on its head, Abraham sacrificing his son 'and half the seed of Europe one by one'.

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Erik Chisholm (1904-1965)

The Donkey (1923)

GK Chesterton

When fishes flew and forests walked,
And figs grew upon the thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood,
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

The Offending Eye (1926)

AE Housman

If it chance your eye offend you,
Pluck it out, lad, and be sound:
'Twill hurt, but there are salves to friend you,
And many a balsam grows on ground.

And if your hand or foot offend you,
Cut it off, lad, and be whole;
But play the man, stand up and end you,
When your sickness is your soul.

Sixty Cubic Feet

Randall Swingler

He was the fourth his mother bore,
The room was ten by twelve,
His share was sixty cubic feet
In which to build himself.

He sat and learned his letters
With forty in a room,
And sixty cubic feet of draught
The Council lent to him.

At fourteen he must earn a wage,
He went to pit from school,
In sixty feet of dust and gas
He lay and hacked the coal.

At twenty-two they told him
His freedom was a stake;
He left his sixty cubic feet,
A soldier for to make.

He slept with seven others,
The tent was pitched in clay,
The rain ran down the hillside
And drenched them night and day.

He lay and coughed his heart out
In sixty feet of damp.
At last when he could hardly stand
They marched him out of camp.

They brought him from the hospital,
They brought him home alone,
In sixty cubic feet of deal
That he could call his own.

They buried him with honour,
The bugler blew Retreat,
And now he claims of English earth
Some sixty cubic feet.

The Braw Plum

William Soutar

'Tak a gawk at me, my brither',
Pech'd a plum abüne a wa'.
'I hae grown sae unco sonsie
Wi' my shiny face and a'
That folk will cry as they gae by:
"O Man! but you're lookin braw."

Mess John, makin up his sermon,
Glower'd but naething saw.
A lass wha was baith blithe and bonnie,
Sech'd: 'It süne will fa'.
But a young nip wi' a lowp and skip
Taen the tasty bite awa.

*[pech'd: puffed; abüne a wa': above a path; sonsie: plump;
Mess: Master; nip: nipper; lowp: leap]*

Texts continue overleaf

Home Sickness

Erik Chisholm, after Anonymous

Home sickness I am feeling
For the highlands for the shieling,
For the cattle in the Lowlands,
For the deer roaming the mountain.

For the clear blue rippling waters,
For the salmon jumping the river,
For the bramble, little humped one,
For the briar roase, little thorned one.

For the bracken, for the heather,
For the sea-tang and misty weather,
For the blackbird in the willow
With its yellow beak and clean keen whistle.

Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012)

A History of the Thé Dansant (1994)

MR Peacocke

Foxtrot

The briefest card my dear we are leaving.
Imagine the long curve of the Blue Train like the line of a
mouth closed and smiling and Charles in the opposite
window seat head thrown back the smoke from his
cigarette coiling and coiling.
There is a fellow in the carriage with artificial legs and a
scar on his face unspeakable.
My hem is in handkerchief points, my head is a gleaming
oval on the fluid stem of my spine.
I shall turn my shoulders, the silhouette narrow and
disengaged.
Imagine the endless fluted bias of the waves.
I shall show my creamy back.
Write to the Hôtel Blanc.
I am learning a modern geometry of desire.

Slow Foxtrot

Lacquer bows to bleu marine, fingered waded, who must
respond as though she were not gratified.
Begin the formal promenade.
The sea is wrinkled like a skin and laps the darkly pitted
sand.
A liner moving Tunis bound sets the powdered stars aside,
jewelling the bay alone, and creeping on and creeping
on, elegant à la mode, fades away from sight of land.
And don't you love the negro band? Don't you adore the
saxophone?
Your nails are painted deep as blood.
Softly flexing insteps glide.
Attentive to the live-long end beneath the scalpel of the
moon.

Tango

Let us invent marble and five o'clock.
I'll take white, you take black.
How engagingly we rhyme across the chequered level in
the perfume of tea and petits fours.
I shall sample the tiniest slice of the Grand Succès on the
lemon terrace, the newly apparent moon a delicacy cat-
ice thin, fresh as mimosa.

Your legs are dangerously long under the palm trees at
Menton, my thighs all silk and hesitation drawing the
tango down the polished length of the floor.

And the cellos have such slim waists and violins are girls
with flattened breasts.

Let us invent the chaise-longue, bamboo, Lapsang
Souchong, linen and panama.

You may cough and thump your stick, but I have been up
in the attic and I have a bundle of postcards here to
prove that once we were seen to be in love on the Riviera
in nineteen twenty-four.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920)

3 Poems of Fiona MacLeod Op. 11 (1918)

Fiona Macleod

The Lament of Ian the Proud

What is this crying that I hear in the wind?
Is it the old sorrow and the old grief?
Or is it a new thing coming, a whirling leaf
About the gray hair of me who am weary and blind?
I know not what it is, but on the moor above the shore
There is a stone which the purple nets of heather bind,
And thereon is writ: *She will return no more.*
O blown, whirling leaf, and the old grief,
And wind crying to me who am old and blind!

Thy Dark Eyes to Mine

Thy dark eyes to mine, Eilidh,
Lamps of desire!
O how my soul leaps
Leaps to their fire!

Sure, now, if I in heaven,
Dreaming in bliss,
Heard but a whisper,
But the lost echo even
Of one such kiss -

All of the Soul of me
Would leap afar -
If that called me to thee
Aye, I would leap afar
A falling star!

The Rose of the Night

The dark rose of thy mouth
Draw nigher, draw nigher!
Thy breath is the wind of the south,
A wind of fire,
The wind and the rose and darkness,
O Rose of my Desire!

Deep silence of the night,
Husht like a breathless lyre,
Save the sea's thunderous might,
Dim, menacing, dire,
Silence and wind and sea, they are thee,
O Rose of my Desire!

As a wind-eddy flame
Leaping higher and higher,
Thy soul, thy secret name,
Leaps thro' Death's blazing pyre,
Kiss me, Imperishable Fire, dark Rose,
O Rose of my Desire!

Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986)

2 Sonnets by William Alabaster Op. 87 (1955)

William Alabaster

Upon the Crucifix

Now I have found thee I will evermore
Embrace this standard where thou sittest above,
Feede greedie eyes, and from hence never rove;
Suck hungrie Soule of this eternall store;
Issue my hart from thie two-leaved dore,
And lett my lippes from kissinge not remove.
O thatt I weare transformed into love,
And as a plant might springe upon this flower,
Like wand'ring lvy or sweete honiesuckle:
How would I with my twine about it buckle,
And kisse his feete with my ambitious boughes,
And clyme along uppon his sacred brest,
And make a garland for his wounded browes:
Lord soe I am, if heare my thoughts may reast.

On the Reed of our Lord's Passion

Long tyme hath Christ (long tyme I must confesse)
Held me a hollowe Reede within his hande,
That merited in Hell to make a brande
Had not his grace supplied mine emptines.
Oft time with langour and new-fangleness
Had I bene borne awaye like sifted sande,
When Sinn and Sathan gott the upper hande,
But that his stedfast mercie did mee blesse.
Still let mee growe upon that livinge lande,
Within that wounde which iron did impresse,
And made a springe of bloud flowe from thie hand:
Then will I gather sapp, and rise, and stand
That all that see this wonder maye expresse
Upon this grounde how well growes barrennes.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

4 Hymns for tenor, viola and piano (1914)

Lord! Come Away!

Bishop Jeremy Taylor

Lord! come away!
Why dost Thou stay?
Thy road is ready; and Thy paths, made straight
With longing expectation, wait
The consecration of Thy beauteous feet!
Ride on triumphantly!
Behold we lay our lusts and proud wills in Thy way!

Hosanna! Welcome to our hearts! Lord, here
Thou hast a temple too; and full as dear
As that of Sion, and as full of sin:
Nothing but thieves and robbers dwell therein;
Enter, and chase them forth, and cleanse the floor!
Crucify them, that they may never more
Profane that holy place
Where Thou hast chose to set Thy face!
And then, if our stiff toungues shall be
Mute in the praises of Thy Deity,
The stones out of the temple wall
Shall cry aloud and call
'Hosanna!' and Thy glorious footsteps greet!

Who is this fair one?

Isaac Watts

Who is this fair one in distress,
That travels from the wilderness,
And press'd with sorrows and with sins,
On her beloved Lord she leans?

This is the spouse of Christ our God,
Bought with the treasures of his blood,
And her request and her complaint
Is but the voice of ev'ry saint:

'O let my name engraven stand
Both on Thy heart and on Thy hand;
Seal me upon Thine arm and wear
That pledge of love for ever there.

Stronger than death Thy love is known
Which floods of wrath could never drown,
And hell and earth in vain combine
To quench a fire so much divine.

But I am jealous of my heart,
Lest it should once from Thee depart;
Then let my name be well impress'd
As a fair signet on Thy breast.

Till Thou has brought me to Thy home,
Where fears and doubts can never come,
Thy countenance let me often see,
And often shalt Thou hear from me:

Come, my beloved, haste away,
Cut short the hours of Thy delay,
Fly like a youthful hart or roe
Over the hills where spices blow.'

Come Love, come Lord

Richard Crashaw

Come Love, come Lord, and that long day
For which I languish, come away.
When this dry soul those eyes shall see
And drink the unseal'd source of Thee,
When glory's sun faith's shades shall chase,
Then for Thy veil give me Thy face.

Evening Hymn

Robert Bridges, translated from the Greek

O gladsome Light,
O Grace Of God the Father's face,
The eternal splendour wearing;

Celestial holy, blest,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
Joyful, joyful in Thine appearing:

Now ere day fadeth quite,
We see the evening light,
Our wonted hymn outpouring;

Father of might unknown,
Thee, His incarnate Son,
And Holy Spirit adoring.

To Thee of right belongs
All praise of holy songs,
O Son of God, Lifegiver;

Thee, therefore, O Most High,
The world doth glorify,
And shall exalt for ever.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac Op. 51 (1952)

Anonymous

God speaks

Abraham, my servant, Abraham,
Take Isaac, thy son by name,
That thou lovest the best of all,
And in sacrifice offer him to me
Upon that hill there besides thee.
Abraham, I will that so it be,
For ought that may befall.

Abraham

My Lord, to Thee is mine intent
Ever to be obedient.
That son that Thou to me hast sent,
Offer I will to Thee,
Thy bidding done shall be.

Here Abraham, turning him to his son Isaac, saith:

Abraham

Make thee ready, my dear darling,
For we must do a little thing.
This woode do on thy back it bring,
We may no longer abide.
A sword and fire that I will take,
For sacrifice me behoves to make;
God's bidding will I not forsake,
But ever obedient be.

Here Isaac speaketh to his father, and taketh a bundle of sticks and beareth after his father, and saith:

Isaac
Father, I am all ready
To do your bidding most meekely,
And to bear this wood full bayn am I,
As you commanded me.

Here they both go to the place to do sacrifice:

Abraham
Now, Isaac son, go we our way
To yonder mount, if that we may.

Isaac
My dear father, I will essay
To follow you full fain.

Abraham, being minded to slay his son Isaac, lifts up his hands, and saith the following:

Abraham
Oh! My heart will break in three,
To hear thy words I have pitye;
As Thou wilt, Lord, so must it be,
To thee I will be bayn.
Lay down thy faggot, my own son dear.

Isaac
All ready father, lo, it is here.
But why make you such heavy cheer?
Are you anything adread?

Abraham
Ah! Dear God! That me is woe!

Isaac
Father, if it be your will,
Where is the beast that we shall kill?

Abraham
Thereof, son, is none upon this hill.

Isaac
Father, I am full sore affeared
To see you bear that drawnè sword.

Abraham
Isaac, son, peace, I pray thee,
Thou breakest my heart even in three.

Isaac
I pray you, father, layn nothing from me,
But tell me what you think.

Abraham
Ah! Isaac, Isaac, I must thee kill!

Isaac
Alas! Father, is that your will,
Your ownè child for to spill
Upon this hillès brink?

If I have trespassed in any degree,
With a yard you may beat me;
Put up your sword, if your will be,
For I am but a child.
Would God my mother were here with me!
She would kneel down upon her knee,
Praying you, father, if it may be,
For to save my life.

Abraham
O! Isaac, son, to thee I say,
God hath commanded me today
Sacrifice, this is no nay,
To make of thy body.

Isaac
Is it God's will I shall be slain?

Abraham
Yea, son, it is not for to layn.

Here Isaac asketh his father's blessing on his knees, and saith:

Isaac
Father, seeing you mustè needs do so,
Let it pass lightly, and over go;
Kneeling on my kneeyès two,
Your blessing on me spread.

Abraham
My blessing, dear son, give I thee
And thy mother's with heart free;
The blessing of the Trinity
My dear son, on thee light.

Here Isaac riseth and cometh to his father, and he taketh him, and bindeth and layeth him upon the alter to sacrifice him, and saith:

Abraham
Come hither, my child, thou art so sweet,
Thou must be bound both hand and feet.

Isaac
Father, do with me as you will,
I must obey, and that is skill,
Godès commandment to fulfil,
For needs so must it be.

Abraham
Isaac, Isaac, blessèd must thou be.

Isaac
Father, greet well my brethren ying,
And pray my mother of her blessing,
I come no more under her wing,
Farewell for ever and aye.

*Here Abraham doth kiss his son Isaac, and binds a kerchief
about his head.*

Abraham

Farewell, my sweete son of grace!

Isaac

I pray you, father, turn down my face,
For I am sore adread.

Abraham

Lord, full loth were I him to kill!

Isaac

Ah, mercy, father, why tarry you so?

Abraham

Jesu! On me have pity,
That I have most in mind.

Isaac

Now, father, I see that I shall die:
Almighty God in majesty!
My soul I offer unto Thee!

Abraham

To do this deed I am sorry.

*Here let Abraham make a sign as tho' he would cut off his
son Isaac's head with his sword; then God speaks:*

Abraham, my servant dear Abraham,
Lay not thy sword in no manere
On Isaac, thy dear darling.
For thou darest me, well wot I,
That of thy son has no mercy,
To fulfil my bidding.

Abraham

Ah! Lord of heaven and King of bliss,
Thy bidding shall be done, i-wis!
A horned wether here I see,
Among the briars tied is he,
To Thee offered shall he be
Anon right in this place.

Then let Abraham take the lamb and kill him.

Abraham

Sacrifice here sent me is,
And all, Lord, through Thy grace.

ENVOI:

Such obedience grant us, O Lord!
Ever to Thy most holy word,
That in the same we may accord
As this Abraham was bayn;
And then altogether shall we
That worthy King in heaven see,

And dwell with Him in great glorye
For ever and ever, amen.

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