

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 23 October 2022  
3.00pm

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## The House of Life

Kitty Whately mezzo-soprano  
William Vann piano

Anon	The Willow Song <i>arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams</i>
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)	Take, O take those lips away (1925) When icicles hang by the wall (1925) Orpheus with his Lute (1925)
Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994)	Ophelia's Song (1926) From <i>4 Shakespeare Songs</i> (1956-65) Come away, death • King Stephen
Madeleine Dring (1923-1977)	Take, O Take Those Lips Away It was a Lover
Grace Williams (1906-1977)	The Lament of the Border Widow (?1952)
Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979)	Down by the Salley Gardens (1919) The Seal Man (1922)
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)	The House of Life (1903) <i>Love-sight • Silent Noon • Love's minstrels • Heart's haven • Death in love • Love's last gift</i>

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Literature was a recurring source of inspiration for all the composers on tonight's programme. From the rich, allusive, metaphysical poetry of Walt Whitman that gave rise to the First Symphony, to Robert Louis Stevenson's resolute bleakness in *Songs of Travel*, words were central to **Ralph Vaughan Williams's** output. He was an avid reader and indeed his second wife Ursula was a poet herself. Shakespeare was an author who stayed with Vaughan Williams throughout his whole life. He was first introduced to the playwright by his mother, who read from the plays to him and his sister Meggie in the nursery. He would go on to write not only songs to Shakespeare texts, but incidental music for his plays and an opera, *Sir John in Love*, based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Marrying his interests in folk music and literature, 'The Willow Song' is Vaughan Williams's arrangement of the Elizabethan folksong that Shakespeare later used as Desdemona's song in *Othello*. It is the lament that she sings while preparing for bed, fearing her jealous husband. The *3 Songs from Shakespeare* are composed in a similar vein, drawing heavily on folk idioms. The first, melancholy song comes from *Measure for Measure*, and we are also hearing a second, similarly wistful interpretation of 'Take, O take those lips away' later in today's programme, by **Madeleine Dring**. An actress and singer herself, Dring's responses to Shakespeare are perfectly suited for the theatre boards. Her 'It was a Lover and his Lass' is quirky and humorous, concluding with a flamboyant, curtain-closing flourish.

'When icicles hang by the wall' is Shakespeare's song to winter from *Love's Labour's Lost*. Despite the frozen milk, coughing, and biting wind, Vaughan Williams's setting remains relatively jovial and sprightly, making the most of the hooting owl and the hissing, roasting crabs. This version of 'Orpheus with his Lute' was Vaughan Williams's second attempt at setting this poem. The first was composed over 20 years before, and the differences between the two show the profound impact that folksong collecting had on Vaughan Williams's approach to composition. This setting is in many ways much simpler, and adopts many of the harmonies and rhythms familiar from his folksong arrangements.

**Elizabeth Maconchy** was Vaughan Williams's pupil, and shared with her tutor a love of literature and Shakespeare in particular. She penned 'Ophelia's Song' in 1926, a year after Vaughan Williams's *3 Songs* and while she was studying with him at the Royal College of Music. Inhabiting quite a different sound world, 'Come away, death' and 'King Stephen' come from a set of *4 Shakespeare Songs* that she composed in 1956-65. 'Come away, death' combines

soaring, hopeful melodic snippets with an angular accompaniment. There is no comfort or rest in Maconchy's setting, approaching the text in her characteristically uncompromising manner. 'King Stephen', from *Othello*, is an unusual drinking song about the perils of pride and vanity. Maconchy's setting is descriptive and pictorial - she gives a high, unaccompanied note on 'pride', leading into a descending line for 'leads the country down', before concluding abruptly as the singer counsels the listener to wrap their old cloak around them and be content with it.

Maconchy and **Grace Williams** studied with Vaughan Williams at the same time, and stayed life-long friends after they left the College. Both were far more sympathetic to Bartók, Stravinsky and 'new music' than Vaughan Williams ever was, and this affinity shows in Williams's setting of Walter Scott's poem 'The Lament of the Border Widow'. Although the song is in G minor throughout, Williams gradually introduces increasing dissonance and rhythmic complexity as the song progresses, to convey the widow's sorrow over the brutal murder of her lover.

**Rebecca Clarke's** 'Down by the Salley Gardens' is exquisitely simple, the stripped-back piano part allowing the singer's voice to shine. She penned this piece in a single day while on a performance tour to Hawaii, and the delicate accompaniment may have been evoking the Chinese music that she heard there. 'The Seal Man', by contrast, presents a macabre story, setting John Masefield's tale about a woman who drowns after following her lover into the sea. In Clarke's hands the sea is mysterious, sensual, and brutal. The low piano part evokes the dangerous rumble of the rising ocean, and she gives the final moments to the pianist as the waves roll away again, having consumed their victim. This is one of Clarke's most difficult and most theatrical songs, calling upon the singer to act the different characters in the text.

Première at Wigmore Hall in the same concert as the *Songs of Travel* in 1904, *The House of Life* contains some of Vaughan Williams's most sensual songs. Setting six texts by the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the songs traverse life, death, love, loss and everything in between. Their moods are mercurial - the gentle lyricism of 'Love-sight' is interrupted by the spectre of death, just as the winter winds bring a sudden darkening of tone in 'Love's last gift'. The overall impression, though, is of a resolute faith in the redemptive powers of love, and sheer joy in living.

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# Anon

## The Willow Song

arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams

*William Shakespeare, after Traditional*

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,  
Sing willow, willow, willow  
With her hand in her bosom, her head on her knee,  
Sing willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be;  
Sing all a green willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be.

The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;  
Sing willow, willow, willow;  
Her salt tears fell from her, and soften'd the stones;  
Sing willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be;  
Sing all a green willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be.

Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve,  
Sing willow, willow, willow;  
He was born to be fair, I to die for his love,  
Sing willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be;  
Sing all a green willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be.

I call'd my love false love but what said he then?  
Sing willow, willow, willow;  
If I court more women, you'll couch with more men.  
Sing willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be;  
Sing all a green willow, willow, willow, my garland shall be.

## Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

### Take, O take those lips away (1925)

*Anonymous*

Take, O take those lips away,  
That so sweetly were forsworn;  
And those eyes, the break of day,  
Lights that do mislead the morn:  
But my kisses bring again;  
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain.

### When icicles hang by the wall (1925)

*William Shakespeare*

When icicles hang by the wall  
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,  
And Tom bears logs into the hall,  
And milk comes frozen home in pail;  
When blood is nipt and ways be foul,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl:  
Tu-who!  
Tu-whit! Tu-who! -- A merry note!  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,  
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,  
And birds sit brooding in the snow,  
And Marian's nose looks red and raw;  
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl  
Then nightly sings the staring owl:  
Tu-who!  
Tu-whit! Tu-who! -- A merry note!  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

### Orpheus with his Lute (1925)

*William Shakespeare*

Orpheus with his lute made trees,  
And the mountain tops that freeze,  
Bow themselves, when he did sing:  
To his music, plants and flowers  
Ever sprung; as sun and showers  
That had made a lasting spring.

Every thing that heard him play,  
Even the billows of the sea,  
Hung their heads, and then lay by.  
In sweet music is such art,  
Killing care and grief of heart  
Fall asleep, or hearing, die.

## Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994)

### Ophelia's Song (1926)

*Anonymous*

How should I your true love know  
From another one?  
By his cockle hat and staff,  
And his sandal shoon.

He is dead and gone, lady,  
He is dead and gone;  
At his head a grass-green turf,  
At his heels a stone.

White his shroud as the mountain snow,  
Larded with sweet flowers,  
Which bewept to the grave did not go  
With true-love showers.

He is dead and gone, lady,  
He is dead and gone;  
At his head a grass-green turf,  
At his heels a stone.

## From 4 Shakespeare Songs (1956-65)

*William Shakespeare*

### Come away, death

Come away, come away, death,  
And in sad cypress let me be laid;  
Fly away, fly away, breath;  
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.  
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,  
O prepare it!  
My part of death, no one so true  
Did share it.

Not a flower, not a flower sweet,  
On my black coffin let there be strown;  
Not a friend, not a friend greet  
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown:  
A thousand, thousand sighs to save,  
Lay me, O where  
Sad true lover never find my grave,  
To weep there!

### King Stephen

King Stephen was a worthy peer,  
His breeches cost him but a crown;  
He held them sixpence all too dear,  
With that he called the tailor lown.  
He was a wight of high renown,  
And thou art but of low degree:  
'Tis pride that pulls the country down;  
Then take thine auld cloak about thee.

## Madeleine Dring (1923-1977)

### Take, O Take Those Lips Away

*Anonymous*

Take, o take those lips away,  
That so sweetly were forsworn;  
And those eyes, the break of day,  
Lights that do mislead the morn:  
But my kisses bring again;  
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain.

### It was a Lover

*William Shakespeare*

It was a lover and his lass,  
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino  
That o'er the green corn-field did pass.  
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,  
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding a ding;  
Sweet lovers love the spring.

Between the acres of the rye,  
These pretty country folk would lie,  
This carol they began that hour,  
How that a life was but a flower

And therefore take the present time  
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,  
For love is crownéd with the prime  
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,  
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding a ding;  
Sweet lovers love the spring.

## Grace Williams (1906-1977)

### The Lament of the Border Widow (?1952)

*Sir Walter Scott*

My love he built me a bonny bower,  
And clad it a' wi' lilye flour,  
A brawer bower ye ne'er did see,  
Than my true love built for me.

There came a man by middle day,  
He spied his sport, and went away;  
And brought the King that very night,  
Who brake my bower, and slew my knight.

He slew my knight to me sae dear;  
He slew my knight, and poin'd his gear;  
My servants all for life did flee,  
And left me in extremitie.

I sew'd his sheet, making my mane;  
I watch'd the corpse, myself alane;  
I watch'd his body, night and day;  
No living creature came that way.

I took his body on my back,  
And whiles I gaed, and whiles I sat;  
I digg'd a grave and laid him in,  
And happ'd him with the sod sae green.

But think na ye my heart was sair,  
When I laid the moul on his yellow hair;  
O think na ye my heart was wae,  
When I turn'd about, away to gae?

Nae living man I'll love again,  
Since that my lovely knight was slain;  
Wi' ae lock of his yellow hair  
I'll chain my heart for evermair.

**Rebecca Clarke** (1886-1979)

**Down by the Salley Gardens** (1919)

*WB Yeats*

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;  
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.  
She bid me take love easy as the leaves grow on the tree;  
But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,  
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.  
She bid me take life easy as the grass grows on the weirs;  
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

**The Seal Man** (1922)

*John Masefield*

And he came by her cabin to the west of the road, calling.  
There was a strong love came up in her at that,  
And she put down her sewing on the table, and 'Mother,'  
she says,

'There's no lock, and no key, and no bolt, and no door.

There's no iron, nor no stone, nor anything at all

Will keep me this night from the man I love.'

And she went out into the moonlight to him,

There by the bush where the flow'rs is pretty, beyond the  
river.

And he says to her: 'You are all of the beauty of the world,  
Will you come where I go, over the waves of the sea?'

And she says to him: 'My treasure and my strength,' she  
says,

'I would follow you on the frozen hills, my feet bleeding.'

Then they went down into the sea together,

And the moon made a track on the sea, and they walked  
down it;

It was like a flame before them. There was no fear at all on  
her;

Only a great love like the love of the Old Ones,

That was stronger than the touch of the fool.

She had a little white throat, and little cheeks like flowers,

And she went down into the sea with her man,

Who wasn't a man at all.

She was drowned, of course.

It's like he never thought that she wouldn't bear the sea like  
himself.

She was drowned, drowned.

**Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958)

**The House of Life** (1903)

*Dante Gabriel Rossetti*

**Love-sight**

When do I see thee most, beloved one?

When in the light the spirits of mine eyes

Before thy face, their altar, solemnize

The worship of that Love through thee made known?

Or when in the dusk hours, (we two alone)  
Close-kissed and eloquent of still replies  
Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies,  
And my soul only sees thy soul its own?

O love - my love! if I no more should see Thyself,  
nor on the earth the shadow of thee,  
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring,  
How then should sound upon Life's darkening slope  
The groundwhirl of the perished leaves of Hope  
The wind of Death's imperishable wing?

**Silent Noon**

Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass, -  
The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:  
Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms  
'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.

All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,  
Are golden kingcup fields with silver edge  
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn hedge.  
'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.

Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragonfly  
Hangs like a blue thread loosen'd from the sky: -  
So this wing'd hour is dropt to us from above.  
Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,  
This close-companion'd inarticulate hour  
When twofold silence was the song of love.

**Love's minstrels**

One flame-winged brought a white-winged harp-player  
Even where my lady and I lay all alone;  
Saying: 'Behold this minstrel is unknown;  
Bid him depart, for I am minstrel here:  
Only my songs are to love's dear ones dear.'  
Then said I 'Through thine hautboy's rapturous tone  
Unto my lady still this harp makes moan,  
And still she deems the cadence deep and clear.'  
Then said my lady: 'Thou art passion of Love,  
And this Love's worship: both he plights to me.  
Thy mastering music walks the sunlit sea:  
But where wan water trembles in the grove,  
And the wan moon is all the light thereof,  
This harp still makes my name its voluntary.'

*Texts continue overleaf*

## Heart's haven

Sometimes she is a child within mine arms,  
    Cow'ring beneath dark wings that love must chase,  
    With still tears show'ring and averted face,  
Inexplicably filled with faint alarms:  
And oft from mine own spirit's hurtling harms  
    I crave the refuge of her deep embrace, -  
    Against all ills the fortified strong place  
And sweet reserve of sov'reign counter-charms.

And Love, our light at night and shade at noon,  
    Lulls us to rest with songs, and turns away  
    All shafts of shelterless tumultuous day.  
Like the moon's growth, his face gleams through his tune;  
And as soft waters warble to the moon,  
    Our answ'ring spirits chime one roundelay.

## Death in love

There came an image in Life's retinue  
That had Love's wings and bore his gonfalon:  
Fair was the web, and nobly wrought thereon,  
O soul-sequestered face, thy form and hue!  
Bewildering sounds, such as Spring wakens to,  
Shook in its folds; and through my heart its power  
Sped trackless as the memorable hour  
When birth's dark portal groaned and all was new  
But a veiled woman followed, and she caught  
The banner round its staff, to furl and cling,  
Then plucked a feather from the bearer's wing,  
And held it to his lips that stirred it not,  
And said to me, "Behold, there is no breath:  
I and this Love are one, and I am Death."

## Love's last gift

Love to his singer held a glistening leaf,  
and said: "The rose-tree and the apple-tree  
Have fruits to vaunt or flowers to lure the bee;  
And golden shafts are in the feathered sheaf  
Of the great harvest marshal, the year's chief  
Victorious summer; aye, and 'neath warm sea  
Strange secret grasses lurk inviolably  
Between the filtering channels of sunk reef..."

All are my blooms; and all sweet blooms of love  
To thee I gave while spring and summer sang;  
But autumn stops to listen, with some pang  
From those worse things the wind is moaning of.  
Only this laurel dreads no winter days:  
Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise."