

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 26 January 2025  
3.00pm

## Between Heaven and Earth

### Royal Academy of Music Song Circle

Daniel Vening bass  
Alison Ma piano  
Erin O'Rourke soprano  
Cherry Wong piano  
Anton Kirchhoff baritone  
Tammias Slater piano

#### Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

#### 4 Serious Songs Op. 121 (1896)

*Denn es gehet dem Menschen • Ich wandte  
mich und sahe an alle • O Tod, wie bitter bist du •  
Wenn ich mit Menschen und mit Engelszungen  
redete*

#### Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

#### Hermit Songs Op. 29 (1952-3)

*At Saint Patrick's Purgatory • Church Bell at  
Night • St Ita's Vision • The Heavenly Banquet •  
The Crucifixion • Sea-Snatch • Promiscuity •  
The Monk and His Cat • The Praises of God •  
The Desire for Hermitage*

#### Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

#### From *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1892-99, rev. 1901)

*Das irdische Leben • Wer hat dies Liedlein  
erdacht? • Der Schildwache Nachtlied • Urlicht*

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In the 1890s **Brahms's** thoughts were turning towards death. In quick succession he had lost some of his closest friends and in March 1896 Clara Schumann suffered a stroke; although she rallied sufficiently in May to send Brahms birthday greetings in a virtually illegible scrawl, the fatal relapse soon followed. The *Vier ernste Gesänge*, the first original songs he had composed for a decade, were completed in the same month. On 7 July 1896 he wrote these touching words to Clara's daughter, Marie: 'You will not be able to play the songs, because the words at present would be too painful. But I beg you to put them aside and regard them as a particularly special memorial to your dear mother.' Death dominates the first three songs. In the opening nine bars of *Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh* the piano tolls out the dominant like a huge funeral bell, and at the word 'eitel' ('vain') there is a swirl of diminished sevenths that depict the dust, to which we all return. The descending octaves of the prelude to *Ich wandte mich* likewise lead to death, oblivion and the thought that non-being is preferable to life. The third song describes the solace death can bring to the suffering. The harsh closed vowels of *O Tod, wie bitter bist du* yield to the soft alliteration and open-voweled assonance of 'O Tod, wie wohl tust du', and Brahms, in a magical modulation from minor to major, finds one of his sweetest melodies to depict the power of death's assuagement. The final song is of a different order; with its great arches of melody it ends on an optimistic and religious note, and at 'Wir sehen jetzt!' it rises in a broad sweep to the climax which extols compassion in an unforgettable melisma.

**Samuel Barber's** *Hermit Songs* feature poems that were written between the 8th and 13th centuries by monks and scholars – the translators include Sean O'Faolain, Howard Mumford Jones, Chester Kallman and W.H. Auden. *At Saint Patrick's Purgatory* describes a pilgrimage to Loch Derg – the Red Lake in County Donegal which has been a place of pilgrimage from time immemorial. The bells can be heard pealing in the piano's *ostinato* figure that sounds throughout the song; *Church Bell at Night* is a page-long *adagio* in which the monk states that he would sooner *rendez-vous* with his little bell than with a 'light and foolish' woman. Barber, in *Saint Ita's Vision*, does not give his setting any metrical signature, which allows the singer flexibility in projecting the rhythmic irregularities of the poems – equally important in the opening recitative, where the Saint declaims that she will take nothing from the Lord, unless he give her His Son from Heaven to suckle, and the ensuing *andante con moto*, as she sings a lullaby to Jesus at her breast. *The Heavenly Banquet* is full of good humour with a semi-*staccato* accompaniment that suits the earthiness of the poem in which the Saint longs for 'a great lake of beer for the King of Kings', from which

'Heaven's family' could drink through all eternity. *The Crucifixion* tells us that Jesus met his fate 'at the cry of the first bird' – which can be heard throughout this lovely song in the grace notes of the piano's right hand. *Sea-snatch* describes how we have been broken, crushed, drowned and swallowed by the wind: the vocal line is appropriately harsh and angular, and the accompaniment conjures up the surging waves. *Promiscuity* dates from the 9th century, and Barber sets the lapidary little text to surprisingly lyrical and *sostenuto* music. The protagonists in *The Monk and his Cat* are content to be 'alone together' – you can hear the cat crawling on the piano keys in this delightfully humorous song. Auden's word 'laudation' in *The Praises of God* inspired Barber to a melismatic vocal celebration of the Lord. The poet's passionate plea for solitude in the final *The Desire for Hermitage* is marked *calmo e sostenuto*, and just as the monk always returns to his cell, so does the vocal line always alight on a minim or dotted minim at the end of each phrase. *Hermit Songs* was premiered by Leontyne Price and the composer on 30 October 1953 at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

Almost half of **Mahler's** 40 or so solo songs are settings of poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, three volumes of folk poetry collected by Arnim and Brentano and published in 1805 and 1808. *Das irdische Leben* tells of a child dying of starvation, while the mill grinds the corn too late. Mahler gives both mother and child their own themes, the child's consisting of dramatic octave leaps. The mill can be heard in the oscillating *moto perpetuo* accompaniment, and in the orchestral version, the scurrying accompaniment of the strings creates a mood of extreme anguish. *Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?* is in *Ländler*-style – a test for any singer with its florid vocal line. *Der Schildwache Nachtlied*, a spooky dialogue between a lonely sentry and a girl who appears to him in a vision as she attempts to lure him from the path of duty, displays the sort of military music that Mahler often used in his songs. His predilection for band music goes back to his early youth, where in the Moravian garrison town of Jihlava he learned hundreds of military tunes by heart. *Urlicht* forms part of the Second Symphony, where it is scored for alto solo and orchestra. It is one of Mahler's most beautiful songs, expressing man's anguish and pain and his hope that God will not forsake him but lead him to Heaven. In a letter to Alma of 15 December 1901, Mahler explains the programme of the movement in one simple sentence: 'Die rührende Stimme des naiven Glaubens tönt an unser Ohr.' ('The touching voice of naive faith sounds in our ears').

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## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

### 4 Serious Songs Op. 121 (1896)

*Liturgical text*

#### Denn es gehet dem Menschen

Denn es gehet dem  
Menschen  
wie dem Vieh, wie dies  
stirbt,  
so stirbt er auch, und haben  
alle einerlei Odem;  
und der  
Mensch hat nichts  
mehr  
denn das Vieh; denn es ist  
alles eitel.

Es fährt alles an einen Ort; es  
ist alles von Staub gemacht,  
und wird wieder zu Staub.

Wer weiss, ob der Geist des  
Menschen aufwärts fahre,  
und der Odem des Viehes  
unterwärts unter die  
Erde fahre?

Darum sahe ich, dass  
nichts  
bessers ist, denn  
dass der  
Mensch fröhlich sei in  
seiner  
Arbeit; denn das ist sein  
Teil.  
Denn wer will ihn dahin  
bringen,  
dass er sehe, was nach ihm  
geschehen wird?

#### Ich wandte mich und sahe an alle

Ich wandte mich, und  
sahe an  
alle, die Unrecht leiden  
unter  
der Sonne; und siehe,  
da waren  
Tränen derer, die Unrecht  
litten  
und hatten keinen  
Tröster, und

#### For that which befalleth the sons of men

For that which befalleth  
the  
sons of men befalleth  
beasts;  
as the one dieth, so dieth  
the other; yea, they have  
all  
one breath; so that a man  
hath  
no pre-eminence above a  
beast; for all is vanity.

All go unto one place; all  
are of dust, and all turn to  
dust again.

Who knoweth the spirit of  
man goeth upward  
and the spirit of the beast  
that goeth downward to  
the earth?

Wherefore I perceive that  
there  
is nothing better, than  
that a  
man should rejoice in his  
own  
works, for that is his  
portion.  
For who shall bring  
him to  
see what shall happen  
after him?

#### So I returned and considered all the impressions

So I returned, and  
considered all  
the oppressions that are  
done  
under the sun; and  
behold the  
tears of such as were  
oppressed,  
and they had no  
comforter; and

die ihnen Unrecht  
täten, waren  
zu mächtig, dass sie  
keinen  
Tröster haben konnten.

Da lobte ich die Toten,  
die  
schon gestorben waren,  
mehr  
als die Lebendigen, die noch  
das Leben hatten.  
Und der noch nicht  
ist, ist  
besser als alle beide, und  
des  
Bösen nicht inne wird, das  
unter  
der Sonne  
geschieht.

#### O Tod, wie bitter bist du

O Tod, wie bitter bist  
du,  
wenn an dich gedenket ein  
Mensch, der gute  
Tage und  
genug hat und ohne  
Sorge  
lebet; und dem es wohl  
geht  
in allen Dingen und  
noch  
wohl essen  
mag!  
O Tod, wie wohl tust  
du dem  
Dürftigen, der da  
schwach  
und alt ist, der in  
allen  
Sorgen steckt, und  
nichts  
Bessers zu hoffen,  
noch zu  
erwarten  
hat!

on the side of their  
oppressors  
there was power; but they  
had  
no comforter.

Wherefore I praised the  
dead  
which are already dead  
more  
than the living which are  
yet alive.  
Yea, better is he than  
both they,  
which hath not yet been,  
who  
hath not seen the evil  
work  
that is done under the  
sun.

#### O death, how bitter is the remembrance

O death, how bitter is the  
remembrance  
of thee to a man that  
liveth at rest in his  
possessions,  
unto the man that hath  
nothing to  
vex him, and that hath  
prosperity  
in all things; yea, unto him  
that  
is yet able to receive  
meat!  
O death, acceptable is thy  
sentence  
unto the needy and unto  
him  
whose strength faileth,  
that is  
now in the last age, and is  
vexed  
with all things, and to him  
that  
despaireth, and hath lost  
patience!

*Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.*

## Wenn ich mit Menschen und mit Engelszungen redete

Wenn ich mit Menschen-  
und  
mit Engelzungen redete,  
und  
hätte der Liebe nicht, so wär  
ich ein tönend Erz,  
oder eine  
klingende Schelle.

Und wenn ich weissagen  
könnte  
und wüsste alle Geheimnisse  
und  
alle Erkenntnis, und hätte  
allen  
Glauben, also, dass ich  
Berge  
versetzte, und hätte der  
Liebe  
nicht, so wäre ich  
nichts.

Und wenn ich alle  
meine Habe  
den Armen gäbe, und  
liesse  
meinen Leib brennen,  
und  
hätte der Liebe nicht, so  
wäre  
mirs nichts nütze.

Wir sehen jetzt durch einen  
Spiegel in einem dunkeln  
Worte, dann aber von  
Angesicht  
zu Angesichte. Jetzt erkenne  
ichs stückweise, dann aber  
werd ichs erkennen,  
gleichwie  
ich erkennet bin.

Nun aber bleibet Glaube,  
Hoffnung, Liebe, diese  
drei;  
aber die Liebe ist die  
grösseste  
unter ihnen.

## Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels

Though I speak with  
the  
tongues of men and of  
angels,  
and have not charity, I am  
become as sounding  
brass  
or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift  
of  
prophecy, and  
understand all  
mysteries, and all  
knowledge;  
and though I have all  
faith, so that  
I could remove  
mountains, and  
have not charity, I am  
nothing.

And though I  
bestow all  
my goods to feed the  
poor,  
and though I give my  
body  
to be burned, it  
profiteth  
me nothing ...

For now we see through  
a glass, darkly; but  
then face to  
face:  
now I know in part,  
but then shall I know  
even as also I  
am  
known.

And now abideth faith,  
hope, charity, these  
three;  
but the greatest of  
these  
is charity.

## Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

### Hermit Songs Op. 29 (1952-3)

#### At Saint Patrick's Purgatory

*13th century*

Pity me on my pilgrimage to Loch Derg!  
O King of the churches and the bells  
Bewailing your sores and your wounds,  
But not a tear can I squeeze from my eyes!  
Not moisten an eye after so much sin!  
Pity me, O King!

What shall I do with a heart that seeks only its own  
ease?

O only begotten Son by whom all men were made,  
Who shunned not the death by three wounds,  
Pity me on my pilgrimage to Loch Derg  
And I with a heart not softer than a stone!

#### Church Bell at Night

*12th century*

Sweet little bell, struck on a windy night,  
I would liefer keep tryst with thee  
Than be  
With a light and foolish woman.

#### St Ita's Vision

*Attrib. St Ita, 8th century*

'I will take nothing from my Lord', said she,  
'Unless He gives me His Son from Heaven  
In the form of a Baby that I may nurse Him'.  
So that Christ came down to her  
In the form of a Baby and then she said:  
'Infant Jesus, at my breast,  
Nothing in this world is true  
Save, O tiny nursling, You.  
Infant Jesus, at my breast,  
By my heart every night,  
You I nurse are not  
A churl but were begot  
On Mary the Jewess by Heaven's Light.  
Infant Jesus, at my breast,  
What King is there but You who could  
Give everlasting Good?  
Wherefore I give my food.  
Sing to Him, maidens, sing your best!  
There is none that has such right  
To your song as Heaven's King  
Who every night  
Is Infant Jesus at my breast'.

## The Heavenly Banquet

*Attrib. St Brigid, 10th century*

I would like to have the men of Heaven in my own  
house;  
With vats of good cheer laid out for them.  
I would like to have the three Marys, their fame is so  
great.  
I would like people from every corner of Heaven.  
I would like them to be cheerful in their drinking.  
I would like to have Jesus sitting here among them.  
I would like a great lake of beer for the King of Kings.  
I would like to be watching Heaven's family  
Drinking it through all eternity.

## The Crucifixion

*From 'The Speckled Book', 12th century*

At the cry of the first bird  
They began to crucify Thee, O Swan!  
Never shall lament cease because of that.  
It was like the parting of day from night.  
Ah, sore was the suffering borne  
By the body of Mary's Son,  
But sorer still to Him was the grief  
Which for His sake  
Came upon His Mother.

## Sea-Snatch

*8th–9th century*

It has broken us, it has crushed us, it has drowned us,  
O King of the starbright Kingdom of Heaven!  
The wind has consumed us, swallowed us,  
As timber is devoured by crimson fire from Heaven.  
It has broken us, it has crushed us, it has drowned us,  
O King of the starbright Kingdom of Heaven!

## Promiscuity

*9th century*

I do not know with whom Edan will sleep,  
But I do know that fair Edan will not sleep alone.

## The Monk and His Cat

*8th–9th century*

Pangur, white Pangur,  
How happy we are  
Alone together,  
Scholar and cat.  
Each has his own work to do daily;  
For you it is hunting, for me study.  
Your shining eye watches the wall;  
My feeble eye is fixed on a book.  
You rejoice when your claws

Entrap a mouse;  
I rejoice when my mind  
Fathoms a problem.  
Pleased with his own art,  
Neither hinders the other;  
Thus we live ever  
Without tedium and envy.  
Pangur, white Pangur,  
How happy we are  
Alone together,  
Scholar and cat.

## The Praises of God

*11th century*

How foolish the man  
Who does not raise  
His voice and praise  
With joyful words,  
As he alone can,  
Heaven's High King.  
To Whom the light birds  
With no soul but air,  
All day, everywhere  
Laudation sing.

## The Desire for Hermitage

*(8th–9th Century)*

Ah! To be all alone in a little cell with nobody near  
me;  
Beloved that pilgrimage before the last pilgrimage to  
Death.  
Singing the passing hours to cloudy Heaven;  
Feeding upon dry bread and water from the cold  
spring.  
That will be an end to evil when I am alone  
In a lovely little corner among tombs  
Far from the houses of the great.  
Ah! To be all alone in a little cell,  
To be alone, all alone:  
Alone I came into the world,  
Alone I shall go from it.

*Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.*

## Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

### From *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

(1892-99, rev. 1901)

*Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano*

#### Das irdische Leben

#### Life on earth

Mutter, ach Mutter! es  
hungert mich,  
Gib mir Brot, sonst sterbe  
ich.

Mother, ah mother, I am  
starving,  
give me bread or I shall  
die.

Warte nur mein  
liebes Kind!  
Morgen wollen wir ernten  
geschwind.

Wait, only wait, my  
beloved child!  
Tomorrow the reaping  
will be swiftly done.

Und als das Korn  
geerntet war,  
Rief das Kind noch  
immerdar:

And when at last the corn  
was reaped,  
still the child kept on  
crying:

Mutter, ach Mutter! es  
hungert mich,  
Gib mir Brot, sonst sterbe  
ich.

Mother, ah mother, I am  
starving,  
give me bread or I shall  
die.

Warte nur mein  
liebes Kind!  
Morgen wollen wir dreschen  
geschwind.

Wait, only wait, my  
beloved child!  
Tomorrow the threshing  
will be swiftly done.

Und als das Korn  
gedroschen war,  
Rief das Kind noch  
immerdar:

And when at last the corn  
was threshed,  
still the child kept on  
crying:

Mutter, ach Mutter! es  
hungert mich,  
Gib mir Brot, sonst sterbe  
ich.

Mother, ah mother, I am  
starving,  
give me bread or I shall  
die.

Warte nur mein  
liebes Kind!  
Morgen wollen wir backen  
geschwind.

Wait, only wait, my  
beloved child!  
Tomorrow the baking will  
be swiftly done.

Und als das Brot  
gebacken war,  
Lag das Kind auf der  
Totenbahr.

And when at last the  
bread was baked,  
the child lay dead upon  
the bier.

#### Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?

#### Who made up this little song?

Dort oben am Berg in dem  
hohen Haus  
Da gucket ein fein's, lieb's  
Mädel heraus,

High in the mountain  
stands a house,  
from it a sweet pretty  
maid looks out.

Es ist nicht dort daheime,  
Es ist des Wirts sein  
Töchterlein,

But that is not her home,  
she's the innkeeper's  
young daughter.

Es wohnt auf grüner  
Heide.

She lives on the green  
moor.

Mein Herzle ist wund,  
Komm, Schätzle, mach's  
g'sund.  
Dein schwarzbraune  
Äuglein,  
Die hab'n mich verwund't.  
Dein rosiger Mund  
Macht Herzen gesund,  
Macht Jugend verständig,  
Macht Tote lebendig,  
Macht Kranke gesund.

My heart is sick.  
Come, my love, and cure  
it.  
Your dark brown  
eyes  
have wounded me.  
Your rosy lips  
can cure sick hearts,  
make young men wise,  
make dead men live,  
can cure the sick.

Wer hat denn das schöne  
Liedlein erdacht?  
Es haben's drei Gäns' übers  
Wasser gebracht,  
Zwei graue und  
eine weisse;  
Und wer das Liedlein nicht  
singen kann,  
Dem wollen sie es  
pfeifen. Ja!

Who made up this pretty  
little song?  
Three geese brought it  
across the water,  
two grey ones and a white  
one;  
and for those who can't  
sing this song,  
they will pipe it to them.  
They will!

#### Der Schildwache Nachtlied

#### The sentinel's night song

„Ich kann und mag nicht  
fröhlich sein,  
Wenn alle Leute schlafen,  
So muss ich wachen,  
Muss traurig sein.“

‘I can't and won't be  
cheerful,  
when folk are asleep,  
I must keep watch,  
must be sad.’

„Lieb Knabe, du musst nicht  
traurig sein,  
Will deiner warten  
Im Rosengarten,  
Im grünen Klee.“

‘Dear boy, you must not  
be sad,  
I'll wait for you  
in the rose-garden,  
in the green clover.’

„Zum grünen Klee da geh ich  
nicht,  
Zum Waffengarten  
Voll Helleparten  
Bin ich gestellt.“

‘I cannot go to the green  
clover,  
to the battle-field  
where halberds are thick  
is where I'm ordered.’

„Stehst du im Feld,  
so helf dir  
Gott!  
An Gottes Segen  
Ist alles gelegen,  
Wers glauben tut.“

‘When you stand in battle,  
may God help  
you!  
All depends  
on God's blessing,  
for him with faith.’

„Wer's glauben tut, ist weit  
davon,  
Er ist ein König,  
Er ist ein Kaiser,  
Er führt den Krieg.“

‘He who has faith is far  
from here,  
he is a king.  
He is an emperor.  
He wages war.’

Halt! Wer da? Rund! Bleib mir  
vom Leib!

Halt! Who goes there?  
Patrol! Keep away!

Wer sang es hier? Wer sang zur Stund?	Who was singing here! Who sang just now?
Verlorne Feldwacht	A forlorn sentinel
Sang es um Mitternacht!	sang his song at midnight!
Mitternacht! Mitternacht! Feldwacht!	Midnight! Midnight! Sentinel!

**Urlicht (1892-99, rev. 1901)      Primordial light**

O Röschen rot,	O, little red rose,
Der Mensch liegt in grösster Not,	Humanity lies in greatest need,
Der Mensch liegt in grösster Pein,	Humanity lies in greatest pain,
Je lieber möcht' ich im Himmel sein.	How much I would rather be in Heaven.
Da kam ich auf einen breiten Weg,	Then I came to a wide path,
Da kam ein Engelein und wollt mich abweisen,	There came a little angel and wanted to turn me away,
Ach nein, ich liess mich nicht abweisen!	Oh no, I would not be turned away,
Ich bin von Gott und will wieder zu Gott,	I am from God and want to return to God,
Der liebe Gott wird mir ein Lichtchen geben,	The loving God will give me a little light,
Wird leuchten mir bis an das ewig selig Leben.	Will shine upon me until the eternal blessed life.

*Translation by Richard Stokes of '4 Serious Songs', 'Das irdische Leben', 'Wer hat dies 'Liedlein erdacht?' and 'Der Schildwache Nachtlid' from Des Knaben Wunderhorn from The Book of Lieder published by Faber & Faber, with thanks to George Bird, co-author of The Fischer-Dieskau Book of Lieder, published by Victor Gollancz Ltd. Translation by Jess Dandy of 'Urlicht' from Des Knaben Wunderhorn.*