

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 26 June 2022 3.00pm

William Thomas bass

Joseph Middleton piano

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)	4 Serious Songs Op. 121 (1896) <i>Denn es gehet dem Menschen • Ich wandte mich • O Tod • Wenn ich mit Menschen</i>
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	An den Mond D193 (1815) Auf der Donau D553 (1817) Pensa, che questo istante D76 (1813)
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)	Per questa bella mano K612 (1791)
Frederick Delius (1862-1934)	To Daffodils (1915-6)
Mily Alexeyevich Balakirev (1837-1910)	The Crescent Moon (1858)
Henri Duparc (1848-1933)	La vie antérieure (1884)
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)	Mit deinen blauen Augen Op. 56 No. 4 (1903-6)

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The *4 Serious Songs* are the work of a mature composer reflecting on the fragility of life and the inevitability of death. They were written in 1896 and their sober tone reflects something of **Brahms's** sense of his own mortality. At a party held to celebrate his 63rd birthday on 7 May that year, he showed the score to his friends, saying, 'I offered this to myself as a gift today. Yes, to myself! If you read the text, you'll understand why.' They were also fated to become an unanticipated memorial to Clara Schumann, who had suffered a stroke in March 1896 and who died on 20 May. The first public performance of the *4 Serious Songs* took place in Vienna on 9 November 1896, just five months before Brahms's own death.

The texts of the four songs are taken from the Bible, yet their religious nature is ambiguous. After all, Brahms referred to them as 'serious' rather than 'sacred', and in a letter to his publisher, he claimed that 'they are seriously disturbing, and therefore so godless that the police could prohibit them – if they weren't all taken from the Bible.' Brahms had been baptised into the Lutheran Church and often turned to the words of the German Bible in his choral works, of which *A German Requiem* (1865–8) is surely the most famous. Yet his attitude to organised religion was, like many at the time, sceptical, and he treated Biblical texts as sources of human wisdom rather than divine revelation or creedal doctrine. The first three songs take words from the Book of Ecclesiastes and focus on the vanity of human life. Their tone and diction can be bleak and even unrelenting and their chorale-like textures are more reminiscent of sacred music than the lyricism of profane song. Even here, though, there are moments of light and hope. The second and third songs begin in the minor, yet they modulate to the major, suggesting that their prophetic austerity conceals the possibility of salvation. Then, in the fourth song, Brahms turns to the New Testament, setting the comforting words of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians with its famous evocation of 'faith, hope and charity'.

Brahms takes poems from a single source to fashion a cycle that has both a poetic narrative and a sense of unfolding musical drama. But recital programmes can be fashioned according to the principle of the anthology too – bouquets, as it were, made up of contrasting and complementary scents and shades. After all, the Greek word 'anthos' means 'flower', and the rest of the songs in this afternoon's programme have been collated in a way that illuminates their shared themes.

If Brahms offers us philosophical insights born of long experience, then in Schubert and Mozart, we encounter composers whose lives were tragically brief. **Schubert** wrote some two dozen songs to words by the 18th-century sentimental poet, Ludwig Hölty, all in 1815 and 1816. Hölty died at the age of 27 in 1776, yet his poems remained in print in the late 18th and 19th centuries, attracting the

attention of composers. 'An den Mond' dates from 1815, when Schubert was just 18, and in its nocturnal evocation of the natural world, it gives voice to the poet's mourning for his lost beloved. The mood of 'Auf der Donau' – composed to words by Schubert's close friend, Johann Baptist Mayrhofer, in 1817 – is starker and more uncompromising. In it, the poet juxtaposes the impermanence of humanity's achievements with the fixity, even hostility, of the natural world. The wonder is that Schubert could convey the gloomy sentiments of Hölty and Mayrhofer with such grace and delicacy. For this we have Salieri to thank, as it was the Italian master who first spotted the musical talent of the seven-year-old Schubert in 1804 and who later gave him private lessons in composition. 'Pensa, che questo istante', to words by Metastasio, seems to be one of the exercises that Salieri set Schubert in 1813, and reminds us that the Lied emerged from a fruitful interaction between German Romantic poetry and Italianate vocal lyricism. According to Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, Salieri was murderously envious of **Mozart's** seemingly divine musical gifts. The truth was much more mundane, of course, and Salieri appears to have been more respectful of the younger composer. 'Per questa bella mano' is one of Mozart's several concert arias and was originally written for bass voice, double bass obbligato and orchestra in March 1791, when it was performed by the same singer who had appeared as Figaro, Sarastro and Don Giovanni.

The final four songs in this afternoon's recital take us far from Hapsburg Vienna, offering us instead a 'posy' of poems written in English, Russian, French and German. In 'To Daffodils', **Delius** takes words by the 17th-century lyric poet and priest, Robert Herrick, which address the fleeting beauty of the natural world and compare it to the brevity of human existence. Portentous as such sentiments might seem, both Herrick's verse and Delius's exquisite, limpid setting are suffused with a stoicism that knows no rancour. In 'The Bright Moon', **Balakirev** paints a languid, Italianate nocturne, in which night affords the two lovers the chance to exchange tender words and yet sweeter kisses before the return of day. Originally composed for voice and orchestra in 1884, 'La vie antérieure' is a hypnotic setting by **Duparc** of a grandiloquent sonnet from Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, in which the poet looks back at a vanished golden age. Poignantly, it proved to be the last work that Duparc completed before mental illness condemned him to silence until his death in 1933. That sense of that tragedy is relieved – if only for a moment – by **Strauss's** 'Mit deinen blauen Augen', in which Heine's deceptively simple poem conveys the power of memory to sustain and inspire.

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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

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 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.

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

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 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 Tod

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!

Wenn ich mit Menschen

Wenn ich mit Menschen- und mit Engelnungen 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.

O death

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!

Though I speak with the tongues of men

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.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

An den Mond D193 (1815) To the moon

Ludwig Christoph Heinrich Hölty

Geuss, lieber Mond, geuss deine Silberflimmer
Durch dieses Buchengrün,
Wo Phantasien und Traumgestalten immer
Vor mir vorüber fliehn!

Shed your silver light, dear moon,
through these green beeches,
where fancies and dream-like visions
forever flit by me!

Enthülle dich, dass ich die Stätte finde,
Wo oft mein Mädchen sass,
Und oft, im Wehn des Buchbaums und der Linde,
Der goldnen Stadt vergass!

Unveil yourself, that I might find the place
where my sweetheart often sat,
and where, to the rustle of beech and lime,
I often forgot the gilded town!

Enthülle dich, dass ich des Strauchs mich freue,
Der Kühlung ihr gerauscht,
Und einen Kranz auf jeden Anger streue,
Wo sie den Bach belauscht!

Unveil yourself, that I might enjoy the murmuring bushes that cooled her,
and lay a wreath on every meadow,
where she once listened to the brook!

Dann, lieber Mond, dann nimm den Schleier wieder,
Und traur' um deinen Freund,
Und weine durch den Wolkenflor hernieder,
Wie dein Verlassner weint.

Then, dear moon, veil yourself once more
and mourn your friend,
and weep through hazy clouds,
just like I, forsaken, weep.

Auf der Donau D553 On the Danube

(1817)

Johann Baptist Mayrhofer

Auf der Wellen Spiegel Schwimmt der Kahn.
Alte Burgen ragen Himmelan;
Tannenwälder rauschen Geistergleich –
Und das Herz im Busen Wird uns weich.

The boat glides on the waves' surface.
Old castles soar heavenward;
pine-forests stir like ghosts –
and our hearts grow faint within us.

Denn der Menschen Werke Sinken all';
Wo ist Turm, wo Pforte,
Wo der Wall,
Wo sie selbst, die Starken? Erzgeschirmt,
Die in Krieg und Jagden Hingestürmt.

For the works of man all perish;
where are towers, where gates,
where ramparts,
where are the mighty themselves? Who, clad in bronze armour,
stormed into wars and hunts.

Trauriges Gestrüppe Wuchert fort,
Während frommer Sage Kraft verdorrt.
Und im kleinen Kahne Wird uns bang –
Wellen droh'n, wie Zeiten, Untergang.

Melancholy briars grow rank and rampant,
while the power of pious myth withers.
And in our small boat we grow afraid –
waves, like time, threaten destruction.

Pensa, che questo istante D76 (1813)

Pietro Metastasio

Pensa, che questo istante Del tuo destin decide,
Ch'oggi rinasce Alcide Per la futura età.
Pensa che a dulto sei,
Che sei di Giove un figlio,
Che merto e non consiglio La scelta tua sarà.

Consider that this moment

Consider that this moment in your destiny will decide whether Alcides is today reborn for future ages.
Consider that you are an adult, that you are a son of Jove, and that your reward will depend on your merit, not on advice.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Per questa bella mano K612 (1791)

Anonymous

Per questa bella mano,
Per questi vaghi rai
Giuro, mio ben, che mai
Non amerò che te.

By this fair hand

By this fair hand,
by these lovely eyes,
I swear, my dearest, that never will I love anyone but you.

L'aure, le piante, i sassi,
Che i miei sospir ben sanno,
A te qual sia diranno
La mia costante fè.

The breezes, the plants, the stones,
which know my sighs full well,
will tell you how constant is my fidelity.

Volgi lieti o fieri sguardi,
Dimmi pur che m'odi o m'ami,
Sempre acceso ai dolci dardi,
Sempre tuo vo' che mi chiami,
Nè cangiar può terra o cielo
Quel desio che vive in me.

Turn your proud gaze happily on me
and say whether you hate or love me!
Ever inflamed by your tender glances,
I want you to call me yours forever;
neither earth nor heaven can change
that desire which dwells within me.

Frederick Delius (1862-1934)

To Daffodils (1915-6)

Robert Herrick

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon:
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.
Stay, stay
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the evensong;
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.
We die,
As your hours do, and dry
Away
Like to the summer's rain,
Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
Ne'er to be found again.

Mily Alexeyevich Balakirev (1837-1910)

The Crescent Moon (1858)

M Yatsevich

Vzoshol na nebo mesyats
yasnyi, tumany v pole
uleglis,
Ya zhdu tebya, moi drug prekrasnyi,
na zov moi nezhnyi otzovis.
Soidi syuda na bereg tyomnyi,
nas skroyet sumrak goluboi,
I ne primetit vzor neskromnyi
moyei besedy zdyes s toboi.
O! Ty uznayesh, kak lyublyu
ya,
Dlya chustv serdechnyh net
rechei, ikh skazhet sladost
potseluya,
Obyatii zhar, ogon ochei.
Vzoshol na nebo mesats
yasnyi, tumany v pole
ulyeglis,
Ia zhdu teba, moi drug prekrasnyi,
na zov moi nezhnyi otzovis.

The crescent moon is shining
brightly, the mists have
settled in the field,
I await you, my fair beloved,
answer my affectionate call.
Come hither to the dark river-bank,
the blue twilight will harbour us,
and my conversation here with you
will be hid from indiscreet eyes.
Oh! You will know the strength
of my love,
words can't tell of the heart's
feelings concealed in the
sweetness of a kiss,
a warm embrace, an ardent gaze.
The crescent moon is shining
brightly, The mists have
settled in the field,
I await you, my fair beloved,
answer my affectionate call.

Henri Duparc (1848-1933)

La vie antérieure (1884)

Charles Baudelaire

J'ai longtemps habité sous de
vastes portiques
Que les soleils marins teignaient
de mille feux,
Et que leurs grands piliers,
droits et majestueux,
Rendaient pareils, le soir, aux
grottes basaltiques.

Les houles, en roulant les
images des cieux,
Mêlaient d'une façon solennelle
et mystique
Les tout-puissants accords de
leur riche musique
Aux couleurs du couchant
reflété par mes yeux.

C'est là que j'ai vécu dans les
voluptés calmes,
Au milieu de l'azur, des vagues,
des splendeurs
Et des esclaves nus, tout
imprégnés d'odeurs,

Qui me rafraîchissaient le front
avec des palmes,
Et dont l'unique soin était
d'approfondir
Le secret douloureux qui me
faisait languir.

A previous life

For long I lived beneath vast
colonnades
tinged with a thousand fires by
ocean suns,
whose giant pillars, straight and
majestic,
made them look, at evening, like
basalt caves.

The sea-swells, mingling the
mirrored skies,
solemnly and mystically
interwove
the mighty chords of their
mellow music
with the colours of sunset
reflected in my eyes.

It is there that I have lived in
sensuous repose,
with blue sky about me and
brightness and waves
and naked slaves all drenched in
perfume,

Who fanned my brow with
fronds of palm,
and whose only care was to
fathom
the secret grief which made me
languish.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Mit deinen blauen Augen

With your blue eyes

Op. 56 No. 4 (1903-6)

Heinrich Heine

Mit deinen blauen Augen
Siehst du mich lieblich an,
Da ward mir so träumend zu Sinne,
Dass ich nicht sprechen kann.

With your blue eyes
you gently look at me,
it seemed to me so like a dream,
that now I cannot speak.

An deinen blauen Augen
Gedenk' ich allerwärts:
Ein Meer von blauen Gedanken
Ergiesst sich über mein Herz.

I recall your blue eyes
everywhere:—
a sea of azure thoughts
pours over my heart.

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