

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 26 May 2025
1.00pm

Anthony Marwood violin

James Crabb accordion

Ástor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

S.V.P. (1955) *arranged by James Crabb*

Tzigane Tango (1955) *arranged by James Crabb*

Preparense (1951) *arranged by James Crabb*

Thomas Adès (b.1971)

Märchentänze (2020) *England première*
I. • II. • III. Skylark for Jane • IV.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The Lark Ascending (1914 rev. 1920) *arranged by James Crabb*

Sally Beamish (b.1956)

Lament from *Seavaigers* (2011) *arranged by James Crabb*

Trad/Scottish

Struan Robertson's Rant/Cuckold come out of the Amery (c.1761)
arranged by James Crabb



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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As a keen accordionist noted in a letter to the *Musical Times* in 1936, 'How many musicians know that with a few limitations nearly all music is playable on the instrument? And most of it is not only playable, but effective.' He goes on to add that the accordion is 'as portable as a suitcase!' The author of the letter also drew attention to the recent establishment of the British College of Accordionists. But as **James Crabb** pointed out in an interview in 2013, composers really only began to take the instrument seriously in the 1960s, so there is a relative dearth of dedicated repertoire. 'Effective' transcriptions are therefore required and Crabb makes the scarcity of existing compositions a virtue, curating a vivid programme of arrangements and – echoing the 1936 enthusiast – exploiting the accordion's ability to represent a 'portable orchestra'. Less familiar works sit alongside well-known pieces, experienced afresh in their intriguing new sound world.

Crabb notes that the **Piazzolla** tangos in this programme do not belong to the composer's experimental 'Tango Nuevo' period, such as those featuring in his 'Tango opera' *Maria de Buenos Aires* (1968). Instead, this group from the 1950s are more conventional in style, composed when Piazzolla was living in Paris. *S.V.P.* (*S'il vous plait*) has the beguiling lilt of a Parisian café song; *Tzigane Tango* has a similar quality, though coloured with more characteristic rhythmic figures and a yearning sensuality. The final tango, *Preparanse*, resembles a brooding love song, in a ravishing and intense minor key throughout.

Thomas Adès's *Märchentänze* (Dances in Fairytale) were originally composed in 2020 for violin and piano, with the piano part orchestrated – to brilliant effect – the following year in 2021. Crabb has in turn arranged the characterful accompaniment for accordion. The four dances draw on English folk sources, although these are not specifically named (only the third movement has a title: *Skylark – for Jane*). The first movement is playful and light, its easy-going rhythm punctuated here and there by off-kilter emphases, giving the movement a touch of swing. The melancholy second movement features a beautiful, long-breathed melody, tinged with dissonance, and softly 'sung' throughout. The following movement conjures up the sound of birdsong, building from one skylark to a glorious 'exaltation'. The finale is a lively confrontation between two themes, one in a jaunty 7/8 time, the other in a more regular metre, the latter attempting to rein in the irregularities of the former. The dynamics are also in playful competition, teasingly withholding the louder outbursts until the very end.

Crabb's arrangement of **Vaughan Williams's** *The Lark Ascending*, as he puts it, 'seems to fit somewhere between the orchestral and piano versions'. It is as intimate as the original violin and piano version, but able to evoke the wider dimensions of the orchestral setting. Taking its title and spirit from a poem by George Meredith, *The Lark Ascending* can seem weighed down by its reputation, derided as much as praised for being so often dubbed 'the nation's favourite' classical piece. But it is worth listening to with a fresh perspective. Audiences at the time of its violin and piano première in 1920 were certainly startled by its originality; the *Times* critic noted that the piece 'showed a serene disregard for the fashions of today or yesterday'. The violin part, frequently heard alone and stratospherically high, has a tranquil yet also vulnerable quality, which is more apparent when accompanied by only one other instrument. The accordion here has a 'grounding' function, with its earthy, folk-like harmonies, and overall the mood is peaceful and meditative. Violinist Richard Tognetti, who had originally dismissed *The Lark* as piece of fluff, later suggested it was 'transcendental to the point where you are astral travelling.'

Beamish's 'Lament' (from her concerto *Seavaigers*, or 'Seafarers') was originally composed for Celtic harp, fiddle and strings. It was inspired by and written for the Scottish soloists Chris Stout and Catriona McKay, who hail from Shetland and Dundee respectively. The 'Lament' evokes the seascape between the two locations – its shimmering surface and treacherous depths – and those who have lost their lives within it. Crabb originally arranged this movement for accordion and recorder, the latter part here adapting beautifully for violin. The violin melody is repeated and varied upon – changing octave, or changing metre throughout – while the underlying drone of the start expands and enriches as the music intensifies. The harmonies retreat back to stark octaves at the close.

Cuckold come out of the Amery (or 'cupboard') is a traditional tune associated with both Northumbria and Scotland. The main melody is vigorous and highly adaptable to variations: the version here is an arrangement by Crabb of elaborations on the theme devised by border piper Matt Seattle. Violin and accordion exchange the principal melody with counter-melodies, providing an energetic, toe-tapping finale to this recital.

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