

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 26 November 2023  
3.00pm

## BBC Cardiff Singer Recital

Gihoon Kim baritone  
Simon Lepper piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

4 Serious Songs Op. 121 (1896)

*Denn es gehet dem Menschen • Ich wandte mich •  
O Tod • Wenn ich mit Menschen*

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

The Dream Op. 8 No. 5 (1893)

She is as lovely as the noon Op. 14 No. 9 (1896)

Oh no, I beg you, forsake me not Op. 4 No. 1 (1892)

Sing not to me, beautiful maiden Op. 4 No. 4 (?1892-3)

When yesterday we met Op. 26 No. 13 (1906)

Christ is risen Op. 26 No. 6 (1906)

In the silence of the secret night Op. 4 No. 3 (?1892)

He took all from me Op. 26 No. 2 (1906)

Fragment from Musset Op. 21 No. 6 (1902)

Wonju Lee (b.1979)

Yeon

Mukhyang

Hyeyoung Cho (b.1969)

Monnijeo



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Brahms's *4 Serious Songs* date from 1896 and their sobriety reflects something of the composer's sense of his own mortality. He showed the score to friends at a party held to celebrate his 63rd birthday on 7 May that year, saying, 'I offered this to myself as a gift today. Yes, to myself! If you read the text, you'll understand why.' Shortly afterwards, they become an unanticipated memorial to Clara Schumann, who died on 20 May. They were premièred in Vienna on 9 November 1896, just five months before Brahms's own death.

Their texts are drawn from the Bible, yet their spirituality is ambiguous. Baptised into the Lutheran Church, Brahms 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. He referred to them as 'serious' rather than 'sacred', and in a letter to his publisher, 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.'

The first three songs take words from the *Book of Ecclesiastes* that focus on the vanity of human existence. Their tone can be bleak and 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, and their prophetic austerity conceals the prospect of salvation. Then, in the fourth and final 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 create a cycle that has both a poetic narrative and a sense of unfolding musical drama. But songs can be arranged 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 highlights their shared themes and moods.

Rachmaninov grouped his songs in this manner, plucking texts from a variety of poets both Russian and European. His earliest songs – the *4 Romances* Op. 4 (1893), *6 Romances* Op. 8 (1893) and *12 Romances* Op. 14 (1896) – show a fondness for lyrical landscapes and moments of intensely felt emotion, and alongside texts by classical poets from the 19th Century (Fet, Heine, Pushkin), he experimented with more recent verses by Minsky and Merezhkovsky. Significantly, each of the five songs from the 1890s performed today was dedicated to an important woman in Rachmaninov's life. Two were inspired by his puppyish infatuation with

the three Skalon sisters ('A dream' is dedicated to Natalia Skalon, and 'In the silence of the secret night' to her younger sister, Vera, whose name is sounded in the piano part). 'Oh no, I beg you, forsake me not' records his passion for Anna Lodyzhenskaya, who is also the dedicatee of his fateful First Symphony. 'She is as lovely as the noon' honours the singing of Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya (who famously proposed *Eugene Onegin* to Tchaikovsky). 'Sing not to me, beautiful maiden' was written for his first cousin, Natalia Satina – who would eventually become his wife.

Later on, other influences were to shape Rachmaninov's songs. In 1897, he met the great bass, Fyodor Chaliapin, who opened the way to a more dramatic approach to musical narrative. The following year, composer and singer studied the score of *Boris Godunov* together, and in the *12 Romances* Op. 21 (1902) and the *15 Romances* Op. 26 (1906), one can hear just how much Rachmaninov had learned from Musorgsky's radical treatment of musical declamation ('When yesterday we met' amounts to a miniature dramatic *scena*). Rachmaninov's poetic tastes evolved too, and the four songs from the early 1900s included in this programme explore aspects of philosophy, religion and the vagaries of human existence. Lyric poetry can sometimes seem divorced from the realities of life, yet in 'Christ is risen', Merezhkovsky imagines Christ's sorrow at the fallenness of the world. The original version of his poem contained a verse that the censor struck out: in it, Merezhkovsky prophesises that Christ will return only when all tyrants are deposed and all slaves freed. Rachmaninov has often been seen as nostalgic, romantic and even apolitical, yet this song – written in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905 – retains its enduring and tragic topicality.

The modern art-song repertoire may have emerged in 19th-century Europe, yet it has since travelled around the world, where it interacts with vernacular traditions to this day. This afternoon's concert concludes with three contemporary *kagok* from Gihoon Kim's homeland. *Kagok* can also refer to the ancient, aristocratic form of song culture that has been recognised as one of Korea's most important forms of intangible cultural heritage, yet the music of the pieces performed today are altogether closer to the Western song tradition. *Kagok* can often be lyric and wistful, as in the songs of **Wonju Lee** (b. 1979). 'Yeon' might be translated as 'longing' or even 'destiny', and in 'Mukhyang' ('Scents of Indian Ink'), she evokes a powerful sense of nostalgia. Born a decade earlier than Wonju Lee, **Hyeyoung Cho** (b. 1969) explores a similar emotional palette in her song, 'Monnijeo' ('Unable to forget'). Even for those unfamiliar with the Korean words, music conveys their poetic essence.

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