

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 28 April 2023
7.30pm

Claron McFadden soprano
Alexander Melnikov piano

John Cage (1912-1992)
Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Aria (1958)
5 Melodies Op. 35 (1920)
*Andante • Lento ma non troppo •
Animato ma non allegro • Allegretto leggero e
scherzando • Andante non troppo*

Luciano Berio (1925-2003)
Cathy Berberian (1925-1983)
Oliver Knussen (1952-2018)

Sequenza III (1965)
Stripsody (1966)
Whitman Settings Op. 25 (1991)
*When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
A Noiseless Patient Spider
The Dalliance of the Eagles
The Voice of the Rain*

Interval

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)
Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)
George Crumb (1929-2022)

Improvisation and Fugue (1965)
Sonata Erotica (1919)
Apparition: Elegiac Songs and Vocalises (1979)
*The night in silence under many a star • Vocalise I -
Summer Sounds • When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard
Bloom'd • Vocalise II - Invocation • Dark Mother, always
gliding near, with soft feet • Approach Strong
Deliveress! • Vocalise III - Death Carol • Come lovely and
soothing death • The night in silence under many a star*

Please note that some of these pieces contain adult content that may not be suitable for younger audiences.

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During a period of unprecedented political, social and economic upheaval, a number of 20th-century composers challenged conventional notions of musical language, exploring increasingly radical approaches to melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre. Initially, these developments were more obviously manifested in works that expanded the sonic palette of instruments rather than those of the voice. This changed, however, after the Second World War when the *bel canto* tradition of singing, which had held sway for hundreds of years, came under increasing scrutiny, and composers sought new means of expression through employing extended vocal techniques. Tonight's recital celebrates this liberation of the singing voice in an eclectic programme which places some of the seminal works from this period alongside earlier exploratory vocal repertory. Also featured are two substantial song-cycles composed later in the century.

One of the most significant of these experimental works is **Cage's** *Aria*. It was composed in 1958 and dedicated to the outstanding American mezzo-soprano Cathy Berberian who gave the first performance in Rome the following year. Conceived in an open-ended structure which according to the composer 'may be sung in whole or in part to provide a programme of determined time-length', the visually striking graphic score utilises a text that employs the vowels, consonants and words from five different languages (Armenian, Russian, Italian, French and English) and features vocal lines drawn in black with or without parallel dotted lines, as well as black squares. These dotted lines use one or more of eight different colours, each one representing different modes of singing, ranging from dramatic, lyrical and coloratura style to imitations of jazz, folk and traditional Asian music. The squares, on the other hand, ask the performer to provide freely chosen extraneous vocal noises expressing a gamut of emotions that may suggest, for example, laughter, anger, disdain and/or sexual pleasure.

Berio's *Sequenza III* exploits an equally remarkable level of vocal virtuosity. Composed in 1965 also for Berberian, it uses a brief text by Markus Kutter which is broken down into fragments using a range of extended vocal techniques that include muttering consonants, tongue and finger clicks, dental trills and lip tremolos. Berio described the work as an 'attempt to assimilate in musical terms many aspects of everyday vocalicity with the objective of trying to free the voice so as to ensure there are no more boundaries between the spoken and the sung. It is an exercise in musical dramaturgy which to a certain extent dramatises the relationship between the performer and her own voice.'

As well as espousing avant-garde vocal works by Cage, Berio and others, **Berberian** was also a composer. Her most famous work *Stripsody*, written in 1966, features a graphic score highlighting words and drawings normally associated with cartoons. The performer responds to these images by utilising a sound world that is entirely onomatopoeic in character. This onomatopoeic vocal style may have sounded entirely original at the time of its composition; yet **Schulhoff's** *Sonata Erotica* provides an

intriguing historical precedent for *Stripsody*. Composed in 1919, this provocative Dadaist work asks the singer to simulate the sounds of a woman engaging in increasingly intense sexual activity.

In sharp contrast, **Prokofiev's** *5 Melodies* may seem, at least on the surface, to be far more conventional. But the demands for the singer are no less challenging. Not only have they to negotiate a complex wordless melodic line against a characteristically full-blooded piano accompaniment, but they also need to effect wide-ranging contrasts in mood, from the highly-charged emotional intensity of the first and fifth melody to the more skittish third. It's little wonder then that these atmospheric miniatures, originally composed for the famous Ukrainian mezzo-soprano Nina Koshetz in 1920, found a new and more permanent lease of life in the transcription for violin and piano made by the composer and violinist Paweł Kochoński five years later.

Prokofiev's brittle and percussive style of piano writing was undoubtedly a formative influence on the music of Russian composer **Schnittke**. It can be easily discerned in the rhythmically insistent toccata-like passage work of his *Improvisation and Fugue*, a virtuoso showpiece originally composed for the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in 1965. Equally germane to the work's instant appeal, however, are the striking juxtapositions of style that incorporate allusions to jazz and rumba rhythms. These coexist alongside a strict adherence to 12-tone melodic material.

The two song cycles in tonight's programme draw their inspiration from the 19th-century American writer Walt Whitman, whose poetry was set by a host of major composers including Vaughan Williams, Delius, Holst and Hindemith. **Knussen's** *Whitman Settings* were written in 1991 for American soprano Lucy Shelton. The composer was particularly attracted to setting these specific Whitman poems because, as he acknowledged, 'they deal with grand natural phenomena on small canvases.' Knussen deploys a characteristically brilliant and wide-ranging piano part in tandem with an unusually sensitive and expressive response to the different sentiments of each poem, thereby achieving his declared goal of 'trying to re-imagine a very familiar genre with fresh ears.'

A similar sense of revivifying a long-established musical tradition can be perceived in **Crumb's** *Apparition*, composed in 1979. The text is drawn from various sections of Whitman's famous poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. Crumb utilises this material to muse on the unfathomable nature of death, constructing his cycle as a sequence of five songs interspersed with three vocalises which culminates in a return of the first song at the end. The highly charged vocal writing, incorporating remarkable imitations of birdsong in the first and third vocalises, is matched by piano writing that fully exploits the sonic possibilities of the instrument and includes plucking and rubbing the strings from the inside to create a mesmeric and overwhelmingly powerful effect.

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Aria (1958)

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

5 Melodies Op. 35 (1920)

Andante

Lento ma non troppo

Animato ma non allegro

Allegretto leggero e scherzando

Andante non troppo

Luciano Berio (1925-2003)

Sequenza III (1965)

Markus Kutter

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Cathy Berberian (1925-1983)

Stripsody (1966)

Oliver Knussen (1952-2018)

Whitman Settings Op. 25 (1991)

Walt Whitman

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures were ranged in columns
before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,
and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured
with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the
spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile
anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my
soul.

The Dalliance of the Eagles

Skirting the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest),
Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of the
eagles,
The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating
wheel,
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight
grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward
falling,
Till o'er the river pois'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,
A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons
loosing,
Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate
diverse flight,
She hers, he his, pursuing.

The Voice of the Rain

And who art thou? said I to the soft-falling shower,
Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here
translated:
I am the Poem of Earth, said the voice of the rain,
Eternal I rise impalpable out of the land and the bottomless
sea,
Upward to heav'n, whence, vaguely form'd, altogether
changed, and yet the same,
I descend to lave the drouths, atomies, dust layers of the
globe,
And all that in them without me were seeds only, latent,
unborn;
And forever, by day and night, I give back life to my own
origin, and make pure and beautify it:
(For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfilment,
wandering,
Reck'd or unreck'd, duly with love returns.)

Interval

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)

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Sonata Erotica (1919)

George Crumb (1929-2022)

Apparition: Elegiac Songs and Vocalises (1979)
Walt Whitman

The night in silence under many a star

The night, in silence, under many a star;
The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave, whose
voice I know;
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd Death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Vocalise I - Summer Sounds

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Vocalise II - Invocation

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?

Approach Strong Deliveress!

Approach, strong Deliveress!
When it is so – when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing
the dead,
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O Death.

Vocalise III - Death Carol

Come lovely and soothing death

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later, delicate death.

The night in silence under many a star

The night, in silence, under many a star;
The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave, whose
voice I know;
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd Death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.