

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 28 October 2023
7.30pm

Victoria de los Ángeles Centenary



Tara Erraught mezzo-soprano
James Baillieu piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Vergebliches Ständchen Op. 84 No. 4 (pub. 1882)

Wie Melodien zieht es mir Op. 105 No. 1 (1886)

Meine Liebe ist grün Op. 63 No. 5 (1873)

Die Mainacht Op. 43 No. 2 (1866)

Wiegenlied Op. 49 No. 4 (1868)

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Les nuits d'été Op. 7 (1840-1)

*Villanelle • Le spectre de la rose • Sur les lagunes •
Absence • Au cimetière • L'île inconnue*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Erlkönig D328 (1815)

Ellens Gesang III D839 (1825)

An die Musik D547 (1817)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Les roses d'Ispahan Op. 39 No. 4 (1884)

Clair de lune Op. 46 No. 2 (1887)

Chanson d'amour Op. 27 No. 1 (1882)

Trad/Irish

Gartan Mother's Lullaby *arranged by Herbert Hughes*

I will walk with my love *arranged by Herbert Hughes*

Thomas Dunhill (1877-1946)

The Cloths of Heaven from *The Wind among the Reeds* (1911)

Trad/Irish

She is far from the land

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1 November 2023 would have been the 100th birthday of the Spanish soprano Victoria de los Ángeles, the Barcelona-born singer who took the world by storm after her debut, at the age of just 18, as Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*. A glittering operatic career soon followed, taking her from London to New York, Buenos Aires and Bayreuth; but by the late 1960s she turned her attention almost exclusively to song repertoire, and worked extensively with Ivor Newton, Gerald Moore and Geoffrey Parsons (all of whom had long-standing associations with Wigmore Hall). Tara Erraught's programme brings together song composers with whom de los Ángeles was particularly closely associated, along with the music of Erraught's own home country of Ireland.

Brahms featured frequently in de los Ángeles's programmes, and we begin with a clutch of his best-loved songs. The comically hopeless wheedling of an optimistic lover in 'Vergebliches Ständchen' is followed here by the beautifully long-breathed 'Wie Melodien zieht es mir', a reflection upon the magical evanescence of music and poetry. 'Meine Liebe ist grün' is an impassioned, 'love-drunk' rhapsody, to words by Brahms's godson, Felix Schumann. Such youthful exuberance stands in stark contrast to 'Die Mainacht', a masterclass in subtlety, from the cooing doves to the dark harmonies of the shadows sought by the speaker – and those magically drawn-out lines as the tear makes its way down his cheek. Our group closes with Brahms's most famous song, his 'Wiegenlied' of 1868, a cunning combination of lullaby and Viennese waltz which was offered as a gift to his friend Bertha Porubszky on the birth of her second child.

Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été*, to poetry by Théophile Gautier, is less a narrative cycle than a succession of powerfully evoked dramatic scenes. We move from the fresh, excitable spring lover of 'Villanelle' to the magical 'Le spectre de la rose' and the heartbroken protagonist of 'Sur les lagunes'. 'Absence' is a call for a loved one to come back, though the return in 'Au cimetière' is that of one lost and remembered as 'une forme angélique'. The work ends with a journey to 'L'île inconnue', a fantastical voyage of love and whimsy. Although originally scored for voice and piano in 1841, Berlioz orchestrated the set in the mid-1850s, and it is in this larger-scale version that de los Ángeles recorded the songs with Charles Munch in 1955.

Our second half begins with another Lied composer whose music de los Ángeles performed and recorded: **Franz Schubert**. It was a performance by the German opera star Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient of Schubert's 'Erlkönig' that first persuaded its poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, of the brilliance of the composer's realisation of his words – even more extraordinary for having been written when Schubert was just 18 years old. After this frantic nightmare ride we hear the famous Walter Scott setting 'Ave Maria!', 'Ellens Gesang III', composed as part of a clutch of numbers from Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* in 1825. 'An die Musik' sets words

by Schubert's dear friend Franz von Schober: a moving hymn to the beauty of the art form.

French and Spanish music unsurprisingly feature heavily in de los Ángeles's discography, and she recorded the *mélodies* of **Gabriel Fauré** on multiple occasions. Fauré's 'Les roses d'Ispahan' of 1884 sets a brand-new poem by Leconte de Lisle, in which every four-line strophe ends with the same four words (mousse, l'oranger, douce, léger) in a different order. This picturesque word game is sometimes emphasised in Fauré's lush Persian fantasy, sometimes smoothed over in favour of longer descriptive phrases. It was one of his most successful songs; as was 'Clair de lune' of three years later. This song begins with a lengthy, circling introduction, the pianist's melody then set in counterpoint to the vocal line as Verlaine's mysterious moonlit scene is laid before us. It was written a few months before Fauré began work on his *Requiem*, and later orchestrated at the insistence of the Princess de Polignac, for performance in her salon by her own 20-piece orchestra.

Our third and final Fauré song is the earliest of the three: 'Chanson d'amour' from 1882. It is a love song with refrain in this composer's configuration, the first verse of Silvestre's poem repeated after each subsequent strophe to bring us back to the speaker's adoration of his beloved. There is a simple grace in Fauré's realisation of the text that points straight back towards Robert Schumann – who is also the composer's inspiration for the skilfully interwoven piano and vocal lines in 'Clair de lune'.

The final songs of this evening's concert are particularly close to Tara Erraught's heart, bringing together several Irish folksong arrangements with a setting of WB Yeats. The composer and critic **Herbert Hughes** was born in Belfast the year Fauré composed 'Chanson d'amour', and after studying at the Royal College of Music Hughes became a particularly energetic collector and arranger of Irish folksongs. From his four-volume anthology of *Irish Country Songs* we hear first 'Gartan Mother's Lullaby', the pianist's left hand tolling in open fifths like an evening church bell as the song's rocking rhythm begins. 'I will walk with my love' is a sweet, tragic tale at which our speaker only hints, the melody simple and gently heartbreaking.

Hughes would have overlapped at the RCM with the English composer **Thomas Dunhill**, a star student and later teacher and professor. (John Ireland rather sulkily recalled that 'Stanford always like Dunhill better than me.') 'The Cloths of Heaven' is one of Yeats's most famous texts, and Dunhill's setting is intimate and reverent: a heartfelt plea that the object of his affection 'tread softly because you tread on my dreams'. Finally, 'She is far from the land' was a favourite of the Irish tenor John McCormack, and a touching reflection on the importance of home, love and heritage.

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