

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 29 January 2022 1.00pm

Kathryn Stott piano

Louis Vierne (1870-1937)

Le Glas from *Poème des cloches funèbres* Op. 39 (1916)

Ernesto Lecuona (1896-1963)

Bell-Flower from *3 Miniaturas* (pub. 1943)

Graham Fitkin (b.1963)

From Yellow to Yellow (1985)

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

3 morceaux for piano (1914)

D'un vieux jardin • D'un jardin clair • Cortège

Philip Glass (b.1937)

Etude No. 2 (1994)

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

3 novelettes (1927-8 rev. 1939 & 1958-9)

Novelette in C • Novelette in B flat minor • Novelette in E minor

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

How Long Has This Been Going On? (1928) *arranged by Michael Finnissy*

A Foggy Day (In London Town) from *A Damsel in Distress* (1937) *arranged by Michael Finnissy*

Earl Wild (1915-2010)

7 Virtuoso Etudes after Gershwin (1954-75)

Oh, Lady, Be Good • The Man I Love

Graham Fitkin

Relent (1998)

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Louis Vierne was organist at Notre-Dame in Paris from 1900 until his death in 1937. Among his many pupils was Nadia Boulanger, who many years later made an impact on the young Kathryn Stott on a visit to the Yehudi Menuhin School, where Stott was a pupil. Of the four movements intended for his *Poème des cloches funèbres* ('Poem of the funeral bells', 1916), only two were completed, and only one survives. The layering of bell sounds in 'Le Glas' ('Death-knell') – as well as the parallel motion and whole-tone harmonies – unmistakably evokes Debussy's earlier piano prelude 'La cathédrale engloutie' ('The submerged cathedral').

The bells of **Ernesto Lecuona's** 'Bell-Flower' (the first of his *3 Miniaturas*, published in 1943) are more delicate than Vierne's, punctuation to a dreamy blues-tinted salon piece. Lecuona combined the musical styles of his native Cuba with European forms in the way Gershwin fused jazz and classical. As well as co-founding the Havana Symphony Orchestra, he also launched the dance band the Lecuona Cuban Boys, which toured internationally and recorded for the Columbia label.

There are bell-like allusions, if you want to hear them, in the crystalline right-hand arpeggios and resonant left-hand chords of **Graham Fitkin's** *From Yellow to Yellow*. The piece is tightly constructed: the number of notes in each arpeggio figure reduces by one from seven notes down to four before expanding back to seven. But at the same time, the number of times each arpeggio is repeated reduces, by two cycles, successively throughout the piece – so the opening seven-note arpeggio is heard 14 times at the beginning but only twice at the end, a device that keeps the piece in motion.

Lili Boulanger was the younger sister of Nadia Boulanger and died of intestinal tuberculosis at the age of only 24, by which time her potential as a composer was abundantly clear but tragically unfulfilled. The *3 morceaux for piano* were written in 1914, while the composer was in Rome, having become the first woman to win the Prix de Rome composition prize. 'D'un vieux jardin' ('Of an old garden') opens in a nostalgic vein before turning towards darker thoughts. 'D'un jardin clair' ('Of a bright garden') opens with a rising-falling figure that features throughout. 'Cortège', in contrast to its title, is a playful character piece with a carefree, babbling accompaniment.

Another starry student of Nadia Boulanger, **Philip Glass** said he wrote his *Etudes* (20 in all between 1994 and 2012) 'first, to provide new music for my solo piano concerts, and second, for me to expand my piano technique with music that would enhance and challenge my playing'. The gently ebbing outer sections of *Etude No. 2* have a radiant, Elysian quality, while the middle section builds on denser chords. As so often in Glass's music, simple patterns create a hypnotic quality. He has said that the *Etudes* are not only for the listener, but also for 'those who have the ability and patience to learn, play and perform the music themselves'. So there's a call to action!

Francis Poulenc was drawn to the piano at the age of two, when he received a toy instrument. 'Simply touching the keys,' he later said, 'is enough to arouse my creative urge.' Of his 40 or so piano works, most are miniature in scale, but he also wrote a set of eight Nocturnes, as well as his beloved 15 Improvisations (the last of which was dedicated to Édith Piaf). Poulenc's first two Novelettes come from 1927 and 1928, a few years after Les Six – the group of self-styled *enfants terribles* of which Poulenc was a member – had all but disbanded. The easy-going first Novelette is both charmingly pastoral and coolly nonchalant, a neo-Classical nod to the elegant 18th-century sicilienne. There's something of the circus about the contrasting Novelette No. 2. The blistering speed of the composer's own recording made in 1932 reflects the sweat-inducing metronome mark in the score but, with the piece marked '*très rapide et rythmé*', even Poulenc can only deliver on the former. Based on a theme from Manuel de Falla's *El amor brujo* ('Love, the Magician'), the third Novelette, written after a gap of over 30 years, retains the flowing nature of No. 1, but is in Poulenc's sensuous romantic style and closes with his signature, dream-like chromatic harmonies.

Breaking from his reputation as an uncompromising New Complexicist, **Michael Finnissy** made 22 arrangements of songs by **George Gershwin** between 1975 and 1990. They are more reimaginings than straight arrangements and involved, he says, 'a considerable amount of recomposition, deconstruction and rethinking'. His version of 'How Long Has This Been Going On?' begins with a ghostly intermingling of verse and refrain, before the verse proper underlines the child-like innocence of the song. A jazzier idiom emerges for the refrain, but there are also compositionally complex elaborations. Originally sung by Fred Astaire in the film *A Damsel in Distress*, 'A Foggy Day' is closer to its original, but in the second refrain the harmonies fan out into obscurity, perhaps reflecting the smog-laden view across the London skyline.

The American virtuoso pianist **Earl Wild**, who died in 2010 aged 94, created *7 Virtuoso Etudes* on songs by Gershwin. His version of 'Oh, Lady, Be Good' is slower and bluesier than the original song. Wild made an earlier left-hand-alone version of 'The Man I Love', but in the two-hand version for the *Etudes*, the tune is shrouded in ravishing, harmonically rich arpeggios and filigree chromatic decoration.

The title of Fitkin's *Relent* locks the pianist in continuous toccata-like activity for its entire 11-minute duration. There are perhaps influences of Prokofiev (who himself composed a notable *Toccatà*), Stravinsky and Andriessen, but there is also a groove borrowed from pop music and jazz, which Fitkin listened to as a teenager. Kathryn Stott premièred *Relent* here at Wigmore Hall in December 1998 but, even with her long-standing experience of playing Fitkin's work, the challenge may be no easier over 20 years later.

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