

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 2 January 2024
7.30pm

The Dawn of Time: 'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her'

Ruby Hughes soprano
Joseph Middleton piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Kind im Einschlummern from *Kinderszenen* Op. 15 (1838)
Liederkreis Op. 39 (1840)
*In der Fremde • Intermezzo • Waldesgespräch •
Die Stille • Mondnacht • Schöne Fremde •
Auf einer Burg • In der Fremde • Wehmut •
Zwielicht • Im Walde • Frühlingsnacht*

Deborah Pritchard (b.1977) From *The World* (2021)
The World • Peace

Interval

Alban Berg (1885-1935) 7 frühe Lieder (1905-8)
*Nacht • Schilflied • Die Nachtigall • Traumgekrönt •
Im Zimmer • Liebesode • Sommertage*

Errollyn Wallen (b.1958) Rain (1998)
On the Mountain (2010)
North (2001)
Timeless from *The Lake* (2022)
Peace on Earth (2006)

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Each half of this programme contains a cycle of Lieder written as the result of a passionate love affair, placing this human love in the context of the natural world ('Nature never did betray the heart that loved her', a quote from Wordsworth's *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*), and continues with songs by living female composers that extend these ideas beyond what human beings can physically experience (the other half of this recital's title: *The Dawn of Time*).

Robert Schumann proposed to Clara, the daughter of his piano teacher Friedrich Wieck, on 14 August 1837, but her father vehemently opposed the marriage, believing it would ruin the brilliant career as a virtuoso pianist that he had planned for her. He doubtless also had his eye on the glory reflected from that career onto himself as her father and teacher. In the event of course, after eventually marrying Robert, Clara continued her career as one of the world's leading pianists, as well as not only having to deal with Robert's incarceration in an asylum, but also bringing up their eight children, four of whom died before she did. These would have been extraordinary achievements for anyone, but for a woman in the 19th Century they might seem almost superhuman.

Both Schumann's *Kinderszenen* ('Scenes from childhood') for piano and his *Liederkreis* Op. 39 were written against the background of Robert and Clara's long and bitter struggle to overcome Friedrich Wieck's opposition to their marriage. *Kinderszenen* was composed in 1838, apparently inspired by a comment by Clara that Robert 'seemed like a child'. On 16 July 1839 Robert and Clara began legal proceedings to try to force her father's hand. Wieck's allegations were that they did not have the financial means to support themselves after marriage; Robert being lazy, unreliable and a mediocre composer, that he was an alcoholic, and that he didn't in fact have any feelings at all for Clara but merely wanted to exploit and live off the piano-playing skills that he (Wieck) had devoted his life to teaching her.

Liederkreis Op. 39 was written in May 1840. The court case was still dragging on and the marriage was still uncertain (it would finally take place on 12 September) and the Eichendorff poems that Robert (and probably Clara too) selected mirror their situation at that time. This cycle places the strength of their love against the background of Nature. There are recurring images of the thoughts and the soul of the poet flying to the beloved like a bird ('Intermezzo', 'Die Stille', 'Mondnacht'). In 'Wehmut' the nightingale sings of the poet's yearning, and several of the poems speak of the sorrow of solitude and loneliness ('In der Fremde', 'Waldesgespräch'). 'Auf einer Burg' and 'Im Walde' both mention weddings, in both cases clouded by fear and weeping. 'Zwielficht' also mirrors the uncertainty. However, 'Schöne Fremde' speaks of the certainty of future happiness and this *Liederkreis*

ends with the triumphant optimism of 'Frühlingsnacht' – a declaration from Robert and Clara that their love will surely overcome every obstacle placed in its path.

Deborah Pritchard's 'The World' was written during the pandemic for Ruby Hughes and Huw Watkins, for their album *Echo*, released by BIS in November 2022. It was later included as one of the four songs of *The World*, a song cycle also including 'Peace' that was commissioned by Leeds Lieder and premièred there by Ruby Hughes and Joseph Middleton on 29 April 2023. The texts of both songs, by the 17th-century Welsh metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan, continue the themes of *Liederkreis* by speaking of Nature and the Infinite as being the background to all human activity and feeling. Deborah Pritchard's compositions are full of colour and are often written in response to works by visual artists; examples include *Chagall's Light* for violin and orchestra inspired by Chagall's windows at Tudeley church in Kent. She is also a painter herself and is inspired by her experience of synaesthesia.

Alban Berg's *7 frühe Lieder* ('7 early songs') were written in Vienna in 1905-8 when he was in his early twenties. In 1907 Berg met and fell in love with Helene Nahowski, rumoured to be the illegitimate daughter of Emperor Franz Josef I; he dedicated these songs to her and married her in 1911. The Vienna Secession art movement, epitomised by Berg's friend Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, painted in 1907, was then in full flight, with its emphasis on colour, vibrancy and sensuality, and the *7 frühe Lieder* with their rich, extravagant and dreamlike musical language are written in the same style. The poems Berg chose are mysterious, erotic and full of sensual imagery, and in all of them the natural world is in abundance.

Errollyn Wallen's five songs that end this programme are all settings of her own texts. 'Rain' is inspired (like many of Deborah Pritchard's songs) by a painting, in this case Howard Hodgkin's *Rain*. It was written in 1998 in memory of Rory Allam and is included on her first CD, *Meet me at Harold Moores*, which, in line with the expansive threads running through this programme, travelled to space on the STS-115 shuttle with Errollyn's friend the astronaut Steve MacLean. 'On the Mountain' was written in memory of Martin Luther King Jr and asks us all what have we done to continue his legacy. 'North' was inspired by Errollyn's first visit to Bergen, sometimes called 'the city between the seven mountains', and expresses her love of being as far north as possible. 'Timeless' is from *The Lake*, a song-cycle written in 2022 as a reflection of and response to Schubert's *Schwanengesang*. This recital ends with 'Peace on Earth', which expresses hope for light and peace in our bleak midwinter world.

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