

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 3 September 2021 7.30pm

**Elizabeth Llewellyn** soprano

**Simon Lepper** piano

**Gerald Finzi** (1901-1956)

Till Earth Outwears Op. 19a

*Let me enjoy the earth • In years defaced • The Market-Girl • I look into my glass • It never looks like summer here • At a Lunar Eclipse • Life laughs onward*

**Giacomo Puccini** (1858-1924)

Morire? (c.1917-18)

Terra e mare (1902)

Sole e amore (1888)

Ad una morta (1883)

Sogno d'Or (1913)

E l'uccellino (1899)

Canto d'anime (1904)

Interval

**Giuseppe Verdi** (1813-1901)

Stornello (1869)

Perduta ho la pace (1838)

Ad una stella (1845)

La zingara (1845)

**William Walton** (1902-1983)

A Song for the Lord Mayor's table (1962)

*The Lord Mayor's Table • Glide gently • Wapping Old Stairs • Holy Thursday • The Contrast • Rhyme*

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Tonight's programme reveals the relatively hidden vocal music of composers principally known for their contributions to *other* forms – be it opera, or larger-scale choral and orchestral works. We open with **Finzi's** cycle *Till Earth Outwears* (Op. 19a), settings of poems by Thomas Hardy, brought together by Finzi's executors after his untimely death in 1956. Finzi had a deep affinity for literature, and how words and music interact, the topic he chose for his Crees Lectures of 1954. Diana McVeagh cites Finzi's early losses (of his father, music teacher, and brothers) as a potential root of the sensibilities that he shared with Hardy, of 'the futility of war, the pressure of passing time, and the beauty of nature and its indifference to man'. These songs were written between 1927 and 1956, and the cycle was premièred on February 21st 1958 by Wilfrid Brown and Howard Ferguson, the latter being Finzi's friend and one of those responsible for this compilation (he subsequently recorded this for Decca in 1967).

As an acknowledged maestro of the opera, it is no surprise that **Puccini** can turn a great melody, but it is interesting that his songs have remained hidden, albeit sometimes in plain sight, often reappearing integrated into his operas. These songs are either from his student days, composed for periodicals, or written for friends. The earliest compositions offered tonight are 'Ad una morta' (1882) and 'Sole e amore' (1888); the latter reappeared as the Act 3 quartet of *La bohème*. Of the later group – 'S'ogno d'or' (1912), and 'Morire?' (1917) – 'S'ogno dor' became the Act 2 quartet in *La rondine*, the love motif of Magda and Ruggiero. One can look for echoes of this style in the recordings of Tito Schipa, who created the role of Ruggiero at the première in Monte Carlo in 1917. The middle group – 'E l'uccellino' (1899), 'Terra e mare' (1902), 'Canto d'anime' (1904) – come from Puccini's most fruitful operatic years (1896-1904). The tender lullaby 'E l'uccellino' was composed for the baby son of a friend who had died just before the baby was born. 'Canto d'anime' was commissioned by Alfred Michaelis of the Gramophone Company, the man responsible for Enrico Caruso's 1902 Milan Grand Hotel recordings (see Michael Kaye, *The Unknown Puccini*). Puccini received in exchange some new records of Japanese music for his research into the sound-world for *Madama Butterfly*. The link to the voice of Caruso, who Puccini described as an 'eminent interpreter' of his music, is another avenue worth exploring for those interested in the sound of Puccini. The feeling that emerges from these songs is that they are an iteration of a larger idea; tiny slices of musical and emotional material, miniatures that Puccini is keeping in his mind, like holding a jewel to the light whilst considering what setting it calls for.

**Verdi** also seemed to require quite specific reasons to compose for solo voice and piano. He described his early works thus: 'Everything is lost, and that is just as well'. However, whilst working towards his operatic aspirations, Verdi's first publication was a set of *Sei romanze* in 1838, from which tonight's 'Perduta la pace', a setting of Goethe, is taken. Roberta Montemorra Marvin argues that composing songs 'served both artistic and commercial purposes, bringing the young composer before the public and promoting him in cultural circles'. From the next set, published in 1845, 'La zingara' is an ebullient and defiant number, with effective word-painting, and in 'Ad una stella' the unexpected leap up to the high notes – 'Beautiful star of the earth... how this soul yearns...' – is certainly a refreshing surprise. *Stornello* (1869) was composed as part of an *Album* of pieces organised on Verdi's initiative and published by Ricordi, for the benefit of the librettist Piave, Verdi's long-time collaborator, who had suffered a stroke. He was the librettist for *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, and *La forza del destino*, among many others. Once you start to listen to these as cycles, it makes one wonder why they have been so long ignored, because although occasionally the piano writing seems to cry out for orchestral treatment, viewed as emotive and musical objects these songs are beautifully formed.

Although known as an orchestral composer, **Walton** was not a stranger to text-setting (think of works such as *Façade* and *Belshazzar's Feast*), and he clearly had no trouble gathering collaborators – in this instance it was the inimitable pairing of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Gerald Moore who in July 1962 gave the première of tonight's cycle, *A Song for the Lord Mayor's Table*, in Goldsmith's Hall. The work was commissioned for the City of London Festival, and Walton enlisted the help of Christopher Hassell, librettist of his opera *Troilus and Cressida*, to select the texts. These songs, settings of poems from the 17th to 19th centuries, by Blake and Wordsworth amongst others, depict aspects of London life tending both to the high- and low-brow. They put one in mind of Samuel Johnson, as famously quoted by his friend Boswell: 'Why, Sir, you find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.'

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