

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 July 2022 7.30pm

My Dear, Native Soil!

**Nicky Spence** tenor

**Dylan Perez** piano

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**Charles Tomlinson Griffes** (1884-1920) 3 Poems of Fiona MacLeod Op. 11 (1918)  
*The Lament of Ian the Proud • Thy Dark Eyes to Mine •  
The Rose of the Night*

**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) Who are these Children? Op. 84 (1969)  
*A Riddle (The Earth) • A Laddie's Sang • Nightmare • Black Day •  
Bed-time • Slaughter • A Riddle (The Child You Were) •  
The Larky Lad • Who are these Children? • Supper • The Children •  
The Auld Aik*

Interval

**Samuel Barber** (1910-1981) Knoxville: Summer of 1915 Op. 24 (1947)

**Margaret Bonds** (1913-1972) Songs of the Seasons (1924-55)  
*Poem d'automne • Winter-moon • Young love in spring • Summer storm*

**Stephen Sondheim** (1930-2021) From *Follies* (1971)  
*Broadway Baby • Losing my Mind*  
Anyone Can Whistle from *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964)  
Love is in the air (1962)

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Tonight's programme brings together the music of five 20th-century composers whose songs explore the themes of childhood, memory, things lost – and sometimes found. In each case the distinctive colours and textures of their music conjure scenes of sometimes dizzying sadness or happiness. As Leontyne Price so memorably said of Barber's *Knoxville*, 'You can hear the streetcar, the horns, and everything; you can smell the strawberries.'

The *3 Poems of Fiona MacLeod* by the American composer **Charles Tomlinson Griffes** counts as a 'late' work, although Griffes was just 35 years old when he died, a victim of the Spanish Influenza pandemic, in the spring of 1920. A prolific composer of solo songs, Griffes completed these three settings of 'Fiona MacLeod' – in reality the late 19th-century Scottish poet William Sharp writing in the persona of a young, well-educated woman with a profound knowledge of Celtic lore – in 1918. The richly orchestral writing seems somehow to combine the palettes of Debussy, Strauss and Rachmaninov, perfectly suited to Sharp's sensuous texts.

**Britten's** late cycle *Who are these Children?* is a vivid confrontation between the happy childhood that should be the right of all, and the bleak, violent conditions of a wartime youth. The composer gathered 12 poems by William Soutar: eight in Scottish dialect, capturing riddles, nursery games and getting told off by teacher, and four in English which deal with the impact of war. Whilst the former skip and dance with the highs and lows of a young boy's earliest years, the latter are dark and often dreamlike. We face bleeding trees in 'Nightmare'; and the cycle's title song was inspired by a newspaper photograph of a group of children watching a hunting party riding through a bomb-damaged village.

Childhood years are the precise focus of our next piece, **Samuel Barber's** *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. Barber's partner Gian Carlo Menotti remembered that 'He had a great *Sehnsucht* for his childhood in West Chester.' In 1947, the year in which both Barber's aunt and father died, he discovered a poem by James Agee that seemed to capture so perfectly those magical early years and set it in just a few days. When Barber and Agee finally met, they discovered that 'We both had back yards where our families used to lie in the long summer evenings, we each had an aunt who was a musician. I remember well my parents sitting on the porch, talking quietly as they rocked.'

**Margaret Bonds** was an almost exact contemporary of Barber, working variously in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. A pupil of Florence Price and longstanding friend of Langston Hughes (leader of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s), Bonds was an influential pianist and teacher, and the first African American woman to feature as a concerto soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Her best-known composition is the spiritual *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*, composed in 1935 for Marian Anderson;

in 1965 she wrote the orchestral *Montgomery Variations* inspired by taking part in the famous Selma-Montgomery March led by Martin Luther King.

*Songs of the Seasons* was compiled from pieces spanning more than 20 years, from 'Poème d'automne' in 1924 (when Bonds was just 21) to 'Summer storm' and 'Young love in spring' in 1955, the year of the complete cycle's première – and all set texts by Hughes. We begin with 'Poème d'automne', dreamy and melancholy, before the rocking Debussyian pianism of 'Winter-moon'. The lilting 'Young love in spring' plays sweetly with changing keys as the changing skies move above the lovers, whilst the thunder of the 'Summer storm' is charged with jazz-inflected rhythms and harmonies – Bonds even marks one passage '*con alma*', after Dizzy Gillespie's standard of the same name written in 1954.

This evening draws to a close with songs by the late **Stephen Sondheim**. Our first two numbers come from the 1971 hit *Follies*, a show about the heady possibilities of youth, the lessons of old age, and painful beauty of hindsight. 'Broadway Baby' is sung by Hattie, who has already seen off five younger husbands, and is a pastiche of 'the songs of the 1920s just before the crash, with their optimistic dreams of upward mobility... To see "Broadway Baby" sung by a tough old lady, superannuated and slightly down on her luck, made our show's point about surviving the past as clearly as any moment of the evening,' Sondheim recalled. 'Losing my Mind', sung by Sally, the composer describes as 'less of an homage to, than a theft of, Gershwin's *The Man I Love*.' It is a painfully touching portrait of a woman hopelessly obsessed with a man she cannot have.

'Anyone Can Whistle' is the title song of an earlier show from 1964, which Sondheim summarised as 'A fanciful story about a small economically depressed American town whose venal Mayoress gets the bright idea of arranging a fake miracle to attract tourists. The tourists arrive, but they become intermixed with the inmates of the local Cookie Jar, a rest home for non-conformists. Farcical complications ensue.' Our heroine Fay reflects on how stuck she has become in a life and frame of mind that she wishes she could escape, and sings to her would-be lover in the hope that he can help her be free.

Finally, 'Love is in the Air' became a stand-alone number after being struck from its initial spot at the top of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Sondheim's first Broadway show for which he provided both lyrics and music in 1962. And as with all such contagions, beware: 'Anyone exposed can catch it – Keep your window closed and latch it... Love is going around!'

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## Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920)

### 3 Poems of Fiona MacLeod Op. 11 (1918)

#### The Lament of Ian the Proud

What is this crying that I hear in the wind?  
Is it the old sorrow and the old grief?  
Or is it a new thing coming, a whirling leaf  
About the gray hair of me who am weary and blind?  
I know not what it is, but on the moor above the shore  
There is a stone which the purple nets of heather bind,  
And thereon is writ: *She will return no more.*  
O blown, whirling leaf, and the old grief,  
And wind crying to me who am old and blind!

#### Thy Dark Eyes to Mine

Thy dark eyes to mine, Eilidh,  
Lamps of desire!  
O how my soul leaps  
Leaps to their fire!

Sure, now, if I in heaven,  
Dreaming in bliss,  
Heard but a whisper,  
But the lost echo even  
Of one such kiss -

All of the Soul of me  
Would leap afar -  
If that called me to thee  
Aye, I would leap afar  
A falling star!

#### The Rose of the Night

The dark rose of thy mouth  
Draw nigher, draw nigher!  
Thy breath is the wind of the south,  
A wind of fire,  
The wind and the rose and darkness,  
O Rose of my Desire!

Deep silence of the night,  
Husht like a breathless lyre,  
Save the sea's thunderous might,  
Dim, menacing, dire,  
Silence and wind and sea, they are thee,  
O Rose of my Desire!

As a wind-eddy flame  
Leaping higher and higher,  
Thy soul, thy secret name,  
Leaps thro' Death's blazing pyre,

Kiss me, Imperishable Fire, dark Rose,  
O Rose of my Desire!

## Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

### Who are these Children? Op. 84 (1969)

*William Soutar*

#### A Riddle (The Earth)

There's pairt o' it young  
And pairt o' it auld:  
There's pairt o' it het  
And pairt o' it cauld:  
There's pairt o' it bare  
And pairt o' it claid:  
There's pairt o' it quick  
And pairt o' it dead.

#### A Laddie's Sang

O! it's owre the braes abüne our toun  
Whan the simmer days come in;  
Whaur the blue-bells grow, and the burnies row,  
And gowdan is the whin.  
The gowk sings frae the birken-schaw,  
And the laverock far aboon:  
The bees bummer by, the peesies cry,  
And the lauchin linn lowps down.

#### Nightmare

The tree stood flowering in a dream:  
Beside the tree a dark shape bowed:  
As lightning glittered the axe-gleam  
Across the wound in the broken wood.  
The tree cried out with human cries:  
From its deepening hurt the blood ran:  
The branches flowered with children's eyes  
And the dark murderer was a man.  
There came a fear which sighed aloud;  
And with its fear the dream-world woke:  
Yet in the day the tree still stood  
Bleeding beneath the axe-man's stroke.

#### Black Day

A skelp frae his teacher  
For a' he cudna spell:  
A skelp frae his mither  
For cowpin owre the kail.  
A skelp frae his brither  
For clourin his brow bat:  
And a skelp frae his faither  
For the Lord kens what.

## Bed-time

Cuddle-down, my bairnie;  
The dargie day is düne:  
Yon's a siller sternie  
Ablow the siller müne:  
Like a wabster body  
Hingin on a threed,  
Far abüne my laddie  
And his wee creepie-bed.

## Slaughter

Within the violence of the storm  
The wise men are made dumb:  
Young bones are hollowed by the worm:  
The babe dies in the womb.  
Above the lover's mouth is pressed  
The silence of a stone:  
Death rides upon an iron beast  
And tramples cities down.  
And shall the multitudinous grave  
Our enmity inter;  
These dungeons of misrule enslave  
Our bitterness and fear?  
All are the conquered; and in vain  
The laurel binds the brow:  
The phantoms of the dead remain  
And from our faces show.

## A Riddle (The Child You Were)

It was your faither and mither,  
Yet it wasna weddit:  
It was your sister or brither  
Though nane were beside it.  
Wit and wisdom it lent ye,  
Yet it wasna lairéd:  
And though it dee'd or it kent ye  
It was never buried.

## The Larky Lad

The larky lad frae the pantry  
Skipp't through the muckle ha';  
He had sma' fear o' the gentry,  
And his respec' was sma'.  
He cockit his face richt merry;  
And as he jiggit on  
His mou' was round as a cherry  
Like he whistled a braw tune.  
And monie a noble body  
Glower'd doun frae his frame o'gowd  
On the plisky pantry-laddie  
Wha was sae merry and royd.

## Who are these Children?

With easy hands upon the rein,  
And hounds at their horses' feet,  
The ladies and the gentlemen  
Ride through the village street.  
Brightness of blood upon the coats  
And on the women's lips:  
Brightness of silver at the throats  
And on the hunting whips.  
Is there a dale more calm, more green  
Under this morning hour;  
A scene more alien than this scene  
Within a world at war?  
Who are these children gathered here  
Out of the fire and smoke  
That with remembering faces stare  
Upon the foxing folk?

## Supper

Steepies for the bairnie  
Sae moolie in the mou':  
Parritch for a strappan lad  
To mak his beard grow.  
Stovies for a muckle man  
To keep him stout and hale:  
A noggin for the auld carl  
To gar him sleep weel.  
Bless the meat, and bless the drink,  
And the hand that steers the pat:  
And be guid to beggar-bodies  
Whan they come to your yett.

## The Children

Upon the street they lie  
Beside the broken stone:  
The blood of children stares from the broken stone.  
Death came out of the sky  
In the bright afternoon:  
Darkness slanted over the bright afternoon.  
Again the sky is clear  
But upon earth a stain:  
The earth is darkened with a darkening stain:  
A wound which everywhere  
Corrupts the hearts of men:  
The blood of children corrupts the hearts of men.  
Silence is in the air:  
The stars move to their places:  
Silent and serene the stars move to their places:  
But from earth the children stare  
With blind and fearful faces:  
And our charity is in the children's faces.

## The Auld Aik

The auld aik's doun:

The auld aik's doun:

Twa hunner year it stüde, or mair,

But noo it's doun, doun.

The auld aik's doun:

The auld aik's doun:

We were sae shair it wud aye be there,

But noo it's doun, doun.

## Interval

## Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

### Knoxville: Summer of 1915 Op. 24 (1947)

*James Agee*

*[We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.]*

...It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently, and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars. People go by: things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt: a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, paste-board, and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber.

A streetcar raising its iron moan; stopping: belling and starting, stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks: the iron whine rises on rising speed: still risen, faints: halts: the faint stinging bell: rises again, still fainter: fainting, lifting, lifts, faints foregone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.

Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes...

Parents on porches: rock and rock. From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces.

The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums.

On the rough wet grass of the backyard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there. They are not talking much, and

the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine . . . with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening. among the sounds of the night.

May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble, and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

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## Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

### Songs of the Seasons (1924-55)

*Langston Hughes*

### Poem d'automne

The autumn leaves

Are too heavy with color...

### Winter-moon

How thin and sharp is the moon tonight! ...

### Young love in spring

When young spring comes

With silver rain...

### Summer storm

Thunder, July thunder ...

## **Stephen Sondheim** (1930-2021)

From *Follies* (1971)

*Stephen Sondheim*

### **Broadway Baby**

I'm just a Broadway Baby.  
Walking off my tired feet ...

### **Losing my Mind**

The sun comes up, I think about you.  
The coffee cup, I think about you. ...

**Anyone Can Whistle from *Anyone Can Whistle*** (1964)

*Stephen Sondheim*

'Anyone can whistle,' that's what they say - 'Easy.'  
'Anyone can whistle, any old day - easy.' ...

**Love is in the air** (1962)

*Stephen Sondheim*

Love is in the air  
Quite clearly.  
People everywhere  
Act queerly ...