

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 8 March 2022 1.00pm

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**Rowan Hellier** mezzo-soprano

**Sholto Kynoch** piano

**Judith Weir** (b.1954)

The Voice of Desire (2003)

*The Voice of Desire • White Eggs in the Bush •  
Written on Terrestrial Things • Sweet Little Red Feet*

**Kate Whitley** (b.1990)

Gorgeous Beasts (2021)

**Olga Neuwirth** (b.1968)

Tintarella di luna: cold songs for countertenor and piano (2005)

Marsyas (2003-4)

**Kate Whitley**

This is my love poem to you (2015)

Please note that some of these pieces contain adult content that may not be suitable for younger audiences

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In recognition of International Women's Day, today's programme is a celebration of contemporary female composers and the striking originality and creativity that unites them. So what better place to start than with **Judith Weir**, one of the most successful composers of her generation. She has been, variously, Associate Composer to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (1995-8), Artistic Director of Spitalfields Festival (1995-2000), Associate Composer to the BBC Singers (2015-9), visiting Professor at Princeton (2001), Harvard (2004) and Cardiff (2006-13), and she is now Master of the Queen's Music - the first woman to hold this post in four centuries of its existence.

Her music is of the rare and remarkable kind - intelligent, surprising and intensely communicative - and *The Voice of Desire* is a case in point. Originally composed for Alice Coote, this mini song cycle is a setting of conversations between humans and birds. 'In each case, the birds seem to have a more sophisticated viewpoint than their human hearers', says Weir. The cycle takes its name from the opening song, in which the nightingale's deceptively beautiful song is unveiled instead as a forlorn tale of thwarted desire and forgotten hopes, which can only be shared under the cover of night. In 'White Eggs in the Bush', we learn that the calls of the blue cuckoo and the red-bellied coucal are warnings of impending war and destruction, while the joyful song of the thrush in 'Written on Terrestrial Things' appears at odds with the bleak winter landscape of the world around it. By the closing song, 'Sweet Little Red Feet', the conversation has become one-sided: the dove is dead, having been suffocated by affection.

The animals at the centre of **Kate Whitley's** 'urgent mini drama', as *The Observer* calls *Gorgeous Beasts*, are of a rather different sort. Setting a poem by Hollie McNish, Whitley's song is a hymn to friendship: the 'gorgeous beasts' are women, firm friends since childhood. But this is not a saccharine take on female friendships - though there is a touch of nostalgia about it - rather, it is an honest and unflinching account of what unites us as women, the good and the bad. From the first day at 'big school', through periods, pregnancies, divorce and abuse, McNish does not sugar-coat the journey, and Whitley's music rises to meet her with rich, vibrant hues. This is not a song for the faint-hearted: it is gutsy, fierce and unapologetically candid, but the message at its core remains touching and sincere. 'If you ever need a hand to hold', it concludes, 'chances are, I do as well'.

While Whitley's music is vital and visceral, the two works we hear today by **Olga Neuwirth** reveal her as just as bold and

uncompromising. Neuwirth describes *Tintarella di luna* as a set of 'cold songs' for countertenor and piano, but the texts themselves are full of fire, passion and love. The title translates literally as 'suntan of the moon', a reference to the text by the ancient Greek poet Sappho that underpins the first song. As the moon goes down, the narrator is left pining for their love, their words painted by Neuwirth in stuttering, stilted and drawn-out lines, as though the wait itself were agonising. The second and third songs in the set, by contrast, are to texts by Michelangelo (the Renaissance poet, painter and sculptor) and by the 19th-century poet Giacomo Leopardi, both sending out warnings of the perils of love. 'Flee, lovers, Love, flee the fire', Michelangelo warns, 'the plague is mortal.' This infatuation, bordering on madness, flickers through Neuwirth's vocal writing, which ebbs and flows in intensity, stumbling here and there as though crippled by obsession. But it is the piano that drives the music onwards, insistent, repetitive, almost daring the narrator to crumble beneath the sheer weight of it all. A series of contorted, chromatic runs and a final warning to 'Flee!' sees the work out in a heady, dramatic flourish.

*Marsyas* for solo piano is a tour de force for the instrument, oscillating between extremes. The work takes its name from the character of Greek mythology, who was a master of the aulos (an ancient wind instrument) and sworn enemy of Apollo, who played the lyre. This adversarial relationship comes to the fore in Neuwirth's score, which seems to pit wind against strings, power against peace. Savage, crashing chords alternate with delicate, filigree figurations, together exploiting every inch and timbre of the keyboard. Just as a steady pulse begins to unfurl, it is interrupted by a violent outburst - intense, emotional and deliberately excessive.

Today's programme closes with another song by Kate Whitley. *This is my love poem to you* was originally composed for the bass Matthew Rose and the Angell Piano Trio, but Whitley's score also exists in the version for soprano and piano you hear today. The text, by Sabrina Mahfouz, tells of the rapturous discovery of love: 'It's a place I never knew until I knew you. Where tube maps of mistakes make sense'. Whitley responds with long, languorous lines, as though indulging in every syllable of every word, just as the narrator luxuriates in their extraordinary, new-found happiness. The piano shimmers with the bright, white sheen of this heady perfection, ducking and diving in and out of unison with the voice, like two lovers encircling one another for the first time.

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## Judith Weir (b.1954)

### The Voice of Desire (2003)

#### The Voice of Desire

*Robert Bridges*

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,  
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom  
Ye learn your song:  
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,  
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air  
Bloom the year long!

[Nay,] barren are those mountains and spent the streams:  
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,  
A throe of the heart,  
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,  
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,  
For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men  
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,  
As night is withdrawn  
[From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,]  
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day  
Welcome the dawn.

## White Eggs in the Bush

*trans. Ulli Beier*

The blue cuckoo  
Lays white eggs in the bush.  
When war captures the town  
The blue cuckoo cries:  
'Kill twenty, kill twenty!'  
The red-bellied coucal cries:  
'Kill thirty, kill thirty!'  
Then death will not fail to come,  
Then death will not fail to come.  
When men begin war,  
The blue cuckoo cries:  
'Fools, fools!'  
The red-bellied coucal cries:  
'The world is spoiled,  
The world is spoiled!'  
Then death cannot fail to come,  
Then death cannot fail to come.

## Written on Terrestrial Things

*Thomas Hardy*

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted nigh  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The wind his death-lament.  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
And every spirit upon earth

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead,  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy goodnight air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

## Sweet Little Red Feet

*John Keats*

I had a dove and the sweet dove died;  
And I have thought it died of grieving:  
Oh, what could it grieve for? Its feet were tied,  
With a silken thread of my own hand's weaving;  
Sweet little red feet! why should you die—  
Why should you leave me, sweet dove! Why?  
You liv'd alone on the forest-tree,  
Why, pretty thing! Could you not live with me?  
I kiss'd you oft and gave you white peas;  
Why not live sweetly, as in the green trees?

**Kate Whitley** (b.1989)

**Gorgeous Beasts** (2021)

*Hollie McNish*

when i was terrified of starting big school; the gates loomed far too large,  
palms still yet to sweat yet fingers twitching frantic prayers

you took my hand in yours, my friend,  
walked me to the swing till i was certain we could fly

when i sat on the sidelines  
you passed me every ball  
when you, pushed in the canteen;  
when i, tripped in the hall  
when the crush was just a bitter joke  
the whole class shook laughing

when blood came unexpectedly  
and i had no bloody clue  
there you were tampon ready  
giggling from the cubicle  
tiptoeing next door's toilet seat  
nose peaking the wall  
encouraging me on like some menstruation football coach

one leg up on the lid!  
aim towards your backbone!  
take it out and try again  
you shouldn't feel it when it's in!  
without the wisdom of your words my friend  
what would i have done?

when the outfits did look shit on  
and we need the fucking truth  
or we're sweating in the changing room  
the dress a size too small  
stuck around our blushing necks  
arms held up to the heavens

when hearts are hung out to dry  
and we just want to drunken dance  
douse stinging flames with stamping feet  
you are lipstick pouted ready  
pavement friends  
when all we need is to vent  
you are silent  
lack of judgement friends  
when the stars are muddled guidance  
and we just need blunt advice  
there you always are  
cheering from the sidelines

when foundation's not rubbed in correctly  
face and neck a different colour  
skirt tucked into knickers,  
toilet paper stuck to shoe

when we're smiling unaware of spinach stuck in teeth  
there you always are my friends  
you gorgeous fucking beasts!

when the blue line does not come  
when the blue line comes too soon  
when we miscarry again  
when smears are inconclusive  
when bruises can't be hidden  
and we seek a place of refuge  
when stitches still not healed; when menopause; when thrush!  
when drawn out divorce! when selfish lovers lovely lovers!  
when sex toy advice! when cramping! when coming!  
when pregnancy! when birth! when recovery! when mothering!

when babies do not sleep and we are sobbing in the toilets  
praying for an hour from our children  
without crumbling with guilt  
our body bloody shipwrecks  
searching island sands to moor onto in storms that start at  
midnight  
when we need someone to call before the moon drags our flailing  
tide  
back gasping to the shore

there you are, kettle clicked already on  
umbrellas clutched in palm to shelter each other  
from those constant thrashing hailstones

and no

we're not offered any gemstones nor showered in confetti  
but who needs a lump of diamond to prove how lush this love is  
you know my mind and my body better than most lovers ever have

you're everything I ever need  
except for cunnilingus  
the greatest love of all is surely that of friendship

so if you ever need a shoulder to lean on  
mine are very very sexy  
it was you who told me that my friend

and if  
if you ever need a lifeboat  
i've a thousand in my pockets  
and if  
if you ever need a hand to hold to walk through unknown gates  
that loom a little large

chances are  
i do as well

## Olga Neuwirth (b.1968)

### Tintarella di luna: cold songs for countertenor and piano (2005)

#### I

*Sappho*

Mitte der Nächte, vergeht die  
Stunde  
Doch ich lag allein darnieder.  
Und ich seh'n mich und ich begeh'r...  
In the middle of the night, hours  
pass  
but I lie languishing alone  
and I crave and I desire...

Dir gegenüber sitzen  
darf  
Und nahe den süßen  
Stimmenzauber vernehmen  
Und des Lachens lockenden Reiz  
Das lässt mein Herz im Innern  
mutlos zusammenkauern  
Blick ich ganz flüchtig nur an, die  
Stimme stirbt, eh sie laut ward,  
Ja, die Zunge liegt wie gelähmt,  
Auf einmal läuft mir Fieber  
unter der Haut entlang,  
Und meine Augen weigern die Sicht  
Es überrascht meine Ohren  
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unable to reproduce the full  
translation for this song*

#### II

*Michelangelo Buonarroti*

*Giacomo Leopardi*

Qual meraviglia è, se prossim al  
foco mi strussi e arsi, se or  
ch'egli è spento di fuor,  
m'affligge e mi consuma  
drento, e 'n cener mi reduce a  
poco a poco?  
How wonderful is it, if close to the  
fire I was consumed and burned,  
if now it is extinguished outside,  
it afflicts me and consumes me  
from within, and the ashes  
reduce me little by little?

Che gli occhi al suol tuttora intenti e  
fissi  
lo mirava col lei ch'a questo  
core primiera il varco  
Ed innocente  
aprisi  
Al cielo, a voi, gentili  
anime,  
lo giuro che vogli a non m'entrò  
bassa nel petto,  
Ch'arsi di fuoco intaminato e  
puro  
When, with eyes fixed wholly on  
the ground,  
I marvelled at her, she who was  
first to open,  
all innocent, the passage of my  
heart  
I swear to heaven, to you, great  
spirits,  
that there was no low desire in  
my heart:  
it burned with pure,  
unblemished fire.

...ma la speme, io certo dirò la  
speme  
...but hope, I'll certainly tell of  
hope

#### III

*Michelangelo Buonarroti*

Fuggite, amanti Amor,  
Fuggite il foco;  
L'incendi o è aspro e la piaga è  
mortale,  
C'ol tr'a l'impeto primo più non  
vale né forza ragion né mutar  
loco.  
Fuggite! or che l'esempio non è  
poco d'un fiero braccio e d'un  
acuto strale;  
Leggete in me, qual sarà il  
vostro male,  
Qual sarà l'impio e dispietato  
gioco.  
Fuggite amanti Amor.  
Flee Love, lovers,  
flee the fire;  
the burning is harsh and the  
plague is mortal,  
so first impulses have no more  
value, neither force nor  
reason nor to change location.  
Flee! now you have no small  
demonstration of a fierce arm  
and an arrow's sharpness;  
read in me what will be your  
sickness,  
what will be your ungodly and  
ruthless game.  
Flee Love, lovers.

### Marsyas (2003-4)

## Kate Whitley

### This is my love poem to you (2015)

*Sabrina Mahfouz*

There is a place where my eyes go in those precious moments  
When we make precious tesseræ out of time.  
You're there too with that hanging heart  
Its angled airport architecture keeping it grounded;  
With that face, the skies of its beauty untouched by aviation  
Making me free fall into it  
As if each time my foot left the ground since birth  
It has been only for this jump.

It's a place I never knew until I knew you.  
Where tube maps of mistakes make sense;  
Where the unaired space given to start breathing makes sense;  
Where I, not just my borders, make sense.

It's heavily protected,  
I can't always make it in  
Despite the largeness of my eyes,  
Despite memorising all the codes and alarmed laser beam positions.

I understand the lengths it goes to  
If everyone knew it existed  
How to find it  
Then fields would be unploughed  
Stocks would go back to being what they are  
Nothing would be cleaned, created or invented;  
People would forget how to be discontent.

*Text of 'Gorgeous Beasts' by Hollie McNich, printed with kind permission from the author. 'If and 'Ill' from Tintarella di Luna translations by Rowan Hellier. Text of 'This is my love poem to you' by Sabrina Mahfouz from The Clean Collection: Plays and Poems (Bloomsbury)*