

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 8 September 2021 7.30pm

12 Ensemble

Mary Bevan soprano

Kate Whitley (b.1990)

Autumn Songs (2014)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Les Illuminations Op. 18 (1939)

Fanfare • Villes • Phrase • Antique • Royauté • Marine • Interlude • Being Beauteous • Parade • Départ

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden' (1824) *arranged by 12 Ensemble*

I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto — Trio • IV. Presto — Prestissimo

Welcome back to Wigmore Hall

We are grateful to our Friends and donors for their generosity as we rebuild a full series of concerts in 2021/22 and reinforce our efforts to reach audiences everywhere through our broadcasts. To help us present inspirational concerts and support our community of artists, please make a donation by visiting our website: [wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate). Every gift is making a difference. Thank you.

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG

Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Commissioned by 12 Ensemble, *Autumn Songs* was written in 2014. It takes full advantage of the ability of a string band to separate into individual voices rather than simply coalesce. **Kate Whitley** already knew the musicians well, especially Eloisa-Fleur Thom, for whose playing the virtuosic first violin part was tailored. The composer describes the piece as 'very melody driven, which is why I thought to call it "songs"'. It was written in a rural location 'surrounded by autumnal trees dropping their leaves,' she says, 'which I thought reminded me of the falling, cascading string patterns in the piece'. The cascading figures occur in the outer sections of the three-part structure. The middle section is much more placid, but a gentle breeze of activity is ever present, either as a quivering breath or a ruffle of gathering energy.

Though he became something of an establishment figure in later life, scorned by some of the avant-garde for retaining a firm foothold in tonality, **Benjamin Britten** certainly defied convention at the outset of his career. Whereas the previous generation of British composers had striven to establish a consciously 'national' style, Britten was more of an individualist and internationalist. He was happy to swim against the tide by composing vocal music to texts in French, a language for some reason viewed with suspicion by his musical compatriots. In 1928, barely out of school, he set some of Verlaine's poetry in *4 chansons françaises*. When, ten years later, WH Auden drew his attention to the work of Arthur Rimbaud, a chord was immediately struck – Britten identified instinctively with the poet's paradoxical combination of worldly detachment and yearning for lost innocence.

Les Illuminations was completed by October 1939, by which time the composer was living in the United States. The cycle's dedicatee, the Swiss soprano Sophie Wyss, gave the first performance with the Boyd Neel Orchestra in London in January 1940. There are separate, additional dedications for two of the songs, the ones containing the most erotic imagery: 'Antique' is inscribed with the initials of Britten's soulmate in youth, Wolfgang Scherchen (son of conductor Hermann Scherchen), while 'Being Beauteous' is addressed to his life partner, Peter Pears.

The writing for strings is a dazzling display of effect and allusion to match that of Rimbaud's proto-Surrealist verse. The opening phrase 'J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage' ('I alone hold the key to this savage parade') is brought back in the central instrumental interlude

and again before the last song, lest we should be tempted to look for narratives or to seek certainty where ambiguity is being flaunted.

At the end of March 1824 **Schubert** wrote a letter to his friend the painter Leopold Kupelweiser: 'Imagine a man who can never regain his health, whose consequent and utter despair makes matters worse instead of better ... Each night I go to sleep hoping never to wake, yet every morning reopens the wounds of yesterday.' Nevertheless, optimism surfaces in the same letter as he talks of the chamber music he is writing 'to pave the way towards a grand symphony'.

Schubert had partly recovered from a spell of very bad health brought on by syphilis. He must have known that an early death was likely, but also that it was fruitless to regard its imminence as inevitable. At the same time the 'utter despair' of which he wrote was bound to break through at times; and there would be periods when death would seem more of a welcome release than a fearful prospect.

These conflicting emotions are at the heart of the D minor quartet, written at exactly the same time as the letter quoted above. It grabs the listener by the throat from the very opening – a tearing unison, followed by a bubbling up of energy, soon followed by a watchful and ominous quietness as if some demon is waiting to pounce. For the *Andante con moto* Schubert turned to a song he had written in 1817, 'Death and the Maiden', in which the Grim Reaper woos a young girl. Death's starkly fascinating theme is taken through a series of variations, of which the most fatally seductive is in the warm and comforting realm of G major.

The *Scherzo* contrasts the present reality of pain, anger and anxiety and, in the trio section, a peace that is either out of reach or only achievable by paying the ultimate price. The finale, a sonata-rondo, is based on the rhythm of the tarantella, an Italian dance supposed to imitate the convulsive madness brought on by a tarantula bite. There is a palpable feeling of being pursued, and the chances of escape are lessened when the pace increases just before the end.

© Brian David 2021

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.