
Programme Notes

Music of Majesty, Magic and Mystery . . .

MYSTERY:**Drop, Drop Slow Tears ~ Amen (1623)**

Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)

Master exponent of English Renaissance music, Orlando Gibbons, *'the English Palestrina'*, contributed richly to the repertoire of Elizabethan and Jacobean music for choirs; the then most popular keyboard instrument (the virginal); and madrigals (unaccompanied songs for friends to sing together). Steeped in multi-faceted troves of music (both from his productive musical family as well as from his active musical environment), and eager to learn and master all he could, Gibbons learnt much from his ancestors and predecessors, most evidently from choral champion, William Byrd, and keyboard maestro, John Bull.

Having garnered a degree in music from King's College, Cambridge, he rapidly rose to the illustrious height of gentleman of the Chapel Royal as an outstanding organist, *'with the best hands in England'* in his early twenties, and was ultimately elected organist at Westminster Abbey (the highest post in the land) until his early death. Boasting both intellectual prowess (awarded an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University); myriad musical skills (for *'his most excellent keyboard playing and compositions'*); and unusually intimate royal patronage, Gibbons, *'one of the rarest musicians of his time'*, was equally adept and prolific in sacred and secular genres. His music has come to represent the quintessence of the Tudor and Stuart periods, and was profoundly to influence another Westminster Abbey organist, Henry Purcell: the chief pioneer and exponent of the subsequent Baroque period of music, and most promising pupil of Gibbons's eldest son, Christopher.

A ruminative hymn, **'Drop, drop, slow tears'** combines the poignant poetry of fellow Cantabrigian, Phineas Fletcher (1582-1650) with one of Gibbons's most beguiling and fetching of tunes. *'One of the most perfect models of composition'*, it was a favourite of the late Queen Elizabeth II, who also adored Gibbons's most famous setting of the single word, **'Amen'**, which concludes this opening musical reflection of the mysteries of life, and of its cycle of grief and suffering . . .

Beautifully balancing its two elegantly expressive phrases, Gibbons's hymn epitomises his belief that:

*'proportion beautifies everything,
the whole universe consists of it,
and music is measured by it.'*

Do Not Stand from Requiem (1993)

Eleanor Daley (b. 1955)

The first of two exquisite musical outpourings by contemporary Toronto-based Canadian composer, choral director, and accompanist, Eleanor Daley, this extract from her **Requiem**, although penned thirty years ago is as effective and pertinent today as it was at its conception. Increasingly commissioned by choirs throughout the Northern hemisphere, Daley excels at creating practical handcrafted compositions for specific groups of singers and voice types, revealing *'her remarkable gift for melody-writing . . . and sensitive interweaving of text and music'*; all of which is no better rendered, heard and experienced than in this unaccompanied exemplar, which was honoured with the highest Canadian accolade of: *'National Choral Award for the most outstanding choral composition of the year'*.

Often performed and recorded as a stand-alone piece of music, *'Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep'* is the fourth of the seven movements of her *'deeply-moving'* **Requiem**. It is an unaccompanied setting of another evocative poem of mystery (from 1932), which encouragingly contemplates the cycle of life and death, this time by American botanist, florist, and poet, Mary Elizabeth Frye.

At once personal and profound, free and fluid, and cumulatively unique, it is consistently reassuring in both its sonorities and substance.

'Warmly expressive and hopeful, it is a rich harmonic tapestry of seamless legato melodic lines'.

Upon Your Heart (1999)

Eleanor Daley (b. 1955)

Commissioned by an American doctor for his 45th wedding anniversary (celebrating the fulfilment of dreams with joy and prosperity), this companion musical gem is a veritable 'sapphire' of delight. It breathes heartfelt polychromatic musical modernism onto its traditional biblical words, which are taken from both the Song of Solomon (chapter 8, verses 6-7) and the gospel according to St John (chapter 15, verses 9-12). Most notable is its dwelling on the word *'love'* with aptly expressive intent, closely-binding texture, and repetitive reinforcement; for love is *'ever powerful and enduring in strength.'*

With the composer's opening performance direction, *'gently flowing'*, encapsulating its style, **'Upon your heart'** proceeds to flow and undulate on its course, uniting its singers with captivating aplomb. Its outer sections, for the whole choir to sing as one (thus mirroring Gibbons's opening hymn), are contrasted by its inner section's duetting of upper voices (sopranos and altos) with lower voices (tenors and basses) on the words, *'many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it!'* It appositely resolves in both pitch, rhythm

and text at the end of the phrase, *'then shall your joy be complete'*, before the music of its beginning sensuously returns to round it off, thus affirming its cycle of love.

'Attractive and accessible', this choral cameo has been universal in its appeal and popularity for all occasions (from funerals to weddings; from births to deaths); attesting to the magic and mystery of life and music.

~ *instrumental solo* ~

OPTIMISM:

Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen (1901) Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

I am lost from the world, where I'd spent so long . . .

I am dead to the world's turmoil, and at peace in a still land . . .

I live alone in my own heaven, in my love, in my song.

[Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit*]

This work was uncommonly highly regarded and prized by its composer (*'it is my very self!'*) - indubitably his *'greatest hit'* - described by his chief biographer, Henry de la Grange, as evoking *'the calm surface of a lake or the repose of a Zen garden'*. The third of his cycle of five songs - which each uses text from lyrical, personal and magical poems by Friedrich Rückert (polyglot, poet, translator and professor, whose works consistently inspired myriad musicians) - this transcendent song (one of 47 Mahler composed during his troubled lifetime) not only captures its nineteenth-century Zeitgeist masterfully, but also the profound impact of his recent near-death experience (collapsing after conducting a performance of Mozart's **Die Zauberflöte** at the Austrian capital's State Opera House, almost dying from acute intestinal haemorrhaging).

His result offers us a window onto both our souls, lives and the future; fulfilling Mahler's belief that: *'you can express so much more in the music than the words actually say. The text is a mere indication of the deeper significance to be extracted from it; of hidden treasure within.'* And hidden jewels *'of blissful serenity'* most assuredly lie and glisten coruscant herein.

Premièred in the dark days of January 1905, in the glorious splendour of Vienna's golden Musikverein, with Mahler directing - *'...totally absorbed and submerged in a musical world of his own . . . completely engrossed in and overcome by the sadness of his own song'* - it has become the epitome of late-Romantic Lieder (high-art song), with nearly 200 recordings made and released worldwide this century alone.

Originally scored for oboes, cor Anglais, clarinets, bassoons, French horns, harp, and the customary five separate string parts (for two violins, viola, cello, and double bass) to complement and support the solo mezzo-soprano line and its haunting, intimate words, it was arranged for the traditional duo of solo voice and piano by Mahler a little later; exhibiting the same care and attention to detail, for which, as with many great artists, he was rightly and productively renowned. And the version performed tonight (constructed in 2006 by choral-arranger Thorsten Kuhn) takes Mahler's voice-and-piano arrangement as a starting point, expanding it (with reference to the original orchestral score) for the customary four choral voice parts.

The holographic manuscript score was dedicated and gifted to Mahler's close confidant, the Austrian musicologist, Guido Adler (for his 50th birthday), inscribed:

'to my dear friend (who will hopefully never be lost to me)',

and it remains as Mahler's

'signature representation of death . . . creating a cessation of time and of life itself . . .

blending into eternal silence . . . depicting musically a personal nirvana . . .

a blissful end to motion, emotion, and consciousness itself . . .

life's very own 'morendo' ['dying away'] . . .'

Who Shall Separate Us? (2022)

James MacMillan (b. 1959)

A contemporary Scottish classical composer and conductor, of remarkable repute and productivity, James MacMillan imbued himself in all things Scottish, especially whilst studying composition at the University of Edinburgh, and as associate composer for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. He continues to attract commissions and awards from choirs and orchestras around the world for his musical hallmarks of depth of spiritual and political expression (as *'the best-known Catholic composer in the world'*; as well as a passionate musical activist); intellectual integrity; and programmatic (story-telling / filmic) qualities.

Knighted by the Queen in 2015 for his numerous services to music and music-making, as well as being mantled with honorary university degrees and presidencies, MacMillan was commissioned to write this a-cappella anthem initially by the Queen herself in 2011 (in which year he wrote it in advance of the inevitable), and specifically for her state funeral by the Dean of Westminster Abbey, where it was first performed on 19th September 2022 (just preceding the final blessing of the service) by the combined royal choirs directed by the long-standing Abbey organist, James O'Donnell. Inspired by its text (from St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 8), it majestically charts its course in establishing, with rhythmic and textural might, the absolute assurance of its words: *'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God!'*

The four standard choral voice parts each divide in two, and entwine along its path in different combinations to illuminating kaleidoscopic effect. After wave upon wave of climactic gravitas, it gently reaches its hushed ending, *'tranquillo e dolce'* (*'tranquil and calm'*), reassuringly settling back in the soothing tonality of E major in which it began.

*'Opening with upper voices hovering ethereally . . . over a sustained chasmic bass drone . . .
this powerful, earthy anthem . . .*

*escalates towards a sequence of ecstatic 'alleluias' . . . burning bright sonic trails . . .
and comes to rest on a quiet 'Amen' . . . of utter tranquility',*

as reviewers in London and Pittsburgh explained after hearing its première in the Abbey.

Let's Do It! (1930)

Cole Porter (1891-1964)

An oft-requested choir - and composer - favourite is Cole Porter's finger-clicking up-beat, love song, **'Let's do it!'** Veritably international (from Spain to both Americas via Lithuania and Holland), it is a pot-pourri song (talking of birds, marine life, insects, centipedes, and mammals) of love and hope, as championed in this slick zappy arrangement for unaccompanied choir concocted by David Blackwell in 1995 (where each voice part - and singer - regularly gets a chance to *'fall in love'* with its main musical motifs).

Written in 1928, to reintroduce Porter's music to New York's musical scene (and duly *'elevating him into the upper echelon of Broadway songwriters'*), this now-classic number first appeared in the much-loved musical, **Paris**, and was so popular that Porter re-used it in the 1933 Hollywood movie, **Grand Slam**, as well as his film, **Can-Can**, in 1960. Suggestive, droll, and full of double entendre and quirky images, its infectious tune and drive render it both perennially appealing and delectably singable!

One of the pre-eminent American song-writers of the first half of the last century, Yale-educated Porter was renowned for his cutting-edge wit, urbanity, and modernity: uniquely fusing his own words and music together (designed to lift everyone's spirits) with endless enduring success; all epitomised in **'Let's do it!'**

Hedonistic and ever in love, Porter captures the magic and mystery of falling in love with adept flair and many a melodic hook (aural ear-worms which are hard to forget) in this song. Initially deemed rather risqué, it has become a standard beloved of artists from Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Oscar Peterson to Harry Connick jr., Dianna Krall, and the modern American a-cappella vocal quintet, Pentatonix, as well as prominently featuring in such films as Woody Allen's 2011 **Midnight in Paris**:

*'Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it;
let's do it, let's fall in love!'*

CELEBRATION:

Hear My Prayer (1680s)

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Hear my prayer, Lord, and let my crying come unto Thee!

[Psalm 102, v.1]

*'As poetry is the harmony of words, so music is that of notes;
and as poetry is a rise above prose and oratory, so is music the exaltation of poetry.'*

[Henry Purcell]

The Restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660 provided a magnificent catalyst for an outburst of creative energy in London, where Purcell rapidly established himself as the most influential and productive provider of music, responding to the growing needs and demands of church, royalty and aristocrats for music to reflect their feelings; for worship; for entertainment; for leisure; and for pleasure.

Inspired by a wealth of English and pan-European musical models, Purcell penned this so-called '*noble fragment*' (named thus as it is but a small section of an intended longer work - now sadly lost - cast as a majestic and reverential musical monument) with the rigours of the musical past (the legacy furnished by the composers of the preceding Renaissance period, keen to write complex, contrapuntal music, whose individual parts are closely related yet independent: personifying the notion that all humans are individual but equal in the sight of God) in synergy with the advances of the Baroque era in which he lived and worked: colourfully chromatic; stirringly impassioned; and purposefully emotionally-moving music; it is thus seminally rooted in the past, yet magically foreshadows the future.

Scored for eight separate voices (doubling each of the four traditional choral voices), this 34-bar unaccompanied anthem in c minor (typically used for the most noble and deep musical utterances) was written in his native English at the start of Purcell's tenure as organist at Westminster Abbey, and was clearly intended to impress. It continues to leave its indelible mark today.

The voices enter one-by-one and culminate in '*pungent harmonies . . . which accumulate during an inexorable vocal crescendo lasting over three minutes . . . to a towering dissonant note cluster which desperately demands the final cadential resolution*': analogous with the modern cinematic style and practice of pacing and building tension and then strikingly releasing it: increasingly poignant and powerful throughout its captivating voyage.

Words (2005)

Anders Edenroth (b. 1963)

Words: a letter and a letter on a string, will hold forever humanity spellbound . . .

Words inside your head can come alive as they're said, softly, loudly, modestly and proudly . . .

Words: expression by the living and the dead, everybody, everyday, everywhere and every way . . .

Words: find them, you can use them, say them, you can hear them, write them, you can read them,

Love them, fear them, find them, you can use them, write them, you can send them . . .

An electrifying work by Anders Edenroth - founder of the professional a-cappella Swedish one-singer-per-part choral quintet, The Real Group - **Words** has a clear-cut format which ensures maximum clarity of its crucial text, shaped with climactic harmonies and soaring phrases (most brilliantly captured on a recording by Eton College's close-harmony group, The Incognitos).

Inspired by the American vocalist and fusion (of classical and jazz; and of the traditional and the popular) artist, Bobby McFerrin, The Real Group arrange and compose almost all of the songs they perform: and this one is consistently a favourite of the singers (who met and formed this group as students at the Swedish Royal College of Music in 1984) and their audiences worldwide. With multiple CDs and awards to their credit, they rejoice in the inextricable union and bilateral influence of words and music: explicitly expounded and celebrated in **Words**.

With lush jazz harmonies, hypnotically driving rhythms and a compelling structure, **Words** is both intriguing and energetic. Mysteriously, it never seems to want to end . . .

Ave Maria (1985)

Hjálmar Ragnarsson (b. 1952)

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death! Amen.

Travelling East from Sweden to Iceland, tonight's carefully-selected and musically-curated journey continues with a haunting soulful prayer by an active composer, conductor, and teacher, hailing from the bleak and barren North-East region of his country: a landscape he often tries to capture in his music, such as in this rendition of the traditional liturgical Latin words of the **Ave Maria** prayer. Hungry for knowledge, Ragnarsson graduated from Iceland's College of Music in Reykjavik with a bevy of certificates, having studied the piano, music theory, composition, and conducting, all with a full scholarship from an American businessman who then funded his further education in the States, via a year exploring the world of electronic music and synthesized sounds at the Institute of Sonology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

Widely involved in his country's cultural and political circles, Ragnarsson helped establish the Icelandic Academy of the Arts in 1998, becoming the conservatory's first rector, presiding over the fields of art, theatre, dance, design, architecture, fine arts, and, primarily, music. Fusing traditional and experimental interests and strands, and the simple and the complex, Ragnarsson's musical output covers a broad gamut from songs to orchestral scores; from choral to instrumental music; and from operas and ballets to film music and musicals: all expressive and evocative, as this a-cappella hymn-like setting exemplifies. Sinuous in melody, fluid in rhythm, and colourfully unexpected in its harmonies, his **Ave Maria** is at once magical and mysterious in its multifarity and mood.

~ *instrumental solo* ~

MAGIC:

Unicornis Captivatur (2001)

Ola Gjeilo (b. 1944)

Returning Westwards to Scandinavia, tonight's programme delves deeper into the wonders and influence of magic and mystery in music with a stirring musical story for unaccompanied choir by the eclectic freelance Norwegian composer and pianist, Ola Gjeilo. A child prodigy, Gjeilo studied first at the Norwegian Academy of Music, and then at both the world-renowned Juilliard School in New York and the Royal College of Music in London, before settling in Manhattan, New York, establishing himself as a jet-setting musician of the world.

'One of the most frequently performed composers in the choral world', Gjeilo has amalgamated influences from all across the globe (from architecture to film; from jazz to contemporary music; and from the structured to the improvisational) to create his own musical soundscape, which is consistently praised as being: '*cinematic and evocative . . . lush and harmonious*'.

This unaccompanied musical tale rises from Mediaeval chant-like strains (discovered in the fourteenth-century Engelberg Codex, which came to light in the Engelberg Monastery in Switzerland in the 1980s) with Latin text about a unicorn (that most phantasmagorical and mythical of creatures) freeing itself from capture; healing its wounds with a viper's venom; and singing (symbolically and allegorically) of a lamb, a lion, a pelican, a phoenix, a crocodile, and a hydra (secular creatures purring and roaring, dying and reawakening, with sacred meaning), all bound with the eternal refrain of resurrection and hope: '*alleluia!*'

Melding this ancient world of words and music with modern ideas for modern ears and minds, Gjeilo urges us to join him on his magic musical carpet of discovery, as he recounts his timeless exotic fairy tale (somewhat in the ilk of Oscar Wilde), exploring a panoply of scenes and atmospheres with an enticing array of keys, thrilling chords, and rhythms (by turns dizzily syncopated and calmly still) to astounding effects.

Geographical Fugue (1950) - *solo quartet*

Ernst Toch (1887-1964)

Continuing tonight's musical travels, ExeVox's programme reaches a seminal paradigm of *Sprechgesang*: music solely spoken rather than sung. Featuring just four performers (one per part), it is thus scored in meticulous copious detail for 'speaking chorus'. Starting with the tenor, countries, towns, lakes, landmarks, and cities (whose words were chosen for their inherent rhythm and percussive sounds) are introduced in rapid succession. In the style of a musical fugue (akin to a complex musical canon), the alto voice then repeats the tenor's opening entry, duly followed by the soprano's version, and finally by the bass's reaffirmation; all four voices building tempestuously en route to a gigantically eruptive unison climax in '*Trinidad*'!

Toch was an innovative avant-garde Austrian composer of contemporary music and film scores, equally qualified in philosophy, medicine, and music. Strongly indebted to the music of his native Vienna (most notably that of its golden child, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart), Toch collected numerous prizes (including a Pulitzer) for his plethora of compositions (from operas to film scores; and piano solos to choral music), both throughout Europe and in America, where he lived and worked from East to West coasts.

One of his innovations was for '*Gesprochene Music*' ('*Spoken Music*'), of which this **Geographical Fugue** is the finest and most-performed example. It towers as the third and last movement of a suite written for (and first recorded at) the 1930 Berlin Festival of Contemporary Music. Originally written in German, it will be sung in Toch's own English translation tonight.

Toch's experimental intention was that the performers should be recorded reciting his score, and the subsequent performance be achieved by playing the recording at ever-increasing speeds: '*from highly-structured order to babbling chaos . . . like simultaneous conversations of human voices intruding upon your consciousness at social gatherings*'. Thus heightening both its velocity, energy, and pitch, it miraculously conjured more instrumental than vocal sonorities, and greatly impressed all those present at its première, including the most radical of American avant-garde composers, John Cage.

Rhythm of Life (1965)

Cy Coleman (1929-2004)

Summing up the uplifting life-enhancing spirit, energy, and sizzle of music, ExeVox concludes tonight's celebration of majesty, magic and mystery captured and conveyed in music throughout time from around the world with the world première of their founding director's a-cappella arrangement of the **Rhythm of Life** from Cy Coleman's 1966 Broadway musical, **Sweet Charity**.

Imbued and oozing with jazzy Broadway razzamatazz, the **Rhythm of Life** is the most popular number Coleman wrote for the Broadway stage during his lengthy fabled career of producing music for the most famous theatres and largest audience numbers. An American songwriter and jazz pianist, Coleman was another musical child prodigy who revelled in adulation and success. Collaborating with the talented American librettist and lyricist Dorothy Fields, multi-Tony-Award-winning Coleman (elected to the American Songwriters' Hall of Fame in 1981) produced **Sweet Charity** nearly sixty years ago. Its lengthy run of shows firmly cemented his presence on the Broadway scene, and cast it - and him - enduringly on the world's musical stage for decades to come.

Zippy and rumbustious, this song (covered by numerous soloists, companies, and groups throughout the last half century) boasts many a musical hook:

*'for the rhythm of life is a powerful beat,
puts a tingle in your fingers and a tingle in your feet . . .'*

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PERFORMERS:

ExeVox Chamber Choir

www.exevox.org.uk

Peter Adcock ~ music director and pianist

www.peteradcock.co.uk