

**Programme Notes**

## 20 Years of ExeVox choral favourites

**Saturday 10th May** St James's Church *Exeter*  
**Sunday 11th May** St Swithun's Church *Woodbury*

**SACRED BEGINNINGS:****Locus Iste**, W. A. B. 23 (1869)

(Josef) Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

*This place was made by God, a priceless mystery; it is without reproach.*

An eminent Austrian Romantic-period composer, Bruckner was a prolific composer of sacred choral music, with 3 complete masses and a plethora of shorter a-cappella works to his credit, of which, this 4-voice Latin motet reigns supreme, as one of the most-loved and oft-performed masterpieces in the unaccompanied-choral repertoire.

Bruckner was born in a suburb of Linz, and worked, for the most productive period of his life, as the organist at its monastery of St Florian (his spiritual home, and where he was later buried). He remained dedicated to the musical life of this north-Austrian city (its third largest; straddling the River Danube; and boasting an illustrious music conservatoire), having been organist and composer at the old St Ignatius Cathedral in Linz between 1856 and 1868.

Professor of harmony at both Vienna's eminent music conservatory and its university, Bruckner revelled in ingeniously exploring a wide gamut of musical elements (from lush harmonies - and their interaction - to varied scorings and textural combinations and conversations); perhaps no more characteristically and stylishly than in this coruscant offertory motet.

Fully immersed and schooled in the performance and study of traditional choral-music (from the 'golden age' of Italian Renaissance polyphony; through German Baroque music - most notably that of J. S. Bach; to the refined Classical period of composition in Austria - as epitomised by the music of Mozart), Bruckner distilled this acquired knowledge and experience to great effect and success in his offerings; confidently adding to a richly-furnished repertory, epitomised in his **Locus Iste**.

**Locus Iste** (the Latin gradual text for the annual celebration of a church's dedication) was written to celebrate the dedication of the votive (thanksgiving/offering) chapel of the new Linz Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (itself, a 20,000-seater Roman-Catholic building, started in 1862, and for many stages of whose construction, Bruckner provided specially-written music, starting with this motet for its initial chapel).

It was premièred there on the 29th October 1869, in the same service as Bruckner's imposing **Mass in e minor**. Its sense of presence, purpose, history and majesty are duly strongly in evidence, as it combines his trademark harmonic colouring and textural solidity on its homophonic course (with all of its voice parts moving together with the same words at the same time), bound by its elegant symmetrical structure (in honour of his Austrian predecessor, Mozart; as well as musically acknowledging and reflecting the architecture of the new cathedral); veritably, '*it is a hauntingly beautiful work reminiscent of the quiet chapel it honoured.*'

Most appropriately, its ever-present and constantly-propelling bass line, which underpins and drives the whole motet, acts as a clear metaphor for the cathedral's sure and sturdy foundation. The return of its opening theme occurs at its 'golden section' (the crowning ancient-classical aesthetic proportion at the 30th of its 48 bars); its firm and sure grounding in the key of C major (the primary fundamental musical tonality); and its regular use of simultaneous rests in each voice part, to cater for the natural reverberation of the new cathedral's impressive acoustics; all similarly skilfully concluded by the '*ethereal spell*' spun by its melismatic coda.

**Hear My Prayer**, Z. 15 (ca. 1682)

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

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

**[Psalm 102, v.1]**

*'Poetry and painting have arrived to their perfection in our own country;  
music is yet but in its nonage, a forward child,  
which gives hope of what it may be hereafter in England,  
when the masters of it shall find more encouragement.'*

*'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]**

One of Purcell's most eloquent and deeply-felt of works - most nobly and clearly fulfilling his profound sentiments and beliefs, as quoted above - this soulful English prayer-motet voices Purcell's personal and public personae, on an ever-upward trajectory: ever building in hope and optimism, fervour and strength.

The Restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660 provided a catapult for an outburst of creative energy in London, where Purcell rapidly established himself as the most influential and productive catalyst 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. It is thus richly chromatic; powerfully passionate; and carefully-crafted, emotionally-moving music - rooted in the past; yet looking to the future.

Scored for 8 separate voices (two separate lines for each of the standard choral voices: soprano, alto, tenor and bass), this 34-bar English unaccompanied anthem in c minor (a key typically used for the most stirring and profound musical utterances) was written at the start of Purcell's tenure as organist at Westminster Abbey, and was clearly intended to impress - as it still does today - gloriously weaving its vocal parts together: from harmonic ambivalence and dichotomy to sonic union and solidarity.

The voices enter one-by-one, fulfilling its titular request to God (as they characteristically did in a-cappella Renaissance choral music), culminating 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*'. With its archetypal filmic-style building of tension and then release; increasingly poignant, passionate and powerful throughout its captivating journey; and successfully imploring, in a multitude of ever-more-impassioned musical ways it fervidly and remarkably reiterates, '**hear my prayer, O Lord!**', throughout its determined musical and emotional crescendo, unequivocally illustrating and affirming its text, with one of choral music's most memorable climaxes.

**Crucifixus à 8** (ca. 1718)

Antonio Lotti (1667-1740)

*He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried.*

**[Nicene Creed]**

A slice of pain, suffering, hope and exaltation, this striking and time-honoured setting of 2 lines of the Creed in Latin - also scored for the same discrete voice parts as the preceding Purcellian masterpiece (that is, 2 sopranos, 2 altos, 2 tenors and 2 basses) - Lotti's 8-voice **Crucifixus** is a musical edifice which is at once both powerful and heart-wrenching. It first appeared as part of the **Credo** from his **Missa Sancti Christophori** (*Mass for St Christopher*) in F major (dating from the time of his tenure in Dresden, Germany, 1717-1719), and, repeatedly inspired by its visceral text, he wrote additional different settings for 4, 5, 6 and 10 voices respectively.

This popular and much-loved product of the prolific period of the Baroque (headed by Bach, Handel, Couperin, Lully, Purcell and Vivaldi - all of whom were readily familiar with Lotti's music), it exemplifies both the overriding philosophy of the age (to move the audience through the emotive power and rhetoric of art and music, *Affektenlehre*) and its musical elements (including counterpoint - with the voice parts interweaving, comparable with a pictorial tapestry; and sequences - musical ideas repeated, ever rising or falling, as either echoes or for adamant reinforcement).

First a singer; then an organist; ultimately the musical director ('*il maestro di cappella*') at the most prestigious musical venue in Europe (St Mark's Basilica in Venice); and finally a teacher (for example, of the inventive Bohemian, Zelenka, whose music was revered by the Baroque musical giant, J. S. Bach), Lotti enjoyed and excelled at both teaching, performing and composing: he was the quintessential disciple and pedagogue of his art; the ultimate expressive art of music.

Lotti, '*the learned*', was renowned for the beauty, grace and pathos that pervaded his music. The famous music-historian, Charles Burney, declared: '*the choral music of this excellent master is at once solemn and touching.*' Burney's contemporary, Sir John Hawkins, similarly extolled Lotti and his music as '*very fine*' - this 8-voice **Crucifixus** tapestry especially so.

**Ave Maria** (ca. 1959)

Franz Biebl (1906-2001)

*The Angel of the Lord brought tidings to Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Ghost . . .  
Mary said: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy Word!" . . .  
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . .*

***Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and  
blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death! Amen.***

A German choral director, composer, and professor at the prestigious Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, Biebl confirmed his position in the international composing arena with this skilful and stirring masterpiece, commissioned by the fire department of Fürstenfeldbruck (near Munich) for their employees' choir, with a view to performing it in choral competitions and festivals, which they duly did.

A luxurious Romantic realisation of the famous **Ave Maria** prayer, it integrates the text of the hymn, **Angelus Domini** (a devotion describing the mystery of Christ's Incarnation as Jesus on earth) with the Marian antiphon refrain, **Ave Maria** (the traditional Roman-Catholic plea for Mary's intercession on behalf of the penitent).

One of hundreds of settings of this important sacred text, this engaging unaccompanied choral motet has been championed and universally popularized by the all-male Californian vocal equivalent of The King's Singers, Chanticleer, as part of their regular repertoire in its original scoring for a quartet of all-male voices (with two separate tenor and two discrete bass parts).

Biebl later rescored it for different choral groupings to suit myriad choirs throughout the world. Staggeringly for sacred choral music, it has sold well over half-a-million sheet-music copies to date. Typical of his spine-tingling writing, it is strikingly rich in sonically-satisfying, closely-scored harmonies (pre-echoing his later predilection for secular barbershop compositions).

'Calmly flowing', it interleaves solo lines of the **Angelus** (delivered in the style of Gregorian plainchant: in this arrangement, first by unison basses; then by the altos; and finally by the sopranos), with a heart-wrenching full choral refrain. Its resplendent phrases rise and fall, ebb and flow, and intertwine in the manner of Renaissance choral music (another sonic tapestry), as the tenors and basses repeatedly spar against the sopranos and altos: each with equal conviction and splendid consummation (features amplified even further in Biebl's highly-potent arrangement of his gem for brass band).

**Bogoroditsye Dyevo**, op. 37 (1915)

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

*(Ave Maria) Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;*

*blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

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

In complementary comparison follows the result of Russian Romantic legend, Rachmaninov's, artistic conception of the same text which so stirred Biebl. Though often performed, as tonight, as a stand-alone hymn, **Bogoroditsye Dyevo** (*Ave Maria*) was envisaged as the sixth of the 15 movements of Rachmaninov's awe-ful Russian-Orthodox **All-Night Vigil** (often misnamed, '**Vespers**'), praised as '*Rachmaninov's finest achievement . . . and the greatest musical achievement of the Russian Orthodox church*', and remained beloved of its composer (and audiences, even, unusually, in his lifetime: frequently warmly received and enjoyed) as his favourite composition (and now one of ExeVox's, too), even requesting its fifth movement, **Nunc Dimittis**, be fittingly included in his funeral service.

An astonishing pianist and conductor as well as a fine composer, Rachmaninov drew on all his strengths and influences - most notably from his mentors, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov - to hew a musical language instantly identifiable, as clever as it is moving; as Russian as Romantic; all proved and shining throughout this popular, time-honoured masterpiece. Here he specifically drew a wealth of ideas from traditional Russian Orthodox musical chants (even preserving the use of their old-church-Slavonic words), two-thirds of his deeply complex, widely varied (and wide ranging, especially in pitch; especially in depth of notes for the traditional Russian '*octavian*' basses), and mellifluously-sonorous **All-Night Vigil** quotes his selection of them directly, the remainder, including this **Ave Maria**, are so similar, that Rachmaninov called them '*conscious counterfeits*'.

Conflicting with anti-religious Soviet policies, its dissemination was external rather than internal to Russia, solidly confirming its place on the international musical style; particularly this exemplary snapshot **Bogoroditsye Dyevo** (it has even been used in more years as the protest song of the Russian feminist punk-rock group, Pussy Riot, to drive their new words: '*Mother of God, chase Putin away!*').

Rachmaninov recounted the seeds of his lifetime interest in Russian sacred choral music, which he supplanted with his **All-Night Vigil**, and stamped with this hallmark hymn: '*the dearest reminiscences of my childhood are the four notes of the Novgorod Saint Sofia Cathedral bells, which I often heard when babushka (grandmother) took me to town on feast days. We also spent hours standing in the beautiful St. Petersburg churches. Being only a young greenhorn, I took less interest in God and religious worship than in the singing, which*

*was of unrivalled beauty, especially in the cathedrals where one frequently heard the best choirs of Saint Petersburg. I usually took pains to find room underneath the gallery and never missed a single note. Thanks to my good memory, I also remembered most of what I heard. This I turned into capital – literally – by sitting down at the piano when I came home, and playing all I heard. For this performance my grandmother never failed to reward me with twenty-five kopecks.'*

Characteristically boasting astounding, haunting melodies which possess the rare equality of both redolence and prescience, this lustrous exemplar (for which Rachmaninov maintained special affinity and affection) seems timeless in both its stature, substance, and merit. '*Melody is the main foundation of all music, because a perfect melody presupposes and brings to life all harmonic structure. Melodic inventiveness in the highest meaning of this world is the main life goal of a composer*' as Rachmaninov explained, thus creating the ideal musical document of both his and general musical language of the Romantic epoch in Russia.

A contemporary reviewer wrote that '*never before has Rachmaninoff approached so close to the people, to their style, to their soul, as in this work. And, perhaps, this work in particular bespeaks a broadening of his creative flight, a conquest of new dimensions of the spirit, and, hence, a genuine evolution of his powerful talent.*' It still burns as a living musical legacy (dedicated to the memory of his friend and colleague, the composer and scholar, Stephan Vasilyevich Smolensky, 1849-1909, who first introduced Rachmaninov to the vast seams of Russian sacred music): his self-confessed shining of musical light in darkness.

*instrumental solo*

### THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE AND LOVE:

**Lay a Garland** (1840)

Robert Lucas Pearsall (1795-1856)

*Lay a garland on her hearse of dismal yew! Maidens, willow branches wear, say she died true.*

*Her love was false, but she was firm from her hour of birth.*

*Upon her buried body lie lightly, thou gentle earth!*

**[Francis Beaumont (ca. 1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625)]**

An Englishman, born and brought up in the West-country, Pearsall was a keen and busy amateur composer (counter-balancing his career as a barrister with the delights of leisure time with his Bristol-based family). Complete with his own Mediaeval Swiss castle retreat at Wartensee (bought after many years of living in Germany), he soon moved to the shores of Lake Constance, above the monastery of St Gall: '*the healing place of the soul*'. Pearsall revived the art of composing and singing madrigals (much as

the pre-Raphaelite school of painting - and the English Gothic Revival - both looked backwards in order to move forwards) - together with soulful music for the Roman Catholic church - with consummate flair and universal approval. Most notable and oft-recorded amongst his surviving works (all published by the most respected English music publishers, Novello) are **Lay a Garland** (= *Tu es Petrus*) - and his own favourite choral piece: his **Requiem**.

An earlier secular setting of his sacred and much-loved choral contrafactum number, **Tu es Petrus** (published in 1854), **Lay a Garland** (dating from 1840) is another voluptuous eight-voice work (SSAATTBB) - though this time, styled as a mock-Elizabethan madrigal (an unaccompanied secular part-song for friends/amateurs to sing at home). It is one of 22 such madrigals he wrote throughout his lifetime; each imbued with Romantic ideas and ideals, and written for (and first performed by) the Bristol Madrigal Society (of which he was a founding member and regular tenor). Each part wefts and warps its tapestry through many a gradual build-up to a fulfillingly colourful climax prior to a well-graded and welcome release. Its sounds, phrases and emotions accumulate and abate in sublimely satisfying succession; all resolutely bound and framed in the strong, secure, warm key of Eb major, and marked to be performed '*with solemnity*'.

Words aside, this neo-Renaissance music is equally convincing in both church and at home. With either its sacred or secular text (the latter based on the play, **The Maid's Tragedy**, at the point when the protagonist's betrothed, Amintor, is forced, by the King, into a marriage of convenience, to the King's secret mistress, Evadne), its music (which owes much to his Italian musical hero, Antonio Lotti - most notably from his **Crucifixus**, which featured earlier in our concert of favourite musical memories) totally triumphs over the text (in which the *yew* is the symbol of everlasting life; and the *willow branches* of lost love). True to its title and words, **Lay a a garland** is finely fluid, noble, and impeccably elegant right through to its all-embracing ending.

**Earth Song** (2007)

Frank Ticheli (b. 1958)

*Sing, be, live, see!*

*This dark stormy hour, the wind, it stirs, the scorched earth cries out in vain:*

*O war and power, you blind and blur!*

*The torn heart cries out in pain.*

*But music and singing have been my refuge, and music and singing shall be my light.*

*A light of song, shining strong: Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Through darkness and pain and strife,*

*I'll sing; I'll be; live; see . . . Peace.*

Frank Ticheli (2007)

Equally ethereal, hypnotic, mesmeric and reverential, Ticheli's recent **Earth Song** seems to capture the gentle breathing and pace of the earth, air, and life, as its supple and subtle musical phrases peacefully appear, expand, float, subside, and vanish, before another breath breathes life into its next musical utterance. Apart from a short break for the basses in the middle of this song, all four of its vocal parts move together almost solely as one - '*one for all, and all for one*' - until it comes tenderly to rest on an enigmatically unresolved chord of a bare fifth, repeating the summatory exhortation: '*peace*'.

Ticheli is an American composer based in Los Angeles as professor of composition at the University of Southern California. With a wall full of degrees, and a mind full of tastes and interests, he has contributed to most major musical genres and groupings (from ensembles to large-scale works; for instruments and / or voices) in his plethora of rôles as teacher, professor, composer, and composer-in-residence throughout the United States of America, satisfying commissions and garnering awards, grants, and fellowships for his musical compositions, including the Charles Ives Scholarship and the Distinguished Service to Music Medal for his American band music.

In a world ravaged by war of all types (visible and invisible; transitory and lasting), this beautifully poignant setting remains dearly close to Ticheli's heart. It originally appeared as part of a work for wind ensemble entitled '**Sanctuary**', but broke loose, eschewing wind instruments for voices. Ticheli wrote: '*the music is so vocal in itself . . . as a cry and a prayer for peace . . . of weariness and comfort . . . like a rose, it's got both thorns and beauty.*' Uniquely, the words came to Ticheli after he had written the music in 2007 (invariably composers start with the words as the inspiration for their music).

Now Ticheli's **Earth Song** has almost become an anthem for our times: '*music remains a constant support in our lives, helping us remain grounded and secure . . . there is always peace in music - even when life overwhelms us and pulls us apart.*'

In its creator's own words: '*Earth Song is one of only a few works that I have composed without a commission . . . I felt a strong impulse to create something that would express my own personal longing for peace. It was this longing which engendered the poem's creation. I knew I had to write the poem myself - partly because it is not just a poem, but a prayer, a plea, a wish - a bid to find inner peace in a world that seems eternally bent on war and hatred. But also, the poem is a steadfast declaration of the power of music to heal. In the end, the speaker in the poem discovers that, through music, he is the embodiment of hope, peace, and the song with the Song. Perhaps music has the power not only to nurture inner peace, but also to open hearts and ears in a world that desperately needs love and listening.*'

## Into Thy Hands (1996)

Jonathan Dove (b. 1959)

*Into Thy hands, O Lord and father, we commend our souls and our bodies,  
our parents and our homes, friends and kindred.*

*Into Thy hands, O Lord and father, we commend our benefactors and brethren departed.*

*Into Thy hands, O Lord and father, we commend all Thy people faithfully believing,  
and all who need Thy pity and protection.*

*Enlighten us with Thy holy grace and suffer us never more to be separated from Thee!  
Lord Jesus Christ, mercifully grant to me that the rest of my pilgrimage may be directed  
according to Thy will; that the rest of my life may be completed in Thee,  
and my soul may deserve to enjoy Thee, who art eternal life forever!*

**St Edmund, 1175-1240**

Written by one of England's finest and most creative and intelligent of modern classical composers, **Into Thy Hands** was commissioned by Salisbury Cathedral to celebrate the 750th anniversary of the canonization of St Edmund of Abingdon (1175–1243), who was Canon Treasurer of Salisbury before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury. Dove was asked for an anthem which set words of eminent Mediaeval scholar, St Edmund of Abingdon - Dove actually chose to set two of St Edmund's prayers - which would be sung by Salisbury Cathedral choir in Pontigny Abbey in France where St Edmund is buried. Of his work, Dove wrote : *'knowing that it was a very resonant building, I imagined that the echo would be part of the piece, and set the first prayer spaciously, allowing for the sound of each phrase to reverberate. The second prayer talks of pilgrimage and eternity, and the music reflects this in a calm processional which does not reach an ending, but simply, in trust, surrenders itself.'*

'... exquisite, stunning, breathtakingly beautiful and utterly moving . . .', this sublime musical reflection and rumination on twelfth-century prayers uses Dove's approachable, accessible, and highly-singable modern musical language for unaccompanied SATB choir with the utmost care, love and tenderness *'to communicate, to create wonder, and to enrich people's lives'* (Dove's three stated - and fulfilled - aims).

A pianist, organist and viola-player, Dove read music at Cambridge, and has worked as a freelance musician, arranging, accompanying, directing choirs, and composing ever since, focussing on his main interest and passion: the human voice, and its powers and abilities to impart, communicate and disseminate ideas and feelings.

*'He knows how to rouse passions and raise smiles. Tunes flow in abundance, and for him, creating a mood, capturing a feeling for an instant, are second nature . . . to communicate with clarity and coherence'* - these words of an eminent musical commentator are wonderfully exemplified in Dove's **Into Thy Hands**.

**O Magnum Mysterium** (1994)

Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943)

*O great mystery and wonderful sacrament,  
that animals should see the new-born Lord lying in a manger!  
O blessed is the Virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear Christ the Lord.  
Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with you, Alleluia!*

*Fourth of the Nine Responsories for Matins of Christmas Day*

And so to conclude the opening half of this celebratory concert, an increasingly-familiar modern setting of centuries-old Latin text, written by the American award-winning composer and professor of composition, Morten Lauridsen (a friend and colleague of comparable choral composer, Eric Whitacre); popularised by regular airings on Classic FM and BBC Radio 3, as well as innumerable amateur and professional live performances (some even with complementary dances and pictures).

Revelling and specialising in vocal music, Lauridsen has written multiple song cycles and collections, as well as much choral music from ancient Latin to modern English texts; often appropriately referring to the original musical styles (such as Gregorian plainchant) of the original period of the text he has chosen to set to music.

Fellow American musicologist and conductor, Nick Strimple, declared that Lauridsen's sacred music, and, in particular, his now universal setting of the **O Magnum Mysterium** text, is typically '*mystical, probing and serene . . . containing an elusive and indefinable ingredient which leaves the impression that all the questions have been answered.*' His music now ranks as the most frequently-performed of any American choral composer.

Lauridsen's **O Magnum Mysterium** established both his indelible musical language and his international reputation, and has been recorded countless times across the world. As resident composer of the Californian Master Chorale group, Lauridsen identified this as a pivotal time in his life, when he realised that music, and, in particular, composition, was his ultimate and all-consuming vocation: a realisation '*triggered by the unanticipated response to his first commission for the Master Chorale, O Magnum Mysterium, which would go on to become the highest-selling item in the catalogue of Theodore Presser, ever since the company had been founded in 1783.*'

Commissioned for the Master Chorale's then president, it has subsequently become its signature piece, '*emblematic of Lauridsen's most mystically serene vein*'. Glowing with its '*harmonic secret . . . and luminous flow*', it represents the distilled realisation of Lauridsen's musical goal: '*to resonate immediately and deeply into the core of the listener; to illumine through sound . . .*'

## *interval*

### **NATURE:**

**The Blue Bird** (1910)

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924)

*The lake lay blue below the hill. Over it, as I looked, there flew across the waters,  
cold and still, a bird whose wings were palest blue.*

*The sky above was blue at last, the lake beneath me blue in blue.*

*A moment, ere the bird had passed, it caught his image as he flew.*

*Mary E. Coleridge* (1861-1907), from *Fancy's Following* (first published in 1896)

A gentle, pastoral, and organic English Romantic part-song opens the second half of our anniversary concert, portraying the exquisite blue bird in vocal sounds. Melding the clearer, more direct and delicate words of Mary Coleridge, with the more soothing sounds, uninterrupted phrases, and comforting chords of Stanford's now legendary choral setting, it is another firm ExeVox favourite.

A child prodigy from a privileged background, Stanford was encouraged to compose music, emboldened so to do by the sounds of nature and music all around him. A scholarship to read music at Queen's College, Cambridge furthered his knowledge and love of the musical language, and eventually led him to return as professor of music both at Cambridge University and the Royal College of Music in London, teaching such now-household names as Holst, Ireland and Vaughan Williams.

Highly influenced by the complex colours, structures and Bach-ian counterpoint of Brahms's multifarious music, Stanford often chose to use the dark warm keys that were Brahms's fondest predilection (here, the key of G-flat major), coupled with his penchant for deep-rooted sonorities (especially low-pitched notes in all voice parts; as heard in the earlier work by Rachmaninov) and luxuriantly luscious textures/sound combinations in this '*remarkable, sophisticated and refined setting*' of his friend Coleridge's **Blue Bird**. It also exhibits elements of the current vogue for Impressionism (analogous with the paintings of Monet, Sorolla and Turner, for example), with its apt performance instructions to paint, through the music, an inherently soft, peaceful and still atmosphere.

Stanford's **Blue Bird** also briefly features a solo soprano line (cast as a blue bird), which gently rises up out of the choir's non-stop mellifluity, to evoke both the protagonist's song, and its sound of gracefully flapping its wings, hovering, and effortlessly soaring skywards . . .

'Stanford is justifiably given credit for the twentieth-century Renaissance of British music. At a time when British standards of music and art were at a low point, this composer brought beauty and substance to music in an innovative way and restored its importance to society and education' - and this plush, sumptuous part song - 'which reaches near perfection both in melodic invention and in capturing the mood of the poem' - is the prime example: giving both performers and audiences fine, attractive and appealing reasons to both sing (as amateurs or professionals) and attend concerts (as invited friends or keen music-lovers).

### **The Deer's Cry (2007)**

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)

*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,  
Christ in me, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.  
Christ with me.*

*St Patrick's breastplate (patron saint of Ireland)*

Combining sacred text with more secular-style music, again for 8 vocal parts (SSAATTBB), this haunting, chilling and spine-tingling paradigm of meditative Minimalism (in which there is minimal change and maximum unity provided by a regularly-repeated musical idea - known as a '*mobile*' - which underpins the whole fabric of the piece to hypnotic effect) builds, like a torch song, to a cathartic climax, released by a bar of complete silence before calmly decaying into unresolved nothingness: as if the music never ends . . . is ever there . . . and will always return . . .

Mozart's declaration that '*music is in the silence between the notes*' finds incredible sustenance here. The many silent spaces between both individual chords and longer phrases (as exclusively experienced in John Cage's earlier 4'33" of total silence) allow both what came before to be considered, savoured and processed, as well as what is still to come to be prepared all the more effectively and meaningfully.

Ancient Greek rhetoric and chant-like reminiscences imbue this piece with a timeless feel and a ubiquitous emotional resonance. The mobile which begins and ends **The Deer's Cry**, and provides its musical lifeblood and heartbeat, also recalls its innovative multi-award-winning Estonian composer's self-created '*tintinnabuli*' effect: recurrent bell-like sounds which further enhance its otherworldly ruminative quality.

As the pre-eminent composer of film music, American legend, John Williams wrote: '*Pärt's music is enormously popular, which is so inspiring. His music fulfills a deep human need that has nothing to do with fashion.*'

Commissioned by the Louth Contemporary Music Society in Ireland, Pärt selected the end of an ancient 5th-century Irish prayer (Saint Patrick's breastplate / 'the holy lorica') as both its text (as a call to nature for protection from evil) and as its starting point. Pärt's use of a modern-English translation of this powerful prayer mirrors the century-crossing musical elements he selected and combined in this musical rendition, which he steadfastly rooted in the bleak key of A minor: another reference to things past, yet present, and still more to come . . .

### **Unicornis Captivatur** (2001)

Ola Gjeilo (b. 1978)

*The Unicorn is captured, it's presented to the royal court in the hunters' snare.*

*Creeping, it freed itself from the pole; because it's wounded, it heals itself with viper's venom.*

*Sing Alleluia to the dying lamb!*

*Sing Alleluia, cry Alleluia, to the victorious Lion!*

*Life returns to the wounded Pelican after miserable death in its nest for the sins of the world.*

*The Phoenix's light is burnt out, the ancient sins of the world are utterly consumed by flame.*

*Sing Alleluia . . . !*

*The Hydra enters the crocodile, deprives it of its entrails, kills it, and comes back alive.*

*Three days long, the Lion slept till the King awakened it with a roar.*

*Sing Alleluia . . . !*

*Engelberg Codex (late Mediaeval)*

Geographically (by composer nationality) travelling a short distance Westwards, 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, where he has successfully established 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 (which Gjeilo treats to, and parades with, a jaunty rhythmic setting): '*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 here throughout **Unicornis Captivatur** (itself, a title worthy of authors, Lewis Carroll or C. S. Lewis) as he recounts his timeless exotic fairy tale (perhaps more in the ilk of Oscar Wilde), exploring a panoply of scenes and atmospheres with an enticing array of keys, thrilling chords, and rhythms (which are by turns dizzily syncopated and calmly still) to most astounding, magical, and memorable effects.

### **The Seal Lullaby** (2008)

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)

*Oh! Hush thee, my baby, the night is behind us,  
And black are the waters that sparkled so green.  
The moon, o'er the combers, looks downward to find us,  
At rest in the hollows that rustle between.*

*Where billow meets billow, then soft be thy pillow,  
Oh weary wee flipperling, curl at thy ease!  
The storm shall not wake thee, nor shark overtake thee,  
Asleep in the arms of the slow swinging seas!*

*Rudyard Kipling* (1865-1936)

And now we reach the most modern piece created so far; both in date of authorship and style, purpose, and use of its distinctive musical language. Commissioned by an American choir (the large Californian community-choir, the Towne Singers), and 'dedicated with love and gratitude to Stephen Schwartz' (a fellow 'legendary' American composer - primarily of musicals - of such Broadway hit shows as **Godspell** and **Wicked**), **The Seal Lullaby** appropriately gently sets an encouraging, loving poem by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) for SATB and piano. An internationally-acclaimed, multi-award-winning American composer, Eric Whitacre typically writes effectively and evocatively for voices - especially choirs - as this charming piece well illustrates.

Regularly commissioned by the world's top orchestras and choirs; composer-in-residence at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University; and artist-in-residence at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, Whitacre is supremely skilled at engaging both singers and audiences with consistently beautiful, distinctive and atmospheric realisations of the texts he sets to music: '*the sort of music Vaughan Williams might have composed had he been alive today*'.

After working with Schwartz ('a profoundly insightful and helpful mentor'), Whitacre was asked by a major film studio to write the music for an animated feature, based on Kipling's **The White Seal**: a mother seal singing to her young pup. A childhood love of Disney films was thus rekindled, and Whitacre was duly stirred to compose this '*simple, sweet Disney-esque song . . . which came gushing out of me in one sitting*'. Alas, the film came to nothing, but this song (with the voices representing the seal's song; and the piano evoking the sea) was taken up by the Towne Singers, who commissioned a special arrangement: the delicate one featured in this evening's concert of stylish, atmospheric and evocative, best-loved and treasured favourites.

*instrumental solo*

## **MUSIC AND THE FUTURE:**

**A Boy and a Girl** (2002)

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)

*Stretched out on the grass, a boy and a girl.*

*Savoring their oranges, giving their kisses like waves exchanging foam.*

*Stretched out on the beach, a boy and a girl.*

*Savoring their limes, giving their kisses like clouds exchanging foam.*

*Stretched out underground, a boy and a girl.*

*Saying nothing, never kissing, giving silence for silence.*

*Octavio Paz (1914-1998), translated by Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980)*

- and in Whitacre's own words:

*'A Boy and a Girl is such a tender, delicate, exquisite poem.*

*I simply tried to quiet myself and find the music hidden within the words.*

*I'm often asked which of my compositions is my favorite.*

*I don't really have one that I love more than the others,  
but I do feel that the four measures that musically paint the text 'never kissing'  
may be the truest notes I've ever written.'*

Another perennial ExeVox favourite, **A Boy and a Girl** is a mesmeric and serenely somnolent musical miniature for unaccompanied chamber choir, replete with many-a unique Whitacre fingerprint of his distinctive chords (collection of notes sung simultaneously) and chromaticisms (unexpected notes). As with all the music carefully selected for this programme, it speaks from both the heart and the brain, and is exemplary of its composer's unique vocabulary, aesthetic, period, and output. In this refined choral masterpiece, for example, Whitacre's interest in refocussing chords from the classically-expected to the colourful, musing and questioning, he champions with pleasing relish and spine-tingling success throughout.

Iridescent in its musical sonority, and admirably sensitive and responsive to the words of the poem it sets by Octavio Paz (a contemplative modern Nobel-prize-winning Mexican poet), **A Boy and a Girl** was written for the Californian All-State Chorus, and dedicated to Whitacre's close friend and fellow composer, Dr Ron Kean.

Imaginative and practical, Whitacre, like his own choral music, excels in composing compact choral pieces, most notably this marvellous setting. Bristling with sumptuously-sustained note clusters, '*full of shimmering, shuddering, shifting harmonies that awaken the ear to a contemporary yet accessible voice*' (as musical representations of both colours and feelings), it is structured in well-defined phrases (separated with spacious silent rests) allowing both the words and the music to settle - and their effect to continue to stir - before the next enticing entry, en route to the final hummed page:

*'a boy and a girl saying nothing . . .  
giving silence for silence . . .'*

It justifiably remains a favourite of its prolific and widely-popular, multi-award-wielding composer and virtual-choir visionary and virtuoso, too, who explained: '*A Boy and a Girl is such a tender, delicate, exquisite poem. I simply tried to quiet myself and find the music hidden within the words. I'm often asked which of my compositions is my favorite. I don't really have one that I love more than the others, but I do feel that the four measures that musically paint the text 'never kissing' may be the truest notes I've ever written.*'

**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 fusion (of classical and jazz; and of the traditional and the popular) artist, and vocalist, Bobby McFerrin, *The Real Group* arrange and compose almost all of the songs they perform: and this one is consistently a much-loved 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; it even recently opened their 40th-year anniversary concert in Stockholm. With multiple CDs and awards to their credit, they rejoice in the inextricable union and bilateral influence and formidable fusion 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, too, never seems to want to end . . .

**El Hambo** (1996)

Jaakko Mäntyjärvi (b. 1963)

*Du-de-li-dm, du-de-li-dm . . . !*

*Hi jakka dakka dudi aadi, hi, jakka dakka dambo . . . !*

*Dam dordi yordi, bork bork . . . !*

*Oi aadi oodi sveeba deeba deeba dam dam - Hambo!*

With a heady Scandinavian musical predilection, our specially-chosen programme of choral hits drifts from Sweden (though not far!) to Finland; and from the motivating power of words to other vibrantly vivid and visceral sounds from an unaccompanied choir imitating the sound of tuning folk fiddles and cheerful meaningless scat text. Abounding with '*amusing imitations of the vowel sounds of any Scandinavian language except Danish*' (to both humorous and colourful effects) comes Mäntyjärvi's foot-tapping, finger-clicking, smile-inducing **El Hambo** (a *hambo* being a lively modern Swedish folk dance). A professional translator, as well as a noted classical composer, Mäntyjärvi entitled this unaccompanied musical firework with two words which encompass several meanings: from '*the ultimate hambo to end all hambos*', and '*electric hambo*' (both in Swedish), to '*the jump of joy*' (in Welsh) and '*the boyfriend*' (in Catalan).

A Finnish graduate in linguistics as well as musicology from the University of Helsinki, Mäntyjärvi specialised, as a singer, in choral conducting and composition at the Sibelius Academy, publishing well over 150 choral works to date. Describing

himself as '*an eclectic traditionalist*', his music focuses on the fusion of practical and traditional traits - ensuring its accessibility and rapid appeal - as this optimistic example reveals. His music is increasingly performed and recorded by both amateur and professional groups around the world, encouraged by regular talks, lectures, and workshops on his music, its background, and personal tips on its performance.

The second work in a choral trilogy entitled, '**Justly Forgotten Peoples**', **El Hambo** is remarkably reminiscent of folk dancing and singing, punctuated with foot stamping, hand clapping, and joyful shouting for extra panache, all adding to its popularity as one of the best-selling pieces of Finnish music of all time.

Although primarily in the triple time (three beats per bar) of a Swedish *hambo* dance, **El Hambo** frequently slides into duple-time measures (two beats per bar) with witty, energy-enhancing, momentum-increasing results, keeping singers and audiences very much awake. It was inspired, in part, by Norwegian, Finnish, and Swedish choral folk songs and dance, as well as by the whacky eccentric Swedish chef in The Muppet Show. Commissioned by the Cantinovum Chamber Choir of Jyväskylä, Finland, it was premiered in June 1997, and remains an oft-requested and repeated core of their repertoire.

Headed to be performed '*with a jolly Scandinavian smile*', **El Hambo** opens with the sound of a violinist tuning its strings - as represented by all the singers - and also features vocal drones akin to the sound of a hurdy-gurdy/bagpipe.

**Thank You for the Music!** (1977) ABBA's Andersson and Ulvaeus (fl.)

*I'm nothing special, in fact I'm a bit of a bore, if I tell a joke, you've probably heard it before, but I have a talent, a wonderful thing, 'cause everyone listens when I start to sing; I'm so grateful and proud, all I want is to sing it out loud!*

*So I say:*

*"Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing! Thanks for all the joy they're bringing!*

*Who can live without it? I ask in all honesty, what would life be?*

*Without a song or a dance what are we?"*

*So I say: "thank you for the music, for giving it to me!"*

*Mother says I was a dancer before I could walk; she says I began to sing long before I could talk, and I've often wondered; how did it all start?*

*Who found out that nothing can capture a heart like a melody can?*

*Well, whoever it was, I'm a fan!*

*I've been so lucky, I am the girl with golden hair, I wanna sing it out to everybody:*

*What a joy; what a life; what a chance!*

What more apposite a way to end tonight's paean of ExeVoxers' choral favourites from its concert programmes over the last 20 years, and our fascination and passion for all things Scandinavian - and, especially, Swedish - with this ultimate answer to them all - perhaps even gifting the ultimate earworm for you to take away!

Nearly half a century ago, world-renowned, Eurovision-song-contest-winning, Swedish pop group ABBA (Agnetha Fältskog, Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson, and Anni-Frid Lyngstad), inspired by such cabaret artists as Doris Day, brainstormed in Stockholm's famous Marcus Music Studio, to conceive their own celebratory number for all that music has done, continues to do, and can still do: **Thank You For The Music!**

Featuring on recordings, concert halls, and films ever since - frequently presented as an anniversary tribute number - this instantly-familiar chart-topping song has been championed by groups as diverse as the Irish Nolan sisters; Finnish choral ensemble, Rajaton; American Carpenters siblings; and solo singer, Dame Vera Lynn.

So we all say: thank you for supporting ExeVox; we look forward to seeing you at many more future concerts; and thank you for the music!

## ENCORES:

**A Cappella** (1992)

Revd Michael '*Traditional*' Blake (b. 1951)

- Evangelical, South African Classical-gospel fusion composer
- words by American singer-songwriter, Brenda Lee (b. 1944), as a gospel song
- stirring, funky, and built on a hypnotically-repeated bass ostinato riff
- redolent of African musical culture (and their spirituals, in particular), it is structured in classic 'call-and-response' fashion.

**Irish Blessing** (1987)

James Edward Moore, jr (1951-2022)

*May the road rise to meet you, may the wind be always at your back;  
may the sun shine warm upon your face, the rains fall soft upon your fields;  
and, until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand!*

*[traditional Irish blessing]*

- Virginian, Afro-American, Catholic composer, singer and pedagogue
- **Irish Blessing** prayer text originally in ancient Celtic; with pagan roots - honouring nature - before its Christian adoption - for God.

# ExeVox

## **Sopranos:**

Harriet Brown  
Phine Burlingham  
Emma Green  
Lorna MacLeod  
Charlotte Moyes  
Ann Williams

## **Altos:**

Lorraine Adams  
Helen Beard  
Jessica Dalton  
Carolin van Montfoort  
Diana Wackerbath

## **Tenors:**

Simon Bates  
Julian Clutterbuck  
Garon Heslop

## **Basses:**

Charles Beer  
Anthony Butler  
Maurice Dunster  
Peter Harflett  
Charlie Lane