

Programme Notes

Crystal Mandal

3 Browning Songs - Amy Beach

The Year's at the Spring

The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world!

Ah, Love, but a day

Ah, Love, but a day,
And the world has changed!
The sun's away,
And the bird estranged;
The wind has dropped,
And the sky's deranged;
Summer has stopped.

Look in my eyes!
Wilt thou change too?
Should I fear surprise?
Shall I find aught new
In the old and dear,
In the good and true,
With the changing year?

—
*Thou art a man,
But I am thy love.
For the lake, its swan;
For the dell, its dove;
And for thee — (oh, haste!)
Me, to bend above,
Me, to hold embraced.*

(Beach set only the first two stanzas in her song.)

I Send My Heart Up To Thee

I send my heart up to thee, all
my heart/
In this my singing,
For the stars help me, and the
sea, and the sea bears part;/
The very night is clinging/
Closer to Venice' streets to leave
on space/
Above me, whence thy face/
May light my joyous heart to
thee, to thee its dwelling place.

“It has happened more than once that a composition comes to me, ready made as it were, between the demands of other work. *The Year's At The Spring* was “born” the same way.”

So describes composer Amy Beach (1867 - 1944) the process of her realising of these Robert Browning poems. According to her story, Beach had put off the composition of *The Year's at the Spring* until just before the expected date of first performance. Under pressure from the upcoming deadline, Beach wrote the song in one train ride from New York back to Boston. Indeed, by her own admission, much of Beach's composition is impulsive - “[the music] jumped at me and struck me, most forcibly!” - and it is reflected on the openness and directness of her music. The emotional highs and lows are treated with utmost dramatic intensity and are especially well represented in this set of songs set to texts by Robert Browning. The set is dedicated to the Boston Browning Society.

Spring - Florence Price

There are promise and pleasure and hope in the spring,
That beckon, and reckon the future. I know.
The bud and the bee, swaying low on the lea,
The dove cooing late.
To his nesting mate.
In a dream of ecstasy

There are laughter and magic and joy in the spring,
That capture, enrapture my heart. I know.
A lilt on the breeze, That is tossed by the trees,
Which doth for me weave
Like a thrush above
A song of ecstasy.

Ah! There are madness and gladness and nothing of sadness.
That will me and thrill me and fill me I know
Life and its weal are to give and to feel
The soul that can ache,
The heart that can break.
With a pain of ecstasy.

Florence Price (1887-1953), remarkably, is both composer and poet for this song, which is unusual in the realm of Western Classical Song. Her contributions to the field of poetry, though pleasant, have yet to enter a wider canon; she does number, in contrast, amongst the most influential and loved Classical composers. With her monumental First Symphony in E Minor, Price became the first African-American Woman to have her music performed by a major U.S. Orchestra in 1933. Her musical style is a distinct blend of her European training and American upbringing, merging large-scale European structures with the rhythmic and harmonic richness of African-American spirituals.

The Apple Orchard - Lori Laitman

You won't remember it—the apple orchard
We wandered through one April afternoon,
Climbing the hill behind the empty farm.

A city boy, I'd never seen a grove
Burst in full flower or breathed the bittersweet
Perfume of blossoms mingled with the dust.

A quarter mile of trees in fragrant rows
Arching above us. We walked the aisle,
Alone in spring's ephemeral cathedral.

We had the luck, if you can call it that,
Of having been in love but never lovers—
The bright flame burning, fed by pure desire.

Nothing consumed, such secrets brought to light!
There was a moment when I stood behind you,
Reached out to spin you toward me . . . but I stopped.

What more could I have wanted from that day?
Everything, of course. Perhaps that was the point—
To learn that what we will not grasp is lost.

This composition is dedicated to the composer's father-in-law as a birthday gift. Most birthday gifts are wrapped in decorative paper and maybe forgotten in a few years. This one will live forever in the hearts, minds, and souls of everyone who ever encounters its kind, gentle beauty: unquestionably the best 80th birthday present ever given or received. The composer, Lori Laitman (b. 1955) is still alive. It is unfortunately rare to have your compositions programmed and performed, and rarer still to have your music widely loved when your heart is still beating and your pen is still writing. So much love surrounds this piece - in the gifting, in the writing, in our listening - and it shows. The soft, dance-like figurations lead into a rich, almost syrupy-smooth vocal line, with the most breathtakingly gorgeous melody one can imagine : such is the musical language of Lori Laitman. It's a surprise, then, that Laitman considers herself an "Accidental" Vocal Composer. In her own words, Laitman was drawn to the "evocative story and exquisite language" of the poem, especially the image of "spring's ephemeral cathedral". The poem is written by Dana Gioia (also alive, born in 1950), and was set his permission, and is taken from his collection *Pity the Beautiful*.

from *Liederkreis Op.25* - Robert Schumann

No - 9, Mit Myrten und Rosen

Mit Myrthen und Rosen, lieblich und hold,
Mit duft'gen Zypressen und Flittergold,
Möcht' ich zieren dies Buch wie 'nen Totenschrein,
Und sargen meine Lieder hinein.

O könnt' ich die Liebe sargen hinzu!
Auf dem Grabe der Liebe wächst Blümlein der Ruh',
Da blüht es hervor, da pflückt man es ab,—
Doch mir blüht's nur, wenn ich selber im Grab.

Hier sind nun die Lieder, die einst so wild,
Wie ein Lavastrom, der dem Ätna entquillt,
Hervorgestürzt aus dem tiefsten Gemüt,
Und rings viel blitzende Funken versprüht!

Nun liegen sie stumm und totengleich,
Nun starren sie kalt und nebelbleich,
Doch aufs neu' die alte Glut sie belebt,
Wenn der Liebe Geist einst über sie schwebt.

Und es wird mir im Herzen viel Ahnung laut:
Der Liebe Geist einst über sie taut;
Einst kommt dies Buch in deine Hand,
Du süßes Lieb im fernen Land.

Dann löst sich des Liedes Zauberbann,
Die blassen Buchstaben schaun dich an,
Sie schauen dir flehend ins schöne Aug',
Und flüstern mit Wehmut und Liebeshauch.

No 9 - With myrtles and roses

With myrtles and roses, sweet and fair,
With fragrant cypress and golden tinsel,
I should like to adorn this book like a coffin
And bury my songs inside.

Could I but bury my love here too!
On Love's grave grows the flower of peace,
There it blossoms, there is plucked,
But only when I'm buried will it bloom for me.

Here now are the songs which once cascaded,
Like a stream of lava pouring from Etna,
So wildly from the depths of my soul,
And scattered glittering sparks all around!

Now they lie mute, as though they were dead,
Now they stare coldly, as pale as mist,
But the old glow shall kindle them once more,
When the spirit of Love floats over them.

And a thought speaks loud within my heart,
That the spirit of Love will one day thaw them;
One day this book will fall into your hands,
My dearest love, in a distant land.

Then shall song's magic spell break free,
And the pallid letters shall gaze at you,
Gaze imploringly into your beautiful eyes,
And whisper with sadness and the breath of love.

Almost all of Robert Schumann's lieder - German song - production was during the miraculous period lovingly referred to as his "Liederjahr" (year of song), where, directly after his marriage to Clara Wieck - another well respected composer and pianist - in 1840, he spent the next year dedicated to writing almost exclusively songs. These songs span the breadth of his musical style, from bombastic showpieces like *Der Contrabandiste* to more intimate works like *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai* and this piece, *Mit Myrten und Rosen*, or "With myrtles and roses". The poem - by German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) - is a languid painting of a love buried so deep that it will never reach the intended recipient. Hopefully, though the love will reach the audience. After 1841, his song output diminished. Robert Schumann lived from 1810 to 1856, though he spent the last two years of his life in a mental institution, and his musical output stopped in 1854. Among his last pieces is, curiously, a return to song - though this time for solo piano - in the enigmatic *Gesänge der Frühe*.

Chanson - Nadia Boulanger

Chanson

Les lilas sont en folie,
Cache cache
Et les roses sont jolies,
Cachez-vous.

Tirez les rideaux, tirez les rideaux !
Et sous les vertes feuilles
Cachez-vous !

Ah ah! Ah ah! Ah ah!

Lilas et rosiers
la belle,
la plus belle, c'est toi !

Beaux seigneurs et dames belles,
aime, aime,
dans vos atours de dentelles,
Aimez-vous.

Tirez les rideaux !
Qui voudra de mon âme?
Aimez-vous !

Ah ah! Ah ah! Ah ah!

Amours et baisers, la belle
Ah ah! Ah ah!
la plus belle c'est toi !

Song

The lilacs are inflamed,
Hide-and-peek,
And the roses are pretty,
Hide yourself.

Draw the curtains, draw the curtains!
And beneath the green leaves
Hide yourself!

Ah ah! Ah ah! Ah ah!

Lilacs and rose-bushes Ah ah!
The fair one, Ah ah! Ah ah!
The fairest one is you!

Handsome lords and beautiful ladies,
Love, love,
In your silken finery,
Love.

Draw the curtains, draw the curtains!
Who would like my soul?
Love!

Ah ah! Ah ah! Ah ah!

Love! Ah ah! Ah ah! Ah ah!
Love and kisses, ah the fair one,
Ah ah! the fairest one is you!

Nadia Boulanger lived a long, long life - from 1887 to 1979 - during which she was primarily known as a teacher of composition. Her numerous students include Elliot Carter, Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, Quincy Jones, and Astor Piazzola; that is, her teachings influenced almost an entire century of composers, and her distinct musical voice is reflected in the work of hundreds. It's rather unfortunate, then, that Nadia Boulanger stopped composing soon after her sister's passing in 1918. This piece is on the livelier side, with bountiful laughing and a bright, cheerful melody. You can hear the pure, bashful joy of having a crush on someone, not knowing if they admire you back. The poem is written by a Georges Delaquer (1880-1970), who was a frequent songwriter for both Nadia Boulanger and her sister Lili Boulanger.

from *12 Romances*, Op. 21 - Sergei Rachmaninoff

No. 5 - Siren', 'Lilacs'

Poutru, na zare,
Po rasistoj trave,
Ya pajdu svezhym utrom dyshat';
I v dushystuyu ten',
Gde tesnitsya siren',
Ya pojdu svoyo shchast'ye iskat'...

V zhizni shchast'ye odno
Mne najti suzhdeno,
I to shchast'ye v sireni zhyvyot;
Na zelyonykh vetvyakh,
Na dushistykh kistyakh
Moyo bednoe shchast'ye tsvetyot...

No. 5 - Lilacs

In the morning, at dawn,
Through the dew-clad grass,
I shall walk, breathing in the freshness of morning;
And to the fragrant shade,
Where lilacs cluster,
I shall go in search of happiness. . .

In life there is but one happiness
That I am fated to find,
And that happiness dwells in the lilacs;
On their green branches,
In their fragrant clusters
My poor happiness blooms. . .

Sergei Rachmaninoff, renowned Russian Composer, lived from 1873 to 1943, and, like many Russian artists of the time, left the country following political turmoil in 1917. Notably, Rachmaninoff's last published songs - the *12 Romances* - were composed in 1917. These songs, then, reflect Rachmaninoff's earlier writing - intimate, flowing, lyrical, and harmonically colourful. This song in particular was well loved by the composer and rearranged for solo piano later in life. The text is taken from Russian poet Ekaterina Andreyena Beketova, who lived from 1855 to 1892.

Life Story, Op. 8b - Thomas Adès

After you've been to bed together for the first time,
without the advantage or disadvantage of any prior acquaintance,
the other party very often says to you,
Tell me about yourself, I want to know all about you,
what's your story? And you think maybe they really and truly do

sincerely want to know your life story, and so you light up
a cigarette and begin to tell it to them, the two of you
lying together in completely relaxed positions
like a pair of rag dolls a bored child dropped on a bed.

You tell them your story, or as much of your story
as time or a fair degree of prudence allows, and they say,

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,
each time a little more faintly, until the oh
is just an audible breath, and then of course

there's some interruption. Slow room service comes up
with a bowl of melting ice cubes, or one of you rises to pee
and gaze at himself with the mild astonishment in the bathroom mirror.
And then, the first thing you know, before you've had time
to pick up where you left off with your enthralling life story,
they're telling you their life story, exactly as they'd intended to all along,

and you're saying, Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,
each time a little more faintly, the vowel at last becoming
no more than an audible sigh,
as the elevator, halfway down the corridor and a turn to the left,
draws one last, long, deep breath of exhaustion
and stops breathing forever. Then?

Well, one of you falls asleep
and the other one does likewise with a lighted cigarette in his mouth,
and that's how people burn to death in hotel rooms.

Life Story is a compositional whirlwind that showcases a wildly different style of art song. The music is dissonant and rhythmically inscrutable, and the first page of the score immediately challenges the performer with the style indication of "late Billie Holiday"; the piece stands as an interpretive monolith. Even more intimidating is the text, by Tennessee Williams (1911—1983), which recounts the hazy aftermath of a Queer hookup in 1930s America. The composer Thomas Adès (b. 1971) is gay. No doubt, the composition of this piece (and a contemporary reinterpretation) is influenced heavily by the impact of HIV/AIDS on this world, and the global AIDS crisis of the late 80s and 90s. How dangerous it is to love when that love *will* kill you. *Life Story's* back-and-forth comic and tragic narratives, coupled with the dramatic irony of Queer Life and Death as coloured by HIV/AIDS is brutal, welcoming, violent, warm and, to a Queer audience, intimately familiar.