

THE GESUALDO SIX WISHING TREE

PROGRAM NOTES

We open our program with one of the very few pieces by **William Byrd** that might rightly be called a madrigal: *This sweet and merry month of May*. However common it has become to refer to almost all his English-texted vocal works as ‘Elizabethan madrigals’, the fact remains that Byrd was generally reluctant to allow the Italian madrigal style – with its heightened emotional expression and lavish word-painting – to influence his own musical language. It was only to satisfy the publisher Thomas Watson’s wish to include the work of a native British composer in his *Italian madrigalls, Englished* collection of 1590 that Byrd truly invested his energy in such music. Listen to how the composer portrays birds calling to one another, as if from branch to branch, with short, lively melismas, or how the ‘beasts do play’ through dancing syncopation. Of note, too, is the conventional praise of Elizabeth in the text, reflected here in a stretching of the harmonic pulse and a high tessitura for the upper voices, creating a sense of grandeur.

Bristol-based composer **David Bednall** chose a passage from St Luke to set for his commission from Opus Anglicanum, *Put out into the deep*. The story tells of Jesus filling the doubtful fishermen’s nets, which had been empty from the previous night’s work. *Put out into the deep* is a beautifully crafted piece which draws on a rich vein of twentieth-century British composers, including Edward Bairstow, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells.

The term ‘folk song’ was first coined in the mid-nineteenth century to describe songs that were widely known and sung for entertainment, pleasure, and communal sharing. Their origins were diverse: some came from professional or amateur songwriters, others from plays, song sheets, or printed collections, but the majority survived through oral tradition, passed from singer to singer across generations. Our first setting, *Bushes and briars*, arranged by **Ralph Vaughan Williams**, explores English folk tradition. During this tale of love and longing, the speaker reflects on lost affection amid the beauty of the natural world. Vaughan Williams enhances the emotional resonance by shifting textures: from rich four-part harmony through to subtle duetting lines, allowing the story to be sometimes declaimed to a crowded room, and at others gently whispered in your ear. The music flows with the natural pulse of the countryside, its ebb and swell reflecting the cycles of life and memory.

The Wind’s Warning by **Alison Willis** was the winning work in the 21-and-over category of The Gesualdo Six’s second composition competition. Willis chose to set *The Wind*, believed to be the last poem written by Ivor Gurney. According to the editor of the collection in which the poem appears, it was written on the back of an Oxford University Press letterhead dated 6 March 1929 and signed ‘Valentine Fane’ by Gurney (he frequently used different names on his later manuscripts.) The poem is a bleak reflection on the passing of time and lost opportunities. Musically the piece uses vocalisations to create the sound of the wind against which are set gently dissonant clusters. Melodic motifs drift in and out until the middle section, “At dawn a thin rain wept” which becomes more lyrical and tonal. The piece finishes with a return to the opening soundscape.

The Wishing Tree, from which this program takes its name, was composed by **Joby Talbot** in 2002 and was first performed in that year by the BBC and King's Singers. Talbot plays games with texture, splitting the text up syllable-by-syllable between voices, using a rhythmic ostinato in an irregular time signature to virtuosic effect. The composer notes: "The feeling I would most readily associate with the Elizabethan madrigalists is a sense of perpetual yearning. Kathleen Jamie's poem expresses just such a sense of longing but bypasses the Arcadian idyll to link people's expectations and desires more directly to the natural world. My music is accordingly punchy and angular – a sense of desperation creeping in as words and syllables are bounced from one side of the ensemble to the other."

The US-based composer **Christen Taylor Holmes** sets Emily Dickinson's *Summer shower* for four voices, with each line bringing out elements of the text through sensitive and delicate writing. Holmes creates textures that often feel as if they are unfolding organically from the poetry itself. The result is a piece with the timeless quality of a folk song, where subtle harmonic colours illuminate Dickinson's imagery.

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford's setting of *The blue bird* is his most celebrated part-song. This gem is the third of Eight Part-Songs, all settings of texts by Mary Coleridge, who during her lifetime was much better known as a novelist. Highly regarded by a minority including some distinguished figures, her poetry is fresh and direct. Stanford's admiration of her work was not shared by many of his contemporaries, though Frank Bridge and Hubert Parry are among the exceptions. The serenity of the picture painted owes something to the unorthodox use of unresolved chords – the piece tapers away on one – and a judicious technique of hanging, lengthy notes which allow no ripples on the surface of this particular lake.

The oak and the ash is a traditional English ballad dating back to the seventh century, believed to have first been printed on a broadside – an early form of newspaper. Its story follows a young girl who moves from the 'North Country' to London, expressing homesickness and longing for the familiar landscapes and rhythms of her earlier life. This arrangement by **Gordon Langford** has long been one of our favourites, particularly for how he allows the undulating melody to glide through a variety of vocal scorings. My personal highlight is at 'No doubt, did I please, I could marry with ease' as the uncertainty in the text is mirrored by a shift to a neighbouring key, followed by a clever escape manoeuvre to allow us to return home.

As with most long-surviving melodies passed down by ear, the origins of *My bonny lies over the ocean* are a mystery. Perhaps it was written about Charles Edward Stuart – erstwhile claimant to the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland – known as 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', following his defeat at the Battle of Culloden. **Anna Semple** bookends her arrangement with a dreamy aleatoric passage, which gives way to a series of duets in the middle of the work.

We travel to Ireland with *The lark in the clear air*, here in an arrangement by **James Whitbourn**. This cherished folk song celebrates the beauty of the natural world. Whitbourn's arrangement preserves the simplicity of the original melody, as it soars like a bird above the fields, looking down over gentle harmonies which paint a vivid musical portrait of a sunlit landscape.

El grillo ('The cricket') is composed in the style of a frottola, a type of secular Italian song that flourished around the turn of the sixteenth century. Frottole favoured clear harmonies, catchy rhythms, and an immediacy that made them ideal for convivial, courtly entertainment, and *El grillo* is among the most charming examples of the genre. Its music alternates between long, sustained notes and bursts of quick, chattering syllables, delightfully mimicking the cricket's incessant song. The piece is often linked to a certain Carlo Grillo, a singer at the Milanese court whose surname conveniently matches the insect and who was known for grumbling about his patron's casual approach to paying wages. Its quirky style has led some scholars to question **Josquin's** authorship, yet it remains an irresistibly vivid miniature: witty, bright, and brimming with personality.

Poulenc's visit in 1936 to the shrine of the Black Virgin at Rocamadour marked a profound turning point in his creative life. The remote pilgrimage site – set high in the limestone cliffs of the region from which his father's family hailed – reawakened a sense of faith that would place choral music at the heart of his output for the rest of his career. In the months that followed, he composed two sacred choral works in quick succession, plus the *Petites voix*, setting of poems by Madeleine Ley for three-part children's voices. Poulenc keeps the writing deliberately simple, letting the freshness of the poetry and the natural colour of children's voices lead the way. Melodies are often shaped in small, supple arches, gently rocking back and forth, while the harmony remains largely diatonic, illuminated by those unmistakable Poulenc turns of phrase: sudden shifts of colour, a wistful modal inflection, or a chord that briefly darkens the light. The three parts frequently move in close parallel motion, before peeling away into more independent lines. Moments of stillness, where time seems to suspend on a single sonority, are as telling as the more animated passages.

Orlando Gibbons was one of the most versatile English composers of his time, writing numerous keyboard works, around thirty fantasias for viols, many popular verse anthems, and an abundance of madrigals. *The silver swan* (published in 1612) is probably his best-known madrigal, and presents the legend that swans sing only just before their deaths. Gibbons's words for this madrigal were perhaps his own creation, though they were more likely written by his musical patron, Sir Christopher Hatton, who chose the texts for many of Gibbons's madrigals. The line "more geese than swans now live, more fools than wise" has been taken as a comment on the demise of the English madrigal form or, more generally, on the loss of the late Elizabethan musical tradition.

Sarah Rimkus wrote *My heart is like a singing bird* for The Gesualdo Six's first composition competition in 2016. It has remained one of the ensemble's favourite works, in part because of its imaginative setting of words by Christina Rossetti. The two countertenors duet at the opening, setting out the melodic theme as the accompaniment gradually enters, providing a harmonic backdrop to canon above. The duet then transitions to the lowest voices, before a gradual increase in tempo and dynamic leads into the middle section. A clever device, hard to pick out aurally but evident in the score, is the strategic placement of notes for the accompanying parts, which makes the shape of a heart. As the voices gradually drop out, a single tenor note is left hanging as the work draws to a close.

Composed in 2013 as a birthday gift for a friend, *Louisa* sets William Wordsworth's 1805 poem celebrating a spirited personality enlivened by the natural world. The principal melody unfolds in the manner of a folk song – free and wandering – as it passes between the voices and is re-harmonised across successive verses. The work inhabits a distinctly English pastoral sound world, with echoes of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Robert Burns brought *My love is like a red, red rose* to public attention, though not quite in the way he intended. In his final years, Burns worked extensively on traditional Scottish songs and requested that these words appear in a publication by his friend James Thomson. Before that could happen, another collaborator, Pietro Urbani, published them first, ending their friendship in the process. The now-popular tune, *Low Down in the Broom*, was paired with Burns's text decades later, its arching melody allowing the soloist to convey a determined devotion as it continuously reaches upwards. The words have inspired settings by composers including Robert Schumann and Amy Beach, and the song also holds special personal significance for me: the ensemble sang it during the signing of the register at my wedding.