

Programme Notes, St. George's Bristol, 13.06.24

Welcome to St. George's and the launch concert for our new album – *The Past & I* – which is a celebration of Thomas Hardy's unique influence on art song over the last one hundred years. All the music you will hear tonight either sets or responds to poetry by Thomas Hardy. You will hear new arrangements of existing songs alongside new music by Kerry Andrew and Arthur Keegan.

Choosing the songs to arrange for the album wasn't easy. We wanted to find overlooked gems as well as famous Hardy settings from across the 20th Century. To find these unknown songs I worked with publishers and archives to locate and review unpublished manuscripts. Many didn't suit arrangement to guitar or quartet, others were tantalisingly incomplete or, plainly, not as good as others. We worked on about twenty completed arrangements before choosing just eight to record. What emerges, I hope, is a collection that celebrates the canon of Hardy song whilst bringing new music to the repertoire as well.

Whilst working on the arrangements we commissioned Kerry Andrew to compose something new. Kerry's piece - *The Echo Elf Answers* – is a beautiful, haunting evocation that also shows off the performers' extraordinary versatility.

The whole idea for this programme began with my own song cycle *Elegies for Emma* which I began writing after hearing Lotte sing for the first time in 2018. *Elegies for Tom* is it's sister piece, written mostly in 2020/21, is a string quartet with sung interludes between its five movements.

In the poetry, themes of nature, the passing of time and railways are present throughout the set which is a pretty good reflection of Hardy's poetic output generally! A few details about each piece are given below.

All the poetry for this programme is available to read at www.arthurkeegan.co.uk/texts or by scanning the QR code. All programme notes are written by Arthur Keegan, except where stated.



Programme

Gerald Finzi – *The Too Short Time* (1949) *

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Derek Holman – *Midnight on the Great Western* (2011) *
Muriel Herbert – *Faintheart in a Railway Train* (post 1926)*
Benjamin Britten – *At the Railway Station, Upway* (1953)*
Gerald Finzi – *Shortening Days* (1928) *

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Arthur Keegan – *Elegies for Emma* (2023)

1. *Days to Recollect (part 1)*
2. *The Walk*
3. *Rain on a Grave*
4. *Interlude: I Look into My Glass*
5. *The Voice*
6. *She to Him*
7. *Days to Recollect (part 2)*

--- Interval ---

Kerry Andrew – *The Echo Elf Answers* (2022)

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Imogen Holst – *Weathers* (1926) *
Ivor Gurney – *In the black Winter Morning* (1924) *
Robin Milford – *If it's Ever Spring Again* (1938) *

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Arthur Keegan – String Quartet no. 1 'Elegies for Tom' (2023) **

1. *Delicate-filmed, as new spun silk*
1st Interlude
2. *An eyelid's soundless blink*
2nd Interlude
3. *Nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm*
3rd Interlude
4. *Full-starred heavens that winter sees*
4th Interlude
5. *A new bell's boom*

* new arrangement by Arthur Keegan

** world premiere performance

The Too Short Time – Gerald Finzi (1949)

Gerald Finzi is the most prolific setter of Hardy's words and this beautiful song is archetypal of his naturalistic, easy working of the poetry. The piano part works very naturally for guitar and the atmospheric opening – a musical rendering of leaves falling from a tree (as depicted in the first line of the poem) – works especially well for delicate guitar harmonics.

Midnight on the Great Western – Derek Holman (2011)

This beautiful song was originally written for harp. The opening and closing sections are light and lyrical, the middle section is much darker, with knotty harmony creating a disturbing atmosphere appropriate to Hardy's rich, evocative narrative.

Faintheart in a Railway Train – Muriel Herbert (unsure, post 1926)

This setting is playful, with clear word-painting of the sound of a train in motion which works perfectly for string quartet. The poem is a simple story of sliding doors and a missed romantic opportunity.

At the Railway Station, Upway – Benjamin Britten (1953)

Hardy's prowess as a story teller comes to the fore again in this poem which is essentially a (very) short story. The original piano part alludes to violin writing (reflecting the violin in the story). So in this arrangement, the guitar is playing music originally written for a piano that is trying to sound like a violin.

Shortening Days – Gerald Finzi (1928)

This was so much fun to arrange! The atmospheric, fidgety accompaniment of the first half works brilliantly for quartet, before the sadness of summer leaving gives way to the striding entrance of autumn's cider maker. The joyful end, celebrating the return of cider, should resonate well with a Bristolian audience!

Elegies for Emma – Arthur Keegan (2023)

I – *Days to Recollect (Part 1)*

II – *The Walk*

III – *Rain on a Grave*

Interlude – I Look into My Glass

IV – *The Voice*

V – *She to Him*

VI – *Days to Recollect (part 2)*

This piece began life as a single song (The Walk) written after hearing Lotte sing for the first time in 2018. The rest of the piece was written over the following five years as this project developed.

Thomas Hardy met Emma Gifford in Cornwall in 1870 and, after a romantic courtship, they married four years later. Over the years their marriage soured to the point of acrimony and Emma spent her days in the attic rooms of their house where Florence Dugdale (who would become Hardy's second wife in 1914) was a frequent guest. Within this context, the outpouring of grief and love in Hardy's Poems of 1912-13 (written just after Emma's death) is a surprise. Hardy published over 900 poems, astonishingly, more than one-fifth are about Emma but only one was written before her death.

These elegaic poems do not shy away from the couple's complicated relationship. They include regret, remorse and anger. They are also threaded with love, though often a nostalgic love for the Emma he first met in Cornwall as a younger man. The poetry is laced with evocative, ghostly imagery, it seems Emma's presence is always felt from beyond the grave as Hardy writes.

With all of this going on, these poems are a dream to set! I hope the music holds onto the complex emotional core of the poetry, evokes the eerie, ghostly tone of the poems and gives Emma a voice (albeit through Thomas' words). Writing these songs was a deeply collaborative process, my heartfelt thanks go to Lotte Betts-Dean and James Girling for their ideas, advice and hard work putting this together.

The Echo Elf Answers – Kerry Andrew (2022)

“The Echo Elf Answers... is mischievous, eerie, full of the impish power of the ‘echo elf’. The guitarist ‘knocks’ at the door, as the singer seeks answers in classic folk-tale manner...”

- Lucy Walker. [From the booklet essay for *The Past & I: 100 Years of Thomas Hardy*]

What a pleasure to get a commission to set the words of Thomas Hardy! Though a great fan of his novels, I didn't much know his poetry and found this wonderfully, sweetly dark poem right up my street. Being the singer and arranger of folk ballads as well as a composer, I felt like I was bringing two of my musical worlds together. My great thanks to Arthur, Lotte and James.

- Kerry Andrew

Weathers - Imogen Holst (1926)

Finding the pristinely notated manuscript of Imogen Holst’s setting of ‘Weathers’ in The Red House Archive was such a pleasure. The song is a beautiful example of naturalistic text setting and the sweet, almost naïve air of the poem is beautifully reflected in the music which is perfectly suited to the guitar.

In the Black Winter Morning - Ivor Gurney (1924)

Hardy’s own title of this poem was simply ‘Bereft’ and it’s a gloomy account of longing and grief. Ivor Gurney wrote this piece whilst hospitalised with mental health difficulties caused or exacerbated by his time fighting in World War 1. We know this piece hadn’t been performed publicly until we unearthed the manuscript (with grateful assistance of the Ivor Gurney Trust). It’s possible it had only been heard by Gurney at the piano in the psychiatric hospitals where he spent the last fifteen years of his life.

If its Ever Spring Again – Robin Milford (1938)

This sprightly, jaunty setting of Hardy’s pastoral poem works perfectly for guitar! Milford’s music sits exactly within the English pastoral school and encompasses large-scale oratorio as well as intimate art songs like this. The upbeat lightness of the song is in contrast with Milford’s own story; lifelong struggles with his mental health were exacerbated by a series of personal tragedies and he died by his own hand in 1959.

String Quartet no. 1 ‘Elegies for Tom’ – Arthur Keegan (2023)

I - *Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk*

1st Interlude

II - *An eyelid’s soundless blink*

2nd Interlude

III - *Nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm*

3rd Interlude

IV - *Full-starred heavens that winter sees*

4th Interlude

V - *A new bell’s boom*

My first string quartet is a companion piece to the song cycle *Elegies for Emma* which I was writing at the same time. Its five-movement structure follows the Hardy poem *Afterwards* in which Hardy (aged 77 at the time of its publication) reflects on his own legacy, hoping he would be seen in posterity as someone who was kind and was sensitive to the natural world.

Each movement is a response to the atmosphere, mood and imagery conjured by specific lines from each stanza (which are the movement titles). These lines demonstrate Hardy’s curious taste for unusual and evocative imagery. The interludes between movements include a vocal line singing Philip Larkin’s poem *The Mower*. Larkin was a huge fan of Hardy’s poetry and *The Mower* riffs on a line from Hardy’s *Afterwards*, reflecting, extending and developing – with somewhat gruesome imagery – the tale of a hedgehog as well as the kindness which is at the heart of Hardy’s poem.

Lotte Betts-Dean is an Australian mezzo soprano based in the UK with a wide-ranging repertoire and a passion for curation, programming and collaborative project development. Praised for her “irrepressible sense of drama and unmissable, urgent musicality” (The Guardian) and “arrestingly opulent voice” (Gramophone), Lotte is equally at home in chamber music, art song, contemporary repertoire of all kinds, early music, opera and narration.

Recent albums have been released on Delphian Records, Another Timbre, NAXOS and Divine Art Métier, with further recordings due for release on Platoon, BIS and Delphian.

James Girling is a highly versatile British guitarist who lives in Oslo and works internationally. He was tutored by Craig Ogden at the Royal Northern College of Music, where he was recently conferred the honour of Associate Artist. He is the only guitarist to have won the RNCM’s prestigious Gold Medal Award.

Strongly influenced by music traditions rooted in improvisation, James also regularly tours and records with Prohibition-era jazz septet The Easy Rollers and Afrobeat-/Ethiojazz-inspired band Agbeko, who have headlined festivals across mainland Europe and the UK.

The **Ligeti Quartet** has been at the forefront of modern and contemporary music since its formation in 2010, breaking new ground through innovative programming and championing of today’s most exciting composers and artists. The Quartet’s album Nuc (2023, Mercury KX) is a celebration of Anna Meredith’s music for string quartet, including arrangements by the quartet’s viola player Richard Jones. “An album that continually surprises and enlightens” (BBC Music).

Ligeti Quartet are: Freya Goldmark, Patrick Dawkins, Richard Jones, Val Welbanks.
Today’s performance features Gemma Sharples in place of Freya Goldmark.

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