

## PROGRAM NOTES

**W**illiam Walton, born in 1902, roared into the general public's musical consciousness with his dramatic and spectacular 1930/1 oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*. The composer's *Five Bagatelles for Guitar*, from 1971, reveal a more intimate and light-hearted side of their composer. The *Bagatelles* were written especially for the British virtuoso and scholar Julian Bream, and dedicated to fellow composer Malcolm Arnold in celebration of his fiftieth birthday.

The sung portion of *Spring Rites and Romance* begins with four British and four American "part-songs." Part-songs are choral settings of secular texts, often verse, whose subjects are often romantic or pastoral, perhaps borrowing these conceits from the Italian and English madrigalists. In the most finely crafted part-songs, the composer has taken extra care to link the musical rhythm and syntax to the cadences of the language of the poetry. Paul Spicer, noted British conductor of this musical genre, suggests that a greater appreciation of the best part-songs can be achieved by reading each song's text aloud before the music is sung.

Gerald Finzi studied privately with Edward Bairstow from 1918-1922. Finzi greatly admired and promoted the music of his contemporaries, among them Vaughan Williams and Holst. While there are some stylistic similarities to that of his teacher and colleagues, Finzi's musical language evolved into something uniquely his own. A fragile, quietly ecstatic and extremely personal element is never far from view in his work. This is apparent in the two part-songs we offer from his op. 17, each set to the ardent yet tender verse of Robert Bridges.

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford was born in 1852, and showed talent at an early age as both a singer and a 'cellist. His studies included stints in Berlin and Leipzig where the influence of Brahms and the other famous Germanic composers was inescapable. He joined Sir Hubert Parry as Professor of Composition at the founding of the Royal College of Music in 1883, and for the next forty years taught virtually all the subsequent important British composers. So highly regarded was he by his peers, that at his death in 1924 he was buried in Westminster Abbey next to Purcell.

*The Blue Bird* - a great favorite of British audiences - is an impressionistic yet intriguingly austere portrait in color and sound. A shimmering stasis is achieved with the vivid yet calm text almost magically reflected in the music.

Gustav Holst is best known to concertgoers for his very popular 1919 orchestral suite *The Planets*. But church musicians know that Holst wrote a large body of very effective music for choirs. He grew up idolizing Wagner, and in 1895 while a student at the Royal College of Music met Ralph Vaughan Williams where the two became good friends. Holst later became infatuated with Hindu literature and philosophy and left his musical studies to learn Sanskrit. He returned to the College, studied trombone, played in wind ensembles, began teaching, was among the first to revive and be an advocate for the music of Purcell, and began conducting choirs in schools. His big success with *The Planets*, sadly, served only to bewilder him. He became introverted and withdrew from public life. A series of illnesses was broken by a visit to Harvard as Guest Lecturer in Music in 1932, but he fell ill again that spring and died in London – far too soon – in 1934.

*Come to Me*, written in 1903, was intended to be the fifth of Holst's *Five Part Songs*, op. 12, but for reasons unclear, it and the third song were left behind when three of their brethren were published by Novello many years ago. Perhaps Holst felt that the frankly romantic text and the rich, heartfelt music to match it did not project a *persona* appropriate to his later life, or the song harbored a poignant or wistful memory he later chose to forget – we will never know. In any case, *Come to Me* is extraordinarily beautiful, very much worthy of being heard. The Spectrum Singers were privileged to give the first United States performance of this work in 1992 through the gracious assistance of the Holst estate and Faber Music in London. The work has now – finally and thankfully – been published by Faber and is available at last for all to read and admire.

Virgil Thomson's *Four Songs Set to the Poems of Thomas Campion* are as elegant, fastidious and deceptively tricky as the personality of the composer himself. Thomson celebrated what he called "vertical, undifferentiated counterpoint," and the *Four Songs* all exhibit this to a greater or lesser degree. The charm and the skill of the writing manage to artfully camouflage this attempt at simplicity of expression. When combined with the relentless diatonic harmony Thomson favors, one might be tempted to dismiss this music as simplistic and naive, but it is precisely these qualities of simplicity and innocence which befit Campion's beautiful texts so perfectly. And, more is at work in this music than may be first apparent!

These songs were originally written for solo mezzo-soprano with clarinet, harp, and viola accompaniment. When Thomson and Ruggero Vené (a possible pseudonym of a friend?) recast the songs for chorus, a piano accompaniment was supplied. Because the original scoring with three instruments is so colorful, charming and well wrought, and because it more accurately reflects the sound of the original Elizabethan lute-song inspiration for these works, we will perform the choral settings with the original solo accompaniment.

Emilio Vilarrubí Pujol was renowned as a superb guitar soloist, teacher, and scholar. As soloist, he began his career in Barcelona, moved on to Paris, Madrid, London, and then South America. As a scholar, he spent a number of years at the Lisbon Conservatory and the Chigiana Academy in Siena, Italy, and became a world authority on guitar and vihuela repertoire, history, and technique. His *Three Spanish Pieces* were first published in 1926, concurrent with his highly acclaimed concerts in Paris, at the height of his solo career.

The *Trois Chansons* of Claude Debussy exhibit clear homage to the past: they incorporate texts by the celebrated Middle Age lyric poet Duke Charles D'Orleans (1391–1465), and they are modeled on the “old” chanson musical form. Despite this, they are overlaid with newer and richly drawn Debussian harmony. The results create three of the most treasurable of Debussy's too few choral works, and his only *a cappella* creations. The first chanson is simply a love song, in which a man ponders the beauty of his beloved with meltingly beautiful harmonies which slide languidly over and under one another. The second chanson is set for contralto solo over three wordless voices. These accompanying parts onomatopoeically create the sound of a “*tabourin*” – a tambourine or a little drum. The soloist hears the sound of a festival calling her to celebrate the month of May, but as it is early in the morning, she decides instead to drowse in bed a little longer. The text of the third chanson colorfully tells of the villainy of Winter, its destruction of the beauty created by Spring, and thus by all rights ought to be exiled. Solo quartet parts are deftly interwoven through the chorus parts, everything precisely edited and marked by the composer. An accurate yet musical performance of these three little works requires careful concentration and attention to detail.

Clément Janequin was a French renaissance composer best known for his mastery of the chanson form, and for his subsequent and unusual lengthening of it. In so doing, he allowed himself more creative space to develop his musical ideas and to incorporate certain effects which were to become his most famous stylistic traits. One such work, *La Guerre*, depicts two feuding armies. As they face each other,

flashes of the countries' national music are heard, and as they enter into battle one hears the sounds of cannon, overhead artillery shells, trumpets and drums, all depicted vocally. In *Le Chant des Oyseaulx*, the chorus imitates birdsongs instead of battlesongs.

At the outset of *Le Chant des Oyseaulx*, the god of love summons all sleeping hearts to awake from their winter slumbers, and birds begin to join the call, awakening hearts to springtime. As the birds are described – thrush, starling, robin, nightingale - we hear their individual songs. Then, suddenly, with an abrupt shift of gears, Janequin thrusts us into a bustling street scene in France. People walk down the streets, jostling one another (“*q’est là-bas, passe villain*”); perhaps en route to Mass (“*à la messe*”), or, a bar (“*à boire*”). Just which two venues is unclear, and the wonderful confusion created by the text is echoed in the music. The delightful contrast of sacred vs. secular “destinations” is typical of Janequin, who often precariously perched his chanson texts between the two. The effect of the city street is soon replaced by the sounds of birds, as the text tells what each bird signifies, such as the cuckoo, long a universal symbol of infidelity. The culminating scene depicts all the birds singing together, wakening the sleeping hearts, and thereby reawakening love in the world. A great part of the fun is the confusion – the profane combination of the busy streets, the church, the lovers, and the birds. The challenge for the chorus is to breeze (or, fly) cleanly through the confusion as Janequin intends.

Our two Brahms *Lieder* were written as works for chamber performance – music at home, perhaps – works presumably intended for solo vocal quartet, either *a cappella* or with piano accompaniment. One might ask: why delve into this repertoire when so much Brahms exists clearly intended for ensemble performance?

Some answers:

- precedent exists for the concept of “choral *Lieder*”
- certain of these quartets are unusually well-suited to larger ensemble performance. Those performed tonight are greatly enriched by the larger number of singers, and the impact of the conjunction of music and poetry is significantly enhanced
- these works deserve to be heard by as many listeners as practicable

*Waldesnacht*, redolent of the atmosphere of the dark green woods, dates from 1874 and is notable for its rich harmonic progressions, suspensions, and sense of repose.

*Der Abend*, written but one year later is a concise masterwork, painting in almost operatic colors the symbolic descent of the sun in the form of Phoebus, the archer, and his chariot being welcomed into the sea by his lover Thetis, as Cupid leads the exhausted horses to a cooling stream.

Annotator David Wright has written: "... By 1940, the crosscurrents of war had washed a remarkable collection of musicians ashore in Beverly Hills, California, among them Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Korngold, and from Florence, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895–1968). Like Korngold, Castelnuovo-Tedesco wrote concert works and vivid scores for Hollywood films."

*Romancero Gitano* (Gypsy Ballads), set to verse by the complicated and haunted Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, probably owes its origins to the friendship between the composer and the famous Spanish guitar virtuoso Andrés Segovia, for whom the former had written a Guitar Concerto in 1939.

Imbued with rich Spanish/Gypsy harmonies and color, *Romancero Gitano* offers many opportunities for chorus and guitar – together and separately – to display languid sensuousness and fiery virtuosity.

Wright continues: "During the first three songs, the music grows in violence, as (does) Lorca's imagery. First it is just a twinge of regret at a lost love, carried away by the rippling accompaniment of *The Ballad of the Three Rivers*. In *The Guitar* that instrument weeps, like 'a heart stabbed by five fingers.' *The Dagger* itself appears, horribly in the third song. Finally, the *Procession* comes into view, its mystical images transforming the grief of Earthly life. The composer has written:

I recall those strange religious processions, simultaneously macabre and gaudy, in which are carried into the courtyard the images of Christ (for the most part emaciated and marked with horrible wounds) and of the Madonna (covered with brocade and precious jewels), accompanied by wooden statues of the Paladin of Charlemagne (or of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic); the grotesque figures of Carnival.

After this central song, three more songs bring the music back to life: the mournful tango *Memento*, the *seguidilla Dance* (in which the sinister, ghostly Carmen is glimpsed dancing in the street at night), and finally the wild, rhapsodic *jota, Castanets*."

~Program Notes © 2003 by John W. Ehrlich,  
with some text by David Wright on *Romancero Gitano*.