

Recital of English Music

Aileen Thomson – soprano soloist

Accompanied by Christina Pavlaki, Alexis Bjørkstén and Kåre Sandvik

Fairest Isle from King Arthur

by Henry Purcell (1659 - 1695)

Purcell's 1691 work *King Arthur* is typical of a style of opera (known as 'dramatick-opera' or, less glamorously, 'semi-opera') popular during the Baroque period. To be frank, such works are usually utterly bonkers: *King Arthur* is no exception. Loosely based on the story of Arthur's battle with the Saxons, it features characters as diverse as Thor and Merlin; the aria *Fairest Isle* is sung by Venus in Act V, and is an ode to the Isle of Britain - a place wonderful enough for her to 'forsake her Cyprian grove'! *Fairest Isle* inspired Charles Wesley to pen what has become one of England's best-loved hymns (albeit sung almost exclusively to a Welsh tune) - *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, as featured in the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (Prince William & Catherine Middleton) in 2011.

Where'er you walk

from *Semele* by G.F. Handel

From Venus to Jupiter, and back to Handel. *Where'er you walk* is an aria sung by Jupiter in Act 2 of another of Handel's masterpieces: *Semele*. And, rather like *Rodelinda*, *Semele* lapsed into almost total obscurity for over two centuries after its first few performances. Originally - and rather sneakily - presented by Handel as an Oratorio (which are supposed to be religious - Christian - works), this work is based on the character of Semele, the mother of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine-making (amongst other things). The character of Jupiter is normally sung by a tenor, but such is the popularity of this aria that it has been appropriated by singers of all voice-parts.

Silent Noon

by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958)

Jumping a couple of centuries, from the 18th to the 20th, we land in what might well be described as the 'golden age' of English Song. Indeed, the period after the death of the great 'English' Baroque composers (Purcell, Handel (who was really a German) etc.) and before the start of the 20th Century was a somewhat barren period for English classical music - so much so that German critic Oskar Schmitz (somewhat sharply) described England during that period as 'Das Land ohne Musik' - 'The land without music'. All that changed with Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries at the Royal College of Music in London, who are credited with reintroducing a national style of music to England, rooted in the folk traditions of centuries past. This work, *Silent Noon*, is one of his most famous individual songs, and is a setting of a poem by Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 - 1882). The poem, and Vaughan Williams' setting of it, are both absolutely typical of the preoccupation of English composers of this period with England's rural countryside, particularly as it existed before industrialisation threatened its very existence.

Now sleeps the crimson petal

by Roger Quilter (1877 - 1953)

Unlike Vaughan Williams, Roger Quilter's reputation in England rests almost exclusively on his songs. Despite being an almost direct contemporary of Vaughan Williams, Quilter was the product of a German musical education: after Eton, he studied for five years at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, becoming part of what became known as the 'Frankfurt Circle' of British composers. Whilst his works are less 'English' than those of Vaughan Williams' circle, *Now sleeps the crimson petal* is an early example of his song-writing prowess, and sets a poem by that most English of poets, Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Take, o take those lips away from Seven Shakespeare Songs

by Madeleine Dring (1923 - 1977)

Madeleine Dring is unusual in the context of this recital, and indeed in the contexts of both English Song and classical music more generally, insofar as she is a woman. She is also the most contemporary of all the composers featured today, especially by style. Born and brought up in London, she too attended the Royal College of Music, whilst also studying mime and drama, influences which are clear to hear in her music. Her output is mainly comprised of short works such as songs and solo piano compositions; it is a great shame that family responsibilities kept her from composing larger-scale works. Stylistically, her music is unashamedly 'jazzy', and is certainly very different from that of her teachers at the Royal College, who included Vaughan Williams.

Song of a nightclub proprietress

from *Five Betjeman Songs* by Madeleine Dring

Another song by Madeleine Dring concludes today's recital, although it could not be further removed from a setting of Shakespeare. The *Song of a nightclub proprietress* is a poem by John Betjeman (1906 - 1984), who was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom (the country's 'official poet') from 1972 until his death. His poetry divides opinion as to its quality, but he was widely regarded as a 'national treasure', and his writing tended to focus on an England which no longer really existed - a nostalgic and fond remembrance of times past which has always been typical of the English older generations and upper classes. Whilst this poem's title might indicate a somewhat light-hearted work, it is, however, regarded as being one of Betjeman's bleaker writings, and Dring's mournful, bluesy accompaniment perfectly encapsulates this.