

SCHOLA
Cantorum of Oxford

Steven Grahl
Conductor

Patrick Maxwell
Conducting Scholar

Britten: *Hymn to St Cecilia* *Flower Songs*

Weir – a blue true dream of sky

Dove – The Passing of the Year

Shaw – And the swallow

Sam Mitchell
Piano

Monday 16 June 2025, 8:00 pm
Trinity College Auditorium
Broad St, Oxford OX1 3BH



From the Chairman of the Trustees



Schola Cantorum of Oxford, the Oxford University Chamber Choir, is delighted to be presenting this concert of music by Benjamin Britten, Jonathan Dove and others. Schola Cantorum provides a great musical experience for its members, but also gives audiences in Oxford access to a wonderful range of choral repertoire – both sacred and secular. The choir sets out to challenge the best young singers from across the University to perform to the highest standards, and to provide an outstanding musical performance experience.

The choir has an enviable and unbroken 60-year history and has played a pivotal role in the development of an astonishing number of singers and choral conductors of the last six decades, building an international reputation through extensive tours and recordings.

If you would like to receive regular information about its concerts, please email us at admin@schola-cantorum.net or use the QR code below to sign up via our website at www.schola-cantorum.net.

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Please switch off mobile phones
Photography is not permitted during the performance

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Five Flower Songs Opus 47

It may seem a strange thing to say about this country's most respected twentieth-century composer, but Benjamin Britten knew when and how to please. The highlights of his choral works presented in tonight's programme are challenging pieces of music: but they are also essays in concision and efficacy. Funerals, weddings, stage plays, films and protests – Britten wrote for them all, often at intense speed. His Weberian roots in the obscure provinces of the English musical scene should not make Britten's industriousness a surprise to us. Perhaps it is misleading that biographers often turn to Britten's personal life as their first port of call. A more basic diary of his extraordinarily diverse composing catalogue would perhaps get us closer to this sensitive and complex man.

The *Five Flower Songs* of 1950 are perfect examples of this attention to occasion. They were written for a very specific purpose; an outside performance by a student choir at Dartington Hall, Devon, to celebrate the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst. The couple were keen botanists. Britten was keen not to allow his audience to get bored: the songs get through a striking variety of poetry in not quite twelve minutes, and maintain a perfect balance between the impetuosity of the opening and closing numbers and the more staid textures of the middle settings. The pieces were first performed out of doors, with the threat of the 'mellow showers' mentioned by Robert Herrick always at play. Much of the choral texture is boisterous, thereby able to get over any natural impediments, while the cascading accelerando which finishes these delightful pieces sets up the guests for a swift transfer to the dinner celebrations.

These are not quite 'party pieces', however. Britten's choice of poetry was always careful, and George Crabbe had already shown his deep influence on the composer in *Peter Grimes*. The frantic opening setting Herrick's text *To Daffodils* is a vibrant example of Britten's darkly enigmatic scene-setting – the harmonies on 'even-song' suggest something is slightly awry in our generally pastoral scene. Eventually the music peters out to the repeated call of 'Ne'er to be found again', transient as the soft patter of the 'summer rain'. Nonetheless, the joyous mood is restored in Britten's final setting, a quite brilliant surge of energy involving the narrative voice in every voice part, telling the typically strange 'Ballad of Green Broom'. We have passed through the different characters of the spring months, and into the bright sun of summer.

1. To Daffodils

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon:
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.
Stay, stay

Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the evensong;
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a Spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or any thing.
We die,
As your hours do, and dry
Away,
Like to the Summer's rain;
Or as the pearls of morning's dew
Ne'er to be found again!

Robert Herrick (1591 - 1674)

In every chink delights the fern to grow,
With glossy leaf and tawny bloom below:

The few dull flowers that o'er the place
are spread
Partake the nature of their fenny bed.

These, with our sea-weeds, rolling up
and down,
Form the contracted Flora of our town.

George Crabbe (1754 - 1832)

2. The Succession of the Four Sweet Months

First, April, she with mellow showers
Opens the way for early flowers,
Then after her comes smiling May
In a more rich and sweet array,
Next enters June and brings us more
Gems than those two that went before,
Then (lastly,) July comes and she
More wealth brings in than all those
three;
April! May! June! July!

Robert Herrick

3. Marsh Flowers

Here the strong mallow strikes her slimy
root,
Here the dull night-shade hangs her
deadly fruit;
On hills of dust the henbane's faded
green,
And pencill'd flower of sickly scent is
seen;

Here on its wiry stem, in rigid bloom,
Grows the salt lavender that lacks
perfume.

At the wall's base the fiery nettle springs,
With fruit globose and fierce with
poison'd stings;

4. The Evening Primrose

When once the sun sinks in the west,
And dew-drops pearl the Evening's
breast;
Almost as pale as moonbeams are,
Or its companionable star,
The Evening Primrose opes anew
Its delicate blossoms to the dew;
And hermit-like, shunning the light,
Wastes its fair bloom upon the Night;
Who, blindfold to its fond caresses,
Knows not the beauty he possesses.
Thus it blooms on while Night is by;
When Day looks out with open eye,
'Bashed at the gaze it cannot shun,
It faints, and withers, and is gone.

John Clare (1793 - 1864)

5. Ballad of Green Broom

There was an old man lived out in the
wood,
And his trade was a-cutting of Broom,
green Broom,
He had but one son without thought
without good
Who lay in his bed till 'twas noon, bright
noon.

The old man awoke one morning and
spoke,
He swore he would fire the room, that
room,

If his John would not rise and open his
eyes,
And away to the wood to cut Broom,
green Broom.

So Johnny arose and slipp'd on his
clothes
And away to the wood to cut Broom,
green Broom,
He sharpen'd his knives, and for once he
contrives
To cut a great bundle of Broom, green
Broom.
When Johnny pass'd under a Lady's fine
house,
Pass'd under a Lady's fine room, fine
room,
She call'd to her maid: "Go fetch me," she
said,

"Go fetch me the boy that sells Broom,
green Broom!"

When Johnny came into the Lady's fine
house,
And stood in the Lady's fine room, fine
room,
"Young Johnny" she said, "Will you give
up your trade
And marry a lady in bloom, full bloom?"

Johnny gave his consent, and to church
they both went,
And he wedded the Lady in bloom, full
bloom;
At market and fair, all folks do declare,
There's none like the Boy that sold
Broom, green Broom.

Anon.

Caroline Shaw (b. 1982) And the Swallow

Caroline Shaw's distinctive musical voice has been put to eclectic use throughout a career already hitting two decades. 'And the swallow' is a powerful setting of words in a new version of Psalm 84. The psalmist's wonder at 'your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts' has frequently been set to music – Brahms' setting in *Ein Deutsches Requiem* perhaps the most famous, and performed by this choir in November of last year. Shaw's setting strikes a more awestruck and contemplative mood, with a low choral writing rising up to a harmonic transition in the middle which then falls back down, as the lower voices tell of a 'pass through the ... place of springs' and the 'autumn rains' that 'cover it with pools'.

how beloved is your dwelling place,
o lord of hosts,
my soul yearns faints
my heart and my flesh cry out

The sparrow found a house
and the swallow her nest,
where she may raise her young

They pass through the Valley of bakka,
they make it a place of springs
the autumn rains also covers it with pools

Text from Psalm 84

Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

The Hour Glass Suite H.148: II. 'The Dew Fairy'

Frank Bridge, a distinguished British composer and violist, is perhaps best known today as the mentor of Benjamin Britten, yet his own music displays refined expressive artistry and supreme craft. *The Hour Glass Suite*, published in 1920 for solo piano, is a whimsical collection of short pieces inspired by childhood imagination and fantasy.

The second movement, *The Dew Fairy*, is a gentle and lyrical character piece. Marked *Andante tranquillo*, it evokes a serene, dreamlike world. With delicate, impressionistic harmonies and graceful melodic lines, Bridge captures the quiet shimmer of early morning.

A committed pacifist, Bridge's music took a dramatic turn after the First World War, becoming notably darker and more angular. Though written post-war, this piece recalls his earlier, more lyrical style. Perhaps its whimsical content reflects a longing for a simpler, more innocent past.

Britten

Hymn to St Cecilia

Britten left England for America in May 1939, citing the greater opportunities for artistic expression and financial security, but in Spring 1942 he decided to return. The *Hymn to St Cecilia*, setting words by W.H. Auden, was composed during the precarious convoyed journey back to England on the MS Axel Springer.

Auden's text is in three parts, with the refrain of '*Blessed Cecilia*' at the end of each. In the first, he introduces the purified and 'subtle psalms' of the ancient Goddess. The music played by the deity is at first of Classical calm, but it then becomes more 'enchanted' and disrupting. Both the 'angels' and 'the wicked in Hell's abysses' are moved beyond their usual stations by music's irrational force. In the second section, Auden depicts the personification of music itself. It has 'no shadow to run away from', and 'knows it can now do nothing / By suffering'. The music duly makes it all seem too good to be true, with the simple phrases of the basses and altos against the youthful injections of the sopranos and tenors. The final section is the longest, and works around the theme of language's ruined estate, and the futile attempts of music to restore that Arcadian innocence. The first stanza provokes Auden's plea for a 'Sorrow' that is 'forgetting all / the gaucheness of her adolescent state' and when a 'Hope ... From every outworn image is released'. A beautiful soprano solo then drifts over the top of the choir, 'weeping' over a collective 'Lost innocence'.

In the final part of the piece, Auden reels off a series of contradictory instructions: to 'bless the freedom that you never chose' and to 'wear your tribulation like a rose'. Britten uses these moments to issue forth the four instruments for each voice – the soprano as a flute, alto as a violin, tenor as trumpet and bass as drum.

The repeated dissonance of the tenor solo, as if throbbing itself against the 'Long winter of our intellectual will', recedes into a moment of stunning consonance. The refrain, with the 'translated daughter' repeated in an inverted tenor phrase, finishes off this beguiling and fascinating essay in music's dangerous and ambiguous potential.

In a garden shady this holy lady
With reverent cadence and subtle psalm,
Like a black swan as death came on
Poured forth her song in perfect calm:
And by ocean's margin this innocent virgin
Constructed an organ to enlarge her prayer,
And notes tremendous from her great engine
Thundered out on the Roman air.
Blonde Aphrodite rose up excited,
Moved to delight by the melody,
White as an orchid she rode quite naked
In an oyster shell on top of the sea;
At sounds so entrancing the angels dancing
Came out of their trance into time again,
And around the wicked in Hell's abysses
The huge flame flickered and eased their pain.

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
To all musicians, appear and inspire:
Translated Daughter, come down and startle
Composing mortals with immortal fire.

I cannot grow;
I have no shadow
To run away from,
I only play.
I cannot err;
There is no creature
Whom I belong to,
Whom I could wrong.
I am defeat
When it knows it
Can now do nothing
By suffering.
All you lived through,
Dancing because you
No longer need it
For any deed.
I shall never be Different. Love me.

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
 To all musicians, appear and inspire:
 Translated Daughter, come down and startle
 Composing mortals with immortal fire.
 O ear whose creatures cannot wish to fall,
 O calm of spaces unafraid of weight,
 Where Sorrow is herself, forgetting all
 The gaucheness of her adolescent state,
 Where Hope within the altogether strange
 From every outworn image is released,
 And Dread born whole and normal like a beast
 Into a world of truths that never change:
 Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange.
 O dear white children casual as birds,
 Playing among the ruined languages,
 So small beside their large confusing words,
 So gay against the greater silences
 Of dreadful things you did: O hang the head,
 Impetuous child with the tremendous brain,
 O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain,
 Lost innocence who wished your lover dead,
 Weep for the lives your wishes never led.
 O cry created as the bow of sin is drawn across our trembling violin.
 O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain.
 O law drummed out by hearts against the still
 Long winter of our intellectual will.
 That what has been may never be again.
 O flute that throbs with the thanksgiving breath
 Of convalescents on the shores of death.
 O bless the freedom that you never chose.
 O trumpets that unguarded children blow
 About the fortress of their inner foe.
 O wear your tribulation like a rose.
 Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
 To all musicians, appear and inspire:
 Translated Daughter, come down and startle
 Composing mortals with immortal fire.

W H Auden (1907-1973)

Chris Perren (b. 1983)

Samurai Loops

Samurai Loops, written in 2015 by Australian composer Chris Perren, was commissioned and premiered by Sam Mitchell. Perren is a composer, videographer, and lecturer in music technology at the University of Queensland. Of his piece, he says:

"*Samurai Loops* uses a few minutes of footage cut from the 1967 film *Samurai Rebellion*. In the four sections of the work, this footage is manipulated in different ways to make the rhythmic patterns visible. In the scene, two friends are bound by their duties as samurai to fight to the death. The duel is resolved in a single fluid and deadly motion. In *Samurai Loops*, *this critical moment is frozen, and its hidden rhythmic qualities revealed.

In the first section, simple cuts are made to emphasise the gradually densifying harmonic movement. The second section shifts into a surreal visual space; melodic fragments begin in unison across the four hands (one live piano, one pre-recorded), and gradually drift out of phase. This is reflected by the images multiplying and slowly splitting out across the screen. Each time the melody appears, a little more of it is revealed, and likewise the footage progresses slightly further each time.

In the following section, the four hands each play the same rhythm and melodic contour, but at different speeds; the footage also splits into four, each looping at a rate corresponding to one of the hands, continuing and developing until the polyrhythmic parts realign. The final section mirrors the first, showing the conclusion of the duel.

Samurai Loops is part of an ongoing exploration into how complex polyrhythmic patterns can be reflected and elucidated by moving images. In these works, repetition robs the footage of its representative function, bringing out its formal and rhythmic characteristics. The music and images of *Samurai Loops* were composed simultaneously, as a single integrated musical work."

Judith Weir (b. 1954) **a blue true dream of sky**

Judith Weir's short setting of E.E. Cummings's joyous *a blue true dream of sky* was written in 2003 in honour of the eminent choral director and organist Philip Brunelle, and first performed in Minneapolis in April 2004 during his 35th season as musical director of Plymouth Church Choir in Minneapolis. The music exhibits a typically close attention to poetic detail, with a high soprano soloist balanced with two alto counterparts and a 'hushed' chorus. Weir makes the most of the poet's best lines: 'lifted from the no / of all nothing' is given a beautifully simple D major melody, while the bracketed last stanza awakens into C major.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

E.E. Cummings (1894-1962)

Jonathan Dove (b. 1959) The Passing of the Year

Jonathan Dove has established a career as an opera composer, but now with a significant number of works for the Anglican choral tradition as well. *See him that maketh the seven stars*, a setting for Advent which revels in minimalist splendor, came before *Vast Ocean of light* and other similar works that have cemented his unique place in the repertoire. *The Passing of the Year* shares many of the features of this writing, spread over twenty minutes to piano accompaniment. In its settings of William Blake, Emily Dickinson and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Dove's setting sums up the transient light, naturalistic landscapes and youthful exuberance in each part of tonight's programme.

1. Invocation

O Earth, O Earth, return!

2. The narrow bud opens her beauties to the sun

The narrow bud opens her beauties to
The sun, and love runs in her thrilling
veins;

Blossoms hang round the brows of
morning, and

Flourish down the bright cheek of
modest eve,

Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into
singing,

And feather'd clouds strew flowers
round her head.

The spirits of the air live on the smells
Of fruit; and joy, with pinions light, roves
round

The gardens, or sits singing in the trees."
Summer is icumen in

Lhude sing cuccu

William Blake (1757 - 1827)

3. Answer July

Answer July -

Where is the Bee -

Where is the Blush -

Where is the Hay?

Ah, said July -

Where is the Seed -

Where is the Bud -

Where is the May -

Answer Thee - Me -

Nay - said the May -

Show me the Snow -

Show me the Bells -

Show me the Jay!

Quibbled the Jay -

Where be the Maize -

Where be the Haze -

Where be the Bur?

Here - said the Year -

Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886)

4. Hot sun, cool fire

Hot sun, cool fire, temper'd with sweet
air,
Black shade, fair nurse, shadow my white
hair:
Shine, sun; burn, fire; breathe, air, and
ease me;
Black shade, fair nurse, shroud me, and
please me:
Shadow, my sweet nurse, keep me from
burning,
Make not my glad cause, cause of
mourning.
Let not my beauty's fire
Enflame unstaid desire,
Nor pierce any bright eye
That wand'reth lightly.

George Peele (1556? - 1596)

5. Ah, Sun-flower!

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun;
Seeking after that sweet golden clime,
Where the traveller's journey is done:

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves and aspire
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

William Blake

6. Adieu! farewell earth's bliss!

Adieu, farewell earth's blisse,
This world uncertain is:
Fond are lifes lustfull joyes,
Death proves them all but toyes.
None from his darts can flye:
I am sick I must die -
Lord, have mercy on us!

Rich men, trust not in wealth,
Gold cannot buy you health;
Physic himself must fade;
All things to end are made;

The plague full swift goes by:
I am sick, I must die -
Lord, have mercy on us!

Beauty is but a flower
Which wrinkles will devour:
Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair
Dust hath closed Helen's eye:
I am sick, I must die -
Lord, have mercy on us!

Thomas Nashe (1567 - 1601)

7. Ring out, wild bells

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.
Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more,
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the time;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.
Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 - 1892)

BIOGRAPHIES

Steven Grahl (Conductor)



Steven Grahl is a sought-after conductor and keyboard player, and has been Conductor of Schola Cantorum of Oxford since 2017. Since January 2024, he has also been Director of Music at Trinity College, Cambridge.

Steven served as Organist and Tutor in Music at Christ Church, Oxford, and Associate Professor of Music at Oxford University from 2018 to 2023. He was also Musical Director of Benson Choral Society. From 2014 to 2018 he was Director of Music at Peterborough Cathedral, where he was responsible for training the Cathedral Choir, and for the re-pitching of the Hill Organ, on which instrument he has recorded a solo CD. Peterborough Cathedral Choir's recording of Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *EvenYouSong*, made under Steven's direction, was released to critical acclaim in December 2017. He also held positions as Assistant Organist at New College, Oxford, and as Organist and Director of Music at St Marylebone Parish Church, London.

Steven was an interpretation finalist in the International Organ Competitions at St Albans (UK) in 2011, and in Dudelange (Luxembourg) in 2013, and completed his term as President of the Incorporated Association of Organists in 2019. He is a prize-winning graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford, and the Royal Academy of Music. He gained the top prizes in the FRCO examination, and is also a holder of the Worshipful Company of Musicians' Silver Medallion. In 2010, he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

Sam Mitchell (Piano)



Sam Mitchell is an Australian pianist and singer based in Oxford, celebrated for his versatility across both classical and contemporary repertoire. His career has taken him to stages around the globe—including Europe, Australia, the USA, Asia, and Africa—with featured appearances on BBC Radio 3, Australia's ABC Classic FM, and New York's WNYC.

A committed advocate for new music, Sam is a founding member of the contemporary ensemble Nonsemble, with whom he has performed at TEDx and been featured twice on the influential *I Care if You Listen* mixtape. Their 2015 EP, *Go Seigen vs. Fujisawa Kuranosuke*, was praised by Cut Common Magazine as "a monumental contemporary classic."

His dedication to new music continues with the 2024 release of *Piano Day*—an EP featuring commissioned works by Piers Connor Kennedy, Connor D'Netto, and Madeline Cocolas, released through Corella Records. Notable past performances include John Adams' *Phrygian Gates* at MONA in Tasmania and opening Sydney's Extended Play Festival in 2019.

As a singer, Sam has collaborated with leading ensembles including Tenebrae, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Oxford Bach Soloists, Ex Cathedra, the Norwegian Soloists' Choir, and Copenhagen's Mogens Dahl Kammerkor. Solo highlights include Handel's *Messiah* with the Hanover Band and Bach's *St Matthew Passion* with Eboracum Baroque. For six years, he was a Lay Clerk at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

Sam currently teaches piano at Radley College and St Helen and St Katharine, where he previously served as acting Head of Piano. He is also an official accompanist for Oxford University and was recently appointed as an examiner for the ABRSM.

Patrick Maxwell (Conducting Scholar)



Patrick Maxwell is currently an academical clerk in the Choir of New College, Oxford, where he reads History. Having enjoyed international choral experience as a chorister at Westminster Abbey, he started conducting under Neville Creed at St Edward's School, Oxford, and has continued to conduct choral and orchestral groups in Oxford and in London. Highlights include Handel's *Messiah* in London and a concert performance of Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* in New College Chapel in November last year. He sings as a tenor in the Choir at New College, where he is taught by Bronwen Mills.

Schola Cantorum of Oxford

Schola Cantorum of Oxford is the University of Oxford Chamber Choir. Schola's mission is to share the joy of choral music with our singers, our community of alumni and supporters, and with audiences in Oxford and around the world. We challenge ourselves to perform to the highest standards, providing outstanding musical training for young singers and conductors.

The choir was founded by László Heltay in 1960 at a point when there were few opportunities for men and women to sing together to a high standard. Times have changed and Schola's role has changed too. We've now built a reputation as Oxford's premier concert choir – engaging deeply with complex repertoire, and providing a space for performance outside religious services.

Schola has worked with many of the foremost musicians of the last six decades and has built an international reputation through extensive tours and recordings. We are proud of our alumni who have gone on to lead successful musical careers such as John Mark Ainsley, Emma Kirkby, Christine Rice, Susan Gritton, Ian Bostridge and Roderick Williams – many came to Oxford to study other subjects but developed their musical talents during their time in Schola.

Recent concerts include Brahms *Requiem* in Somerville College, a programme of works by Orlando Gibbons and James MacMillan in Oxford and London, and a 65th Anniversary Concert including JS Bach - *Magnificat* with Instruments of Time and Truth in Oxford Town Hall. Future plans include Mozart's *C Minor Mass* with La Nuova Musica in the Sheldonian Theatre.

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