

Programme Notes

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736): *Stabat Mater*

The *Stabat Mater* is one of the most powerful of the medieval hymns, meditating on the suffering of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as she stood at the foot of the cross during his crucifixion. It was originally the Sequence at the Mass of Our Lady of Sorrows but is frequently sung today during the Stations of the Cross and on Good Friday. Many composers, including Palestrina, Pergolesi, Haydn and Rossini have set it to music.

Born at Jesi, Pergolesi was one of the most important composers of early *opera buffa* (comic opera). *La Serva Padrona*, (1733), which originated as an intermezzo, soon became a popular opera in its own right. He also wrote sacred music, including a Mass in F but his *Stabat Mater* (1736), is his best-known sacred work. Although, classical in style, the opening section hints at his Italian baroque background with numerous suspensions over moving bass and use of fugato in later sections. But, the emotional melodic lines come straight from his operatic work and take the listener through darkness and grief to a final prayer of hope – a place in paradise.

The *Stabat Mater* became the most frequently printed work of the 18th century, and was arranged by a number of other composers, including J.S. Bach who used it as the basis for his setting of Psalm 51, *Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden*. This evening's performance is an arrangement for full choir and soloists by Desmond Ratcliffe.

Jonathan Dove (1959-): *The Passing of the Year*

The romantic *lied* or solo song of the early nineteenth century is automatically associated with Schubert. His 600 songs included three song cycles - collections of songs telling a story or on a theme, often the work of a single poet. Alongside Schubert's great song-cycles, *Die Schöne Mullerin* and *Winterreise*, Schumann's own works form the pinnacle in the musical repertoire.

Song cycles have been closely associated with German romantic music but there are examples from most cultures including several English collections dating to the present day. Benjamin Britten wrote several cycles, including *Les Illuminations*, and *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*. Other examples include Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel* (performed by RCS in 2008) and Jonathan Dove's *The Passing of the Year*, which we are performing for the first time this evening.

Jonathan Dove is best known as a composer of operas and choral music. He has written over a dozen operas, including *Siren Song* and *L'Augellino Belverde*, four large-scale community operas and a church opera, *Tobias and the Angel*. His choral music includes several anthems and carols, among them *The Three Kings*, and *The Far Theatricals of Day*, settings of Emily Dickinson for soloists, choir, brass quintet and organ.

The Passing of the Year was a millennium commission by the London Symphony Chorus. It takes the listener through the seasons of the year, opening with new life in the first shoots of spring, and closing with the wild cacophony of bells on New Year's Eve, but with a brief reference to the opening bars, as the world looks forward to the birth of another spring.

The composer wrote, "The seven poems that I have set in *The Passing of the Year* make up three 'movements'. The first looks forward to summer, beginning with a line from Blake ('O Earth, O Earth return!'). 'The narrow bud' comes from Blake's *To Autumn*, but is a description of summer; the rapid questions of 'Answer July' suggest the quickening senses, the excitement of everything bursting into life, and summer's triumphant arrival.

The second section follows the passing of summer. It begins in sultry heat, with a song from the opening scene of *David and Bethsabe* ('Hot sun, cool fire'): a girl bathing in a spring feels the power and danger of her beauty. The section ends with the sense of mortality the Autumn brings: 'Adieu! Farewell earth's bliss', from *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, heralds the death of summer.

The cycle ends in winter, on New Year's Eve with a passage from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. This song cycle is dedicated to the memory of my mother, who died too young."

Robert Schumann (1810-1856): *Dichterliebe*

Although Schumann started to perform and compose music from the age of seven, his early life was equally absorbed by literature. His father was a publisher, bookseller and author, and the influence of literature shows in Schumann's early work as an essay writer and music critic, as well as his choice of great poets for the texts of his songs.

Schumann's early compositions were almost entirely collections of short pieces for the piano, but the year 1840, when he eventually married Clara Wieck, was the beginning of an outpouring of songs and large orchestral works. *Dichterliebe*, (The poet's love), is the best known of his song-cycles, being settings of sixteen poems from the *Lyrisches Intermezzo* by the great German poet Heinrich Heine. The piano accompaniment, rather than just supporting the singer, is an integral part of the work, which imaginatively brings out the meaning of the words.

The emotions of poet's love, depicted in flowers, dreams, fairy-tales light and darkness are beautifully illustrated in Schumann's settings. He occasionally adapts the words of the poems, repeating phrases or rewording a line for musical effect. Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo* and Schumann's inspired interpretation through *Dichterliebe* is surely one of the greatest marriages of words and music in the entire vocal repertoire.

John Rutter (1945-): Gloria

There will be few people in any audience who have not sung or heard a piece by John Rutter! His music is well known in Europe, US and Australia and, in terms of performances he is probably the most successful composer of his generation.

Most of Rutter's compositions are choral, ranging from simple but memorable carols and arrangements, to extended choral works: *Magnificat*, a *Requiem Mass*, and a setting of *Psalms 150* commissioned for the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002.

Rutter's musical style is diverse. It shows the influence of the English Choral tradition, touches of early 20th century French music as well as American light music. Almost every choral work is orchestrated with an imaginative variety of instruments, making his name as well-known in the concert hall as in the smallest church.

The *Gloria*, performed this evening, provides a lively and upbeat ending to a reflective programme. It is difficult to assess the music of such a composer, but perhaps the best tribute comes from a review in the London Evening Standard of 25th September 2005. "*For the infectiousness of his melodic invention and consummate craftsmanship, Rutter has few peers.*"

Margaret Withers
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