

Britten Sinfonia

### **Richard Rodney Bennett (1936 - 2012) Tom O'Bedlam's Song for tenor & cello (1961)**

Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, who died on Christmas Eve, was an extraordinarily eclectic composer. As a young man, he studied in Paris for two years under his idol, Pierre Boulez, and his early works reflect this hard-core modernist training. But he also loved jazz and popular music such as Cole Porter, and, like Walton and Britten, successfully composed for the cinema. From 1957 onwards he composed the scores of over 50 films. The films funded his concert-hall work: operas, symphonies, concertos, choral and chamber works. He played and wrote jazz for fun.

*Tom O'Bedlam's Song* dates from his serialist youth and is dedicated to Peter Pears. The text is an anonymous poem probably written in the early 1600s. The term "Tom O'Bedlam" was used to refer to beggars who had or feigned mental illness; some of them may have been former inmates of the Bethlem Royal Hospital (Bedlam). This institution, founded in 1247 as a poor house, had by the early 1400s started to specialise in caring for the mentally ill and is the world's oldest psychiatric institution. Despite its provisions, there were many mentally-ill vagrants at large in the 1600s, forced to beg to survive. Edgar in *King Lear* disguises himself as mad "Tom O'Bedlam": "*Who gives anything to poor Tom? whom the foul / Fiend hath led through fire and through flame...*"

### **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) Elégie for horn & piano (1957)**

*Très calme - Agitato molto - Très calme*

Poulenc dedicated this *Elégie* to the memory of the virtuoso horn player Dennis Brain who was killed, aged 36, when his TR2 sports car hit a tree beside the A1 on 1 September 1957. Dennis, whose father (Aubrey), uncle and grandfather were all professional horn players, did more than anyone to popularise and liberate the horn in post-war Britain. Britten and Hindemith both composed for him. His legendary and hugely popular recordings of the Mozart horn concertos with Karajan (another fast car enthusiast) and the Philharmonia were allegedly played from memory while Brain read *Autocar* magazine from the music stand.

Poulenc's later music has a seriousness that is largely absent from the music of his youth. His mother, a talented amateur pianist, was from a well-known Parisian family of artists and craftsmen, his father was a devout Catholic from the Aveyron. At family musical soirées the young Francis would listen from under the grand piano, but it was a formative experience with a nickelodeon in a Paris arcade that convinced him that he wanted to be a composer. His natural gift for writing simple folk-like melodies impressed Bartok, and his individual style was influenced by Stravinsky and by Eric Satie. He preferred writing for wind rather than strings (it is said that Fauré's violin sonata had driven him upstairs from under the family grand) and his work shows a tension between his mother's Satie-like personality, and his father's serious catholicism. Following the death in 1936 of his friend and fellow composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud in a car crash in Hungary, Poulenc turned more to the Catholic faith and composed a number of sacred choral works. The *Elégie* is one of his least comfortable works, capturing the harshness of Brain's awful death, and giving the horn a tragic eloquence that, like Britten's earlier *Serenade* (written for and performed by Brain), inspired later composers.

## **William Walton (1902-1983) Three Songs (arr 1931-2 from *Façade*, 1922)**

*Daphne*

*Through gilded trellises*

*Fox-Trot: Old Sir Faulk*

After an early childhood in Oldham singing in his father's church choir, the ten year-old William Walton won a choral scholarship to Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford; he and his mother had arrived late for the auditions after his father had drunk their train fare. At Oxford he began to compose, in order, he said, to avoid having to return home. In 1918, aged 16 he was admitted to the university thanks to the support of Thomas Strong the Dean of Christ Church, but left without a degree two years later, after failing the obligatory Greek and Algebra exams three times. Much of his time had been spent in the library studying scores by Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev and Stravinsky. At Oxford he met the Sitwell siblings Sacheverell, Osbert and Edith, who housed him in the attic of their London home, and gave him a cultural education. He met Stravinsky and Gershwin, won the praise of Alban Berg for a string quartet, and listened to jazz at the Savoy. In 1920 he went with the Sitwells to Italy, whose music and sunshine captivated the Oldham boy and inspired the music of *Façade*.

At *Façade*'s public premiere in 1923, Edith declaimed her verses through a megaphone from behind a screen, while Walton conducted a six-piece ensemble in what the *Manchester Guardian* denounced as a "relentless cacophony". Noel Coward ostentatiously walked out. The clarinettist asked Walton "has a clarinet player ever done you an injury?". Edward Dent writing for the *Illustrated London News* was more perceptive: "The audience was at first inclined to treat the whole thing as an absurd joke, but there is always a surprisingly serious element in Miss Sitwell's poetry and Mr Walton's music ... which soon induced the audience to listen with breathless attention." They still do.

*Façade* underwent a number of changes: in the 1970s Walton added eight new numbers in *Façade Revived* and made further changes in 1979 to produce *Façade II*. He also composed two *Façade* suites (1926, 1938) for a larger orchestra which Günter Hess and Frederick Ashton used in their ballets. The arrangements for sung voice and piano that we hear today were made by Walton in 1931-1932 and are dedicated to his publisher Hubert Foss and his wife Dora who gave the first performance.

## **Gerald Barry (b.1952) Jabberwocky (world premiere tour)**

## Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Canticale III *Still falls the rain* Op 55 (1954)

Britten's third Canticale *Still Falls the Rain* (*The Raids, 1940, Night and Dawn*) is a setting for tenor, horn and piano, of a poem by Edith Sitwell. Britten wrote it in 1954 shortly after *The Turn of the Screw*, and it was first performed by Peter Pears, Dennis Brain and Britten at the Wigmore Hall the following year in a memorial concert for Noel Mewton-Wood, to whom it is dedicated. Newton-Wood was a brilliant young Australian pianist, friend of Britten and accompanist to Pears, who had recently committed suicide, blaming himself for the death of his manager and lover Bill Fedricks from appendicitis.

Edith Sitwell was overwhelmed by the first performance and subsequently collaborated with Britten on a work for the 1956 Aldeburgh Festival centered on the third Canticale but flanked by readings and three further settings by Britten of her poetry. The event was called "*The Heart of the Matter*".

The self-consciously shocking, sardonic world of *Façade* is far from that of *Still Falls the Rain*, one of Sitwell's most substantial poems. Here the crucifixion is a powerful metaphor for the Blitz, and man's perennial culpability: "*Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails / Upon the Cross*".

The Canticale consists of six variations on a theme that contains all twelve chromatic pitches. The first five variations are for piano and horn, with the tenor declaiming Sitwell's verses. The final variation is introduced by a quotation from Dr Faustus ("*O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune*") in *Sprachgesang* – speech-rate articulation but with the intonation of steady musical pitches. The tenor joins the horn and piano for the coda representing the voice of God: "*Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.*"