

A Celebration of Conductor and Composer STEPHEN WILKINSON (PFC147)

A Celebration of Conductor and Composer STEPHEN WILKINSON features a collection of previously released recordings of works by John McCabe, David Ellis and Stephen Wilkinson himself, performed by the William Byrd Singers and conducted by Wilkinson. Prima Facie are delighted to add a world première release of a recording of *Late Afternoon in November* by Peter Dickinson, commissioned by the BBC for Wilkinson and the BBC Northern Singers for their twenty-first anniversary.

Born in Eversden Rectory, Cambridgeshire, on 29 April 1919, Stephen Wilkinson was a chorister at Christ Church, Oxford, under Sir William Henry Harris. He then went on to St. Edward's, Oxford, where he had a few composition lessons with Sir Thomas Armstrong. Going up to Queens' College, Cambridge as Organ Scholar in 1937, Wilkinson was active as a pianist at the University Music Club, of which he was secretary in his third year; he also refounded the Echo Club for aspiring student composers. His tutors were Edward Dent, Cyril Rootham, Hubert Middleton, Henry Moule, Philip Radcliffe, Boris Ord and Patrick Hadley.

Wilkinson has always been a great champion of new music, commissioning many works and giving many 'Proms Premières' and other first performances with the BBC Northern Singers. He was conductor for nearly forty years of the William Byrd Singers of Manchester, becoming a much-admired figure on the Manchester music scene (described by Robert Beale of the Manchester Evening News as "one of the most extraordinary men I have ever met"). Manchester University gave him an honorary MA in 1982 and he was awarded an MBE for services to choral music in the 1992 New Year's Honours List.

Wilkinson's 70th birthday was marked by his appearance as 'Artist of the Week' on BBC Radio 3; in honour of the occasion, Michael Ball, Alan Bullard, Stephen Dodgson, David Gow, John Joubert, John McCabe and Elizabeth Maconchy composed choral works for him. His 80th birthday was celebrated with a pair of concerts in Trinity College, Cambridge. Wilkinson retired as conductor of the William Byrd Singers in May 2009 at the age of 90.

Since his retirement from conducting, Wilkinson has been increasingly active as a composer. A CD of a selection of his choral music, *Dover Beach*, was released in 2012 on the label Deux-Elles. *A Phoenix Hour*, settings of Irish poets, was premièred at the Aldeburgh Festival by the BBC Northern Singers. Wilkinson has recently embarked on a new career as Reader for concerts given by his daughter Clare's early music ensemble, Courtiers of Grace, with whom he has appeared at the Trigonale Festival (Austria), Trinity College (Cambridge), the Brighton and York Early Music Festivals and Stour Music.

The twentieth was a long century in terms of the development of musical style. This disc reflects something of the range of British choral composition during the period.

Peter Dickinson is a British composer of the senior generation. He was born in 1934 at Lytham St Annes, Lancashire; went to Cambridge as Organ Scholar of Queens' College; then spent three formative years in New York, initially as a graduate student at the Juilliard School. His

music has been performed by leading performers for many years. There are four full CDs on Albany; three on Naxos; and six on Heritage of his performances or music; two CDs of chamber music were released in 2018 and 2020; the first, called *Translations*, on Prima Facie; the second on Toccata. As a pianist Dickinson had a twenty-five-year partnership with his sister, the mezzo Meriel Dickinson. His books include studies of Lennox Berkeley (two), Billy Mayerl, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Lord Berners, and Samuel Barber. He is an Emeritus Professor of the Universities of Keele and London and chair of the Rainbow Dickinson Trust. *Peter Dickinson: Words and Music* was published in 2016.

Late Afternoon in November was commissioned by the BBC for Stephen Wilkinson and the BBC Northern Singers for their twenty-first anniversary. They gave the outstanding first performance on this CD at Keele University on 14 November 1975. The first BBC Radio 3 broadcast on 30 December 1976 of this demanding piece was from that concert. I wanted to create a close correspondence between words and music involving scrutiny of the words and even letters of the alphabet in a poem I had written much earlier. The mood of the original experience I had in writing the poem may emerge in the bleak simplicity of the deliberately static music. (Notes: Peter Dickinson)

The two works by **John McCabe** are from his *Mangan Triptych*, which holds an important place in his choral output. *Siberia* was commissioned by Cork International Festival and first performed there by the Byrds on May 10th, 1980; *Visions* commissioned by Harrogate Festival and first performed there by the BBC Northern Singers, both conducted by Stephen Wilkinson. They set poems by the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan. The texts are emanations from a very dark psyche; indeed, John Montague describes Mangan as a haunted man who 'found a metaphor for the stricken psyche worthy of Baudelaire'. The poet describes himself thus in another poem: 'There was once one whose veins ran lightning no eye beheld'. And it ends:

And lives he still then? Yes! Old and hoary
At thirty nine, from despair and woe,
He lives, enduring what future story
Will never know.

Him grant a grave to, ye pitying noble,
Deep in your bosoms! There let him dwell!
He, too, had tears for all souls in trouble,
Here and in Hell!

It has the astonishing directness of the best of D.G. Rossetti, but far greater power. Self-pity, yes, but he has tears, too, for the exile in Siberia.

McCabe tells us how 'on a flight back to England from Dublin, having just picked up a book of Irish Verse, 'Mangan's work immediately impressed him 'with its characteristically Irish rhetorical power and vivid imagery', having at best 'a consistently visionary quality that is superbly controlled yet forcefully spontaneous'.

Each of the pieces is in several sections, usually alternating slow and very fast tempi. *Siberia*, a disciplined four-part score with no divisions, is the simpler and starker piece. It makes increasing use of the Scotch snap, which gives the effect of forced labour and it is with a double speed snap that the convict 'at length sinks there'. The more substantial *Visions*,

largely in eight parts, has a more varied mood palette, ranging from tenderness to screaming madness and a much richer harmonic palette, basically diatonic but with sudden sideshifts.

David Ellis's *Sequentia in Tempore Natali Sancti*, one of several sequences he has written, dates from 1965 and was first performed in Ilkley on November 10th of that year by the BBC Northern Singers under Stephen Wilkinson. A sequence for Christmas time, it sets texts from the great Advent Antiphons and a Christmas Introit interspersed with verses of a tender mediaeval carol. These verses are sung first by a solo soprano, later by two female voices and finally by the full choir. They provide a gentle contrast to the liturgical sections, which range widely from awed hush to declamatory outcry and ultimately ebullient alleluias. The effectiveness of the piece stems largely from the variety of its textures and dynamics, everything skilfully tailored to the choral medium.

The one original composition by **Stephen Wilkinson** featured here dates from 1976. It is a setting for baritone solo and mixed choir of a sonnet by Shakespeare. The poet exaggerates his age to persuade his younger mistress to 'love that well which thou must leave ere long'. The accompanying voices reiterate 'that time of year' at gradually rising pitches as if aiming to overwhelm the solo voice until 'death's second self... seals up all in rest'. The music then lies low in the darkness with male voices only, until at "This thou perceiv'st" the female voices re-enter and it mounts to a climax of agonised tenderness before fading to nothing. The Byrds gave the first performance with Christopher Underwood at the Royal Northern College of Music on May 28th, 1977.

We have interspersed all these more serious and substantial pieces with folksongs drawn from Stephen's collection *Grass Roots*, one English, one Irish, one Scottish, one Welsh. They are in the nature of studies; the Welsh arrangement, for example, conscientiously eschewing that characteristic weakness of the arranger, chromatic harmony, hasn't a single accidental from start to finish. It begins misleadingly with the 'wrong' 'folk-song', a rising masculine tune in 3/4 time; the real '*Y deryn pur*', a graceful falling one in 6/8, only appears later. The two combine well enough harmonically, but each retains its rhythmic independence. It is, after all, a tale of unrequited love, a meeting with an angel, not a marriage made in heaven.

In the *Irish Song* the larks rise at dawn. As the young man labours all day under the sun, he seems to hear his loving thoughts echoed. As he lies down in the gathering darkness at the end of the day his mind is full of tomorrow's lark rise and the love he intends to declare. Rowing down the tide was taken down from a Hertfordshire folksinger who described it as 'ancients of years old'. In the course of those ancients the tale understandably got into a bit of a tangle and the arranger has attempted to untwist it into some degree of credibility in the interest of its bewitching tune.

As to the *Piper o' Dundee*, he 'gae his bags a heaze an' played anither key', a hilarious opportunity not to be missed - leading ultimately to singing in both keys at once!

[1] LATE AFTERNOON IN NOVEMBER (1975)

The mist hangs in clusters. Smoke, from farmers' fires, And incipient darkness Compete to banish day.

The cold air is thick
And hangs in suspension.
The pheasants mix mutterings With the purr of a farm tractor.

Puddles and rich mud
Possess the Roman road, Marking in its track
Centuries of confused twilights.

The moist earth reigns here. There are no houses, no cars; And the only movement is In the black pines

Silently stabbing the mist. Peter Dickinson

[2] As I walked out (Y deryn pur)

As I walked out at early morn In merry mood a-maying
A maiden fairer than the dawn On lightest foot came straying. I to view her still was staying.

Fairest flower of all I found her.
Deep in heart this thought came o'er me: Her smile turns all to heaven round her. Let none deny that on that morn
An angel walked before me.
Come faithful bird, this message bear On azure wing to woo her,
The careless maid that's all my care
Since first my eyes did view her.
Go before her, say this to her:
Say I'm weary of my crying,
Say, for lack of her I languish;
All for love of her I'm dying,
And God forgive the face so fair
That deals me mortal anguish.

[3] Visions

I saw her once, one little while, and then no more:
'Twas Eden's light on Earth a while, and then no more,
Amid the throng she passed along the meadow-floor:
Spring seemed to smile on Earth awhile, and then no more; But whence she came, which way she went, what garb she wore I noted not; I gazed a while, and then no more!
I saw her once, one little while, and then no more:
'Twas Paradise on Earth a while, and then no more.
Ah! what avail my vigils pale, my magic lore?
She shone before mine eyes awhile, and then no more.

The shallop of my peace is wrecked on Beauty's shore.
Near Hope's fair isle it rode awhile, and then no more!
I saw her once, one little while, and then no more:
Earth looked like Heaven a little while, and then no more.
Her presence thrilled and lighted to its inner core

My desert breast a little while, and then no more. So may, perchance a meteor glance at
midnight o'er Some ruined pile a little while, and then no more!

I saw her once, one little while, and then no more:
The earth was Peri-land awhile, and then no more.
Oh, might I see but once again, as once before,
Through chance or wile, that shape awhile, and then no more! Death soon would heal my
griefs! This heart, now sad and sore, Would beat anew a little while, and then no more.

James Clarence Mangan (1803 - 1849)

[4] Rowing down the tide

As I walked out one summer morning On purpose to meet my bride,
Oh, there I saw my fair pretty maid Come rowing down the tide.

"Good morning to you, young fisherman, O pray what's brought you here?"
"I'm fishing for a young lady gay
Right down the river clear".

He boldly stepped up to her
And kissed both cheek and side;
He's tained her by the lily white hand And rowed her down the tide.

Then she down on her bended knee Cried "Pray, sir, pardon me
For calling you a young fisherman That sails the briny sea".

He launched her boat unto the shore Saying "Your pardon's lent".
And in each other's arms embraced Until she gave him consent.

"Now it's you go to my father's hall And married we shall be;
And you shall have a young fisherman To row you on the sea".

Betjeman's Bells [5] Wantage Bells

Now with the bells through the applebloom Sundayly sounding
And the prayers of the nuns in their chapel gloom us all surrounding, Where the brook flows
Brick walls of rose
Send on the motionless meadow the bell notes rebounding.

Wallflowers are bright in their beds and their scent all pervading, Withered are primroses
heads and the hyacinth fading,

But flowers by the score,
Multitudes more,

Weed flowers and seed flowers and mead flowers our paths are invading.

Where are the words to express such a reckless bestowing? The voices of birds utter less
than the thanks we are owing. Bell notes alone
Ring praise of their own,

Clear as the weed-waving brook and as evenly flowing.

[6] Uffington

Tonight we feel the muffled peal Hangs on the village like a pall.
It overwhelms the towering elms, That death-reminding dying fall. The very sky no longer
high
Comes down within the reach of all. Imprisoned in a cage of sound, Even the trivial seems
profound.

[7] Bristol

Green upon the flooded Avon shone the after-storm-wet sky. Quick the struggling withy
branches let the leaves of autumn fly And a star shone over Bristol wonderfully far and high.

Ringers in an oil-lit belfry - Bitton ? Kelston ? Who can say? Smoothly practising a plain
course caverned out the dying day As their melancholy music flooded up and ebbed away.

Then all Somerset was round me and I saw the clippers ride High above the moonlit houses,
triple-masted on the tide By the tall embattled church towers of the Bristol waterside.

And an undersong to branches dripping into pools and wells Out of multitudes of elm trees
over leagues of hills and dells Was the mathematic pattern of a plain course on the bells.
John Betjeman (1906-1984)

[8] The Lark in the Clear Air

Dear thoughts are in my mind And my soul soars enchanted As I hear the sweet lark sing In
the clear air of the day.

For a tender beaming smile To my hope has been granted And tomorrow she shall hear All
my fond heart would say.

It is this that gives my soul All its joyous elation
As I hear the sweet lark sing In the clear air of the day.

I shall tell her all my love. All my soul's adoration
And I think she will hear me And will not say me nay.

[9] Siberia

In Siberia's wastes
The Ice-wind's breath
Woundeth like the toothed steel; Lost Siberia doth reveal

Only blight and death.
Blight and death alone,
No summer shines,
Night is interblent with Day
In Siberia's wastes alway
The blood blackens, the heart pines.

In Siberia's wastes
No tears are shed,
For they freeze within the brain. Nought is felt but dullest pain, Pain acute yet dead.

Pain as in a dream,
When years go by
Funeral-paced. yet fugitive,
When man lives and doth not live, Doth not live - nor die.

In Siberia's wastes
Are sands and rocks.
Nothing blooms of green or soft But the snow peaks rise aloft And the gaunt ice-blocks.

And the exile there
Is one with those;
They are part, and he is part, For the sands are in his heart, And the killing snows.

Therefore, in these wastes
None curse the Czar.
Each man's tongue is cloven by The North Blast, that heweth nigh With sharp scimitar.

And such doom each drees
Till, hunger-gnawn,
And cold-slain, he at length sinks there, Yet scarce more a corpse than ere
His last breath was drawn.
James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849)

[10] The Piper o'Dundee

The piper cam tae our toun
An he played merrily.
He played a spring the laird to please, A spring brent new frae yont the seas An then he gae
his bags a heaze
An played anither key.
An wasna he a roguey

The piper o'Dundee?
He played 'The Kirk', 'The Mullin Dhu', He played 'The Queir' and 'Chevalier' An 'Lang awa
but welcome here'
Sae sweet, sae bonnilie.

[11] Sequentia in tempore Natali Sancti

O my dear heart, young Jesu sweet, Prepare thy cradle in my spreit And I shall rock thee to
my heart And nevermore from Thee depart.

O Sapientia
O Wisdom, which camest out of the mouth of the most high

And reachest from one end to another, mightily ordering all things, Come and teach us the
way of prudence.

O Oriens
O Dayspring, Brightness of Light everlasting and Sun of Righteousness, come and enlighten
him

that sitteth in darkness and the shadow of death.

Dum medium silentium Whenas all the world was in profoundest quietness and night
was in the midst of her swift course, Thine Almighty Word, O Lord, leaped down from
Heaven out of Thy Royal Throne.

The Lord is King and hath put on glorious apparel and girded himself with strength. Alleluia.
O my dear heart.....
The knees of my heart shall I bow

And sing that right 'Balulalow' But I shall praise thee evermore With songes sweet unto Thy
glor'.

[12] That time of year

That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after Sunset fadeth in the West,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes
thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must
leave ere long.
William Shakespeare (1546 - 1616)