

Programme Notes: Saturday 7th July 2007 8pm

Holywell Music Room

# Sex, Lies, and Cuckoo Calls

Conducted by John Cotton  
Christian Wilson, Piano  
Steve Kershaw, Double Bass

Summer, balmy sunshine, and outdoor pursuits have always put a spring in the step of poets and musicians. In Oxford, the start of summer is traditionally marked by May Day celebrations, when madrigals, partsongs, and folksongs are sung. It is this structure that we follow tonight, adding jovial modern madrigal settings where we join the composer in placing our tongues slightly in our cheeks.

## Part 1: Madrigals

Reading Rota - *Summer is icumen in*

**Thomas Morley** (1557- 1602) - *Now is the month of Maying*  
*Fyer! Fyer!*

**John Bennet** (c1575 - c1614) - *Weep, O mine eyes*  
*All creatures now*

**John Farmer** (c1570 - c1601) - *A little pretty bonny lass*  
*Fair Phyllis*

***Summer is Icumen*** In is very important to musicologists, being a very early and highly accomplished example of six-part writing. Over a canonic ground, sung in two parts by the basses, the melody, itself a four-part canon, enters to create a pealing effect, entirely in keeping with the welcoming rites of spring. It is a rare example of a work of art from Reading, the original source being the 13th-century Reading Rota.

**Thomas Morley** was responsible for the madrigal's rise in popularity in England in the 16th century. His Italianate madrigals (some mere transcriptions of works by Gastoldi and Anerio) paved the way for the later flowering of the English school. The two we sing tonight show Morley's skill in word painting. ***Now is the month of Maying*** betrays its Italian roots in the feminine endings of its rhyme scheme and its compulsion to fa-la-la at each refrain – a feature it shares with ***Fyer! Fyer!***

**John Bennet's** madrigals show great technical assurance, be they joyful like ***All creatures now*** or mournful like ***Weep O mine eyes***. The former depicts playful shepherds' daughters, fa-la-la-ing nymphs, bugles, and hovering birds, and was Bennet's contribution to *The Triumphs of Oriana*, a publication of 1601 intended as an extravagant musical compliment to Elizabeth I, represented by Oriana.

Both the madrigals by **John Farmer** are set, unsurprisingly, in the fields. ***A little pretty bonny lass*** features a rather fresh suitor whose passions reach a climax at the tongue-twisting conclusion. Lack of textural clarity on the part of the singers can blunt the poet's wit. We hope our diction tonight proves more potent than our hero's. ***Fair Phyllis*** continues the theme, but the lovers' ups and downs, and their falling a-kissing, suggest a more satisfactory conclusion.

## Part 2: Romantic Partsongs

**Horsley** (1774-1858) - *Slow Fresh Fount*

**Gounod** (1818-1893) - *My True Love Hath My Heart*

**Sullivan** (1842-1900) - *The Long Day Closes*

**Stanford** (1852-1924) - *Heraclitus*  
*The Blue Bird*

**Poulenc** (1899-1963) - *Fancie*

The next section includes one glee and five partsongs. A glee is a simply harmonised, unaccompanied English song. The term partsong just means a song for more than one voice, normally for a cappella choir, and applies predominantly to Romantic English and German choral songs.

*Slow Fresh Fount*, a glee by **William Horsley** to beautiful words by Ben Jonson, displays a more developed style than that of many of his peers, with adventurous use of harmony and sensitive word setting.

It is a little-known fact that **Gounod** lived for 2½ years in England, having fled France because of the Franco-Prussian War. He was in effect kidnapped by Georgina Weldon, a singer of sorts and Victorian do-gooder who had founded an orphanage to teach girls how to sing like her (with teeth clenched, without a grimace or effect of any kind)! She housed Gounod in an upper room, where he was to write music to pay for board and lodging (while dodging her attempts to wed him to her daughter). During this time, among other works, he wrote more than 60 songs to English texts, including *My True Love Hath My Heart*. Gounod eventually fled back to France with two lawsuits pending against him, which sadly prevented any return to England.

**Sullivan** needs no introduction, though it is often forgotten that he wrote many successful and perhaps more musically creditable works when working without W. S. Gilbert. A perennial favourite is *The Long Day Closes* – a classic Victorian miniature that manages, through good craftsmanship, to rise above the cloying sentimentality of the time.

**Stanford** is famed for his contribution to the Anglican rite, particularly during the Edwardian period, but his partsongs are ambitious, as might be expected from a professor of composition at the Royal College of Music. Both *Heraclitus* and *The Blue Bird* are expressive and sensitive settings, the latter foreshadowing what would later become close harmony.

**Poulenc** wrote around 150 mélodies, and only one song in English, *Fancie*. Interestingly, both his setting and that of Benjamin Britten were written in 1962 for Marion Harwood. It was the last song Poulenc wrote.

## INTERVAL (Approx 20 mins)

### Part 3: Folksong Settings by Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

*Ca' the yowes*

*Loch Lomond*

*The Turtle Dove*

*Greensleeves*

*Bushes and Briars*

*Linden Lea*

**Vaughan Williams** was highly influential, with Cecil Sharpe, Moeran, Grainger, and Butterworth, in preserving the folksongs of the British Isles. He travelled extensively, recording the melodies and words of an art that was perilously close to being lost as rapid changes in society eroded the tradition of oral transmission. As he became immersed in the modality and implicit harmony of this timeless genre, his compositions acquired an unmistakably folk-like sound, and it is this synthesis for which he is most famous, and for which his music is so distinctive.

In arranging folksongs for voices, his skills as conservationist and composer were best served. Few arrangers can have been so immersed in both folk and classical music, and his art lies in preserving the feel of the original song – harmonic and melodic simplicity – and adding touches of colour to heighten moments of tension, melancholy, joy, and despair, raising each song to the realm of art song. And yet the result is artless, leaving the original song as an object of veneration, rather than subsumed into a vehicle for the composer. The song can make its own mark and tell its own story.

*Ca' the yowes*, with dialectal words by Burns, is a haunting Scottish sheep-folding song, with a love song intermingled. *Loch Lomond*, also Scottish, yearns for return to the homeland – though the loch will never be reached.

Moving to England, *The Turtle Dove* tells of fidelity in love, despite separation. *Greensleeves*, thought to have been written by Henry VIII, extols the virtues of the Lady “Greensleeves”, who some think was Anne Boleyn (though she rebuffs her suitor’s attentions). *Bushes and Briars* is a melancholy song from Essex, in which a girl wonders whether admitting her affection to her lover will drive him away. *Linden Lea*, though not a folksong (since Vaughan Williams wrote the melody and Barnes the words), is in the same vein as his folksong settings. We sing an arrangement by Arthur Somervell, made with the composer’s blessing, of the original for voice and piano.

## Part 4: Birthday Madrigals for George Shearing by John Rutter

*It was a lover and his lass  
Come live with me  
My true love hath my heart  
When daisies pied*

The unusual pairing of Elizabethan poetry and **George Shearing** came about when the conductor of the Cheltenham Bach Choir, Brian Kay (formerly of the King’s Singers), invited **John Rutter** to compose a work to celebrate the 75th birthday of the great jazz pianist. Rutter and Shearing had both worked with, and arranged for, the King’s Singers.

Shearing was born in Battersea, south London, in 1919. He was congenitally blind and the youngest of nine children. From his days as a youth playing in local pubs, he developed into one of jazz’s most enduring performers, and composed more than 300 tunes. He has received countless awards, including two “Grammys” for recordings made with Mel Tormé.

The first performance of the *Birthday Madrigals* was in Cheltenham town hall on 3 June 1995, in the presence of Shearing, with the composer conducting and Shearing’s regular double bassist, Neil Swainson, on bass. The first piece was written in 1975, and the others added in 1995. All texts are drawn from the madrigal era, hence the title.

It was a *Lover and his Lass* sets words by Shakespeare in the jazz close harmony style. Thanks to the composer’s skill at pastiche and the poet’s greatness the result is successful! *Come Live with Me* sets words by Marlowe and Raleigh in a lively happy manner from the world of early popular music. *My True Love Hath my Heart* is a touching setting of the well-known words by Sir Philip Sidney. Rutter’s response is very different from Gounod’s, but acts as a splendid oasis of calm within this set: its opening and ending remind us of the Scottish folksongs heard earlier. The final piece, *When Daisies Pied*, returns to the rollicking style – a jazz waltz that reminds the listener of Shearing’s famous arrangement of his own *Lullaby of Birdland*, where some of the birds, at least, must be blue! The set ends with the words “loud sing cuckoo”, neatly echoing the evening’s opening words: “*Summer is icumen in, Lhude sing cuckoo*”!

John Cotton  
June 2007

## The Cherwell Singers

<i>Soprano</i>	<i>Alto</i>	<i>Tenor</i>	<i>Bass</i>
Claire Appleton Sue Bignal Kipper Chipperfield Sarah Franks Anne Holland Louise Locock Eleanor Parker Beatrix Stewart Jo Tucker Lucy Watson	Virginia Allport Jenny Ayres Caroline Higginbottom Stella Holman Helen Maidlow Joanna McLean Lizzy Newton Sally Prime	Paul King Tim Nixon Guy Peskett David Sutton John Tucker	Alistair Braden Christopher Franks Neil Herington Paul Hodges Simon Jones Simeon Mitchell