

John PICKARD

SONGS FOR VOICE AND PIANO

THE BORDERS OF SLEEP

BINYON SONGS

THE PHOENIX

Eve Daniell, soprano
Roderick Williams, baritone
Simon Lepper, piano

SONGS FOR VOICE AND PIANO : AN INTRODUCTION BY THE COMPOSER

by John Pickard

This recording contains my complete output to date of music for solo voice and piano. For many composers, songs are often the first things they try to write; for me, it was not until I was almost 30 that I made a serious attempt to compose one, which turned out to be *The Phoenix* [6]. Since then, I have periodically returned to song-writing, but since my natural inclination tends towards extended instrumental forms, the songs I write have a habit of organising themselves into larger works. In the case of *The Phoenix*, a single long song divides into a number of smaller sections, each with a distinctive character, almost like separate songs, whereas the Binyon and Thomas settings ultimately resulted in extended cycles, though I have no objection at all to the performance of individual songs from the cycles.

I do not come from a musical background where singing was particularly prominent. Nevertheless, I have never found much difficulty in writing for voices. Finding the right words, on the other hand, is a real challenge. I am afraid of spoiling a good poem by setting it to music; conversely, there needs to be only one musically problematic word in a poem and I am unable to set the text at all. So finding appropriate texts often takes far longer than actually setting them. Occasionally, though, a text leaps off the page, demanding to be set, as happened in the case of the last of my *Binyon Songs*.

Although Laurence Binyon's Great War poem *For the Fallen* contains some of the most famous words ever written in the English language, Binyon (1869–1943) is now a deeply unfashionable figure, his measured, civilised voice largely drowned out in the clamour of the late twentieth and early 21st centuries. The neglect is especially regrettable, because he has much to say that is of directly contemporary relevance, frequently offering a message of consolation and hope that is all the more potent for

being so realistic and unsentimental in expression. Even so, the five *Binyon Songs* were not originally envisaged as a cycle. The final song, ‘The Burning of the Leaves’ [5], was the first to be written, commissioned in its original voice-and-piano version by the 2010 Ludlow English Song Weekend. The first performance had to be postponed because the soloist was ill and, since the festival at Ludlow was at the time a triennial event, the belated premiere took place in Tardebigge on 5 June 2011, given by James Rutherford and Simon Lepper. In the meantime, I made a version for voice and orchestra, which was first performed in Dorchester Abbey on 28 May 2011, again by James Rutherford, with the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by John Andrews, as part of the 2011 English Music Festival. ‘The Burning of the Leaves’ is dedicated to the memory of Robin Jeffries. Over Christmas 2012, purely for my own enjoyment, I set four more Binyon poems for voice and piano, subsequently orchestrating them in November 2015.

Four of the five poems I have set explore Nature: its indifference to human aspirations and desires, and also its renewing power in the context of a corrupted and ever-changing world. These themes are explicit in the first three settings [1]–[3], whereas the fourth, a simple love-song [4], attempts to encapsulate a timeless moment, seemingly untouched by the relentless cycle of birth, decay and death. The final setting is by far the longest. ‘The Burning of the Leaves’ was one of Binyon’s last poems, published posthumously in 1944. It takes the autumnal decay of vegetation as a metaphor for the corruption of the old social order, both meeting their ultimate fate in the all-consuming flames. Binyon’s final lines, written at the height of the Second World War, offer a ray of hope, diffracted by doubt and ambivalence: ‘Earth cares for her own ruins, naught for ours. / Nothing is certain, only the certain spring’. These ideas return the listener to the ideas of the first song, so that the whole work turns out to have been a cycle after all.

The music of both the *Binyon Songs* and *The Borders of Sleep* covers a wide spectrum of the extended tonality that underpins most of my music. The sense of a fundamental pitch-centre is rarely absent from any of these songs, though it is sometimes challenged, or even almost overwhelmed, according to the demands of the text. At one extreme, songs like ‘The Burning of the Leaves’ explore highly dissonant harmony and sometimes tortuous melodic contours whereas, at the other, songs like ‘When all the world is

hidden' (*Binyon Songs*) [4] or 'Last Poem' (*The Borders of Sleep*) [14], inhabit a region of pure diatonicism into which my work sometimes steps with complete sincerity and without any sense of irony (a point that is crucially important to me). Within those extremes, the songs tend to be pithy and sharply etched, concentrating on one idea or emotion in each song. *The Phoenix* [6], which is a much earlier work than the other songs, is somewhat different, being more wide-ranging in mood, luxuriant in texture and harmonically elaborate – as perhaps befits its fantastical subject-matter – with a piano part that is both more virtuosic and yet more obviously accompanimental in nature, and less tightly integrated with the vocal line.

The text of *The Phoenix* is freely adapted from R. K. Gordon's translation of the ninth-century poem of the same name found in the Exeter Book, a tenth-century anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry held in the library of Exeter Cathedral. The poem was long thought to be by the Northumbrian poet Cynewulf, though modern scholarship now suggests even earlier origins for the text in the *Carmen de ave phoenice* by Lactantius, and Ambrose's *Hexaemeron* (both from the fourth century), as well as the Book of Job. In its full version, the poem is a Christian allegory in the manner of the rather later bestiaries – mediaeval tracts (themselves derived from the Ancient Greek 'Physiologus') which describe animals, some of them fabulous, in vivid language and which end by drawing a 'moral' from the description. In 'The Phoenix' the ability of the mythical bird to rise from its own ashes becomes a symbol of Christ's resurrection.

'The Phoenix' is a long poem – 677 lines – and so the text prepared for this piece uses only a fraction of the original. It concentrates on the first half of the poem, using very little of the specifically Christian allegory of its second part. The shape of the original poem has thus been completely distorted for musical and dramatic purposes. Furthermore, the text is not only translated into modern English, but I have in turn freely adapted the translation for my setting: where certain words seemed inappropriate for music, I substituted my own. Naturally, all of this takes us a long way from the original text.

Nevertheless, I have attempted to retain and to amplify in musical terms the ecstatic lyricism of the original poem. In contrast with the prevailing gloom of much Anglo-Saxon poetry (one need only compare this poem with *Beowulf* to see the difference), *The Phoenix* is suffused with light, warmth and optimism. These are the features I have tried to reflect in the music.

The Phoenix was commissioned by the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University College, Aberystwyth, with funds from the Welsh Arts Council. It was written for Delyth Hopkins Evans and Lyn Davies, who gave the first performance at the University of Aberystwyth on 15 February 1993.

The Borders of Sleep was composed for its dedicatee, the baritone Jeremy Huw Williams, who commissioned it with financial assistance from the Arts Council of Wales and gave the first performance at St David's Hall, Cardiff, on 26 February 2002, with the pianist Nigel Foster. The work was begun in the summer of 2000 and completed a year later.

Edward Thomas (1878–1917) was killed in the Great War, at the Battle of Arras. He is therefore often grouped with Owen, Sassoon and Brooke as a 'war poet'. In fact, he tends to deal far less directly with the War in his work than the others do, but in some of the poems one can, as it were, hear the shell-fire in the background. As a composer, I am interested in that obliqueness: it opens up an expressive space for the music to occupy. For similar reasons, I was also attracted to the striking lack of metaphors in most of the poems that I chose to set. Generally speaking, the poems are simply intense observations – any symbolic associations stand outside and beyond the text itself. Again, this uncluttered approach frees up space for the composer and aids comprehensibility when set to music.

Apart from the first, 'Tall Nettles' [7], and last, 'Lights Out' [15], I wrote the songs in a completely different order from the one in which they now appear. As I became increasingly involved with Thomas' poetic world, what began as an arbitrary collection of three or four songs, each of which could stand alone as a separate item, grew into an extensive nine-movement cycle, lasting about half an hour. As I worked on the songs,

a sort of imaginary narrative began to emerge: a soldier at the Western Front lies in his bunk, half-awake (at ‘the borders of sleep’, as the last poem says) the night before going over the top into no man’s land. Recollections of the natural world from back home (he is a country man) and of lost love merge with images of war. The memories darken, culminating in the macabre vision of the central song, ‘The Gallows’ [11]. The final song, ‘Lights Out’ [15], brings release in the oblivion of sleep.

The penultimate song, ‘The Sorrow of True Love’ [14], sets Thomas’ last poem. It was found on the final page of the war diary he kept until 10 April 1917, the day a shell blast killed him. He was 39 years old and had been writing poetry for just two years.

The baritone **Roderick Williams** is at home in a wide repertoire, from Baroque to contemporary music, in the opera house and on the concert platform, and is in demand as a recitalist worldwide. He enjoys relationships with all the major UK opera houses and has sung operatic world premieres by Sally Beamish, Alexander Knaifel, David Sawer, Robert Saxton and Michael van der Aa. He sings regularly with all the BBC orchestras and all the major UK orchestras, as well as the Berlin Philharmonic, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Russian National Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, Cincinnati Symphony, Music of the Baroque Chicago and the Bach Collegium Japan, amongst others. His many festival appearances include the BBC Proms (including the Last Night in 2014), Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and Melbourne.

Roderick Williams has an extensive discography. He is a composer and has had works premiered at the Wigmore and Barbican Halls, the Purcell Room and live on national radio. In December 2016 he won the prize for best choral composition at the British Composer Awards.



Photo: Benjamin Falovega

In 2015 he started a three-year odyssey through the Schubert song-cycles culminating in performances at the Wigmore Hall in the 2017–18 season.

He was Artistic Director of Leeds Lieder in April 2016 and won the RPS Singer award in May 2016. He was awarded an OBE in June 2017.

Eve Daniell, soprano, began her training in Canada where she received the national Gold Medal for Voice of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2009. She continued her training at the Royal Academy of Music in London on a Sainsbury Award and the Catherine Osborne Scholarship, winning the Royal Academy Pavarotti Prize in 2015.

Her roles have included Konstanze, Donna Elvira, Fiordiligi, the Countess, Tatyana, and Nerone in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Eve was a soloist at the Last Night of the Proms in 2016 and has appeared on *In Tune* and *A Prairie Home Companion* with Garrison Keillor on BBC Radio 3, on *The Archers* on Radio 4, with the Victoria Symphony Orchestra, in the 'Song Circle' of the Royal Academy of Music and the Kohn Foundation Bach Cantata Series.

Eve is grateful for the support of the International Opera Foundation, British Columbia Arts Council, Josephine Baker Trust, Canadian Centennial Scholarship Fund and the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation.

Her website can be found at www.evedaniell.com.



Simon Lepper read music at King's College, Cambridge. He is a professor of piano accompaniment and a vocal repertoire coach at the Royal College of Music, where he also co-ordinates the piano-accompaniment course. He is an official accompanist for the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition

Performance highlights have included an invitation from the Wigmore Hall to present a three-concert project on the songs of Joseph Marx; a recital tour with Stéphane Degout, which included the Ravinia and Edinburgh Festivals; his debuts at Carnegie Hall with the mezzo Karen Cargill and at the Frick Collection with Christopher Purves; performances of the Schubert song-cycles with Mark Padmore, not least at the Schubertiade, Hohenems; and recitals with Angelika Kirchschrager at La Monnaie, Brussels, and at the Wigmore Hall, where his other appearances have included recitals with Sophie Bevan, Stephan Loges, Christopher Maltman, Sally Matthews, Elizabeth Watts and Lawrence Zazzo.

His vocal recordings include two volumes of Debussy songs and a Strauss disc with Gillian Keith, a disc of Mahler songs with Karen Cargill and the complete songs of Jonathan Dove with Kitty Whately. Forthcoming releases include a song-recital disc with Dame Felicity Palmer, a ballad CD with Stéphane Degout and Schubert songs with Ilker Arcayirek.

His website can be found at www.simonlepper.com.

John Pickard was born in 1963 and started to compose at an early age. He studied composition first with William Mathias at Bangor University, then with Louis Andriessen at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, The Netherlands, on a Dutch Ministry of Culture Scholarship. He is currently Professor of Composition at the University of Bristol, where he has worked since 1993.



Photo: Robert Workman

John Pickard has composed over sixty works, as well as several transcriptions and reconstructions of works by other composers. At the centre of his output are five symphonies and other orchestral works of symphonic dimensions, together with five string quartets and the large-scale oratorio *Agamemnon's Tomb* (2005–8), commissioned by the Huddersfield Choral Society, and premiered by it in 2008.

John Pickard's music has been widely praised for its large-scale architectural sense and bold handling of an extended tonal idiom. His string quartets have received particular acclaim. Reviewing the premiere of the Fourth Quartet in June 1998, *The Strad* called it 'one of the best pieces of British chamber music to be heard for years', and the January 2003 edition of *Tempo*, reviewing the Sorrel Quartet's CD of Quartets Nos. 2, 3 and 4 (Dutton Epoch CDLX 71117), wrote that 'even if Pickard were never to write another quartet in his life, his place among the greats is secure'. His orchestral music has also received critical praise.

The US premiere of *The Flight of Icarus* by the San Francisco Symphony was described by *The San Francisco Chronicle* as 'a translucent and achingly lovely memorial to the fallen Icarus' and 'a serious contender for the most exciting musical première of 2006'. Reviewing the recording of Pickard's Fifth Symphony (BIS-2261) in 2017, *The Financial Times* reported: 'this is urgent, must-listen music, as incandescent a symphony as Walton's First'.

Many of John Pickard's compositions are available in recordings. The major international label BIS Records has issued four albums devoted to his music. Two albums of his chamber music have been issued by Toccata Classics, including his Piano Trio and Violin Sonata (TOCC 0150) and the String Quartets Nos. 1 and 5 (TOCC 0197).

In addition to his compositional activities, John was General Editor of the Elgar Complete Edition between 2004 and 2017.

His website can be found at www.johnpickard.co.uk.



Photo: Martin Anderson

Texts

Binyon Songs

1 Nature

Because out of corruption burns the rose,
And to corruption lovely cheeks descend;
Because with her right hand she heals the woes
Her left hand wrought, loth nor to wound nor
mend;

I praise indifferent Nature, affable
To all philosophies, of each unknown;
Though in my listening ear she leans to tell
Some private word, as if for me alone.
Still, like an artist, she her meaning hides,
Silent, while thousand tongues proclaim it
clear;

Ungrudging, her large feast for all provides;
Tender, exultant, savage, blithe, austere,
In each man's hand she sets its proper tool,
For the wise, wisdom, folly for the fool.

2 Sowing Seed

As my hand dropt a seed
In the dibbled mould
And my mind hurried onward
To picture the miracle
June should unfold,
On a sudden before me
Hanging its head,
With black petals
Rotting and tainted,

Stood a flower, dead;
As if all the world's hope

Were rotting there,
A thing to weep for,
Ripe for burial,
Veined with despair.
Yet I cannot prevent

My ignorant heart
From trust that is deeper
Than fear can fathom
Or hope desert.

The small twy-bladed
Shoot will thrust
To brave all hazards.
The seed is sown
And in Earth I trust.

3 Autumn Song

All is wild with change,
Large the yellow leaves
Hang, so frail and few.
Now they go, they too
Flutter, lifted, lying,
Everywhither strewn.
All is wild with change.
Nothing shrinks or grieves.
There's no time for sighing.
Night comes fast on noon,
Dawn treads after soon;

Days are springing, dying,
We with them are flying.
All is wild with change.

4 When all the world is hidden

When all the world is hidden
And there is only you,
When bosom beats to bosom
As if the heart broke through,
O never speech nor language
Song nor music told
The wonder more than all the world
That in my arms I hold.
Day is a dream abolished,
Sweet madness only true.
The night is burning beauty
Where there is only you.

5 The Burning of the Leaves

Now is the time for the burning of the leaves.
They go to the fire; the nostril pricks with
smoke
Wandering slowly into a weeping mist.
Brittle and blotched, ragged and rotten sheaves!
A flame seizes the smouldering ruin and bites
On stubborn stalks that crackle as they resist.
The last hollyhock's fallen tower is dust;
All the spices of June are a bitter reek,
All the extravagant riches spent and mean.
All burns! The reddest rose is a ghost;
Sparks whirl up, to expire in the mist: the wild
Fingers of fire are making corruption clean.

Now is the time for stripping the spirit bare,
Time for the burning of days ended and done,
Idle solace of things that have gone before:
Rootless hope and fruitless desire are there;
Let them go to the fire, with never a look
behind.

The world that was ours is a world that is ours
no more.

They will come again, the leaf and the flower,
to arise

From squalor of rottenness into the old splendour,
And magical scents to a wondering memory
bring;

The same glory, to shine upon different eyes.
Earth cares for her own ruins, naught for ours.
Nothing is certain, only the certain spring.

6 The Phoenix

I have heard that far off in the east is the noblest
of lands, famous among men. The face of this
land is not to be found by many, but by God's
might is set afar from evil men. Lovely is all
the land, dowered with delights, with earth's
sweetest scents; matchless is that plain, noble
its Maker, proud, rich in power; He created the
country. Often to the blessed comes the delight
of blissful harmonies, the door of heaven is
set open and revealed. Green forests spread
beneath the skies, hung with fruits winter and
summer alike.

Within the wood there dwells a bird,
wondrous fair, mighty in flight, which is called
the Phoenix. Alone there it holds its abode,

its brave way of life; never shall death do it harm while the world endures. There it is said to gaze on the sun's course, till God's candle, gracious jewel, rises, gleaming, over the waves of the sea from the east. The ancient work of the Father, radiant sign of God. The stars are hidden, whelmed under the waves in the west, quenched in the dawn. The land is beautified, the world made fair, when the glorious gem, most famed of heavenly bodies, pours light on the land throughout the world.

When the sun towers high over the salt streams the grey bird flies from the tree in the grove; swift in its wings, it flies aloft and pours forth harmony and song to the sky. That song is sweeter and fairer than all music, more beautiful than any melody. Neither trumpets, nor horns, nor the sound of the harp, nor the voice of any man on earth can equal that outpouring. Thus it sings, blissfully glad, till the sun has sunk in the southern sky. Then it is silent and falls to listening. The bird is mute.

Ever it notes the hours, day and night, until the bird has lived for a thousand years. Then mighty in flight, pressed down by years, it flies on westwards. It dwells in a desert place, in the shade of a forest grove. Then far and near it gleams and gathers the sweetest plants and blossoms of the wood for its dwelling. When the jewel of the sky, the sun in summertime, shines above the shade, the pyre is kindled. Flame enfolds the nest. The Phoenix is consumed by fire.

Yet after due time, the life returns anew. The ashes draw together, shrunk to a ball. From it grows a worm, shaped like the eagle's young, a fair fledgling. Then further it grows until its flesh is fashioned all anew. Men throughout the earth marvel at its beauty. Their writings set it forth.

The Phoenix, young in its dwelling, betokens the power of the Son of God, when from its ashes it rises again to the life of life. These are the words, the utterance of holy men whose hearts are urged onwards towards heaven, to the joy of joys.

Alleluia.

The Borders of Sleep

7 Tall Nettles

Tall nettles cover up, as they have done
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the
plough

Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.
This corner of the farmyard I like most:
As well as any bloom upon a flower
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

8 The Trumpet

Rise up, rise up,
And, as the trumpet blowing
Chases the dreams of men,
As the dawn glowing
The stars that left unlit

The land and water,
Rise up and scatter
The dew that covers
The print of last night's lovers –
Scatter it, scatter it!

While you are listening
To the clear horn,
Forget, men, everything
On this earth new-born,
Except that it is lovelier
Than any mysteries.
Open your eyes to the air
That has washed the eyes of the stars
Through all the dewy night:
Up with the light,
To the old wars;
Arise, arise!

9] The Mill-Water

Only the sound remains
Of the old mill;
Gone is the wheel;
On the prone roof and walls the nettle reigns.
Water that toils no more
Dangles white locks
And, falling, mocks
The music of the mill-wheel's busy roar.
Pretty to see, by day
Its sound is naught
Compared with thought
And talk and noise of labour and of play.
Night makes the difference.

In calm moonlight,
Gloom infinite,
The sound comes surging in upon the sense:
Solitude, company, –
When it is night, –
Grief or delight
By it must haunted or concluded be.
Often the silentness
Has but this one
Companion;
Wherever one creeps in the other is:
Sometimes a thought is drowned
By it, sometimes
Out of it climbs;
All thoughts begin or end upon this sound,
Only the idle foam
Of water falling
Changelessly calling
Where once men had a work-place and a home.

10] Out in the Dark

Out in the dark over the snow
The fallow fawns invisible go
With the fallow doe;
And the winds blow
Fast as the stars are slow.
Stealthily the dark haunts round
And, when the lamp goes, without sound
At a swifter bound
Than the swiftest hound,
Arrives, and all else is drowned;

And star and I and wind and deer,
Are in the dark together, – near,
Yet far, – and fear
Drums on my ear
In that sage company drear.
How weak and little is the light,
All the universe of sight,
Love and delight,
Before the might,
If you love it not, of night.

[11] The Gallows

There was a weasel lived in the sun
With all his family,
Till a keeper shot him with his gun
And hung him up on a tree,
Where he swings in the wind and the rain,
In the sun and in the snow,
Without pleasure, without pain,
On the dead oak tree bough.

There was a crow who was no sleeper,
But a thief and a murderer
Till a very late hour; and this keeper
Made him one of the things that were,
To hang and flap in rain and wind,
In the sun and in the snow.
There are no more sins to be sinned
On the dead oak tree bough.

There was a magpie, too,
Had a long tongue and a long tail;
He could both talk and do –
But what did that avail?

He, too, flaps in the wind and rain
Alongside weasel and crow,
Without pleasure, without pain,
On the dead oak tree bough.

And many other beasts
And birds, skin, bone, and feather,
Have been taken from their feasts
And hung up there together,
To swing and have endless leisure
In the sun and in the snow
Without pain, without pleasure,
On the dead oak tree bough.

[12] Rain

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
For washing me cleaner than I have been
Since I was born into this solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be for what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

13 No One Cares Less than I

'No one cares less than I,
Nobody knows but God,
Whether I am destined to lie
Under a foreign clod,'
Were the words I made to the bugle call in the
morning.

But laughing, storming, scorning,
Only the bugles know
What the bugles say in the morning,
And they do not care, when they blow
The call that I heard and made words to early
this morning.

14 Last Poem

The sorrow of true love is a great sorrow
And true love parting blackens a bright morrow:
Yet almost they equal joys, since their despair
Is but hope blinded by its tears, and clear
Above the storm the heavens wait to be seen.
But greater sorrow from less love has been
That can mistake lack of despair for hope
And knows not tempest and the perfect scope
Of summer, but a frozen drizzle perpetual
Of drops that from remorse and pity fall
And cannot ever shine in the sun or thaw,
Removed eternally from the sun's law.

15 Lights Out

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose

Their way, however straight,
Or winding, soon or late;
They cannot choose.

Many a road and track
That, since the dawn's first crack,
Up to the forest brink,
Deceived the travellers,
Suddenly now blurs,
And in they sink.
Here love ends,
Despair, ambition ends;
All pleasure and all trouble,
Although most sweet or bitter,
Here ends in sleep that is sweeter
Than tasks most noble.

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown
I must enter, and leave, alone,
I know not how.

The tall forest towers;
its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf;
Its silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.



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