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The
King's Singers
Live at the BBC Proms
Royal Albert Hall, London



BBC

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**LIVE AT THE BBC PROMS
ROYAL ALBERT HALL, LONDON**

	Chansons Françaises, op. 130	Francis Poulenc	
1.	La bell' si nous étions		[1.13]
2.	La belle se sied au pied de la tour		[1.34]
3.	Clic, clac, dansez sabots		[1.58]
4.	Pilons l'orge		[0.42]
5.	Ah! Mon beau laboureur		[3.34]
6.	Les Tisserands		[1.56]
7.	Scenes in America Deserta	John McCabe	[14.11]
8.	Dessus le marché d'Arras	Orlande de Lassus	[1.28]
9.	Il est bel et bon	Pierre Passereau	[1.03]
10.	Toutes les nuitz	Orlande de Lassus	[3.00]
11.	La Guerre	Clément Janequin	[7.11]
12.	Hears not my Phillis	John Rogers	[2.47]
13.	Phillis is my only joy	John William Hobbs	[1.49]
14.	The Little Green Lane	Trad. arr. S. E. Lovatt	[2.05]
15.	The Goslings	Frederick Bridge	[2.47]
16.	Greensleeves	Trad. arr. Bob Chilcott	[3.11]

17.	Blow Away the Morning Dew	Trad. arr. Gordon Langford	[1.56]
18.	The Turtle Dove	Trad. arr. Philip Lawson	[3.30]
19.	Widdicombe Fair	Trad. arr. Gordon Langford	[3.42]
20.	The Long Day Closes	Arthur Sullivan	[4.22]
	Total Timings		[66.56]

THE KING'S SINGERS

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ARTISTS' NOTE

The Henry Wood Promenade Concerts - the BBC Proms - is the world's biggest classical music festival, and naturally we were thrilled to be invited to perform again in the festival. The new director of the Proms, Roger Wright, was keen for us to celebrate the 40-year history of the group and to demonstrate the breadth of repertoire we have built up over that time. Our challenge became how to condense 40 years of The King's Singers into just 70 minutes!

The 2008 Proms season focussed on folksong, and so we chose to begin and end with examples from

France and England. Poulenc's *Chansons Françaises* arrangements are wonderful examples of his skill. Our English folksong repertoire shows off the unsung heroes of much of our music - the arrangers. Gordon Langford's arrangements played a large part in the development of the now famous King's Singers sound. We decided to interpolate two classic examples of his from the 70s with more recent additions we had just recorded on our album 'Simple Gifts'.

There was a specific request for us to perform the virtuosic *La Guerre* by Clément Janequin, the 450th anniversary of whose death was being commemorated, and so we attached other

favourite French renaissance madrigals to it. To represent a contemporary commission we decided on John McCabe's wonderful *Scenes in America Deserta*, an atmospheric piece which held the 3,000-strong audience in its thrall. Finally we chose Victorian partsongs. Originally designed to be sung in small gatherings, we turned the enormous Royal Albert Hall into the world's largest Victorian parlour! With the encore, *The Long Day Closes*, a very special concert came to a close. We hope you enjoy it.

The King's Singers

PROGRAMME NOTE

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Chansons Françaises, Op.130 - selection

A man of sharp contradictions, not least those prompted by the tensions between his homosexuality and Catholic faith, Poulenc developed a lasting reputation as a suave modernist, devoted to the artistic pursuit of stylistic elegance and sophisticated wit. He was born into a wealthy family in Paris, where his father ran a pharmaceutical manufacturing business with his two brothers. The boy's mother, a keen amateur musician, encouraged Francis to

learn piano and explore composition at an early age. In 1923, Poulenc made his breakthrough with the ballet score *Les biches*, successfully staged in Monte Carlo by Diaghilev's 'Ballets Russes' in January 1924.

"I am religious by deepest instinct and by heredity," Poulenc once observed: "I am a Catholic. Nevertheless the gentle indifference of the maternal side of my family had, quite naturally, led to a long fit of forgetfulness of religion". The death of a friend in a car accident, followed by a visit in the summer of 1936 to the shrine of the Black Virgin at Rocamadour, effectively revived the vigour of Poulenc's childhood faith. Thereafter, he produced one of the largest and certainly finest outputs of sacred choral music by any French composer since pre-Revolutionary times.

Poulenc also enriched the repertoire of secular vocal compositions, in the form of solo songs and ensemble pieces, touching the sublime with works such as the song-cycle *Tel jour, telle nuit* and the cantata *Figure humaine*. His Eight French Songs, written in 1945 and 1946, are formed from more mundane material; however, Poulenc manages to inflect his choice of artless popular tunes with sufficient personal touches to lift them above the

mill's run of folk arrangements. There's a tremendous swagger about *Clic, clac dansez sabots*, for instance, that owes as much to the composer's ostinato patterns and sonorous harmonies as to the unrelenting tread of the song's original melody. The direct expressions of bucolic pleasures and pains found in these *Chansons Françaises* suited the patriotic spirit of post-war France, however manufactured in the aftermath of the Allied victory or challenged by troubling memories of French public and private affairs under the Nazis.

John McCabe (b.1939)

Scenes in America Deserta

During infancy, John McCabe was seriously hurt in a fire and came close to death. The setbacks of a prolonged recovery process were offset by the boy's discovery of recorded music at the McCabe family home in Huyton, Liverpool. Young John soon became an accomplished pianist and, by the age of 11, attracted attention as the composer of over a dozen symphonies. In 1958 he enrolled at Manchester University, where he studied composition with Humphrey Proctor-Gregg, one of Charles Villiers Stanford's last pupils. Two years later, he became a piano and composition student at the Royal Manchester College of Music. McCabe, a

genuine all-rounder, spent a postgraduate year at Munich's Hochschule für Musik, where his compositions came under the influence of Karl Amadeus Hartmann.

The critical success of McCabe's *Variations on a Theme of Hartmann* prompted the Hallé Orchestra and Sir John Barbirolli to commission his First Symphony for the 1966 Cheltenham Festival. The composer's catalogue of works, including substantial commissioned pieces for the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Stuttgart Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet, The King's Singers and Three Choirs Festival, is striking for its powerful and imaginative tonal harmonies, the richness of its melodic invention, and the intense colours of its scoring. Those qualities catch the ear throughout *Scenes in America Deserta*, the sixth in a series of works for various forces directly related to the imagery of, or influenced by, desert places. Here, McCabe sets a tapestry of words and phrases carefully selected from the eponymous book by architectural historian Peter Reyner Banham (1922-88).

Although composed as one uninterrupted piece, *Scenes in America Deserta* echoes in its successive sections clearly defined moods evoked by Banham's descriptions of desert landscapes of the American southwest. "This vocal work," explains McCabe,

“is based on texts chosen not so much to convey the picturesque aspects of the desert ... but rather to touch on several different points: the nature of the colouring, the silence and the heat, of course, but also the human element in the manmade structure, decorations and pastimes”.

French Renaissance chansons

Orlande de Lassus (c.1530/2-94)

Dessus le marché d'Arras

Pierre Passereau (fl. 1509-47)

Il est bel et bon

Lassus

Toutes les nuitz

Clément Janequin (c.1485- after 1558)

La Guerre

According to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, the rise of the French bourgeoisie was matched by a corresponding growth of sexual repression. It became necessary “to subjugate [sexuality] at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present”. In the era of

Clément Janequin and Pierre Passereau, however, no such restrictions applied. The poetry of French chansons, a form of polyphonic song akin to the Italian madrigal, could span everything from the refined language of courtly love to so-called carnivalesque lyrics, complete with onomatopoeic imitations of natural and man-made sounds and gloriously demotic details of sexual couplings.

The chanson poets of early sixteenth century France developed a sophisticated language of sensual allegory and imagery, frequently presenting a natural view of the unrestrained pleasures of sex by recalling the libidinous antics of birds. Passereau's *Il est bel et bon* reveals the earthly pleasures sought by a young wife while her husband tends to their clucking hens. This sparky little piece was, according to the sixteenth century commedia dell'arte actor Andrea Calmo, a popular hit on the streets of Venice.

Janequin, born in the town of Châtellerauld to the north of Poitou, excelled in the composition of programmatic chansons, *Le chant des oiseaux*, *Les cris de Paris* and *La Guerre* famous among them. The latter vividly recalls Francis I's victory over the Swiss mercenary forces employed by Duke Ercole Sforza of Milan at the Battle of Marignano in 1515. Published in 1528 and later adapted by

the composer for a group of five voice parts, *La Guerre* informed a whole genre of 'battle pieces'. Janequin sets the scene in simple fashion in the chanson's first part, before letting rip with a thrilling depiction of the battle itself in its longer second part.

Orlande de Lassus, born in the Franco-Flemish city of Mons in the early 1530s, achieved international fame as maestro di cappella at the Bavarian court, which he served from 1556 until his death thirty-eight years later. Despite his long tenure in Munich, Lassus, as the American musicologist James Haar neatly puts it, “never entirely let off being a Frenchman”. He wrote around 150 chansons, mostly published in the Netherlands and Paris and widely reprinted elsewhere. *Dessus le marché d'Arras*, for six voices, was published in Paris in 1584 and appears to be based on the tune of a popular song. Its rapid-fire patter, shifts from quadruple to triple metre and use of alternating combinations of voices collectively illustrate the bustle of Arras marketplace, where a ‘Spaniard’ tells a young girl that she could ‘make good money there’. The five-part *Toutes les nuitz*, published in Rome in 1563, by contrast, reflects the elegance of Clément Marot's tender love poetry.

Victorian partsongs

John Rogers (1780-1847)

Hears not my Phyllis

John William Hobbs (1799-1877)

Phyllis is my only joy

Trad. arr. S.E. Lovatt

The Little Green Lane

Frederick Bridge (1844-1924)

The Goslings

Long before it became a journal of academic record and review, *The Musical Times* tailored much of its editorial content to satisfy a rapacious public appetite for partsongs. The periodical's original title, *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, reflected the nature of its market from the first issue in 1844 until the name was curtailed sixty years later. Sales of the magazine, like those of sheet music in general, escalated throughout the nineteenth century. Consequently, the old courtly culture of singing in parts continued its progress, by way of eighteenth century glee clubs and tavern catch societies, into the drawing rooms and salons of bourgeois society.

The King's Singers, since their early days as the Cam River Boys, have regularly programmed and enlivened works from the Victorian partsong tradition, reviving interest in a rich repertoire all too easily stereotyped and dismissed as sentimental schlock. While sentimentality is prominent in this quartet of works, notably so in S.E. Lovatt's gentle arrangement of *The Little Green Lane*, it is far from being the only emotion expressed.

Sir John Rogers, president of the Devon Madrigal Society and a powerful figure in Devonian affairs, was clearly a master of the glee, a form of unaccompanied partsong usually conceived for male voices. His *Hears not my Phyllis* drew aspects of its style, if not its musical substance, from the Elizabethan madrigal, a genre rediscovered and popularised in the mid-1700s by several societies of 'ancient music'. The Devon Madrigal Society's select membership, which included Samuel Sebastian Wesley, convened during the winter months in Exeter to enjoy the combined pleasures of eating and making music. *Hears not my Phyllis* is a vigorous setting for male voices of Sir Charles Sedley's famous 'Knotting Song', best known today thanks to Henry Purcell's solo song to the same text.

The glee tradition was upheld by Rogers's younger contemporary John William Hobbs, a Gentleman of

the Chapel Royal, tenor lay vicar at Westminster Abbey and outstanding concert singer. His tenor voice, apparently limited in range, was described as being of "remarkable purity and sweetness" during Hobbs's youth. As composer of over 100 songs, glees and partsongs, *Hurrah! for the Saxon Race* and *England rules the deep* among them, Hobbs enjoyed considerable popular success. *Phyllis is my only joy*, to another of Sedley's lyrics, was first published in the late 1840s as a 'Ballad in the old English style'. Brief cadential flourishes and simple imitative counterpoint mark the composer's homage to the English madrigal tradition. Hobbs died in Croydon in January 1877 and was buried in West Norwood cemetery.

Like John William Hobbs, the organist and composer Sir Frederick Bridge studied with John Goss, an influential figure in nineteenth century church music. Bridge was appointed organist of Manchester Cathedral and, in 1882, became organist of Westminster Abbey. His partsongs include a priceless setting of *The Goslings* by F.E. Wetherby, first published by Novello in 1913. Victorian sentimentality and Edwardian humour nestle snugly together here, like the song's two hapless, headless birds in their 'dish so deep and wide'.

English folk songs

Trad. arr. Bob Chilcott (b.1955)
Greensleeves

Trad. arr. Gordon Langford (b.1930)
Blow Away the Morning Dew

Trad. arr. Philip Lawson (b. 1957)
The Turtle Dove

Trad. arr. Gordon Langford
Widdicombe Fair

Gordon Langford, born in Edgware in 1930, is perhaps best known for his countless arrangements and light pieces for BBC Radio 2's *Friday Night is Music Night* programme. His name also features prominently in the list of composers associated with the King's Singers, notably so on the ensemble's 1971 debut album, *The King's Singers: By Appointment*. Brian Kay, a founder member of the ensemble, recalls a turning point for the King's Singers, "right at the end of the 'swinging sixties'. A messenger arrived with a new arrangement by a man called Gordon Langford, unknown to us at the time but about to become an absolute lynch-pin in the fortunes of the group. That arrangement of *Blow Away the Morning Dew* blew away more than

its title implied. It scattered our [conservative] musical inheritance out of the window, or at least onto the back burner". Langford, Kay adds, "instinctively and brilliantly understood how to tailor the music to what was then an unusual, and virtually unknown, combination of voices". His virtuoso arrangement of *Widdicombe Fair*, likewise, helped create the characteristic King's Singers sound.

Continuous repertoire refreshment has been a feature of life for the King's Singers for most of their history. Bob Chilcott, who sang first tenor from 1985 to 1997, and the group's current first baritone, Philip Lawson, have jointly contributed many fine arrangements to The King's Singers stockpile of music. Lawson's use of a gently repeated accompaniment figure and plangent harmonies intensifies the central declaration of undying love and song of farewell in *The Turtle Dove*. Chilcott keeps the powder of his part-writing skills dry, or at least stores them beneath the cover of a rolling keyboard accompaniment, until the elaborate syncopated conclusion of *Greensleeves*.

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BIOGRAPHY

THE KING'S SINGERS

David Hurley, counter-tenor

Robin Tyson, counter-tenor

Paul Phoenix, tenor

Philip Lawson, baritone

Christopher Gabbitas, baritone

Stephen Connolly, bass

Regularly performing in excess of 120 concerts every season complemented by recording and teaching, The King's Singers have maintained their place at the apex of a cappella singing and are amongst the world's elite classical performers. Since their debut concert in 1968 they have commissioned works from many well-known composers including Krzysztof Penderecki, Luciano Berio, Peter Maxwell Davies, Richard Rodney Bennett and Gyorgy Ligeti. With more than a dozen commissions since 2000, the latest works have come from John McCabe, Eric Whitacre, Ivan Moody and Michael Nyman.

Concert venues range from cathedrals and palaces to most of the world's major concert halls.

They have joined forces with many orchestras and ensembles, including the Cincinnati and the New York Pops Orchestras, the LSO, Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, St Louis, Toronto and National Symphony Orchestras, The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, His Majesty's Sackbutts and Cornetts, Concordia, Sarband and L'Arpeggiata. They also broadcast regularly across all continents on both TV and Radio

Over the last four decades The King's Singers have worked with distinguished musicians from Kiri te Kanawa to Dudley Moore. In recent years they have worked with Emanuel Ax, George Shearing, Christina Pluhar, Evelyn Glennie, and even Bruce Johnston of the Beach Boys. These collaborations have often resulted in recordings to add to the group's discography on Signum Classics, BMG and EMI labels.

Renowned for their mastery of blend, balance and intonation, the group conducts masterclasses and workshops in many countries, and has for 10 years been Prince Consort Ensemble-in-Residence at the Royal College of Music, London.

www.kingsingers.com



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