

RENEWAL

Programme Notes

Joanna Marsh (arr. Azkoul): In Winter's House

Described in *The Guardian* as 'one of today's leading composers for the voice', Joanna Marsh has written extensively for some of today's leading vocal ensembles. Commissioned for the tenors and basses of Tenebrae Choir, *In Winter's House* is a setting of a poem of the same name by the Oxford-based poet Jane Draycott.

Although the poem's verse structure and rhyme scheme resemble those of a carol, the text is not religious. The poet conjures up a fairy-tale landscape using the imagery of darkness and light, renewal and rebirth. The music by Joanna Marsh has the resonance of an old folk song, introducing a simple lilting motif at the start and gradually transforming it. Each of the five verses takes the initial musical idea and unravels it in a different direction. Over time it becomes more fundamental to the structure, leading to a spacious ending. My adaptation for string orchestra expands the pitch range, enhancing the sense of spaciousness of the original. I am grateful to the composer for her advice and for encouraging me to adapt her work. (Julian Azkoul)

Caroline Shaw: Entr'acte

Originally conceived for string quartet, Caroline Shaw's *Entr'acte* is increasingly popular in its version for string orchestra. On the genesis of the work, Shaw writes: '*Entr'acte* was written in 2011 after hearing the Brentano Quartet play Haydn's Op. 77

No. 2 – with the spare and soulful shift to the D flat major trio in the minuet. It is structured like a minuet and trio, riffing on that classical form but taking it a little further. I love the way some music (like the minuets of Op. 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition.'

Entr'acte is a refreshing take on the Classical minuet and trio form, inventive and entertaining in equal measure. It explores a variety of ensemble textures and features a smorgasbord of extended string instrument techniques including bow noises, slides, harmonics and Bartók *pizzicato*. Ostensibly traditional harmony is gradually infected with subtle dissonance and the work demands a high degree of rhythmic precision throughout. Shaw successfully creates contrasting colours and moods ranging from the frenetic to the whimsical. The version for string orchestra differs slightly from the original with some of the cello material taken over by the bass. Switching back to the bare

string quartet texture when the minuet material returns gives an added sense of nostalgia to the music. (Julian Azkoul)

Caroline Shaw (arr. Azkoul): and the swallow

and the swallow is a setting of Psalm 84, which is commonly read at the dedication of new churches. The work splits the SATB choir into two equal groups, exploring antiphonal textures and imitative effects. In my arrangement for string orchestra, I sought to enhance this by redeploing the players, placing the double bass in the centre with cellos, violas and violins each split into two groups emanating out from the centre. Although Shaw's vocal music is renowned for its use of extended techniques, *and the swallow* largely eschews special effects, except for the very ending where the singers evoke the pattering of autumn rain. This hushed murmuring is akin to the tremolo technique on bowed instruments which I use in my arrangement.

Shaw has mentioned two sources of inspiration for *and the swallow*: the Syrian refugee crisis and the humanitarian crisis on the southern border of the USA. 'There's a yearning for a home that feels very relevant today. The second verse is: "The sparrow found a house and the swallow her nest, where she may place her young" which is just a beautiful image of a bird trying to keep her children safe – people trying to keep their family safe.' The COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the universal human need for a home. (Julian Azkoul)

Oswaldo Golijov: Three Songs

Oswaldo Golijov grew up in Argentina in a family that had arrived from Romania in the 1920s. As a child he was exposed to classical music (his mother taught the piano), Jewish liturgical and Klezmer music, as well as the *nuevo tango* of Astor Piazzolla. He later emigrated to the USA where he is based today. Although the songs on this album were written separately for different occasions, Golijov rearranged them to form his *Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra*. As a collection it captures various strands of the composer's immigrant identity as well as specific moments of inspiration, both felicitous and tragic. This is the first time all three songs appear with string orchestra on disc.

The first song, *Night of the Flying Horses*, begins with a Yiddish lullaby, *Close Your Eyes*, that Golijov wrote for Sally Potter's film *The Man Who Cried*, a story that explores the fate of Jews and Gypsies in the lead up to World War II through the doomed love of a young Jewish woman for a Gypsy man. The lullaby gives way to a *doina* (a slow, mournful Gypsy genre) featuring our principal violist Elitsa Bogdanova, only to be followed by a mad 'gallop' which Golijov says he 'stole' from his friends the Gypsy band Taraf de Haidouks, who also feature on the film's soundtrack. It is presented here as a chase between the two violin sections who play in canon before merging towards the end.

The second song sets the poem *Lúa Descolorida (Colourless Moon)* by Rosalía de Castro. Written in Gallego (the language of the Galician region of Spain), the

poem according to Golijov 'defines despair in a way that is simultaneously tender and tragic'. He describes his setting of the poem as a 'constellation of clearly defined symbols that affirm contradictory things at the same time, becoming in the end a suspended question mark. The song is at once a slow-motion ride on a cosmic horse, an homage to Couperin's melismas in his *Lessons of Tenebrae*, and velvet bells coming from three different churches.' The song was later incorporated into Golijov's 87-minute *Pasión según San Marcos*.

How Slow the Wind, originally conceived for soprano and string quartet, is a setting of two short Emily Dickinson poems. The impetus for this song was the death of Golijov's friend Mariel Stubrin in an accident. He writes: 'I had in mind one of those seconds in life that is frozen in the memory, forever – a sudden death, a single instant in which life turns upside down, different from the experience of death after a long agony.'

We have adapted the songs for our RENEWAL album with the composer's permission. Upon hearing our version, Golijov wrote: 'I was moved by Ruby Hughes' and the United Strings of Europe's extraordinary understanding of every impulse in the writing, especially passages that I had felt were unclear or inadequate (like "love, love, love..." in the third song *How Slow the Wind*). I love Ruby's changes to *Lúa Descolorida*, especially the hushed intimacy she brings to the ending by singing it down an octave. I wish I had thought of that myself.' (Julian Azkoul)

Oswaldo Golijov: Last Round, Muertes del Angel

"I composed Last Round (the title is borrowed from a short story on boxing by Julio Cortázar) as an imaginary chance for Piazzolla's spirit to fight one more time," Golijov wrote. *Muertes del ángel* is a tango elegy both impassioned and reflective.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (arr. Azkoul): String Quartet in F minor, Op. 80

The impetus for Felix Mendelssohn's String Quartet in F minor, Op. 80, was the unexpected and tragic death of his beloved sister, the composer Fanny Mendelssohn. Upon learning of her sudden fatal stroke, Mendelssohn reportedly shrieked and collapsed to the floor. Having been convinced to travel to Lucerne, Switzerland, to convalesce, he divided his time between painting watercolours and writing what was to be his final string quartet. It was followed by a few songs, the last of which finishes with the lines 'only I suffer pain, I will suffer without end, since, most beloved, you must part from me and I from you'. A few months later Mendelssohn would be dead.

The F minor Quartet is unlike anything Mendelssohn had written before, at times ferocious and brutal. It is probably no coincidence that it shares the same key as Beethoven's 'Serioso' Quartet, Op. 95. Both works are imbued with a dark sense of foreboding although, unlike Beethoven's, Mendelssohn's quartet clings

to the minor mode until the final chords of the work, with no relief either for the composer or the listener. The tumultuous and unsettled first movement is followed by a frenetic scherzo, a quasi-Totentanz with a processional and funereal trio. The third movement in A flat major offers a reprieve from the stormy anguish, a tender and melancholic movement characterised by a sighing, almost vocal melody reminiscent of the composer's *Songs Without Words*. There is also a deep sense of nostalgia and longing, with prominent dotted rhythms akin to a heartbeat. The movement concludes with a hushed series of chords before the torment resumes in the final movement. The unsettled rumblings underneath the furtive melodies at the start of the movement increasingly become a feature, sometimes taking over entirely. The conclusion of the quartet is one of the most virtuosic in the repertoire. The coda moves at breakneck speed with a wild triplet motion in the first violin, a final attempt to overcome the composer's grief. However, catharsis and redemption are never achieved; the quartet ends with the same fist-shaking raw intensity with which it began.

The contrasting textures and large range of dynamics in this quartet make it an excellent candidate for an adaptation for string orchestra with the double bass giving this harrowed music a welcome spaciousness. In this arrangement the first violin retains some solos in the cadenza-like passages of the first and last movements, while the codetta of the second movement sees a return of the original quartet texture, providing an added sense of intimacy with the double bass replacing the cello in some of the final bars. The third movement includes solos from both violin parts in the more tender passages and the final movement takes advantage of the larger forces to divide up some of the material.

Henry Purcell: Dido's Lament (arr. Stokowski)

This is an arrangement for string orchestra of Purcell's aria *When I am laid in earth*, from his opera *Dido and Aeneas*, originally for soprano and accompaniment.

When I am laid, am laid in earth,
May my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast;
Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.