Alexandra Ensemble

Highgate Sessions

March 10th 11:30am

Emma Tring - soprano

Robin Martin - violin

Nicholas Korth - Gongs

Clive Williamson - keyboard



**Michael Finnissy**

Four Motets for voice and violin

**Gustav Holst**

Four songs for voice and violin

**Andrew Toovey**

Almost

**Rebecca Clarke**

Songs with Violin

**Nicholas Korth**

Wild Places

**Michael Finnissy (b. 1946) - Four Motets (2020)**

Michael Finnissy is an English composer, pianist and pedagogue. An immensely prolific composer, his music is “notable for its dramatic urgency and immediacy.”

These four motets for voice and violin were arranged by Michael Finnissy for Alexandra Ensemble back in 2020. They will finally receive their London premiere today.

The motets existed in various combinations but they have been brought together into this beautiful set as an ecstatic exploration of humanity’s search for truth through religion and ritual.

1. **O quam glorifica luce** *(Gregorian chant)*

O how you sparkle with glorious light

royal offspring of the Davidic stock.

O Virgin Mary, dwelling on high

over all the citizens of Heaven.

You a mother with virginal honour,

being chaste made ready in your holy bosom

the court of your heart for heaven’s Lord;

Thence was born Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

He whom all the world adores with veneration,

to whom now every knee is bent;

with your help we implore from him the joy of light

with all darkness dispelled.

Grant this o Father of all light

through your own Son, in the Holy Spirit

who lives with you in the shining heavens

ruling and governing all the ages.

Amen.

1. **Villaribus gallinis et religio inest** *(Pliny the Elder)*

Farmyard hens actually have a religious ritual:

after laying an egg they begin to shiver and shake,

and purify themselves by circling around,

cleaning themselves and their egg.

Above all, birds imitate the human voice, parrots indeed actually talking.

Others deny that they can learn the truth, except those who feed on acorns,

and among them it is easier for those who have five toes on their feet,

and not even those themselves for the first two years of their lives.

1. **Videtis enim interiorem** *(Hildegard von Bingen - Conversations with Angels)*

For you look into the Father’s inner strength, the breathing of his heart as of his face.

Praise be to you who glimpse the chamber of the ancient heart within the fount, the source.

O you angels who guard the peoples in your care, whose form reflects in flash upon your face,

and O archangels, you’re reckoned in the mystic fifth, the seal upon God’s mysteries.

Praise be to you who glimpse the ancient heart within the fount, the source.

1. **Iam mea certa manent** *(Sibylla cumana/* Psalm 86)

*My most recent words remain certain and true*

“The foundations thereof are in the holy mountains.”

*They were the latest oracles of the King to come,*

“The Lord loveth the gates of Sion above the tabernacles of Jacob.”

*Who, coming with peace for the whole world, will be pleasing.*

“Glorious things are said of thee, O city of God.”

*Rightly clothed in our flesh as he wanted,*

“Man is born in her, and the Highest himself hath founded her.”

**Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934) - Four Songs** for Voice & Violin, opus 35

These four songs were composed in 1916 and 1917 and were initially inspired by a woman Holst heard singing a wordless song while playing her violin in church after worship one Sunday. He used poems from *A Medieval Anthology* and set out to create “a tune at one with the words.”

1. **Jesu sweet, now will I sing to thee a song of love longing:**
2. **My soul has nought but fire and ice**
3. **I sing of a maiden**
4. **My Leman is so true**

**Andrew Toovey ( b.1962) - Almost**

Andrew Toovey studied composition with Jonathan Harvey, Michael Finnissy and Morton Feldman. His work embraces widely diverse influences and reflects his passion for 20th century visual art.

This collection of seven settings of Emily Dickinson poems for voice and violin were selected after reading her complete poems and chosen because they reflect a profoundly personal and powerful vision of the darker, less luminous side of life, death and relationships that captured the visceral imagination. Their mood is one of perception and memory. In the preface to Dickinson’s complete poems was written:

“The main quality of these poems is that of an extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigour sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable.”

1. **Almost**
2. **Now**
3. **Delight becomes**
4. **Secrets**
5. **As by the dead**
6. **Griefs**
7. **Numen lumen** *(Emily Dickinson)*

**Rebecca Clarke (1886 - 1979) - Songs with violin**

Rebecca Clarke was one of the finest viola-players of her day, she studied composition with Sir Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music and played chamber music with many of the great artists of the 1910s and 1920s, including Scnabel, Casals, Thibaud, Rubinstein, Grainger, Hess and Szell. Her first instrument was the violin and it was Stanford who urged her to shift over to the viola so she would be “in the middle of the sound and see how it was done.” These songs with violin demonstrate her absolute command of the instrument and an ear perfectly attuned to its character.

A review in the Manchester Guardian from 1928 states: “For all their art these settings sound perfectly spontaneous. To anyone who is only aware of their effect, they might seem to be improvised by two of Nature’s Musical Children somewhere in the wilds of Ireland!”

**Three Irish Country Songs**

1. **I know my love**
2. **I know where I'm goin’**
3. **As I was goin’ to Ballynure**

**Down by the Salley Gardens** *(W.B. Yeats)*

**Nicholas Korth (b. 1971) - Wild Places** Three Songs for soprano, violin, keyboard and Gongs

This set of three songs was written for Alexandra Ensemble and is receiving its premiere today.

"The inspiration for Wild Places was the beauty of Emma Tring's singing and the extraordinary array of harmonics produced by Gongs.

I came across the first of the poems from an unlikely source when watching an episode of the American hospital drama ER! In a scene, a doctor who is beginning to lose his memory, recites The Peace of Wild Things and attributes it to Walt Whitman. I was very taken by the poem but thought it really didn't sound like Whitman, which in fact it isn't! It's actually by the celebrated poet and ecologist Wendell Berry. Marsh by Charles Austin is a setting of one of my late grandfather's poems. The set ends with Michael Cullup's personal view of heaven.

Wild Places is based entirely on natural tuning. The Gongs used are a Saturn Planet Gong, a Tai Loi Symphonic Gong and a Chinese Wind Gong. The specially tuned keyboard uses sampled Celeste, Marimba and Organ Sounds as well as a deep, misty, swirling Synthesizer sound (which I have labeled 'Marsh-god'!) in the second song. In addition, the performers are asked to play a Rain Stick, Crystal Singing Bowls and pebbles." Nicholas Korth.

1. **The Peace of Wild things** *(Wendell Berry)*
2. **Marsh** *(Charles Austin)*
3. **Heaven** *(Michael Cullup)*

**Emma Tring**

Emma Tring studied Music at Bristol University and GSMD and is now a successful soloist and ensemble singer in the UK and abroad.

Emma has performed operatic roles with companies including European Chamber Opera, I Fagiolini and BBC Singers. She has sung ensemble and chorus with Music Theatre Wales and BBC Singers under conductors including Martyn Brabbins and John Adams.

As a soloist she has premiered many works and has performed with all the BBC Orchestras, the LSO, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, English Sinfonia, Nu Civilisation Orchestra, Orchestra of Opera North, Britten Sinfonia, The Hanover Band, RPO, AAM, The Bristol Ensemble and St James Baroque, as well as Choral Societies around the UK.

Emma joined the BBC Singers in 2008 as one of their full-time sopranos and appears regularly with them as ensemble singer and soloist. She has been a member of EXAUDI vocal ensemble since 2017 and regularly performs with them around the UK and Europe.

She also recently joined new vocal ensemble Vox Urbane whose aim is to promote diversity within choral music.

She has performed widely with I Fagiolini and has worked with Britten Sinfonia voices, The Clerks, The Scholars and The Sixteen.

In 2023 highlights as soprano soloist included Verlaine Songs by John Pickard; Emilie Suite by Saariaho (both with BBCNOW and Martyn Brabbins); Berio’s Sinfonia in Tenerife; Vaughan-Williams Sea Symphony in Southampton; Duke Ellington’s Sacred Music in Brighton; Eriks Esenvalds ‘Passion and Resurrection’ in Ely with Britten Sinfonia; Rossini’s Stabat Mater at Dartington; Mehta Songs by Nick Korth with English Sinfonia.

Also two performances of Poulenc’s Figure Humaine with Sir Simon Rattle at Barbican and Royal Albert Hall were a particular career highlight!

This spring she will be performing Harrison Birtwistle’s Moth Requiem with BBC Singers and Nash Ensemble in the Wigmore Hall on 26th March and then the Gorecki Symphony no 3 with Bristol Ensemble at St George’s Bristol on 27th March.

She will also be performing Berio’s Sinfonia for the third time, this time with BBC Symphony Orchestra and Martyn Brabbins at the Barbican centre in London in May.

**Robin Martin**

Born in central London, Robin attended Dulwich College as a music scholar. After teaching and travelling in India he went to the University of Bristol, where he gained a degree in Historical Studies. Consecutive full scholarships to Trinity College of Music then enabled him to study the violin with Diana Cummings and Simon Blendis, and he was awarded a Postgraduate Diploma, followed by an Advanced Postgraduate Diploma with Distinction.

Following a happy year in Chile with the Santiago Philharmonic Orchestra, Robin returned to London and worked as a freelancer with many of the UK's leading symphony, chamber, opera and ballet orchestras before joining the BBC Concert Orchestra, his spiritual home, in November 2023. He loves the variety of work, which in the next few months includes performances with artists such as Elbow, The Pet Shop Boys and Texas for Radio 2’s Piano Rooms; playing Mozart for a Radio 4 podcast; recording at Abbey Road with Guy Barker and his Big Band; a run of Puccini and Rachmaninov operas with Bryn Terfel at Grange Park Opera; Sibelius at Queen Elizabeth Hall; The Queens of Soul in Valletta, Malta; and several BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall including concerts celebrating the music of Sarah Vaughan and Henry Mancini.

Away from the violin, Robin is a keen cook, enjoys exploring beaches, woods, museums and art galleries with Emma and their two boys, and is easily persuaded to play football, cricket and board games!

**Alexandra Ensemble**

Emma and Robin formed Alexandra Ensemble in 2018 and performed frequently around their home in South East London. During the pandemic of 2020 they took part in the Proud Songsters online recital series. The Ensemble was reformed in 2024 and their inaugural concert was on March 1st in Victoria Rooms Bristol with guest pianist Libby Burgess, in which they premiered a new version of John Pickard’s Verlaine Songs which was written for them. The orchestral version will be released on the BIS label later in 2024 and features Emma Tring alongside BBC National Orchestra of Wales conducted by Martyn Brabbins.

**Nicholas Korth**

Nicholas is a composer with a fascination for the extraordinary sound worlds of natural harmony and a love for the setting of words. It has been said of his music that it “... made me feel that I was both listening to alien music from outer space, and to something familiar all at the same time.”

Nicholas has also held the position of Co-principal Horn with the BBC Symphony Orchestra since 2000.

**Clive Williamson**

Clive studied at York University and the Royal Academy of Music with Ruth Harte. He made his London solo debut in the Purcell Room. Since then he has played as soloist at all of the major London halls, and many other venues throughout the UK and in Europe. As an ensemble musician he is in considerable demand, working in both concert hall and recording studio throughout the world with many leading groups such as the London Sinfonietta, Gemini, Composers Ensemble and BCMG.

Since leaving Surrey University in 2015 where he was Professor, Clive has become increasingly active with the London orchestras, most notably the Philharmonia Orchestra and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. This has led to accompanying some very distinguished soloists, such as violinist Pekka Kuusisto, and singer Dagmar Manzel.

Alexandra Ensemble

Victoria Rooms

March 1st lunchtime recital

Emma Tring - soprano

Robin Martin - violin

Libby Burgess - piano

Programme

Michael Finnissy

Four Motets for voice and violin

Lili Boulanger

Prelude in D-flat major

Claude Debussy

Clair de Lune

John Pickard

Verlaine Songs for voice, violin and piano

Michael Finnissy - Four Motets (2020)

These four motets for voice and violin were arranged by Michael Finnissy for Alexandra Ensemble back in 2020. They will finally receive their premiere today.

The motets existed in various combinations but they have been brought together into this beautiful set as an ecstatic exploration of humanity’s search for truth through religion and ritual.

I. O quam glorifica luce (Gregorian chant)

O how you sparkle with glorious light royal offspring of the Davidic stock. O Virgin Mary, dwelling on high over all the citizens of Heaven.

You a mother with virginal honour, being chaste made ready in your holy bosom the court of your heart for heaven’s Lord; Thence was born Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

He whom all the world adores with veneration, to whom now every knee is bent; with your help we implore from him the joy of light with all darkness dispelled.

Grant this o Father of all light through your own Son, in the Holy Spirit who lives with you in the shining heavens ruling and governing all the ages.

Amen.

II. Villaribus gallinis et religio inest (Pliny the Elder)

Farmyard hens actually have a religious ritual: after laying an egg they begin to shiver and shake, and purify themselves by circling around, cleaning themselves and their egg.

Above all, birds imitate the human voice, parrots indeed actually talking. Others deny that they can learn the truth, except those who feed on acorns, and among them it is easier for those who have five toes on their feet, and not even those themselves for the first two years of their lives.

III. Videtis enim interiorem (Hildegard von Bingen - Conversations with Angels)

For you look into the Father’s inner strength, the breathing of his heart as of his face.

Praise be to you who glimpse the chamber of the ancient heart within the fount, the source. O you angels who guard the peoples in your care, whose form reflects in flash upon your face, and O archangels, you’re reckoned in the mystic fifth, the seal upon God’s mysteries. Praise be to you who glimpse the ancient heart within the fount, the source.

IV. Iam mea certa manent (Sibylla cumana/ Psalm 86)

My most recent words remain certain and true

“The foundations thereof are in the holy mountains.”

They were the latest oracles of the King to come,

“The Lord loveth the gates of Sion above the tabernacles of Jacob.” Who, coming with peace for the whole world, will be pleasing.

“Glorious things are said of thee, O city of God.”

Rightly clothed in our flesh as he wanted,

“Man is born in her, and the Highest himself hath founded her.”

Lili Boulanger - Prelude in D-flat major (1911)

Lili Boulanger was a child prodigy who died at the tragically young age of 24. She wrote her Prelude in 1911 when she was only 18 years old, and a year later won the Prix de Rome composition prize with her cantata Faust et Hélène, the first woman ever to do so.

This prelude is a short and beautiful work for piano and draws on the whole tone scale while remaining rooted in D flat major.

Claude Debussy - Clair de Lune (1890)

Debussy started writing Clair de Lune (Moonlight) in 1890 but it wasn’t published until 1905 and formed part of his Suite Bergamasque for solo piano. It was inspired by a Paul Verlaine poem of the same name and has possibly become Debussy’s most famous piece of music.

The landscape being described is an 18th century manicured garden, full of characters leaving a masqued ball; laughter fills the air but it is bittersweet, unsatisfied. Their song blends with the quiet moonlight, beautiful and sad.

John Pickard - Verlaine Songs (2019 - 2020)

This cycle of songs sets poems by the great nineteenth-century French poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). They were written for the soprano Emma Tring, with the particular qualities of her extraordinary voice very much in mind. The songs were originally scored for an ensemble of ten instruments and were first performed in June 2022 by Emma, with the Bristol Ensemble under the direction of John himself. An orchestral version was then recorded for the BIS label with BBC National Orchestra of Wales and Martyn Brabbins, to be released in 2024.

This version for voice, violin and soprano was made especially for Alexandra Ensemble and is receiving its premiere here today.

I. Chanson d’automne

II. Spleen

III. Marine

IV. Le Squelette

V. L’heure exquise

VI. Le soleil d’or

Verlaine has always been a popular poet with French composers, with Fauré, Debussy and Ravel among the many who set him. Critics frequently point to the innate musicality of Verlaine’s verse as an important inspiration. John Pickard, though not a native speaker, strongly expresses this musicality in his own settings.

These poems have a broad range of expression and when grouped in this particular order provide dramatic contrast and an overall progression of mood. The first two poems are languorous and subjective, the third depicts a brutal and sinister thunderstorm over the ocean, the fourth is a macabre and comical account of two drunks who try to offer a drink to a skeleton who then sits up and sends them on their way. The fifth song in this sequence is a simple romantic nocturne, before the final song in which the poet begs the pale morning star to shine thoughts of love into his lover’s dreams before the Golden sun awakens her!