

THE

Aldelburgh

C O N N E C T I O N

Blessed Cecilia

Walter Hall, Sunday, November 22, 2009, 2:30 pm



We wish to thank Sue Mortimer
for sponsoring Shannon Mercer

Patricia and David Stone
for sponsoring James McLean

and J. Hans Kluge
for sponsoring Giles Tomkins

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We also thank James and Connie MacDougall
for providing the flowers on stage

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We are performing on the Edith McConica Steinway

Blessed Cecilia

Shannon Mercer, soprano

James McLean, tenor

Giles Tomkins, bass-baritone

Stephen Ralls and Bruce Ubukata, piano

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Desiring to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the birth of Henry Purcell and finding that one of our Sunday concerts was to be scheduled on November 22, it was a logical step to include the music of Benjamin Britten, whose birthday falls today, and to link the two composers with a tribute to St. Cecilia, whose feast day this is.

Cecilia is believed to have been a Roman virgin at the time of the emperor Alexander Severus. Given in marriage by her parents, she persuaded her new husband to take a vow of chastity and be baptised. He, his brother and finally Cecilia herself were all martyred for refusing to sacrifice to false gods, she by an unsuccessful beheading (from which it took her three days to expire). Her association with music seems to come solely from the following passage in her written legend: "While the profane music of her wedding was heard, Cecilia was singing in her heart a hymn of love for Jesus, her true spouse." Later versions of the story have her credited with the invention of the organ, though whether this instrument actually existed at the time of her supposed life in Rome is uncertain, to say the least.

Our programme today has a deliberately split personality. The second half begins with a two-fold rejection of the power of music (first humorous, then deeply serious); then we go on to soothe the savage breast with evocations of music's charms and of its more important saving graces - several of Britten's finest songs are involved here. In our first half, we present the work of two of St. Cecilia's greatest devotees by focussing on Britten's realisations of Purcell's vocal music.

These songs were written down, and first published, with nothing but a voice part and a bass line. The 17th century keyboard player or lutenist was expected to fill in the notes and texture of the implied harmonies -

in other words, to “realise” the basses. Britten admired and loved Purcell’s songs fervently, but he was exasperated by the dullness of many published realisations. His keyboard parts (intended for the modern grand piano) frequently suggest the sound of a harpsichord, while introducing (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the complexity of the song) all kinds of harmonic enrichment and added counterpoints - rather in the manner of his own folksong arrangements. As Graham Johnson writes: “In sheerly musical terms the Purcell realisations, or re-workings, belong to that very special, and usually audacious, world of transcriptions (typified by those larger than life maestri Liszt and Busoni) where old wine is poured into new bottles . . . These conjunctions take our breath away by fusing the spirits of two great composers . . . The Britten-Purcell arrangements (as accurate a billing, I think, as Purcell-Britten, and one which perhaps makes more sense on the programmes of today) may have lost their ability to shock . . . but they can still excite.”

The musicological authorities of Britten’s day were scandalised by what they regarded as inauthentic transgressions. At a distance of some decades, we can hear the tremendous musical qualities of these realisations and relish them as a crucial part of his oeuvre. It’s best to finish, perhaps, by quoting some lines from Britten and Peter Pears’s preface to the Boosey & Hawkes volumes of Purcell songs, with some evocative nouns which we have used as lynchpins of our programme (our italics): “It is clear that the figured basses in Purcell’s day were realised in a manner personal to the player. In this edition the basses have also, inevitably, been realised in a personal way. But it has been the constant endeavour of the arranger to apply to these realisations something of that mixture of *clarity*, *brilliance*, *tenderness* and *strangeness* which shines out in all Purcell’s music.”

PART 1:

All vocal items are by Henry Purcell (1659-95), realised by Benjamin Britten (1913-76). Most were originally written for stage works (either plays or semi-operas), as indicated.

CLARITY

I attempt from Love's sickness to fly: *The Indian Queen*
(soprano)

One of the simplest and best-known of Purcell songs - and of Britten's realisations - uses gentle coloratura to evoke an eternal theme of love poetry.

Fairest isle: *King Arthur*
(bass-baritone)

Often regarded as a patriotic hymn, this song in fact praises the amorous qualities of British youth.

Music for a while: *Oedipus*
(tenor)

Britten's version of this song (one of those in which Purcell used his favourite device of a repeated ground bass) was dedicated to Joan Cross, who premiered roles in several of his operas, from *Peter Grimes* onwards. Perhaps for that reason, it is a much more dramatic realisation than modern audiences are accustomed to hearing. In the play for which it was written, the scene has an ominous quality, an off-stage voice delivering the song.

BRILLIANCE

I'll sail upon the dog-star: *A Fool's Preferment*
(bass-baritone)

Albeit a cheerful one, this is an example of a Purcellian "mad song", a popular genre in the 17th century.

Evening Hymn (*William Fuller*)
(tenor)

As Robert King writes, this "is one of Purcell's greatest miniatures, set to one of his most eloquent ground basses". The final sequence of ecstatic Alleluias is particularly inventive. The poet was Bishop of Lincoln.

TENDERNESS

Sweeter than roses: *Pausanias, the Betrayer of his Country*
(soprano)

A beautiful and dramatic love-song which was one of Purcell's last compositions - he may not have lived to hear its first performance.

If music be the food of love (*Henry Heveningham*)
(bass-baritone)

This is the third of three settings which Purcell made of a poem whose starting point is Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

In the black, dismal dungeon of despair (*William Fuller*)
(tenor)

Like many a Bach cantata, this music sets a religious love-poem. A repentant soul longs for forgiveness: "Fool that I was, worthy a sharper rod, / To slight thy courting, O my God! / For thou did'st woo, intreat and grieve, / Did'st beg me to be happy and to live; / But I would not; I chose to dwell / With Death, far from thee, too near to Hell."

STRANGENESS

Mad Bess (*anon.*)
(soprano)

To this extended mad song, Purcell gave the subtitle "Bess of Bedlam", a reference to the well-known asylum in the City of London. ("Tom o' Bedlam" and Bess o'Bedlam" were generic names for wandering lunatics, who were known for singing "mad songs".)

Passacaglia: *Peter Grimes*
(piano-duet)

Britten

In the 17th century, Grimes would have been deemed as mad as Tom or Bess. This orchestral interlude, which leads into Act II, scene 2 (Grimes's hut), was transcribed for piano-duet by Erwin Stein, Britten's friend and publisher and a former pupil of Schoenberg. Like Purcell, Britten builds music of great expressive intensity over a ground bass - this one uses the notes to which Grimes has sung "God have mercy upon me" and which are taken up the other characters as "Grimes is at his exercise".

Saul and the Witch at Endor (*anon., after I Samuel 28*)
(soprano/tenor/bass-baritone)

One of Purcell's greatest compositions has engendered what may be Britten's finest realisation, with colouristic piano textures and harmonies boldly underpinning the expressive vocal lines. The scene is set after the death of the prophet, Samuel, who had guided Saul until the king rejected the god of Israel. Besieged by the Philistines, Saul persuades a witch to conjure up Samuel's ghost, only to hear of his own impending death. Britten's version dates from 1947; one can imagine members of the English Opera Group - Joan Cross, Peter Pears, Owen Brannigan perhaps - giving a vivid performance in recital.

INTERMISSION

during which tea will be served in the Torel Room,
with the kind assistance of students of the
Opera Division, Faculty of Music.

PART 2: THE ANTI-MASQUE

A Word on my Ear (*Michael Flanders*) Donald Swann (1923-94)
(soprano)

Their two-man revue, *At the Drop of a Hat* (1956) rocketed Flanders & Swann to stardom. This song was written for a friend of theirs as an encore piece, a kind of neo-Purcellian mad scene for soprano.

Ode on the Rejection of St. Cecilia (*Arioso*) Gerald Finzi (1901-56)
(*George Barker*) (bass-baritone)

This extraordinary song is a setting made in 1947 of a poem which George Barker later published as "Ode Against St. Cecilia's Day". The poet was an admirer and follower of Gerald M.Hopkins and T.S.Eliot. His ode is densely filled with imagery, often from the classical world (for example, "catacomb" and "hecatomb" - which is a Greek term for wholesale slaughter). At the same time, images hit us which must have registered strongly in mid-1940s Britain: "underground sleepers" - those seeking refuge from bombing in the London Underground; "the caterwauling siren" - another air-raid allusion; "the great moaners of the Seven Seas" - moaning the numbers killed in war at sea. The whole poem laments the "desertion" of St. Cecilia's anniversary and, because of the dubious militaristic uses to which music can be put, suggests that a celebration is almost obscenely inappropriate; instead, "tender Cecilia silence".

Rise, underground sleepers, rise from the grave
Under a broken hearted sky,
And hear the swan singing nightmare grieve
For this deserted anniversary
Where horned a heart sobs in the wilderness
By the thunderbolt of the day.

Echoing footstep in the ruins of midnight
Knock like a clock in a catacomb
Through the toothless house and the derelict skull
Where once Cecilia shook her veils,
Echo and mourn. Footstepping word, attend her
Here, where, in echoes, she prevails.

Sleep, worm eaten weepers. Silence is her altar.
 To the drum of the head, muffled
 In a black time, the sigh is a hecatomb.
 Tender Cecilia silence. Now, silence is tender
 As never a voice was.
 Here, dumb-struck she mourns in long abandoned grandeur.

O stop the calling killer in the skull
 Like beasts we move towards!
 For was the caterwauling siren beautiful
 Chanting warlong until her bed was full
 Of the uxorious dead?
 Let the great moaners of the Seven Seas
 Let only the seas mourn,
 With the shipwrecked harp of creation on their knees
 Till Cecilia turns to a stone.

PART 3: MUSIC HATH CHARMS

Wie Melodien zieht es mir (*Klaus Groth*), Johannes Brahms (1833-97)
 Op.105/1 (tenor)

A feeling steals through my mind like melodies, like the bloom of spring flowers, and floats there like fragrance. Then words come and capture it, bring it before the eye - and it fades like mist and vanishes like a breath. Yet a scent remains, hidden in the verses, which can be called forth by a moist eye.

The Nightingale and the Rose (The Poet's Echo) Britten
 (*Alexander Pushkin*), Op.76/4 (soprano)

Britten's Pushkin cycle was written for his great friends, soprano Galina Vishnevskaya and her husband, Mstislav Rostropovich, who would accompany her in recital. Voice and piano together uncannily evoke the throbbing voice of the nightingale as he sings to the disdainful, nodding rose.

The garden is dark and still; it is spring. The nightingale sings his love song to the rose. She does not listen, beloved disdainful rose and dozes, nodding, to his amorous hymn.

With such words would you melt cold beauty into fire? Poet, beware of whither you aspire! She is not listening, poetry does not inspire her. You gaze, she only flowers. You call her, she does not answer.

Le Souvenir d'avoir chanté (*Catulle Mendès*) Reynaldo Hahn (1875-1947)
(tenor)

The memory of singing in the sun, beneath the blue sky, is the delight of the cicada when summer is over. Old gypsy, what else do you seek when life oppresses you? - the memory of singing in the sun, beneath the blue sky. When another has your beauty, your laughter and gesture, O Mésange, my heart in its gloom will preserve, like a ray of light, the memory of singing.

PART 4: CECILIA'S CHILD

Dear harp of my country (*Moore's Irish Melodies*) arr. Britten
(bass-baritone)

An Irish bard at the end of his career sings a hymn of praise and thanks to his instrument (which has always been seen as a symbol of national identity). Britten's evocation of the accompanying sound is masterly.

Let the florid music praise (On this Island) (*W.H.Auden*), Britten
Op.11/1 (soprano)

The post uses musical imagery to praise his beloved - although the second section has a darker mood, with a realisation of the transience of beauty.

The Choirmaster's Burial (Winter Words) (*Thomas Hardy*), Britten
Op.53/5 (tenor)

Hardy's subtitle to his poem is "The Tenor Man's Story" - the tenor man being one of the musicians in a consort of viols accompanying services in a 19th century country church. The choirmaster asked for the psalm-tune "Ephraim" to be played at his funeral - which tune Britten introduces in the piano at the start of the song.

EPILOGUE

Bright is the ring of words Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
(*Songs of Travel*) (*Robert Louis Stevenson*) (bass-baritone)

Stevenson's poem brought forth from the composer one of the most direct expressions of the "sweet power of song".

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The Aldeburgh Connection's next presentation in Walter Hall will take place on Sunday afternoon, January 24, at 2:30 pm: our annual *Greta Kraus Schubertiad*, this year entitled "The Lady of the Lake, and other tales". ANITA KRAUSE, CHRISTOPHER ENNS and JAMES LEVESQUE will perform the songs (including "Ave Maria") composed by Schubert to texts from Sir Walter Scott's famous poem, first published 200 years ago. They will be joined by a vocal ensemble in other dramatic ballads. For tickets, call our box office, 416.735.7982.

Our Discovery Series will continue in Walter Hall on Wednesday, February 10, at 7:30 pm. Four talented young singers: JOHANE ANSELL, ERICA IRIS HUANG, CHRISTOPHER ENNS and JAMES BALDWIN will perform Schumann's *Spanische Liebeslieder* (an early celebration of his bicentenary), together with a variety of other music inspired by, or composed in, Spain. Tickets are available through the Faculty of Music's box office, 416.978.3744.

If you are an existing subscriber, remember that you can bring a friend to a future concert for the reduced price of \$40. We do encourage you to take advantage of this special offer! Call our box office at 416.735.7982.

Copies of our CDs, including the Juno-nominated *Schubert among friends* and the most recent, *Our own songs*, which features works commissioned by the Aldeburgh Connection, as well as our double album *Twentieth anniversary collection*, are available during the intermission or through our website.

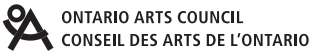
Box office revenues cover only a portion of our operating budget; grants, corporate funding and individual donations are needed for the balance. We encourage you to consider joining one of our supporting categories:

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Your support is vital to the continuation of these concerts! Please reach us at 416.735.7982 or through our website: www.aldeburghconnection.org.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following in the presentation of today's concert:

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Aldeburgh is the small town on the east coast of England where Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and Eric Crozier founded the Festival of Music which flourishes to this day. Artistic Directors **Stephen Ralls** and **Bruce Ubukata** visited and worked there for many summers, as have many of the singers who appear with the Aldeburgh Connection.

Shannon Mercer's voice has been described as luminous and her acting witty and feisty – she has been hailed as “one of Canada’s most promising young sopranos” and a “Leader of Tomorrow (Maclean’s).” Her 2009-2010 season began in Ottawa where she reprised her “achingly beautiful” Pamina in Opera Lyra’s *The Magic Flute*. In October, Shannon appeared at London’s famed Royal Albert Hall for a performance of Monty Python genius Eric Idle’s highly popular *Not the Messiah* which was recorded for later release on DVD. Other highlights of her concert calendar include Carnegie Hall in New York for Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* with Les Violons du Roy, Roy Thomson Hall with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for Handel’s *Messiah* and the Mozart Festival, and in Houston, Texas with Mercury Baroque and Les Voix Baroques.

Shannon’s award-winning discography includes several releases on the Analekta label: the 2009 JUNO Award recipient *Gloria! Vivaldi’s Angels*, the JUNO nominated *Bach and the Liturgical Year, Mondonville*, and *English Fancy*. Her much-lauded French debut in the title role of Marin Marais’s *Sémélé* is available on Glossa, and she also starred in Alexina Louie’s Gemini-nominated comic opera *Burnt Toast*, now on DVD. Her next CD

for Analekta featuring the music of early Italian composer Francesca Caccini will be released in February 2010. With her latest release, *Wales ~ The Land of Song* with the Skye Consort (Analekta), Shannon recalls her Welsh roots, the culture that cultivated her passion for music through her father, an immigrant to Canada. One of Shannon's first musical milestones came at the age of 15, when she performed at the prestigious Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales, returning to Canada with the silver cup in hand and as a proud ambassador of Welsh music!

An alumnus of San Francisco Opera's prestigious Merola Opera Summer Program, Shannon began her operatic career as a member of the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio Program. She has since gone on to perform major roles with the COC (Sesto in Sartorio's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, a Madrigalist in Henze's *Venus and Adonis*, Xenia in *Boris Godunov*, Oscar in *Un ballo in maschera* and Elvira in *L'italiana in Algeri*), l'Opéra du Québec, Opera Lyra Ottawa (Nannetta in *Falstaff*, Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* special school performance), Opera Ontario, Opera Atelier (*Médée*) and the Toronto Operetta Theatre. In July 2006 Shannon made her London debut under the auspices of the ROH Covent Garden in *The Midnight Court* with Toronto's Queen of Puddings Music Theatre.

James McLean is one of Canada's most distinguished vocal artists, known for his sophisticated interpretation of the works of Bach, Mozart and Britten in an illustrious career expanding to more than 25 years on the operatic and concert stages of Europe. He is delighted to return today to the Aldeburgh Connection, with whom he sang in their inaugural concert in February 1982 in the Great Hall, Hart House. He began his solo career with the Toronto Symphony, under the baton of Sir Andrew Davis, and with the Canadian Opera Company. In Germany, he established himself as a lyric tenor, specializing in the repertoire of Mozart. He has performed the roles of Tamino, Belmonte and Ferrando, in Nürnberg with Christian Thielemann, in München at the Gärtnerplatz Theater, and in Düsseldorf at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein. In recent years his repertoire has expanded to include such varied roles as Lensky in *Eugene Onegin* (Theater und Philharmonie Essen), Alfredo in *La traviata* (Niedersächsische Staatstheater Hannover and Städtische Bühne Heidelberg), Tom Rakewell in *The Rake's Progress* (Landestheater Coburg), Steva in *Jenufa* (Opéra Toulon Provence Méditerranée and Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Liège) and the Prince in *Rusalka* (Städtische Bühnen Münster). He recently premiered the role of Alexander Herzog in *Ganna* by Kraus-Hübner at Stadttheater Fürth.

Appearances on concert stages throughout Europe and Israel include works ranging from Bach's Evangelist roles to McCartney's *Liverpool Oratorio* and include Haydn's *Creation*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Britten's *War Requiem*, Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and *Petite messe solennelle* as well as Dvorak's *Stabat Mater* and Verdi's *Requiem*. In 2008, European engagements include *Dead End* (Xaver Poncette) in Krefeld, Germany, Evangelist in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and Beethoven's *9th Symphony* in Kaliningrad, Russia, and Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* and Bach's *Magnificat* in Dislaken, Germany.

James McLean, now based in Toronto, returned to Canada for Mendelssohn's *Symphony No.2 (Lobgesang)* with Kitchener-Waterloo's Grand Philharmonic Choir, Evangelist (*St. Matthew Passion*) with Guelph Chamber Choir, and in July 2009 was a featured soloist at Westben's "Night at the Opera". In 2009/10, Canadian audiences will hear James in concerts with Chorus Niagara (Evangelist, *St. John Passion*), Rossini's *Petite messe solennelle* (Orillia's Cellar Singers), Mozart's *Mass in C* (London's Fanshawe Chorus), and in September 2010 he will debut as Pang in Puccini's *Turandot* with Ottawa's Opera Lyra.

Giles Tomkins is in demand as one of Canada's leading young singers, widely recognized for his vocal virtuosity and lyricism in an impressive range of repertoire. His voice has been described as "sweet but manly" complete with "lovely phrasing and beautiful placement" by Paula Citron, Opera Canada. This 2005 Distinguished Graduate from the University of Toronto's Opera Division is a frequent guest artist with the Aldeburgh Connection, and has appeared with Tapestry New Opera Works, St. Lawrence String Quartet, Canadian Brass, Opera in Concert and the Canadian Opera Company. Mr. Tomkins' performances in the United Kingdom include *King Arthur* (Purcell) at the Aldeburgh Festival, Colline in a touring production of Puccini's *La boheme* with Scottish Opera, and in 2006, the European premiere of Queen of Puddings Music Theatre's production of *The Midnight Court* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Recent operatic roles for Giles include Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte* at Tanglewood, (conducted by James Levine), Don Basilio in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Scottish Opera) directed by Sir Thomas Allen, and Superintendent Budd in Britten's *Albert Herring* (Aldeburgh Festival). Other engagements include Pish-Tush in *The Mikado* (Toronto Operetta Theatre) and Somnus in Handel's *Semele* (Opera in Concert). In 2008, Giles returned to Scottish Opera as Pistola in Verdi's *Falstaff*, and made his debut in the title role in Ottawa's Opera Lyra production of *Le nozze di Figaro*. Giles starred

as Pedro in James Rolfe's new opera *Ines* with Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, and joined the cast of *La boheme* as Colline with Saskatoon Opera.

Giles has appeared on five international Naxos recordings with the Aradia Ensemble (Kevin Mallon, conductor) singing major roles in Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*, Handel's *Rinaldo*, and Vivaldi's *Griselda*, as well as Christus in Bach Consort's 2009 performance of *St. John Passion* with Yannick Nezet-Seguin, conductor. Recent concert appearances include Beethoven's *Mass in C* with Guelph Chamber Choir and *Messiah* with Classical Music Consort.

In September, Giles Tomkins was a member of Pacific Opera Victoria's Resident Artist Program, and sang Dr. Grenvil in their production of *La traviata*. Other performances this season include Toronto Masque Theatre's premiere of Dean Burry's *A Mummer's Masque* in December, *Messiah* with Peterborough Singers, Mozart's *Mass in C* with Fanshawe Chorus London, and *A Gilbert and Sullivan Extravaganza* with Chorus Niagara in May.

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