

Gavin Bryars at 80

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 9.50pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Gavin Bryars *Ramble on Cortona*
Duets from Doctor Ox's Experiment

After Handel's Vesper
Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet
Epilogue from Wonderlawn

If any composer deserves a label of 'visionary', it's surely Gavin Bryars.

Visionary in his seamless melding of jazz, minimalism and experimental ideas; or in his embrace of gentle melancholy, even sentimentality; or in daring to speak softly, and with unwavering elegance. Most visionary for many listeners, however, is Bryars's ability to evoke some of the profoundest emotions, often using the simplest of musical means.

He has drawn from a rich heritage of British experimentalism, periods working with John Cage and Cornelius Cardew, years of performances as a jazz bassist, and eclectic passions for visual art and dance, neglected composers (think Grainger, Sorabji, Busoni), surrealism and linguistic games, all melded together in works that are sometimes tender, sometimes poignant, always exquisitely crafted. To celebrate Bryars's 80th birthday, tonight's concert brings together several of his smaller pieces from recent decades, alongside what must surely count as one of the most iconic British works created since the Second World War.

We begin with a small ensemble version of Bryars's very first piece for solo piano, written as recently as 2010. *Ramble on Cortona* is a ramble of a kind imagined by one of Bryars's most cherished composers. Australian-born maverick Percy Grainger used the term to describe what others might call a 'paraphrase' or even a 'fantasia', a freewheeling rethink of music that already exists. In Bryars's case, that music comes from several of his own vocal laude, setting texts from 12th-century manuscripts found in Cortona, Italy. The piece opens with hymn-like harmonies, before moving through several contrasting sections, each exploring a different keyboard texture. A distinctive rising-scale idea serves to bring several of them to a gently luminous close.

Doctor Ox's Experiment was Bryars's second opera, premiered by English National Opera in 1998, and based on a novella by Jules Verne, adapted into a libretto by poet Blake Morrison. The mysterious Doctor and his sidekick Ygène carry out an experiment on the inhabitants of a sleepy Flemish village, injecting gas into the atmosphere so that the villagers' lives speed increasingly out of control. Among the unwitting victims are young lovers Frantz and Suzel, and their name-alike rivals Fritz and Suzanne. Bryars brought together five duets from the opera in today's revised concert work. In the first, the lovers sing that their respective romances should not be hurried, while the second represents the opera's emotional heart, a devoted declaration of love between Frantz and Suzel. After the release of gas, however, Fritz has replaced Frantz in Suzel's affections in Bryars's third duet, while the fourth is a version of the mezzo-soprano aria that follows an apocalyptic explosion. The fifth duet forms the opera's epilogue: Suzel wonders if her lover Frantz's feelings will ever be the same, while Ygène calls to Ox from afar. Coincidentally, tonight's concert falls precisely on the 50th anniversary of The Hilliard Ensemble's first concert and this revised version is dedicated to David James who sang in that concert and in the opera.

Bryars wrote tonight's next piece, *After Handel's Vesper*, in 1995 for British-based harpsichordist Maggie Cole. If a piece by Handel called *Vesper* draws a blank, don't worry: it's an oratorio, but an entirely fictitious one, imagined by proto-surrealist writer Raymond Roussel in his 1910 novel *Impressions d'Afrique*, and created (as one of Roussel's characters recounts) by the blind composer touching sprigs of holly as he descends a stairway.

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A memory of Roussel's fantastical creation led Bryars to explore 17th- and 18th-century keyboard music, which he reimagines through effusive Frescobaldi-style improvisations and monolithic Bachian power in this brief and playful work.

Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet is one of Bryars's profoundest but also simplest pieces, and its backstory has become the stuff of musical legend. Working with film maker Alan Power on a documentary about London rough sleepers in 1971, Bryars was left with a 26-second clip of an unknown homeless man singing a fragment of an equally mysterious song (neither have ever been identified). The tiny sliver of music captured the composer's imagination: while across the Atlantic Steve Reich was transforming similar found material into driving minimalist workouts in pieces such as *Come Out*, Bryars created what he calls 'a gradually evolving orchestral accompaniment that respected the tramp's nobility and simple faith', one that expands and grows imperceptibly richer on every repetition. The hypnotic, entrancing result becomes virtually a musical symbol of spiritual yearning, one that also links together the half-century-old recorded voice and the live musicians of 2023 in comradeship and compassion.

In Bryars's own words, the closing *Epilogue from Wonderlawn* is 'a long, extended melody, a kind of lullaby: very, very simple'. It's also one his most simply beautiful creations, an expanded version of the original *Epilogue* from his 1994 full-evening dance score *Wonderlawn*, a collaboration with choreographer Laurie Booth. A hushed introduction sets out the piece's reflective harmonic world, with strings echoing the electric guitar's harmonies, before the viola's long, arching melody brings the concert to a contemplative close.

© David Kettle

Performers

David Wordsworth conductor

Sarah Gabriel soprano

David James countertenor

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Gavin Bryars Ensemble

piano

Alexandra Tchernakova

double bass

Gavin Bryars

clarinet/bass clarinet

Roger Heaton

viola

Morgan Goff

Garth Knox

Katie Wilkinson

organ/electric keyboard/double bass

Yuri Bryars

percussion

Gerald Kirby

Glyn Matthews

electric guitar

James Woodrow

cello

Audrey Riley

Nick Cooper

Ziella Bryars

Orlanda Bryars

Addison Chamber Choir

soprano

Kim Evans

Victoria Fea

Inge Gregorius

Silver Klajnscek

Louise Black

Julie Davies

Frederique Genaux

Amanda Hall

Stefanie Rohan

alto

Jan Farmer

Lynn Lacey

Jean Leonard

Zillah Myers

Victoria Jebens

Judy Jones

Sorca Kelly-Scholte

Laura Mackay

Morna Wheatley

tenor

Andrew Lang

Johannes Hemelaar

Geoffrey Hollas

Ian Wilkinson

John Eade

Jasbir Sidhu

bass

Matthew Hough

Mark Sommerfeld

Jan Mirck

Aubrey Botsford

Paul Elliott

Michael Scurr

Chris Swithinbank

**Duets from Doctor Ox's Experiment
(1998, revised 2023)
Libretto by Blake Morrison**

Part I

Soprano and Countertenor

Sponge down that brow,
Straighten that tie,
Button that tantalizing dress.
Until the time has come to marry
Let all love's swelling detumescence.

Throw out the flowers,
Recork the wine,
Unstring your sweet seducing lutes,
The flower of courtship can't be hurried.
Love has the slowest growing root.

And if we die before love's consummation,
Its joy-injecting cure,
We have at least this consolation:
We will die pure.
(hum)

It takes ten years to be a doctor,
To be a barrister half your life.
Can it take fewer years of study
To be a husband or a wife?
(hum)

Drink too much of love too quickly
And you're left with an empty cup.
The hare gives up sex once married
Whereas the tortoise takes it up.

And if we die before love's consummation,
Its joy-injecting cure,
We have at least this consolation:
We will die pure.

Part II

Frantz and Suzel

How good to stand, my darling,
by the riverbed.

Suzel

You with your fishing rod,

Frantz

You with your sewing box,

Both

Our two threads pulling
us as one towards the dusk ...

Frantz

The day comes fast, Suzel,
The day when we'll be wed.
Only five years engaged.

Suzel

Only five short years to go.

Frantz

I thought I felt a pull just then.

Suzel

Have you a bite?

Both

No.
A virgin hook, unbroken thread,
the musked and fronded riverbed.
An angled rod, a needle's eye,
lovers who're true need never lie.

Suzel

Yes, the day approaches
for plans and invitations.
I try to be patient.
I tell myself to wait.
But all I can think of is marriage,
and the marriage bed.

Frantz

We're out of luck tonight.

Suzel

This heart's still not embroidered.

Frantz

I'm getting nowhere with my rod.
It's time to put away our tackle.

Both

And let the shadowed light
lead us homewards through the cool.
A virgin net, unbroken strands,
The churned and mossy riverbank.
A wriggling tail, a woven braid,
What lovers feel can never fade.

Part III

Fritz

The lovely earth ...

Suzel

The little planet ...

Fritz

... will one day be as cold ...

Suzel

... we inhabit ...

Fritz

... as a mortuary.

Suzel

... will soon have had it.

Suzel (together)

While it's still here

Fritz (together)

Until that day

Both

Let us make love.

Fritz

Hurled ...

Suzel

Nothing ...

Fritz

... of the solar road ...

Suzel

... in science ...

Fritz

... the spinning comets ...

Suzel

... can prevent death ...

Fritz

... will explode ...

Suzel

... and impermanence ...

Fritz

... But till they do ...

Suzel

... But till the time has come ...

Both

Let us make love.
The lovely earth
will one day be as cold as a mortuary.
Until that day let us make love.

Part IV**Countertenor**

Though something strange has passed
everything's back to normal.
Though we've lost our streetlamps
everything's clear as day.
Though our clothes are ripped to shreds
everything's in order.
Though our barley crops are ruined
And fish are floating in the river,

Soprano

... everything's hunky dory.

Countertenor

Though our living rooms are deserts,
though the sky is dark as asphalt,

Both

though night howls like a dust-storm,

Countertenor

everything's right as rain.

Part V**Suzel**

Dear Frantz, how good to stand with you again
beside the banks of the idling Vaar.
We have found our old pulse again,
Deep and measured as the church bells tolling for
evensong –
The bells that will one day ring for us ...
How nearly we lost each other
and ourselves.
We were like nomads,
tearing up our roots.
Thank God the town is back to normal,
The old sponge inertia and maplessness,
the daze of tradition,
like coral under the sea.
Yet I can't pretend nothing happened.
I know I shall never be the same again,
that a new age was born that's not been extinguished
With the gasworks.
And I want to be sure, yes our marriage hangs on it,
that you, Frantz, have that feeling too.

(Frantz, in the distance: Ox? Ox?)

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