

Freya Waley-Cohen and Manchester Collective: Spell Book

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 8.45pm, with no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Freya Waley-Cohen *Naiad*

Spell Book

'spell for Lilith'

'spell for sex'

'spell for women's books'

'spell for joy'

'spell for change' (world premiere)

'spell for logic'

'spell for reality'

'spell for the witch's hammer' (world premiere)

Many of Freya Waley-Cohen's recent works play with myths, magic and the occult as lenses through which to look at the contemporary world. Tonight we hear two of these works, including the premiere performance of her complete *Spell Book*.

Naiad

I had a set of images in mind when I was writing *Naiad*. I couldn't find a word to sum them up, but they are things like the way the light catches on the scales of a fish swimming through a shallow sunlit stream, or when it's morning and you can see the dew in a spider web in the grass and it has a tiny rainbow if you look close, or the patterns that bees fly in between flowers, or when you're walking in a forest and the sun makes dapples on the grass through the leaves of the trees. It is constructed a bit like lace, with tiny details in delicate patterns creating a larger pattern or picture when you look at it from further away.

From early on it is made up of two layers: a slow-moving melodic duet and a faster moving filigree figure that at first appears like an embellishment. These two elements hang together in a delicate balance, variously shifting between foreground and background. This interplay is coloured by quickly changing orchestration, settling momentarily on duets within the ensemble here and there.

Naiad was commissioned for the Proms for a concert dedicated to Oliver Knussen who was a deeply inspiring, incredibly kind and generous mentor, teacher and friend to me.

Spell Book

In the spring of 2019, I read *WITCH* by Rebecca Tamás. Tamás's witch is full of desire and power: she doesn't think about the same things that other people are thinking about, but she is neither bad nor good – she exists outside that framework. I was captivated by the world outlook in these poems. While reading it, I started to have strange and witchy dreams and felt a strong impulse to engage creatively with what I found.

Among other longer poems, *WITCH* contains several spells. In the book *Spells: 21st Century Occult Poetry* of which Tamás is co-editor, she writes that 'Spell-poems take us into a realm where words can influence the universe'.

A spell asks to be performed out loud in a ritual setting. It seemed fitting and almost natural to bring these incantations into the ritualistic setting of the concert hall. In each spell I've looked for the moment or method of transformation. Sometimes this is a specific moment of change within the song, sometimes it's a sense of accumulation, and sometimes a shift of perspective. These songs are a sung Spell-book.

The set opens with the 'spell for Lilith'. In Jewish folklore, Lilith is the first woman, created at the same time, and from the same clay as Adam. She refused to be subservient to both Adam and God and left the Garden of Eden.

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She was given the option to return or to become a demon, and she chose to become a demon. The singer summons the image of Lilith, luring her into the space with flirtation and flattery, until the moment of transformation lets us glimpse into Lilith's own world, unruly and joyous, and still out there somewhere.

The 'spell for sex' starts with a tight focus on an object, an ingredient and an action. It is a set of instructions to follow. The last line takes us out from the domestic setting and into the vast, dark openness of the night.

At the opening of 'spell for women's books' a viola line coils around a list of three 'vellums'. Each suggests a story in which a reader might become trapped, but, as the spell continues, subversive lines take us on paths that might lead us to escape these fates.

'spell for joy' is a pure conjuring. Each sentence gives action, movement and imagery, creating a profusion of 'yesses' that add up to a total and reckless joy.

While 'spell for Lilith' is in the first person, creating an immediate and intimate connection between the speaker and Lilith, 'spell for logic' is in the second person, addressing you, the audience. It brings together layers of logic, from the shallow, binding logic we use to try and organise and control our time, to the deeper logic of the earth and sea and its inevitable tides. And it is you, the listener, who is receiving these directions, and it is for you to consider 'what you wanted from this'.

Imagery in 'spell for change' (receiving its world premiere today) is that of geothermal, deep tectonic change. The earth cracks open and the singer asks us: 'are you scared yet?'

'spell for reality' speaks to the quiet domestic rituals of life, and their ability to conjure larger meaning and vivid images, as well as a quietly intensifying connection to the earth's seasonal rhythms.

'spell for the witch's hammer' (also a world premiere) refers to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as the 'Hammer of Witches', a demonology treatise first published in 1486 which became a bestseller, second only to the bible for nearly 200 years. It focuses on how to identify and punish a Witch and was hugely influential in making witchcraft be seen as heresy, and therefore punishable by death, as well as solidifying the idea of the word 'witch' as being inherently linked to women. At a time when the printing press was changing the way information was spread, it was published with an inauthentic Papal Bull to claim legitimacy, and the ideas caught on like wildfire across Europe. This spell conjures accusations and tropes from the treatise, inverting them, taking ownership of them and then destroying them by devouring them.

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Performers

Héloïse Werner soprano
Fleur Barron mezzo-soprano
Katie Bray mezzo-soprano

Manchester Collective
Rakhi Singh violin/music director
Eva Thorarinsdottir violin
Lucy Nolan viola
Peggy Nolan cello
Diane Clark double bass
Helen Wilson flute
Anna Hashimoto clarinet
Katherine Tinker piano
Céline Saout harp

Produced by the Barbican

spell for Lilith

Lilith you look so nice with that snake

your hair curled the way a serpent might

Lilith you are such a bad girl

i heard you like reproductive justice
i heard you like staying up all night with your lips
pressed against the cracks

Lilith can you make an owl demon?
a huge one?
flapping through the night with copper eyes
screaming for our salvation
dripping internal blood all over used cars and buildings of
state

Lilith
you have a really great body

you are a taunt
an un-fucked thing in a realm of little bits

Lilith
please sleep in my bed at night
smelling of lavender and coal
rub my back and look at me with an impossible
black gaze

the things you have seen
a whole universe of your own making
entirely pleasure cos yr made of fire

Lilith
take us back with you

sliding all over the floor
raving & screaming
and very happy

spell for sex

one damp steak

hung outside from the porch

whistling into the streaked and furious
night

spell for women's books

the cat shit vellum

the bad storm coming in over the flatlands vellum

the old murderer's vellum

the poet moves their hips like someone on a tram about to

vomit

Athena still and glacial in her blue ice-bath

fresh as a painted door

spell for joy

THESUN THESUN THESUN

nothing can be trusted!
raise up your rinsed hands!
terrible fury and becoming!
Take off your clothes!

one colossal owner of the void
brightness folding into itself
again and again vulval or filo

I see a shaking which is total and absolute fear

one day yr gonna die

the hot impossible apple of
your perfection

you freckled you covered in something
you utter

just open up your face
light's ice cream cone coming
on the inside of yr eyelids

say yes five thousand times
(o love)

spell for change

CRACK

goes the mountain

BLOOD BLOOD BLOOD

are you scared yet?

little fissures are putting their black hands onto

the earth

an opening

SMASH SMASH SMASH

I hope you like this

hot and wet and tired and pain

a bird grows nasty feathers

its song is geothermal

a clever shaking wound

spell for logic

you will sit on your hands
the sea has a fat logic if you look at it right
operating sneakily by the moon

you will menstruate exactly when the packet
tells you to

cut off all the dead parts in your chest
a cheap Andromeda
BE ORGANISED

lie on a ring binder and hold your breath
look at the flood of water running up the sand
the snow that hovers
bitchy and quiet

in this rest you are rested
this whole and perfect sleep

tell me what you wanted
from this

spell for reality

what do you do when the answer to
too much is absolutely nothing?
honey sits on the table
fat and glowing
winter light gives you a pass
nine minutes of feeling nearly
completely alive

sometimes the ashy body in the ground seems
to have all the answers
ultimate realness nasty truth as the final only truth
why then this stupid relentless yearning for snow
why the honey and talking

the burning bush is another form of ultimate realness
but what is it telling us
certainly it's nasty
however also gold
also the entire pocket cosmos shifting and flapping

gentle limbs holding each other in the depth of the fire

then somehow

as much snow as you could ask for

wet-gold honey and locusts

spell for the witch's hammer

a two-pronged sword

to put them down

out there a lot of things happen

witches

undo each other a candle in each opening

witches wake at night and cry

beasts with curly horns comfort them

/suck gently

witches go astray

carnality swooping and fluttering like a ragged flag

they laugh so much

covered in purple bruises

teaching tricks GPS of the eternal flagellant light

always going home

the witch's hammer sinks into flesh

then disappears and only mercury remains its little

peasant trail

the witches eat your book

then you

then everything

Taken from *WITCH* by Rebecca Tamás (2019); used with kind permission
from Pened in the Margins, where the collection can be found

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