



Call Me Flott

Felicity Lott &
Graham Johnson



The English soprano Dame Felicity Lott, universally known as “Flott” was born in Cheltenham. Music was an important part of her life from her early years. Felicity Lott started learning the piano aged five, learned to play the violin and had her first singing lesson at the age of twelve. Yet she decided against a professional singing career at first. At Royal Holloway College, London University, she read French and Latin to become an interpreter. During a stay in France Felicity Lott continued to take singing lessons at the Conservatoire of Grenoble. Finally in 1969, the love of music gained the victory- she returned to London to take up her singing studies at the Royal Academy of Music and left in 1973, after obtaining her LRAM and winning the Principal’s Prize.

In 1975 Dame Felicity made her debut at the English National Opera as Pamina in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, in 1976 she took part in the first performance of Henze’s opera *We Come To The River* at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. In that year also began her long relationship with Glyndebourne: after rejecting her for the Chorus three times, they offered her the role of the Countess in *Capriccio* on the Tour, and in 1977 she appeared at the Festival for the first time, as Anne Trulove in Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*. Since then, Felicity Lott has appeared at all the great opera houses of the world - to name but a few: Vienna, Milan, Paris, Brussels, Munich, Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, New York and Chicago. Her many roles include the Marschallin (*Rosenkavalier* / Strauss), Countess Madeleine (*Capriccio* / Strauss), Arabella (*Strauss*), Christine (*Intermezzo* / Strauss) Countess Almaviva (*Le Nozze Di Figaro* / Mozart), Fiordiligi (*Così fan Tutte* / Mozart), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni* / Mozart), Ellen Orford (*Peter Grimes* / Britten), The Governess (*The Turn Of The Screw* / Britten), Lady Billows (*Albert Herring* / Britten), Louise (*Chaprentier*), Blanche (*Les Dialogues des Carmélites* / Poulenc) and Elle (*La Voix Humaine* / Poulenc).

Recently, Dame Felicity has shown more and more affection for operetta. In 1993 she sang the title role in Lehar’s *Merry Widow* with Glyndebourne Festival Opera on a recording for EMI, but she had sung the role on stage in Nancy and Paris in the 1980s. In 1999 she appeared as Rosalinde in Johann Strauss’ *Fledermaus* in Chicago and her

performance as Hélène in Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène* at the Chatelet in Paris was a great success. In the 2004-2005 season Dame Felicity appeared very successfully in Paris as Offenbach’s *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein*.

As a concert artist, too, Felicity Lott has built up a great international reputation. She has worked with nearly all major orchestras and festivals under such conductors as Carlos Kleiber, Georg Solti, Bernard Haitink, James Levine, Andre Previn, Neeme Järvi, Klaus Tennstedt, Andrew Davis, Kurt Masur, Franz Welser-Möst and many more. Her repertoire includes works by Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mahler, Brahms, Elgar and Walton.



Dame Felicity’s special love belongs to the song repertoire. She enchants with songs of Strauss, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms as well as with the masters of french *Mélodies*. As might be expected, she is also very fond of English songs, particularly those of Benjamin Britten. Her affection for songs is reflected in her founder membership of the *Songmakers’ Almanac*. This group of singers was founded in 1976 by the pianist Graham Johnson, Felicity Lott’s accompanist since student days. Their intention was, among other things, to discover and perform less well-known songs and ensembles. A huge number of recitals and great recordings reveal the success. The duet recitals with the Irish mezzo-soprano Ann Murray are legendary.

Felicity Lott has received honorary doctorates at the Universities of Sussex, Loughborough, London, Leicester, Oxford and at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama Glasgow. By the French Government she was awarded the titles *Officier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1990 and *Chevalier dans la Legion d’Honneur* in 2001. In 1990 Felicity Lott was also made a CBE. In 1996 she was created a Dame Commander of the British Empire. In 2003 Dame Felicity was awarded the title of *Bayerische Kammersängerin*.

Dame Felicity is married to the actor Gabriel Woolf, their daughter Emily was born 1984.

FELICITY LOTT: 'AT HOME'

In the world of song, dominated as it is by European composers, the luxury of singing in English is not to be taken lightly – although in the case of this disc it is, and deliberately so! In order to sing German *Lieder* and French *mélodie* one has to master the intricate highways and byways of other cultures. Having long become a consummate mistress of these arts, Dame Felicity Lott here demonstrates for us one of the greatest advantages of understanding foreign languages: the return to one's own dear English can be made again and again with a sense of gratitude and almost new-found delight.

Sometimes in this regard one is tempted towards a touch of flag-waving jingoism. Just like Dame Rose Macaulay who, in her poem *A Patriotic Protest*, demolishes, one by one, the famous tourist spots of Europe in favour of their home-grown equivalents. Here she is decrying the sights of Rome and Greece:

*So you want a Colosseum? Well in St. Martin's Lane
There stands one with a roof and walls, where you may well obtain
A performance you can look at without sitting in the rain.*

Writing more than 70 years ago, Dame Rose even prophesies a present-day controversy:

*And Greece is but a history book, an outworn mausoleum,
From which our British diplomats, with their finer sense of meum
Than of tuum, took the treasures long since for our museum.
She ends her poem with advice for the traveller (or indeed lover of English music):
Then stay at home, you English folk; be not so continental.
The beauties that you think you see are really only mental;
They could occur quite anywhere; and are not incidental
To foreign shores and foreign climes. Of any built-on hill
You can make your own acropolis and admire it if you will.
Brighton's as good as Brioni, and Sheffield as Seville.
See England first, see England last, before the silver chord
Be loosened, and the gold bowl breaks, and you get old and bored*

If only Dame Rose had ended her poem at this point, we would have felt justified in presenting you a programme of the purest, unadulterated English song; but she could not resist delivering a final envoi, a coup de grace typical of her rapier wit:

O stay you home, I beg, and leave more room for me abroad!

Oh well, and bother! As much as we may try, it is really too late for Flott and her pianist to become little Englanders. Instead we find ourselves insisting here on the best of both these worlds – a programme sung entirely in our wonderful English language, yes certainly, but one that aims for a touch more inclusivity: there are songs in English here by four French composers (an acknowledgement of the entente cordiale) and by six Americans whose transatlantic influence has been something with which we all grew up, for better or for worse on the whole, but with music of this quality and life-enhancing wit, definitely for the better.

This leaves us with no fewer than twelve English composers for this recital in English, as well as a number of important English poets. Chief of these is Shakespeare, and we make no excuse for beginning this disc with four settings of the Bard. Geoffrey Bush (1920-1998) was a pupil of John Ireland, a delightful man and an underestimated song and opera composer. His *It was a lover and his lass* is one of hundreds of settings of this great lyric, but it ranks as one of the most bracing and exciting – a kind of musical fanfare with which to signal the fact that our party has begun. *Fancy* by Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) is the composer's only song in English, written at the request of Marion Countess of Harewood in 1958, shortly after the Poulenc had visited Aldeburgh the first and only time (he hated the sea and the cooking) and attended a performance of Britten's opera *The Turn of the Screw*: this little *Fancy* is dedicated 'To Miles and Flora' the two children characters in that work. The setting of the same lyric for *The Merchant of Venice* (this time entitled *Fancie*) was also commissioned by Marion Harewood for an anthology of children's music: as usual Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) demonstrates his mastery of vocal writing and provides a deliberately different viewpoint of these words, quicker and more exciting than the dreamy song by his fondly valued colleague from across the Channel. Lord Horder (Mervyn Horder, 1910-1997) was also a friend of Britten's from the 1930s; son of a famous Edwardian doctor he became a distinguished publisher

and entered the song-writing lists relatively late in his career with simple but usually highly effective settings; he was also the complete English eccentric. The slinky tango recorded here shows Horder's talent for melody.

It is an unlikely fact of musical history that Charles Gounod (1881-1893) should have written some 70 songs in English, including the Shelley setting recorded here (***The fountain mingles with the river***, a poem better known in Roger Quilter's setting, *Love's Philosophy*). Escaping to London from the vicissitudes of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Gounod took refuge in a Tavistock Square orphanage run by a certain initially attractive Mrs Georgina Weldon; but she virtually imprisoned the bemused composer and required him to write English songs to raise funds for her institution. The whole episode ended badly and Gounod, begging his wife's pardon, took his English songs home and had them adapted to completely different French texts. As a result, the full extent of 'the English Gounod' still awaits discovery.

Both Reynaldo Hahn (1875-1947) and Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) before him were more tranquil visitors to London. ***The Swing*** (more famous perhaps in Liza Lehmann's setting) is one of five Robert Louis Stevenson songs he composed from *The Child's Garden of Verses*. The unexpectedly touching ***Cherry Tree Farm*** on the other hand boasts no famous poet – it seems to have been dashed off as a homage to one of Saint-Saëns's well-to-do English hostesses and it remains a lesson as to how the most seemingly simple pieces of music benefit from a sovereign compositional technique.

The song ***Oh that it were so*** by Frank Bridge (1879-1941) was written in 1913 (the year of the birth of Bridge's most famous composition pupil, Benjamin Britten). The sentiment of this music with its highly perfumed poem by Walter Savage Landor seems illuminated by a plush Edwardian sunset – entirely different music from Bridge's later style, but typical of its epoch of Imperial certainty. In complete contrast is the deliciously deft anonymous setting about sisters' rivalry, ***A Melancholy Song*** by Antony Hopkins (b.1921) who – leaving his actor-namesake apart – was a famous and omnipresent BBC broadcaster on music for many years. His well-made songs and chamber operas deserve revival.

There are three songs by Noël Coward (1899-1973) on this disc, a composer who been a regular and delightful part of our musical lives since the earliest days of the Songmakers' Almanac. For this recital we have sidestepped Coward the crisp and facetious word-virtuoso (dazzling though he always is in this incarnation) in favour of his sheer genius for melody, and for a sentiment that still brings a lump to the throat. ***If love were all*** was a hit of the musical *Bitter Sweet* (1929) where it was sung by the French disease Ivy St. Helier. It is in *arioso* style, half recitative and half song-confessional, and there is scarcely another piece that better describes the emotional challenges of the performing life. ***You can't make love by wireless*** by Jerome Kern (1885-1945) is the fruit of one of that great American tunesmith's early visits to these shores – there was considerable two-way traffic between London and Broadway in the 1920s and 30s. The distinguished words could only have been written by an Englishman however, and one cannot get much more English and more ingenious than P.G. Wodehouse.

Equally, a more English poet from the next generation than John Betjeman would be hard to imagine; he provided the words for ***Song of a nightclub hostess*** – a wonderful portrait of a once hedonistic home-county flapper in steep decline. The music is by the gifted Madeleine Dring (1923-1977), mistress of song and piano miniatures, whose work deserves reappraisal.

We move now to the United States, and a musical culture that has both drunk deeply from the wells of European inspiration while contributing to the renewal of the art-song medium particularly in the last thirty years. On the whole Samuel Barber (1910-1981) avoided setting poems by Englishmen; he was drawn instead to Irish poems (as well as French and American). His five settings of James Joyce are all remarkable; the enigmatic and haunting ***Solitary Hotel*** is the last of these, taken from the cycle *Despite and Still*. As a complete contrast to this highly wrought art-song, we have Irving Berlin (1888-1989) spinning a melody as only he knew how, the incarnation of American balladry at its best. ***What'll I do*** (1924) is one of literally hundreds of his sure-fire-hit

ballad classics, the tune as inevitable as it is instantly memorable. And it is humbling when we think about the average English-speaker's disinclination to master a foreign language that Berlin, son of Jewish Siberian immigrants, wrote every one of his own song texts.

Cole Porter (1891-1964) was another giant of American popular song. His background was one of High Society and Gatsby-like privilege, something completely different from the rough and tumble Tin Pan Alley background of the Jewish Berlin and Gershwin. As a result there is something urbane and understated about Porter's music, wickedly, even slyly, subversive and humorous, rather than uproariously so. The wistful *Miss Otis regrets* (1934) is a benchmark of the Porter style, a murder story told at one remove.

The song *Litany* to the text of the famous black poet Langston Hughes is by the youngest composer on this disc, the hugely talented and productive John Musto (b.1954) who has already composed an opera on Jonson's *Volpone*, and a more recent one entitled *Hoppera*, based on the famous urban paintings of Edward Hopper. The mixture of styles in this music is an amazing amalgam of ragtime and Randy Newman, via the seriousness and depth of utterance of a Wolf song like *Gebet*. In the last decades it has become an American classic on the recital platform.

In the singing actor George Ware (1829-1895) we encounter the oldest composer on this disc. *The Boy in the Gallery* became a music-hall hit when it was taken up by Marie Lloyd and Nellie Power. A similar theme of star-struck infatuation is explored by Noël Coward in *Mad about the Boy*; reading between the lines a more modern audience may take a guess as to exactly why this good-looking young man is proving inaccessible to his female admirers – and Coward could seldom resist risqué autobiographical inferences of this kind. In *The Return from Town* we have a genuine collaboration between an English composer, Arthur Bliss (1891-1975) and the remarkable American poet Edna St-Vincent Millay. This is music as simple as a folksong, but its heartfelt alliance of melody and feeling makes it rank as one of Bliss's most successful achievements in the medium.

The Physician is Cole Porter at his cleverest and most 'chic' with words – there is little attempt here to connect with the music-consuming American masses – this is definitely a

song for those who enjoy the privilege of private medicine in Connecticut, as well as the chance to flirt without regard to the ethical consequences. *Come on Algernon*, on the other hand, is of a straightforwardly vulgarity prized by the British upper classes who delighted in making incognito visits to working class entertainments. It is a spoof of a musical hall song by Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt-Wilson (Lord Berners, 1883-1950) and Marie Lloyd herself would probably have toned its various double entendres. *A Word on my Ear* is a parody of an *encore* for a recital diva assembled by that divinely gifted pair, the wordsmith Michael Flanders (1922-1975) and the composer Donald Swann (1923-1975). It makes fun of the very *Lieder*-singing grande dame, heart on sleeve, who is the stuff of popular ribbing and misconceptions; no-one who sings out of tune lasts long on the concert platform, whereas in the opera house it can be another matter altogether! The way in which Swann makes the pianist scramble through a series of unlikely modulations in order to catch up with his wayward soloist is extremely ingenious.

It is said that Irving Berlin was a really bad pianist and could only play on the black notes, an observation he made that brings tears to the eyes of professional pianists in the light of the millions Berlin made during his long career. But at least he was well-informed enough to write a song about the importance of pianos – *I love a piano*. He claims to 'know a fine way/To treat a Steinway' but I fear that unfortunate instrument would come in for rather a hammering under his fingers. *Call me Flo'* by Jerome Kern is a little ragtime ditty for a cheerful bigamist or merry widow dating from 1912. We hope that we are forgiven for adapting it to the present circumstances, particularly as the text ('But I like a varied lot') rhymes better with 'Flott' than with the original 'Flo'! The song *Bees are buzzing'* is from *Gay's the Word* (1951), the last musical composed by Ivor Novello (1893-1951) and something of a self-aware parody of his earlier musical style. The song was a great favourite of Dame Cicely Courtneidge and her husband, Jack Hulbert. *Let's put out out the lights* is by an almost exact contemporary of Novello, the American composer Herman Hupfield (1804-1951). It first appeared in 1932 and was recorded by Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby. In exactly this year Charles Cochran produced Noël Coward's review *Words and Music* in the West End. Of the several hit songs in that evening (*Mad*

Dogs and Englishmen among them) we have already heard *Mad about the Boy*. **The party's over** now is tinged with the kind of gentle regret that good times cannot last forever. Coward himself used it as a closing song for his show at the Café de Paris, and he would hopefully excuse us for doing the same.

The reason why Flott and I have taken to this music throughout our professional careers is simply because we were raised with it. Many of these numbers, from musicals in particular, were known and loved by our parents who used to sing some of these songs by heart as they remembered their own years of youthful fun. For us children this provided us with a ready-made tradition of popular music; the glint of youthful vigour reappeared in our parents' eyes as they heard once more music to which they used to dance. How lucky we were to have this link with a time when lyrics were still ingenious (and often meticulously skilful in literary terms) and melodies were instantly memorable with an appeal that traversed the boundaries of amateur or professional musical life! This was at a time when sheer skill in words and music, no matter how popular the targeted market, was more important than the look and saleability of a pop icon, idolized at all costs no matter how poor his or her creative command of melody and harmony. There was a period when singers collaborated with experienced song writers, mostly separate lyricists and musicians, for their next hits; after the Beatles, who happened to be good composers, it became a matter of blind faith that performers should also flatter themselves as composers. Imagine the poverty of recitals if every famous concert singer were only to perform the music they themselves had composed! It is a sign of the times that younger professional singers of today who were raised in households where popular music held sway among their friends and relations, will be able to draw on a far less interesting and subtle treasury of family memories than we did (at least in purely musical terms) when it comes to them making records of lighter music. The party's truly over now. Or perhaps we should prepare ourselves for recordings made by the singers of tomorrow which are made as a reaction to their own parents' dewy-eyed reactions to The Rolling Stones, The Who and Oasis?

Graham Johnson, 2009

Graham Johnson studied at the Royal Academy of Music and subsequently with the late Geoffrey Parsons. He worked regularly with Peter Pears and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf. In 1976 he formed the Songmakers' Almanac and has appeared in recital throughout the world, accompanying such distinguished singers as Sir Thomas Allen, Victoria de los Angeles, Elly Ameling, Arleen Auger, Ian Bostridge, Brigitte Fassbaender, Matthias Goerne, Thomas Hampson, Dame Felicity Lott, Simon Keenlyside, Angelika Kirchschrager, Philip Langridge, Serge Leiferkus, Christopher Maltman, Edith Mathis, Lucia Popp, Christoph Prégardien, Dame Margaret Price, Thomas Quastoff, Dorothea Röschmann, Kate Royal, Christine Schaefer, Peter Schreier, Dame Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Sarah Walker.



Graham Johnson has recorded widely, including his award-winning projects to record the entire Schubert and Schumann *Lieder* for Hyperion. He is Professor of Accompaniment at London's Guildhall School of Music, and is a Fellow of that School as well as of the Royal Academy of Music. He was made an OBE in the 1994 Queen's Birthday Honours list.

March 2009

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1	It was a lover & his lass Bush	1'52
2	Fancy Poulenc	1'48
3	Fancie Britten	0'58
4	Under the greenwood tree Horder	1'37
5	The fountains mingle with the river Gounod	1'37
6	The swing Hahn	1'44
7	Cherry Tree Farm Saint-Saëns	2'23
8	O that it were so Bridge	2'13
9	A melancholy song Hopkins	0'54
10	If love were all Coward	5'44
11	You can't make love by wireless Kern	3'13
12	Song of a nightclub proprietress Dring	2'49
13	Solitary hotel Barber	2'35
14	What'll I do Berlin	3'32
15	Miss Otis regrets Cole Porter	2'48
16	Litany Musto	3'50
17	The boy in the gallery Ware	2'42
18	Mad about the boy Coward	4'55
19	The return from town Bliss	2'05
20	The physician Cole Porter	4'09
21	Come on Algernon Berners	3'04
22	A word on my ear Flanders & Swan	4'35
23	I love a piano Berlin	3'22
24	Call me Flo'(tt) Kern	1'34
25	Bees are buzzin' Novello	3'13
26	Let's put out the lights Hupfield	2'14
27	The party's over Coward	1'40

Total time ~ 74'57



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Recorded at the Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex
Produced by Mark Brown Engineered by Julian Millard Edited by Mark Brown
Mark Brown Music Productions

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