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CLASSICS

Ian Venables

At Midnight

Songs and Chamber Music

Andrew Kennedy
Dante Quartet

AT MIDNIGHT

IAN VENABLES

Invite, to Eternity, Op.31

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Born Upon an Angel's Breast | [7.35] |
| 2. An Invite, to Eternity | [5.09] |
| 3. Evening Bells | [2.02] |
| 4. I am | [9.35] |

Four Songs with String Quartet * (arr. Graham J Lloyd)

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------|
| 5. A Kiss, Op.15 | [4.59] |
| 6. Flying Crooked, Op.28 no.1 | [1.10] |
| 7. The Hippo, Op.33 no.6 | [1.37] |
| 8. At Midnight, Op.28 no.2 | [4.29] |

String Quartet, Op.32 *

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 9. Allegro con energia; meno mosso ed appassionato; piu vivo | [7.16] |
| 10. Allegretto scherzando | [2.40] |
| 11. Adagio e molto espressivo; presto agitato | [11.05] |

* premier recordings

Total Timings [58.04]

ANDREW KENNEDY TENOR
DANTE QUARTET

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Ian Venables is a worthy successor to those many art-song composers who, from the 19th century renaissance of British music to the present day — from Parry and Stanford and continuing through to Finzi — have considered the setting of English words to music as central to their artistic creeds. Amongst their number, Hubert Parry, Ivor Gurney, Roger Quilter, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Peter Warlock and the lesser-known Fritz Hart composed songs at an astonishing rate: between them they wrote a staggering 1416. And happily, the need to set words to music remains as strong a force for composers today as it was to Thomas Campion and his contemporaries in Elizabethan England.

Ian Venables impresses as a composer who has not only added significantly to the genre of English art-song but is also contributing to its continuing development. His burgeoning reputation is founded upon an artistic integrity and obvious sensitivity in setting words to music that have been singled out for praise by leading musicologists such as the late Christopher Palmer: *'Venables's songs are beautiful miniatures...'* and Stephen Banfield: *'[Venables has]...a genius for melancholy, for understanding melodic, harmonic and poetic tradition...'* In addition, however, he has composed a raft of chamber works that includes a majestic Piano Quintet Op.27 and one of the main works on

this disc, the powerful String Quartet Op.32. It was the composition of the Piano Quintet in 1995 and a concomitant development in string technique that broadened Venables's approach to song writing: *'Songs of Eternity and Sorrow'* Op.36 for tenor, string quartet and piano (SIGCD112) and **'Invite, to Eternity' Op.31** for tenor and string quartet being two important cycles from this period.

The latter cycle found its inspiration in the works of the Northamptonshire-born poet John Clare (1793-1864). Written in 1997, Venables felt that the emotional possibilities inherent in the string quartet combination would allow him a much wider and varied tonal palette in which to express the multiplicity of moods that are found in Clare's four poems. The work's genesis can be found in a letter written to the composer by Andrew Glazzard, to whom the final song in the cycle is dedicated. He introduced Venables to Clare's poetry in 1993 by sending him the poem 'I am'; he was then approached by Patrick and Brenda Aydon, who commissioned the complete cycle. The four poems chosen by the composer reflect the many facets of Clare's unconventional life.

'Born Upon an Angel's Breast' opens with a lengthy and arresting introduction for string quartet, which leads to the first of three recitative-like passages,

which take up the theme of love as unsustainable, belonging *'to sin and death'*. These are pivotal sections in the movement and are broken by moments of exquisite tenderness where, amidst this harsh message, the listener is told that love is, in fact, the *only* saviour of the soul. Here we can see Clare as a spokesman for humanity: *they* lie, it is suggested, but *he* tells us not. The tender string writing at important points in the movement provides a sublime backdrop to some of Clare's most profound words.

In contrast, **'An Invite, to Eternity'** opens with the question: *'Wilt thou go with me, sweet maid...?'*; the short string introduction capturing immediately the interrogatory nature of the poem. Its mocking mood is mirrored skilfully in the accompanying rocking figure, which permeates the movement. Clare was adept at sudden changes of direction in his poetry, and what was seemingly innocent becomes existentially taut, necessitating sudden changes of mood. In the second stanza, Venables reflects this change of emotion by accompanying the more angular vocal writing with a gritty viola figure and pointillistic gestures from the other instruments. The third and fourth stanzas give balance to the overall structure and, by way of a coda, the quartet begins what seems to be a move into yet another verse, only to be halted by an

augmentation of the opening rocking figure which ends the movement as questioningly as it began.

'Evening Bells' evokes a landscape of rustic tranquillity, broken only by distant bells and 'zephyrs swelling'. It is a lively, highly driven movement, which uses the intervals of a fourth and fifth in combination with an insistent rhythmic pedal, which dominates the texture; the latter's relentless quality allowing for an almost spontaneous interplay to occur between voice and string quartet. Contrast is provided in the third stanza, where ruminative tremolandos accompany a more lyrical vocal line.

'I am' is without doubt a profoundly moving and poignant setting of Clare's most famous poem. Taking us through the emotions of fear and self-pity, to longing and ultimately acceptance, it opens with a solo 'cello, which is soon joined by the other strings as they play what can only be described as a 'cry'. The longest movement in the cycle, it uses a desolate harmonic language, contrasting yearning vocal lines with tortured counterpoint, reaching an almost atonal climax on the words, *'Even the dearest that I love the best / Are strange....'*. The music that follows is deeply moving. Here the string quartet interlude (a transformation of the cycle's opening) prepares

us for a moment of extreme longing where Clare dreams of *'...scenes where man hath never trod / A place where woman never smiled or wept...'*. Despite the sustained mood of its closing bars, the composer returns to the opening 'cry' which breaks the feeling of resignation and longing momentarily, before ending on a single sustained note, intimating musically that although these emotional states may have been reached, they are never fully liberated from the spectres of past pains.

Unlike 'Invite, to Eternity', the **Four Songs with String Quartet** are arrangements of existing works that were originally written for piano and voice. Out of Ian Venables's many essays in this form, the present writer chose those that he felt would be enhanced by the many different colours and sonorities available from a string quartet but which also enhanced the overall mood and emotional power of each song.

In **'A Kiss'** from 'Moments of Vision', Thomas Hardy contrasts the naïve impulses of an innocent love, with love as an eternal theme. Its two stanzas are treated strophically but with some subtle variation, and are flanked by a lengthy introduction and short coda. Throughout the song, the prevailing mood is one of wistful nostalgia, in music that is both serenely diatonic and radiantly lyrical.

The two songs Opus 28 are examples of Ian Venables's refined sensibility, contrasting the harmonic subtleties and ambiguities of his setting of Robert Graves's poem 'Flying Crooked' with the dream-like atmosphere of one of Edna St Vincent Millay's many sonnets.

In **'Flying Crooked'**, Graves's whimsical poem about a cabbage-white butterfly, the prevailing mood of levity is given extra lightness by the use of playful pizzicatos. It ends with a whole tone scale on the word *'crooked'*, which not only mirrors perfectly the haphazard flight of the unfortunate butterfly in question but also adds to the feeling of mock-gravitas. It is one of Venables's most popular songs and came about as the result of having being sent the poem by the late Lady Bliss, to whom the song is dedicated and at whose home it received its first performance.

By contrast, Edna St Vincent Millay's beautiful sonnet – given the title **'At Midnight'** by the composer – is a poignant description of one woman's (most likely Millay's) reminiscences on past loves and it is a remarkable poem, given that Millay was only in her early 30s when it was written. Here Venables's rich harmonic language and deft melodic writing combine to heighten the sensual, as well as nostalgic nature of the poem.

In Theodore Roethke's **'The Hippo'**, the transition from piano to string quartet was seamless, as in the original, the piano part never moved outside a four-part texture. It too is deeply wistful, but here the composer does not provide parody, but instead creates a mood which supports the poem's narrative. A moment of levity is provided by a deliciously understated pause on the word *'all'* in the context *'He starts to yawn, it takes all day'*. This charming miniature ends as it began – its purely modal tonality adding greatly to its wistfulness.

It was in 1989 that Ian Venables set about writing what he thought would be his first string quartet, unaware at that time that it would ultimately metamorphose into one of his finest chamber works in another form; the Piano Quintet Op.27 (1995). It was not until three years later that he fulfilled a compositional need to write a significant essay in this form.

His **String Quartet Op.32** came to fruition as the result of a commission from the 'Droitwich Concert Club' in celebration of their 25th Anniversary in 1998, and was written with financial support from the West Midlands Arts Council. A work of great emotional power and self-confidence, it is both gritty and at times harsh and uncompromising in tone, but is still firmly rooted in traditional

tonality, using dissonance and occasional atonality as a means of dramatic expression.

The first movement begins with a granitic ostinato, above which soars a virile melody from the first violin in the rhythmically disconcerting time signature of 7/8; the tension arising from these three elements accounting for the arresting nature of this movement. A slower, more lyrical passage follows, where melodic lines are passed between all four instruments. A climax of rapt intensity leads to a soaring violin cantilena, accompanied by syncopated lower strings, after which we are plunged headlong into the maelstrom that is the remainder of the movement. Here, rhythmic cells from the opening theme become the dominant feature, with the return of the opening material - this time more pungent given what has gone before – maintaining a mood of sustained nervousity, until the final two bars end the movement in a calm and questioning way.

The second movement Allegretto Scherzando immediately lightens the mood, with its playful pizzicatos, deft counterpoint and modal melodic lines. Two motifs of rhythmic importance - one trill like, the other based on an arpeggio figure - dance around the main theme with notable strength of purpose, adding considerably

to the prevailing mood of optimism. After much virtuoso playing from all four instruments, a throw away gesture ends this short but radiant movement.

The third movement is without doubt the emotional core of the work. Ranging in mood from sublime tenderness to searing intensity, its firm structural sense is combined with a deeply personal poetry. This is nowhere more apparent than in the opening 'cello threnody, with its 'Second-Viennese School' angularity and ambiguous tonality. Harmonic tension is wrought from the second subject which leads to a deeply poignant melody based on the initial threnody, only this time accompanied by throbbing syncopation. As if from nowhere, a playful theme arrives, presented pizzicato, but even here this playfulness is undermined by yet more harmonic tension, ultimately finding its release in a melody brimming with open-air freshness. A passionate outpouring leads to a burgeoning of contrapuntal activity as various themes vie with one another. A central fugue, artfully contoured from the 'cello threnody, ushers in a climax of moving eloquence. After a passage of unrestrained lyricism, the earlier violin cantilena returns, only this time in lachrymose dialogue with the 'cello, ultimately giving way to a bravura coda which ends the work in a spirit of boisterous optimism.

Ian Venables's String Quartet is dedicated to Sir Michael Tippett whom the composer and present writer had the privilege of visiting shortly before his death in 1998.

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TEXTS

Invite, to Eternity, Op.31

1. Born Upon an Angel's Breast

(For Patrick and Brenda Aydon)

In crime and enmity they lie
Who sin and tell us love can die,
Who say to us in slander's breath
That love belongs to sin and death.
From Heaven it came on Angel's wing
To bloom on earth, Eternal Spring;
In falsehood's enmity they lie
Who sin and tell us love can die.

'Twas born upon an angel's breast.
The softest dreams, the sweetest rest,
The brightest sun, the bluest sky,
Are love's own home and canopy.
The thought that cheers this heart of mine
Is that of love - Love so divine,
They sin who say in slander's breath
That love belongs to sin and death.

The sweetest voice that lips contain,
The sweetest thought that leaves the brain,
The sweetest feeling of the heart -
There's pleasure even in its smart.

The scent of Rose and Cinnamon
Is not like Love remembered on;
In falsehood's enmity they lie
Who sin and tell us love can die.

John Clare

2. An Invite, to Eternity

(For Patrick and Brenda Aydon)

Wilt thou go with me, sweet maid?
Say, maiden, wilt thou go with me
Through the valley-depths of shade,
Of night and dark obscurity,
Where the path has lost its way,
Where the sun forgets the day,
Where there's nor life nor light to see,
Sweet maiden, wilt thou go with me?

Where stones will turn to flooding streams,
Where plains will rise like ocean waves,
Where life will fade like visioned dreams
And mountains darken into caves,
Say, maiden, wilt thou go with me
Through this sad non-identity,
Where parents live and are forgot,
And sisters live and know us not?

Say, maiden, wilt thou go with me
In this strange death of life to be,
To live in death and be the same,
Without this life or home or name;
At once to be, and not to be,
That was, and is not – yet to see
Things pass like shadows – and the sky
Above, below, around us lie?

The land of shadows wilt thou trace,
And look – nor know each other's face;
The present mixed with reasons gone,
And past and present all as one.
Say, maiden, can thy life be led
To join the living with the dead?
Then trace thy footsteps on with me;
We're wed to one eternity.

John Clare

3. Evening Bells

(For Patrick and Brenda Aydon)

Sweet the merry bells ring round
On even zephyrs dying swells
The sweetest chord the harp can sound
Sounds not so sweet as evening bells
O merry chiming bells

Swinging falls and melting rise
On viewless echo how it swells
Tis but the music of the skies
Can breath so sweet as evening bells
O merry chiming bells

Faint and fainter how they fall
Humming through the lonely dells
No sounds to charm this earthly ball
Can charm so sweet as evening bells
O merry chiming bells

Zephyrs breathing once again
Once again the zephyr swells
Still I lie upon the plain
Entranc'd to hear the evening bells
O merry chiming bells

While the runnel curdles clear
Once again the zephyr swells
Sweeter still the strains appear
O evening bells o evening bells
How sweet is evening bells

John Clare

4. I Am

(For Andrew Glazzard)

I am - yet what I am none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of [all] my woes: -
They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,
Like shadows in love's - frenzied stifled throes: -
And yet I am, and live like vapours tossed

Into nothingness of scorn and noise, -
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And even the dearest, that I love the best
Are strange - nay, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod,
A place where woman never smiled or wept;
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood, sweetly slept,
Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below - above the vaulted sky.

John Clare

5. A Kiss, Op.15

(For Kevin McLean-Mair)

By a wall the stranger now calls his,
Was born of old a particular kiss,
Without forethought in its genesis;
Which in a trice took wing upon the air.
And where that spot is nothing shows:
There ivy calmly grows,
And no one knows
What a birth was there!

That kiss is gone where none can tell -
Not even those who felt its spell:
It cannot die; that know we well.
Somewhere it pursues its flight,
One of a long procession of sounds
Travelling aethereal rounds
Far from earth's bounds
In the infinite.

Thomas Hardy

The Complete Poems by Thomas Hardy, edited by James Gibson
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6. Flying Crooked, Op.28 no.1

(For Lady Bliss)

The butterfly, the cabbage white,
(His honest idiocy of flight)
Will never now, it is too late,
Master the art of flying straight,
Yet has - who knows so well as I? -
A just sense of how not to fly:
He lurches here and here by guess
And God and hope and hopelessness.
Even the aerobatic swift
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Robert Graves

The words for Flying Crooked are set to music by permission of
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7. The Hippo, Op.33 no.6

(For Paul and Carol Walshe)

A head or tail which does he lack?
I think his forward's coming back!
He lives on carrots, leeks and hay.
He starts to yawn, it takes all day.
Some time I think I'll live that way.

Theodore Roethke

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8. At Midnight, Op.28 no.2

(For Joanne Azarnoff)

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before.
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Edna St Vincent Millay

From the Collected Poems, Harper and Row.
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BIOGRAPHIES

IAN VENABLES

Ian Venables was born in Liverpool in 1955 and was educated at Liverpool Collegiate Grammar School. He studied music with Professor Richard Arnell at Trinity College of Music, London and later with Andrew Downes, John Mayer and John Joubert in Birmingham. His compositions encompass many genres, and in particular he has added significantly to the canon of English art song. Described as ‘...one of the finest song composers of his generation...’, he has written over 50 works in this genre, which includes his five song-cycles: *Love’s Voice - Four Venetian Songs Op.22* (1995); *Invite to Eternity Op.31* (1997) for tenor and string quartet; *Songs of Eternity and Sorrow Op.36* (2004) for tenor, string quartet and piano; *On the Wings of Love Op.38* (2006) for tenor, clarinet and piano and *The Pine Boughs Past Music Op.39* (2009) for baritone and piano. Other songs for solo voice and piano include, *Two Songs Op.28* (1997) and *Six Songs Op.33* (1999) as well as ‘*A Dramatic Scene*’ for counter-tenor and piano - *At the Court of the poisoned Rose Op. 20* (1994).



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His many chamber works include a *Piano Quintet Op.27* (1995) - described by Roderic Dunnett in the *Independent* as ‘...lending a

new late 20th century dimension to the English pastoral...’ and a *String Quartet Op.32* (1998), as well as smaller pieces for solo instruments and piano. He has also written works for choir - *Awake, awake, the world is young Op.34* - organ - *Rhapsody Op.25* (1996), brass and solo piano. He is an acknowledged expert on the 19th century poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds, and apart from setting five of his poems for voice and piano he has contributed a significant essay to the book *John Addington Symonds - Culture and the Demon Desire* (Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000). He is President of The Arthur Bliss Society as well as being the current chairman of the Ivor Gurney Society. His continuing work on the music of Gurney has led to orchestrations of two of his songs (2003) - counterparts to the two that were orchestrated by Herbert Howells - and newly edited versions of Gurney’s War Elegy and Gloucestershire Rhapsody, with Philip Lancaster.

His music is published by Novello and Company Ltd.

www.ianvenables.com
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ANDREW KENNEDY

Andrew Kennedy studied at King’s College, Cambridge and the Royal College of Music in London. He was a member of the Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden where he performed many solo principal roles. Andrew has won numerous prizes and awards including the 2005 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Rosenblatt Recital Prize. He is a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award winner and won the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society Young Artists’ Award in 2006. He was also a member of BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists Scheme.

Operatic roles include Tamino *The Magic Flute* (English National Opera); Flute *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Royal Opera Covent Garden); Jaquino *Fidelio* (Glyndebourne Festival) and Ferrando *Così fan tutte* (Glyndebourne Touring Opera); Nemorino *L’elisir d’amore* (Opera North) and Tom Rakewell *The Rake’s Progress* (La Scala).

Concert engagements include Jaquino *Fidelio*, Francesco *Benvenuto Cellini* and Mozart *Requiem* for the LSO/Sir Colin Davis (all recorded for the LSO Live CD label) and Novice *Billy Budd* (LSO/Harding, recorded on EMI/Virgin Classics).



© Benjamin Ealovega

Equally passionate about song repertoire, Andrew gives numerous recitals in Europe and the UK and appears regularly with the pianists Julius Drake, Roger Vignoles, Iain Burnside and Malcolm Martineau.

Andrew's fast growing discography includes four solo albums ('Strauss Songs' with Roger Vignoles

for Hyperion; 'On Wenlock Edge' with the Dante Quartet/Simon Crawford Philips for Signum Classics; 'The Dark Pastoral' with Julius Drake and Simon Russell Beale for Altara Classics and 'The Curlew' with Simon Lepper for Landor Records) and two shared recital discs ('On Buying A Horse' and a recording of Liszt songs both with Iain Burnside for Signum Classics). Andrew has recently released his first orchestral album of Gluck, Berlioz and Mozart arias for Signum Classics.

DANTE QUARTET

Krysia Osostowicz - violin
Giles Francis - violin
Judith Busbridge - viola
Bernard Gregor-Smith - 'cello

Winner of the Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Chamber Music in 2007, a *Diapason d'Or* in 2008 and a *BBC Music Magazine Award* in 2009, the Dante Quartet is one of Britain's finest ensembles. Founded in 1995, the group chose the name of Dante to reflect the idea of a great and challenging journey.

Renowned for its imaginative programming and emotionally charged performances, the quartet is a regular guest at festivals and music societies



throughout the UK and abroad, including concerts at the Bath, Buxton, Cheltenham and Aldeburgh Festivals, London's Wigmore Hall and Kings Place, regular broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and appearances in France, Spain, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and Finland.

The Dante Quartet enjoys a special association with King's College, Cambridge, giving concerts and masterclasses and collaborating with King's College Choir. The Quartet has established its own Dante Summer Festival in the Tamar Valley, which offers an eclectic mix of quartet concerts and folk music in barns and ancient churches, working with young musicians and attracting new audiences for chamber music.

www.dantequartet.org

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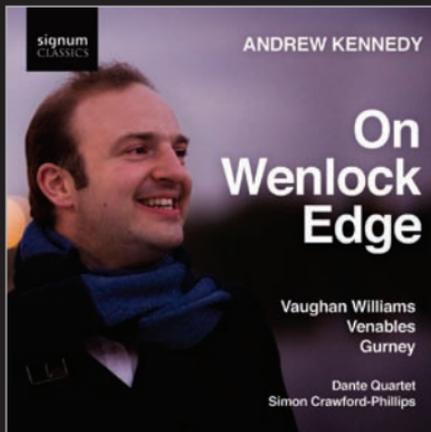
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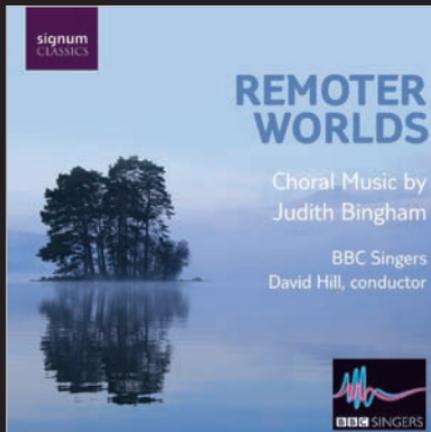
On Wenlock Edge Andrew Kennedy

SIGCD112

Rising tenor star Andrew Kennedy is joined by the award-winning Dante Quartet and pianist Simon Crawford-Phillips to perform a quintessentially English collection of songs, spanning three centuries of composition: from Vaughan Williams's beautifully lyrical and nostalgic *On Wenlock Edge*, and Ivor Gurney's *Ludlow and Teme* to 21st century settings from one of the finest modern song composers, Ian Venables.

"Kennedy has a big, bright, expressive tenor voice and uses it with fervour, delicacy and imagination ... A thoughtfully realised recital"

The Independent on Sunday



Remoter Worlds: Choral Music by Judith Bingham The BBC Singers, conducted by David Hill

SIGCD144

BBC Singers, led by David Hill, are the UK's only full-time professional chamber choir, and their repertoire and virtuosic versatility are almost boundless.

Judith Bingham's compositions stand out in the world of contemporary music, and have been said to "connect and communicate with audiences on an immediate and direct level". These works draw on a wealth of literary and visual sources, ranging from the pastoral introspection of Yeats to forgotten ghost towns of the American West.

"Under David Hill's direction, this superb choir gives precise, passionate and powerful readings." **The Times**

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