

The music

Julian Philips *Autumn Songs* (Ted Hughes settings)

Franz Schubert *Herbst*
Benjamin Britten *Now the leaves are falling fast*
Gabriel Fauré *Automne*

Dans la forêt de Septembre
Richard Strauss *Die Zeitlose*
Lee Hoiby *Autumn*
Franz Schubert *An den Mond in einer Herbstnacht*
Reynaldo Hahn *Chanson d'automne*
Charles Ives *Maple Leaves*
Edward Elgar *A Song of Autumn*

Julian Philips (1969-) *Autumn Songs* (2021)
The Leaves; The Seven Sorrows; The Defenders;
There came a day; The Stag

In 1968 Festival founder Pat Harrison commissioned one of our finest poets, Ted Hughes, to write five autumn poems for Little Missenden School children to chant at Harvest Festival, with Ted present.

To celebrate this Festival landmark we commissioned composer Julian Philips to set the poems as a short song cycle for soprano, baritone and piano – première tonight. Julian will introduce his piece before the performance.

Since they're children's poems we asked Julian to weave in brief episodes for a small chorus of children. When Ted wrote his poems Little Missenden was a junior school, but is now infants only, so for the chorus we invited former Little Missenden pupils who are now mainly at Great Missenden Junior School.

There are two visions of autumn. It's the rich season of 'mellow fruitfulness' and Harvest Festivals. But it's also the time when things start to wither, die and decay. The autumn songs by other composers in the rest of our programme reflect this duality in different ways.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) *Herbst*, D945. This late autumn song sets a poem by **Ludwig Rellstab**. It opens with icy piano quavers suggesting cold winds, bare trees and desolate fields.

The last two lines of each verse link the decay of nature to the fragility of human life: it's the flowers of life that rot; the hopes of life that sink; the roses of love that die. Happy memories are now lost in the past. This 'autumn' is a breakdown of the singer's emotional life.

Schubert uses the outside world to express inner sufferings, as he does in the bleakness of *Winterreise*. This common feature of Romanticism was already replacing the rationality of the Enlightenment.

Benjamin Britten (1913-76). *Now the leaves are falling fast* comes from *On this Island*, Britten's first cycle of songs with piano – which shows more than a hint of the mastery to come. It sets five **WH Auden** poems from the 1936 collection *Look, Stranger*, which had dedications to Britten. The pair met in 1935 at the GPO film unit, where their contributions were key to the production of the famous *Night Mail*. Britten wrote his cycle in 1937. All this in the looming shadow of the coming war.

It opens with four deceptively calm and beautiful piano chords that dissolve into a rapid and jumpy piano *ostinato* which runs through all but the last verse.

The first vocal line "Now the leaves are falling fast" might start a conventional autumn elegy, but it leads to some terrible human catastrophe. Not only do nurses' flowers die, but "nurses to the graves are gone" leaving their prams to roll as they will. Auden's chillingly incisive text vibrates with physical and spiritual death, social repression and the loss of hope. It's not just the death of plants, or even individual people, but of civilization. The horror bursts out in a terrible climax at verse 4:

"Starving through the leafless wood
Trolls run scolding for their food;
And the nightingale is dumb,
And the angel will not come."

Then suddenly the music softens as the last verse seems to offer tranquillity, a vision of a distant white mountain – yet its tantalising blessing is beyond reach and the song ends in midair, quietly but without comfort.

The next two songs are by **Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924), one of the most admired writers of the French *mélodie*.

Automne op18 no3 (1878) sets a poem by **Paul-Armand Silvestre**. The passing seasons mirror the passing of youth. Fauré's fine setting is powerful and dramatic.

In the emphatic first verse the tumultuous skies of autumn inspire a strong sense of melancholy.

The second is reflective; a dream journey to enchanted shores where youth once smiled. The music rises to an aching *forte* in the last line.

The bright sunlight of happy memory triumphs briefly at the start of the final verse – but although the past can be remembered it can't be recreated. Tears set off a final climax.

Fauré's *Dans la forêt de Septembre* (1902) sets a poem by **Catulle Mendès** that contemplates the effects of autumn on an ancient forest. Yet the mood is unlike the previous song. This forest isn't disturbing, it's a companion to the singer in the inevitable process of decay and death. It harmonises with the singer's sad thoughts but doesn't cause them. It knows how the singer suffers, because it too suffers. It's a 'good forest'.

The music is gentle and accepting, without the deep sense of emotional loss that haunted the previous song. Death and decay come as naturally to humans as to forests. A reddening leaf on the speaker's shoulder is just a sign that winter approaches – for both forest and singer.

Die Zeitlose in **Hermann von Gilm's** brief poem is the wild plant we call Autumn Crocus or Meadow Saffron. It's beautiful, but deadly poisonous. The juxtaposition of beauty and poison fascinates **Richard Strauss** (1864-1949).

In this tiny but lovely song Strauss's delicately sensual score has an extremely spare accompaniment; the piano plays occasional chords or falls silent. Threatening bass chords undercut rich sonorities in the brief piano postlude.

American composer and pianist **Lee Hoiby** (1926-2011) was best known for opera and song. *Autumn* is the third of six *Songs for Leontine*, dedicated to the great African American soprano Leontine Price. It sets a **Rainer Maria Rilke** poem in a translation by **Harry Duncan**. Rilke is a great but elusive poet, intensely lyrical, deeply philosophical, often mystical. He recognized no god but believed 'the divine' is an important presence in the world.

The poem starts conventionally with falling leaves – not ordinary tree leaves, but "as though from gardens deep in heaven", "falling with gestures of complete negation". At night the "heavy earth" falls away from the stars, and we and our hands must fall with everything else. What Rilke portrays is no local leaf drop but a universal process – everything falls.

A brief piano interlude ushers in the last two rapt lines: someone gently and eternally holds all this falling in their hands.

Hoiby's setting presents this mysterious text well. Elegant piano figurations swirl round vocal lines that honour its dedicatee, illuminating Rilke's spiritual message.

Aloys Wilhelm Schreiber's poem *An den Mond in einer Herbstnacht* is set in an autumn night but is mainly about the moon: its friendly face; its soft and comforting glow; and (rather oddly) its gentle steps, that punctuate **Schubert's** music with a steady but sprightly tread.

Schubert uses a *ritornello* form to bind the song together, starting with line 3 and repeating its motif.

Walking is a common Schubertian theme. The moon is a “lovely night companion,” and all seems benign. But the singer reflects quietly that, while the moon sees all human life, its light can’t penetrate the graves of his loved ones – where he too will soon rest. In the last verse the music becomes more sombre and the moon’s tread ceases briefly – but the jaunty tone quickly returns, and even the thought of being forgotten is gently accepted.

Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947) was born in Venezuela, came to Paris at age three, and later grew to prominence in *fin de siècle* Parisian society, a friend of Proust and a prolific composer in many genres.

Starting in his teens he wrote over 100 *mélodies*. The **Verlaine** poem of *Chanson d’automne* is a tiny miracle, a masterclass in French vowel sounds, its melancholy mood deepened by Hahn’s softly plangent harmonies. The piano writing is very spare, almost disappearing during the verses and musing gently in the spaces between.

Some dismissed Hahn as a talented lightweight, but this lovely song has emotional heft in spite of its small dimensions. He was just 16 when he wrote it.

Charles Ives (1874-1954) was a strange but impressive American composer. His youth was infused with music – playing drums in his father’s marching band, and becoming church organist at age 12 – but professionally he was an insurance agent. He composed prolifically, but was initially overlooked as an ‘amateur’. Yet he was an original voice and eventually revered – an ‘American original’ with an international reputation.

Maple Leaves (1920) sets an 1876 poem by **Thomas Bailey Aldridge**. It simply describes maple leaves turning to gold in October and then slowly falling – until the last ones slip “like coins between a dying miser’s fingers”.

The inventive piano writing shows the piquant originality of Ives’s musical thought. The voice descends eloquently in the memorable last line, drifting to a stop after “dying miser’s fingers”.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) is more readily associated with orchestral, choral or chamber music than with song, but quite a lot of songs are scattered through his prodigious catalogue.

A Song of Autumn from 1892 sets an 1868 text by Australian poet, **Adam Lindsay Gordon**. It presents autumn as a time of loss – both transient and permanent.

Festival Patron: David Matthews

Grateful acknowledgements

We thank all those who have helped with the Festival or supported us financially and in other ways. Special thanks to the funding bodies, sponsors and supporters listed below, without whose generous help there would be no Festival.

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Next year’s Festival

The 2022 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 7th to Sunday 16th October.

Festival website

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- Email: tickets@little-missenden.org
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61st Little Missenden Festival



AUTUMN SONGS

8pm, Saturday October 9th 2021
Little Missenden Church

Programme Notes

The first of its two verses bewails the loss of “our garlands glad at the falling of the year”. In the second the singer assures a girl that she’ll gather fresh garlands next year – but the singer will “go where the last year’s lost leaves go”.

Notes by Alan Hedges

The artists

Iain Burnside *piano* **Elizabeth Atherton** *soprano*
Dominic Sedgwick *baritone*. And with a small children’s chorus from **Great Missenden C of E Combined School**, prepared and conducted by **John Webb**

Iain Burnside is internationally acclaimed as a leading collaborative pianist, (“pretty much ideal” *BBC Music Magazine*) and has worked with many of the world’s great singers.

His discography features over 50 CDs, spanning a huge sweep of repertoire. Highlights include the *Gramophone* Award-winning *NMC Songbook*, Schubert cycles with baritone Roderick Williams on *Chandos* and a series of English Song for *Naxos*. He’s Artistic Director of the Ludlow ‘English Song Weekend’ and curates programmes for Wigmore Hall and a variety of festivals.

Burnside is an award-winning broadcaster, familiar to listeners of BBC Radio 3, and earning a Sony Radio *Award for Voices*. He’s pioneered a particular form of dramatic concert, with works based variously around Franz Schubert, Clara Schumann and Ivor Gurney. His most recent piece, *A View from the Villa*, unpicks Wagner’s relationship with Mathilde Wesendonck. He has a long association with the Guildhall School, gives masterclasses at home and abroad and is Artistic Consultant to Grange Park Opera.

“His lightness of touch, his expertise in balancing and supporting the voices, and his sheer love for this exquisite repertoire are simply matchless” (*Primephonic*)

“Every beautifully placed word is matched by Iain Burnside’s recreation of Britten’s pianistic subtext, glinting with many a revealing musical gloss” (*BBC Music Magazine*)

“Burnside played with understated elegance and great subtlety throughout” (*The Guardian*)

<https://www.askonasholt.com/artists/iain-burnside/>

Elizabeth Atherton has won major prizes and is at home on the opera stage and concert platform. Versatile as both musician and actress, her repertoire encompasses Monteverdi, Handel and Mozart through to Verdi, Bizet and Britten.

Harrison Birtwistle created the roles of Eurydice in *The Corridor* and Medea in *The Cure* for her – to considerable critical acclaim.

Her debut was as Helena in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (English Touring Opera). For Welsh National Opera she sang Mozart’s Countess, Donna Elvira and Pamina and Bizet’s Micaela; and she’s become a regular performer at Opera North with roles including Mozart’s Fiordiligi and Britten’s Governess.

Elizabeth has taken part in many song recitals and recordings with Iain Burnside, Malcolm Martineau and Roger Vignoles. She’s also worked with eminent conductors – Richard Hickox, Andrew Davis, Charles Mackerras, Antonio Pappano, Neville Marriner, Pierre Boulez, Vladimir Jurowski, Thierry Fischer.

Concert highlights include *Messiah* with Paul McCreesh and the St Paul Chamber Orchestra; Beethoven’s *Choral Symphony* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Richard Farnes in Dubai; Handel’s *Saul* with Harry Christophers; and Britten’s *Les Illuminations* with David Atherton and the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra.

Recent and future engagements include the Shostakovich *14th Symphony* with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra; Beethoven’s *Choral Symphony* with The Hallé/Mark Elder; Barber’s *Knoxville* with RLPO/Robert Spano; *Messiah* with Royal Northern Sinfonia/Jeanette Sorrell; Gorecki’s *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* with London Sinfonietta/David Atherton; and Dvorák’s *Stabat Mater* with Prague Symphony Orchestra/Jac van Steen.

<https://www.rayfieldallied.com/artists/elizabeth-atherton>

Dominic Sedgwick was a member of the Royal Opera’s Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, where his roles included Kuligin in a new production of *Kát’a Kabanová*, Novice’s Friend in a new production of *Billy Budd*, Moralès in a new production of *Carmen*, and Third Ghost Child in the world premiere of Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Coraline*.

Recent roles include Melot in a new production of *Tristan und Isolde* for the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence and English Clerk in David McVicar’s new production of *Death in Venice* for the Royal Opera.

His 2021/22 season sees a return to the Royal Opera House as Marullo in a new production of *Rigoletto*; his debut at Teatro dell’Opera di Roma as Anthony in the world premiere of Giorgio Battistelli’s *Julius Caesar*; and his debut for the Opéra National de Bordeaux as Belcore in *L’elisir d’amore*.

Dominic’s recent concert engagements include his debut at the BBC Proms as Pilate in Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* with

Arcangelo/Jonathan Cohen; *Messiah* with the OAE and the RLPO; and a number of concerts with the OAE featuring Bach Cantatas as part of their *Bach, the Universe and Everything* series at Kings Place.

He studied at Clare College, Cambridge and is a graduate of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama’s Opera School. He won the Audience Prize in the inaugural 2017 Grange Festival International Singing Competition.

<https://www.askonasholt.com/artists/dominic-sedgwick/>

Among his many qualities, composer **Julian Philips** has a particular affinity for vocal music. He’s won critical acclaim for song settings of Emily Dickinson, e e cummings, Dylan Thomas and Langston Hughes, and has recently set Judith Wright and John Clare – the latter a Wigmore Hall commission for James Gilchrist and Anna Tilbrook.

He’s also been very active in writing for opera – as Glyndebourne’s first ever Composer-in-Residence, and working for the Royal Opera House – *How the Whale Became* was based on Ted Hughes’ *The Dreamfighter and other creation tales*.

His new primary school children’s opera, *Henny Penny* (2021), offers its participants an immersive experience both in music and modern language learning, with versions in French (*Cocotte Chocotte*), German (*Hennig Pfennig*) and Spanish (*Pollita Chiquita*).

Julian’s choral music is celebrated – included in the Choirbook for the Queen (*Church Music*) and commissioned for the BBC Proms (*Sorrowful Songs*). He also has an impressive portfolio of work for ballet, orchestra and chamber ensemble.

He studied music at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and is Professor and Head of Composition at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. He was responsible for creating a new Masters Programme in Opera-Making & Writing, and a Doctoral Composer-in-Residence scheme in association with the Royal Opera House.

<https://julianphilips.co.uk/>

We’re very grateful to composer and animateur **John Webb**, who prepared, rehearsed and conducted the children’s chorus. Combining professional singers with very young and untrained voices is tricky, and his skills have been invaluable,

<https://johnwebbcomposer.co.uk/>