

The music

Henry Purcell	Fairest Isle
Reading:	John Clare – On a Lane in Spring
Ralph Vaughan Williams	from Five English Folk Songs: The Lover's Ghost; Wassail Song
Reading:	W H Auden – Night Mail
James MacMillan	The Gallant Weaver
Kristina Arakelyan	My True Love is Parted from Me
Reading:	Alexander Pope – The Quiet Life
Gordon Jacob	The Ash Grove
Michael Tippett	from Four Songs of the British Isles: Gwenllïan
Reading:	Robert Louis Stevenson – An English Breeze
Bob Chilcott	The Isle is Full of Noises

INTERVAL	
Cecilia McDowall	Be Not Afeard
Reading:	Walter de la Mare – The Seas of England
Gustav Holst	I Love my Love
Kerry Andrew	All Things are Quite Silent
Reading:	Elizabeth Barrett Browning – The Herefordshire Landscape
Benjamin Britten	from Five Flower Songs: The Evening Primrose; The Ballad of Green Broom
Reading:	William Blake – Ah! Sun-flower
Owain Park	Louisa
Charles Villiers Stanford	from Six Irish Folksongs: It is Not the Tear
Reading:	Christina Rossetti – Up-Hill
Sarah Quartel	The Parting Glass
Sarah Rimkus	Charlie is My Darling

“There is no original version of any particular tune... in one sense any particular tune is as old as the beginning of music; in another sense it is born afresh with the singer of today who sang it.”
Ralph Vaughan Williams

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) *Fairest Isle* (1691)

This solo air was originally sung by the goddess Venus in the final act of Purcell’s semi-opera *King Arthur*, praising Britain as the home of love. The musicologist Jack Westrup described the music as an expression of “patriotism of the spirit”, rather than the patriotism of jingoism and military might.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) *The Lover’s Ghost* and *Wassail Song* from *Five English Folk Songs* (1913)

Vaughan Williams described this collection as “freely arranged”: *The Lover’s Ghost* is perhaps the furthest removed from the original source material. Derived from a 17th-century ballad called ‘A warning for married women’, it tells the story of a woman who, having promised her love to a sailor, learns that he has died at sea so marries a carpenter instead, and is subsequently carried to hell by the sailor’s spirit as punishment. Vaughan Williams only sets the first part of the ballad and considerably slows the music from the original tempo, creating a bittersweet portrayal of a ghost returning to his lover from beyond the grave.

Having dealt with love and loss, the final piece of the set, *Wassail Song*, is an exuberant depiction of the Gloucestershire yuletide tradition in which people toured the countryside demanding refreshment from each home and conferring luck on its inhabitants, depending on the standard of ale provided. The opening bars, in which the music builds from one part singing the refrain to the whole choir, illustrates the group of wassailers approaching, and the opposite effect at the end of the piece suggests them travelling onwards to the next location.

James MacMillan (b1959) *The Gallant Weaver* (1997)

Setting words by Robert Burns on the importance of marrying for love rather than wealth or social standing, this gently luminous music is strongly influenced by Scottish traditional idioms: the vocal lines feature ornamental inflections such as the Scotch snap, in which a short, accented note is followed by a longer one, or birls, rapid three-note ornaments on a single syllable. The musical texture evokes the heterophonic sound-world of Gaelic psalms, in which the call-and-response style of ‘lining out’ creates a layered texture, as congregations sing the melody out of sync with the precentor and with free embellishment.

Kristina Arakelyan (b1994) *My True Love is Parted from Me* (2016)

Armenian-British composer Kristina Arakelyan sets an excerpt from another Burns’ poem, *The Winter it is Past*. Slow, wordless sections of choral writing contrast with livelier music in the verses, just as the speaker’s persistent sadness contrasts with the depiction of spring in Burns’ poem.

Gordon Jacob (1895-1984) *The Ash Grove* (1928)

The Ash Grove is another lament, now wrapped in a beautiful description of the Welsh countryside. First published in Welsh as *Llwyn Onn*, it was translated into English by the Scottish musician Thomas Oliphant in the 19th century. The song depicts a sailor mourning the loss of his beloved, Gwen of Llwyn, who is buried under an ash tree. Jacob’s writing is relatively sparse, inspired by the simplicity of classical models of composition.

Michael Tippett (1905-1998) *Gwenllïan* from *Four Songs of the British Isles* (1957)

There is a similar clarity of texture in Tippett’s arrangement of *Gwenllïan*. This traditional Welsh lullaby depicts the new-born 13th-century princess Gwenllïan in slumber. It contrasts the peace of the baby’s sleep with the battles fought by her father and brothers in the Norman invasion of Wales. The continual rise and fall of the melody illustrates the rocking of the cradle. Tippett sets the text in opposition to its natural metre, with conflicting cross-rhythms between voices, switching the time signature between 5/8 and 2/4.

Bob Chilcott (b1955) *The Isle is Full of Noises* (2004)

Chilcott sets the first half of Caliban’s speech from Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which he speaks of the beauty of the island and his attachment to it, as he wishes for freedom. The opening soprano and tenor melodic canon sits above the endless chatter of an oscillating two-note cell in the alto part, gradually broadening into the climax of “a thousand twanging instruments” before subsiding back into the opening calm.

INTERVAL
Cecilia McDowall (b1951) <i>Be Not Afeard</i> (2018)

In contrast to the airy, excitable hum of Chilcott’s setting, Cecilia McDowall’s *Be Not Afeard* creates a mysterious, luminous image of Caliban’s island. Melismas and vocal ornaments conjure an other-worldly, mysterious reverie. McDowall also sets the second half of the speech, in which Caliban laments waking and wishes to return to dreaming. Happily, she includes Prospero’s words to Ariel in Act 5 as a final coda to the music, and in so doing seems to be granting Caliban’s wish: “Then to the elements be free, and fare thou well.”

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) *I Love My Love* (1916)

Like his lifelong friend Ralph Vaughan Williams, Holst was a significant figure in the English folksong revival of the early 20th century. *I Love My Love* is a setting of a Cornish folk song in which a woman's lover is sent to sea by his parents in an attempt to end their relationship. She is admitted to a mental hospital (Bedlam), but when her lover learns of her fate, he immediately rushes back to her.

Kerry Andrew (b1978) *All Things are Quite Silent* (2013/2020)

There is no such happy ending for the protagonists of *All Things are Quite Silent*, a Sussex folk song collected by Vaughan Williams in 1904. It tells the story of a woman whose lover is press-ganged into the Navy, perhaps never to return, despite the hopefulness of the last verse. Andrew originally wrote this atmospheric setting in 2013 to perform himself using a loop station, gradually layering fragments of the tune with sounds of the sea. In the version for choir (2020), the singers create the seascape with breath and other vocalisations imitating the wind and seabirds, until the vocal line of the upper voices is gradually overwhelmed, and the protagonist's love is lost forever.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) *The Evening Primrose*;
The Ballad of Green Broom from *Five Flower Songs* (1950)

In contrast to the pastoral treatment of earlier composers, Britten's version of 'Englishness' in music is harder to define. He composed his *Five Flower Songs* as a wedding anniversary gift for the British agronomist Leonard Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy, who founded the Dartington Hall project for progressive education and rural reconstruction. Here, Britten's music continues in the light, airy English part-song tradition of Elgar, Parry and Stanford.

Each song has a unique style: the placid music of *The Evening Primrose* (to a poem by John Clare) comes as gentle relief, as the imitative final phrase depicts the primrose, having blossomed overnight, withering away. In *The Ballad of Green Broom*, the tenors sing the anonymous ballad about a lazy young flower-cutter who marries a rich Lady, while the other voices imitate a guitar accompaniment. As the ballad reaches its happy conclusion, the tempo increases while the couple proceed to the altar, and the accompanying voices are recast as pealing wedding bells.

(Continued on insert) >>

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 2027 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 8th to Sunday 17th October.

Festival Website little-missenden.org

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- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

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Programme Notes

ST MARTIN'S VOICES AND ZEB SOANES

A journey around the British
and Irish Isles



8pm, Friday October 9th, 2026
Little Missenden Church

66th Little Missenden Festival

Owain Park (b1993) *Louisa* (2013)

Louisa sets a poem by William Wordsworth. Simultaneously a love song to a woman and to the English countryside, Louisa's physical beauty and vitality merge with the elemental power of the landscape. Written in the English part-song tradition with a focus on word-painting, Park uses sudden harmonic shifts to represent the "rough and bleak" weather of the moorland, and imitative figures in the soprano part to conjure the echoes of "some old cave".

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) *It is Not the Tear* from *Six Irish Folksongs* (1901)

As a teacher, Stanford was one of the most influential figures in British music at the turn of the 20th century, but he was also a proud and passionate Irishman, and arranged several sets of Irish folksongs. *It is Not the Tear* is his setting of the Irish air *The Sixpence*, a song of remembrance for a friend.

Sarah Quartel (b1982) *The Parting Glass* (2018/2021)

A traditional Scottish and Irish song, *The Parting Glass* is often sung at the end of an evening, second in popularity only to *Auld Lang Syne*. A parting glass, also known as a stirrup cup, was the final hospitality offered to a departing guest: once they had mounted their horse, they were presented with a final drink to fortify themselves for their journey home. The Canadian composer Sarah Quartel arranged this setting (initially for men's voices, later for mixed chorus) for her friend Matt Jones, who served with the Canadian Military in Afghanistan, to celebrate his safe return from deployment.

Sarah Rimkus (b1990) *Charlie is My Darling* (2016)

Charlie is My Darling is a reduction by Robert Burns of a long, romantic street ballad. An unmistakably Jacobite poem, Bonnie Prince Charlie is here described as a romantic, virile figure rather than the more effeminate and unflattering depictions seen in the centuries since the 1745 Jacobite Rising. Sarah Rimkus' setting is a playful arrangement of a cheeky wee song in which the Prince "brawly weel... ken'd the way to please a bonnie lass".

Programme notes by Helen Stanley. A longer version can be found on our website at little-missenden.org/st-martins-voices.

The artists

ST MARTIN'S VOICES: Izzie Palmer, Natalie Houlston, Laura Newey *soprano* Sophie Timms, Helena Cooke *alto* Tom Perkins, Justin Soriano *tenor* Tom Rayner, Theo Nisbett *bass* Andrew Earis *director*

Described as "almost miraculously polished" (*Gramophone*), **St Martin's Voices** is one of the UK's leading vocal ensembles, renowned for its musical versatility and clarity of sound. The choir sings for regular concerts and special events at its home in St Martin-in-the-Fields, performing repertoire ranging from the Renaissance to new commissions from British composers. St Martin's Voices appears at concert venues across the UK and is regularly featured in broadcasts on *BBC Radio 3*, *BBC Radio 4* and *Classic FM*. In live concerts, St Martin's Voices frequently appears alongside *Classic FM* presenter Zeb Soanes, performing recitals of music and poetry at venues including Norwich Cathedral, Southwell Minster and Winchester Cathedral.

St. Martin's Voices is generously supported by the St. Martin-in-the-Fields Trust.

stmartinsvoices.com/

Zeb Soanes presents *Relaxing Evenings* on *Classic FM*.

Over a 25-year career at the BBC he was an authoritative newsreader on *Radio 4*, the reassuring voice of *The Shipping Forecast*, and a presenter of the Proms on BBC television. As a concert presenter and narrator, he performs with the UK's leading orchestras, ensembles and choirs.

He is the author of the bestselling *Gaspard the Fox* series, which has been adapted as narrated concert works by Jonathan Dove. His story *Gaspard's Christmas* gently introduces children to the concept of homelessness, and Zeb has gifted royalties from the book in perpetuity to support the work of St Martin-in-the-Fields.

Zeb is currently touring a one-man play about his theatrical hero Sir Alec Guinness, in which — to critical acclaim — he portrays 33 characters. *Two Halves of Guinness* is a witty and heartfelt journey through Guinness's extraordinary life and career, marking the 25th anniversary of the actor's death.

zebsoanes.com/

Further details of tonight's artists can be found on our website at little-missenden.org/st-martins-voices.