

St Martin's Voices and Zeb Soanes

A journey around the British and Irish Isles

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

Welsh trad. arr. 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

Cornish trad. arr. 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

Scottish/Irish trad. arr. Sarah Quartel *The parting glass*

Scottish trad. arr. Sarah Rimkus *Charlie is my darling*

The Music

“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

Perhaps the most influential British composer of the baroque period, Henry Purcell is significant for his blending of Italian and French musical styles with the unique traditions of English music. His most celebrated achievements were in music theatre, and especially in the creation of the semi-opera – stage productions featuring spoken dialogue alongside elaborate musical masques, in contrast to fully-sung Italian operas. His semi-opera ‘King Arthur’, with libretto by Britain’s first Poet Laureate John Dryden, recounts the battles between the Britons and the Saxons, and Arthur’s quest to rescue the Cornish princess Emmeline from the Saxon King Oswald of Kent. ***Fairest Isle*** was originally a solo air sung by the goddess Venus in the final act, 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. It was later adapted into a choral work, with slightly altered words, by the English composer and editor John E West.

If Henry Purcell is the most important figure of the English baroque period, then Ralph Vaughan Williams should be considered the foundational figure of the 20th century English musical renaissance. His strong interest in Tudor music and English folksong marked a shift in British music away from the German-dominated styles of the 19th century to the more English pastoral style (or, as some detractors of the time called it, “cowpat music”).

Vaughan Williams studied composition at the Royal College of Music under Charles Hubert Parry, whom he idolised. He wrote in his autobiography, “Parry once said to me: “Write choral music as befits an Englishman and a democrat”. We pupils of Parry have, if we have been wise, inherited from him the great English choral tradition, which Tallis passed on to Byrd, Byrd to Gibbons, Gibbons to Purcell, Purcell to Battishill and Greene, and they in their turn through the Wesleys, to Parry. He has passed on the torch to us and it is our duty to keep it alight.”

In 1903 Vaughan Williams started to collect folksongs, travelling around the English countryside to transcribe and later publish traditional songs from various areas, thus preserving many that could otherwise have vanished as oral traditions died out, threatened by increasing urbanisation and commercial entertainment. ***The Five English Folksongs***, published in 1913, represent a major landmark in his quest to popularise English folk music. Vaughan Williams described the collection as “freely arranged”: some of the songs are largely faithful transcriptions of the original tunes, others are closer to re-compositions.

The lover’s ghost is perhaps the furthest removed from the original source material. Originally 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 Gloucester 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.

The gallant weaver returns to the common folksong motif of the importance of marrying for love rather than wealth or social standing. Setting words by the Scottish national poet Robert Burns, James MacMillan's gently luminous music is strongly influenced by Scottish traditional music: 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 soundworld 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.

In **My true love is parted from me**, Armenian-British composer Kristina Arakelyan sets an excerpt from another Burns poem, 'The winter it is past', a ballad based on an Irish highwayman who was hanged for armed robbery in 1750. Wordless, *lento* sections of choral writing contrast with livelier music in the verses, just as the speaker's persistent sadness contrasts with the joyful depiction of Spring in Burns' poem.

The ash grove is another lament 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. This arrangement is by the English composer Gordon Jacob, who studied under Ralph Vaughan Williams and Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music. In contrast to the more lush romantic or pastoral influences of his teachers and peers, Jacob's writing is relatively sparse, inspired by the simplicity of Classical models of composition.

There is a similar clarity of texture in Michael Tippett's **Gwenllïan**. Tippett was commissioned to write **Four Songs of the British Isles** in 1957 for a festival of European choral music in Germany, but the choir for which they were intended found the pieces too difficult, so the first performance took place a year later, given by the London Bach Group. The traditional Welsh song is a lullaby depicting the 13th century Welsh princess Gwenllïan asleep, contrasting 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 described the piece as "possibly an older tune for 'four-squared' harp in the 18th century. So I had to loosen it, by trick means, towards my own lilt". He achieves this by setting the text in opposition to its natural meter, with conflicting cross-rhythms between voices, and switching the time signature between 5/8 and 2/4.

Widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language, William Shakespeare is Britain's foremost playwright and literary figure. His lexicon fundamentally shaped the English language, his innovation as a dramatist drove the development of British theatre and from the 18th century his work was heralded as a crown jewel of British artistic achievement, transformed into a unifying national symbol used to assert cultural superiority. By the time of the first performance of 'The Tempest' in 1611, England was taking its first steps towards building what would become the British Empire. Many believe that 'The Tempest' could have been inspired by a shipwreck which occurred in 1609, when a ship called the *Sea Venture* was caught in a hurricane on its way to Virginia, leaving its crew stranded in Bermuda. The play deals with themes including sovereignty, the exploration of new lands, borders, outsiders, ownership and subjugation. The island of 'The Tempest' can be read as both a depiction of new territories and a mirror for Britain itself. Caliban's speech from Act 3, in which he speaks of the beauty of the island and his attachment to it, is among the most beautiful language in the play, spoken by its most coarse character, as he wishes for freedom.

Bob Chilcott began his musical career as a choral scholar at King's College Cambridge, and was a member of The King's Singers before becoming a highly acclaimed composer and choral conductor. In ***The isle is full of noises***, he sets the first half of Caliban's speech. 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.

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 and setting him free: "Then to the elements be free, and fare thou well."

Like his lifelong friend Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst was a significant figure in the English folksong revival of the early 20th century. Heavily influenced by his friendship with the artist and activist William Morris, he was passionate about making great art available and understandable to all who wanted to learn. He conducted the Hammersmith Socialist Choir in madrigals by Thomas Morley, choruses by Purcell, and his own compositions. ***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 sent to a mental hospital, but when her lover learns of her fate, he immediately rushes back to her.

There is no such happy ending for the protagonists of ***All things are quite silent***, a song collected from Sussex by Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1904. It tells the story of a woman whose lover is pressganged into the Navy, never to return.

The composer, performer and author Kerry Andrew has been described as "Bjork working her magic on the English folk scene". They perform alt-folk music as part of Juice Vocal Ensemble, and under the name You Are Wolf. Their music frequently contains influences from British folklore and the British landscape. Andrew originally wrote this atmospheric setting to perform themselves using a loop station, gradually layering fragments of the tune with sounds of the sea. In the version for choir, 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 is often considered the most important British composer of the 20th century, and successor to Purcell as a pioneer and champion of British music theatre. He also had a lifelong fascination with folksong, setting many as solo songs to be sung by his partner, the tenor Peter Pears. In contrast to the pastoral treatment of earlier composers, Britten's version of 'Englishness' in music is harder to quantify. Despite accepting commissions from major national institutions throughout his career, he was openly suspicious of any attempt to align creative expression with a definite English or British identity. A central figure in the British musical establishment, he was simultaneously kept on the outside by his sexuality, his left-wing politics, and his conscientious objection during the Second World War. Britten composed his ***Five Flower Songs*** to poems by four authors mentioning flowers as a wedding anniversary gift for the British agronomist Leonard Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy, who founded the Dartington Hall project in 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*** comes as a gentle relief, as the imitative final phrase depicts the primrose, having blossomed overnight, withering away. In ***The ballad of green broom***, the tenors begin singing the ballad of 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 as the couple proceed to the altar, and the accompanying voices are recast as pealing wedding bells.

Louisa is a setting by Owain Park of a poem by William Wordsworth, one of the central figures of English Romanticism. Simultaneously a love song to a woman and to the English countryside, Louisa's physical beauty and vitality merges 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 was born in Dublin and studied in Cambridge, Leipzig and Berlin before moving to London, where he was a founding professor of the Royal College of Music. As a teacher, he 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.

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 for her friend Matt Jones, who served with the Canadian Military in Afghanistan, to celebrate his safe return from deployment. An award-winning author, Jones has written extensively about his experiences with deep honesty and piercing insight. He writes, "After you've spent the last year unlearning a whole lifetime's worth of social norms you are expected to snap back. Bam. Normal... There is no coming home, not really."

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 rather more romantic, virile figure than in 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

The Artists

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 London's iconic 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.

St Martin's Voices frequently performs with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and is a regular collaborator with the Piatelli Quartet, appearing in concerts and commercial recordings. Since 2023, the choir has also collaborated with trumpeter Imogen Whitehead as Artist-in-Residence, devising themed concert programmes which seek to explore and expand the rich canon of works for vocal ensemble and trumpet. As part of this association, St Martin's Voices commissioned a new work, *The World Turns*, by Emily Hazrati, which was premiered at St Martin-in-the-Fields in 2025.

Dedicated to promoting contemporary choral music, St Martin's Voices is delighted to work closely with both Bob Chilcott and Lucy Walker as Composers-in-Association. Having premiered numerous pieces by Lucy Walker, St Martin's Voices recently recorded the first album of her choral works to international critical acclaim. The choir has collaborated closely with Bob Chilcott on several projects, including the premiere recordings of his Christmas works *Mary, Mother* and *Little Jazz Carols*, and will be giving the first performance of a major new work in 2027. St Martin's Voices regularly commissions works by other composers including Yshani Perinpanayagam, Anna Disley-Simpson, Nils Greenhow, Esther Bersweden and Iain Farrington. The choir has also given the first performances of works by Will Todd, Cecilia McDowall and Thomas Hewitt Jones.

St Martin's Voices enjoys a close relationship with Classic FM, performing several concert broadcasts in 2025 including a recital for Mother's Day, a Christmas programme and a special broadcast celebrating the 80th birthday of John Rutter. St Martin's Voices has also performed live in the Classic FM studio, recently launching Christmas on Classic FM in 2025. 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.

In 2025, St Martin's Voices began a partnership with the National Gallery. Across the road on Trafalgar Square, the choir regularly performs in the National Gallery Friday Lates series, presenting music inspired by paintings and encouraging visitors to connect with artworks in new and sometimes unexpected ways.

As the flagship choral ensemble of St Martin-in-the-Fields, St Martin's Voices regularly performs on BBC Radio 3 Choral Evensong and BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship. The choir also appears on the Church of England's Daily Prayer app, singing twice-daily choral services, and sings regularly at Lambeth Palace, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

St Martin's Voices has released a number of albums on the Resonus Classics label, including two Christmas albums, *A Winter Breviary* (2023) and *A Babe is Born* (2025), and a collection of works by the American composer Ned Rorem. Upcoming recordings include the first album of choral works by Grace-Evangeline Mason, and a collection of Christmas works by Will Todd. St Martin's Voices will continue to perform at their home in Trafalgar Square and further afield in 2026, with performances at Snape Maltings, Bath Abbey and St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, and appearances at the Thaxted Festival and Little Missenden Festival.

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

<https://www.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.

Born in Lowestoft — the birthplace also of Benjamin Britten — Zeb recently completed a five-year project to install a bronze statue of the composer, depicted at the age at which his talent was first recognised, to inspire local children to pursue their own ambitions. *Britten as a Boy*, by the Royal Sculptor Ian Rank-Broadley, was unveiled by Sir John Rutter on 10th November 2025.

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.

Zeb is a recipient of the Betjeman Society Award and Chancellor of the University of Suffolk, from which he received an honorary doctorate in 2024 for his 'outstanding contribution to education, music, media and literature.'

<https://www.zebsoanes.com/>