

Total performance time: approximately 110 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

My Beloved Man

The Fourth Choir

Nicholas Chalmers conductor

Zeb Soanes reader

Petroc Trelawny reader

Séamus Rea creative producer

Henry Purcell (1659–1695) Thou knowest, Lord (Funeral Sentences, 1677) 3' Text: The Book of Common Prayer	Thomas Morley (1557–1603) Hard by a Crystal Fountain (The Triumphs of Gloriana, 1601) 4' Text: Anon
Samuel Barber (1910–1981) The Coolin' (Reincarnations, Op.16, 1942) 5' Text: 'An Cúileann' ('The fair-haired one'), trans. James Stephens (1880–1950)	Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) Two Madrigals (Books IV and V, 1603–5) 6' Che dar più vi poss'io? (‘What more can I give you?’) Text: Anon.
Pérotin (fl. 1200) Beata Viscera (Blessed womb of the Virgin Mary) 3'	Io mi son giovinetta ('I am a young girl') Text: Anon., after Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375)
Imogen Holst (1907–1984), Two folksong arrangements: 3' The Cobbler (1937, Hampshire) A Sweet Country Life (1937, Gloucestershire)	Imogen Holst Hymne to Christ (1940) 3' Text: John Donne (1572–1631)
Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) Green Broom (Five Flower Songs, Op.47, 1950) 2' Text: trad.	Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) 'Somewhere' from West Side Story (1957) 4' Text: Stephen Sondheim (1930–2021)
Aaron Copland (1900–1990) Help us, O Lord (Four Motets, 1921) 3' Text: Psalms 36:9	Britten Hymn to the Virgin (1930) 4' Text: Anon. c1300
Michael Tippett (1905–1998) 'Deep River' (A Child of Our Time, 1944) 4' Text: Anon. African-American spiritual	Henry Purcell Dido's lament: 'When I am laid in earth' 3' (Dido and Aeneas, 1688), arr. Nicholas Chalmers Text: Nahum Tate (1652–1715)

INTERVAL

Britten

Two Choral Dances (Gloriana, Op.53, 1953):
'Time' and 'Concord' 4'
Text: William Plomer (1903–1973)

The Love Letters of Britten and Pears – A personal response

I met Peter Pears in 1980. At the time, I was a music student at King's College, London, and was desperate to break into the world of opera. Opera had been my passion since I borrowed an LP from my local library of Maria Callas singing *Tosca*. The melodramatic theatricality of Puccini's score and the intensity of Callas's performance was a drug strong enough to block out the problems of growing up during the worst period of the Troubles in the Bogside in Derry, a Catholic ghetto where most of us were equally afraid of the IRA and the Army.

I was catapulted into a new world by a telegram from English Music Theatre, the company originally set up in 1947 by Britten as the English Opera Group. I had neglected to put a phone number on my application letter – hence the telegram, which terrified the aunt with whom I was living at the time as she was from the generation for whom a telegram could only mean a death in the family.

The telegram offered me the job of assistant to the director, Christopher Renshaw, on a new production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be presented as part of the 1980 Aldeburgh Festival. I was to be paid £150 for four weeks' work. I grabbed it.

Those four weeks were indeed a midsummer dream for me, working with singers of the calibre of Marie McLaughlin and David James, and with Stuart Bedford conducting. Pears kept in the background during rehearsals but he came to the public dress rehearsal and afterwards I was introduced to him and shook his hand. He was rather reserved – I don't think he liked the production and he told David James that he couldn't hear his words – but I vividly remember he had the 'glittering eye' of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*.

These memories of course came flooding back when Britten Pears Arts invited the Fourth Choir to perform at Snape Maltings as part of Summer at Snape. The Fourth Choir was founded to represent the LGBT+ community on the classical music scene and this year we are celebrating our tenth anniversary. We were delighted therefore when BPA said that they wanted the concert to relate to Britten and Pears in some way and, for us, it was natural to make the concert a celebration of one of the most famous same-sex relationships of the 20th century.

We were also keen that an element of the concert would be Britten and Pears speaking in their own words by including extracts from their letters to each other. Britten and Pears rarely threw anything away – and never anything of importance – with the result that their home, The Red House, contains an extraordinarily extensive archive of their professional and personal lives. I was lucky enough to spend a fascinating day there last November, being shown around by Christopher Hilton, Head of Archive, and Librarian Nicholas Clark. The archive contains everything from household bills to the telegram of condolence the Queen sent to Pears on Britten's death.

One of the archive's greatest treasures is the collection of 365 letters that Britten and Pears wrote to each other

during their 39-year relationship. The earliest is dated August 1937 – not long after they had first met, when they were friends and roommates but two years before their relationship deepened into love. The last letter is from Pears and is dated 11 November 1976, less than a month before Britten's death on 4 December that year.

The letters tell a story that is extraordinary in many respects. Those written during World War II vividly convey the hardship of those years and the constant fear they had for each other's safety when both London and Suffolk were being bombed. And, quite apart from the fact that they allow us to become a party to intimate conversations between two of the greatest musicians of their time, the letters also give a detailed account of how a same-sex couple coped with living outside the law. Their relationship was illegal until it was decriminalised in 1967, by which time they had been living together for almost 30 years.

It is chilling to think that these letters, in which they are both so frank about the physical and emotional nature of their relationship, would have been evidence enough to get both of them a prison sentence at a time when same-sex couples were forced, under threat of prosecution, to lead invisible lives.

The extracts from the letters that I have selected for this concert give an idea of the enormous international success that both Britten and Pears enjoyed during their careers, but my principal aim was to put the relationship that they were forced to conceal for most of their lives firmly into the foreground. Some of the letters were written in frustration immediately after telephone calls in which they had felt constrained to conceal their feelings. ('These telephone conversations are so damnably unsatisfactory, when there is someone in the room, & one cannot say what one feels.' Britten to Pears, April 1943.) As all calls at the time were connected by switchboard operators, a further danger was that the local exchange might be listening in and report them to the authorities. A friend of mine who was brought up in 1990s rural Russia with a similarly antiquated phone system was 'outed' to his parents by a local operator who listened to a call he made to his boyfriend and then phoned his parents to tell them their son was queer.

Our conductor for this project, Nicholas Chalmers, has selected choral pieces, not only by Britten and his friends and contemporaries such as Imogen Holst, Samuel Barber, Michael Tippett, Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland, but also by composers from earlier centuries that Britten loved and was influenced by, such as the 12th-century Pérotin, Monteverdi, Morley and Purcell. Perhaps the most poignant piece we will sing in the concert is Britten's *Hymn to the Virgin*. Originally written when he was a 16-year old schoolboy, it was later performed at Britten's funeral service at Aldeburgh Church on 7 December, 1976.

If you would like to read more of these extraordinary letters, all 365 were published by the Boydell Press in 2016 in the collection *My Beloved Man*, edited by Vicki P. Stroehrer, Nicholas Clark and Jude Brimmer.

© Séamus Rea 2023

Creative Producer of the Fourth Choir