

Sunday 15 March / 3pm

Piano Greats: Imogen Cooper and Sarah Connolly

The song for solo voice and piano is surely the most intimate of musical forms. To write a song requires a poem, and so the creativity of two artists intertwines and embraces so that they become one artistic personality, before reaching out to draw in a third participant - the listener. Sometimes it can feel as if art is merging with life itself. Certainly, **Robert Schumann** was under the (erroneous) impression that the brilliant, troubled poet Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850) had died when – in 1850 – he created a musical memorial to the poet by setting six of his poems followed by a miniature *Requiem* based on Héloïse's Latin lament for Peter Abelard. Then, on the day of their first performance (in Dresden, in August 1850), came news that Lenau actually had succumbed to syphilis. Schumann felt (he said) "as if I was tolling a passing bell unawares".

Hugo Wolf met a similar fate. "My name is Hugo Wolf. I was born on March 13th 1860 and I'm still alive at the moment. That's biography enough", he wrote, glossing over his rebellious school career, his student friendship with Gustav Mahler, his tempestuous love life, and his terrible last years - confined to a psychiatric hospital until his tragically early death at the age of 42. He preferred to let his music speak for him: more than 240 songs that are amongst the most perfect marriages ever created between the German language and music, each one a music-drama in miniature.

The poet of **Claude Debussy's** *Chansons de Bilitis*, meanwhile, never existed. These erotic verses by the imaginary ancient Greek poetess Bilitis – apparently a contemporary of Sappho – fascinated *belle-époque* Paris when they first appeared in 1894, and their appeal survived the revelation that they were actually the work of their supposed translator, Debussy's friend Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925). Louÿs, who was building a reputation as a writer of erotica, enjoyed the sensation that they caused and Debussy embraced the poems' delicate, impassioned soul regardless. Melancholy and ecstasy find a blissful union in these brief, ravishing settings from 1897.

Henri Duparc's career was truncated even more cruelly than Wolf's. Paralysed by neurasthenia at the age of 37, he never composed again, despite living to the age of 85. Duparc chose his poets with care; here, Baudelaire, Jean Lahor and Theophile Gautier. But there's nothing decadent about his settings. As befits a disciple of Wagner, each – from *Au pays où se fait la guerre*, written on the eve of Duparc's own military service in the Franco-Prussian War, to the brooding, ecstatic *L'invitation au voyage*, generally reckoned to be his masterpiece – is a powerfully characterised miniature narrative.

The natural musicality of the English language creates a special challenge for the British composer; one that - in the centuries since Purcell - only **Benjamin Britten** has succeeded in mastering beyond dispute. His extraordinary folk settings (composed between 1943 and 1961) simultaneously affirm and gently subvert the familiar old words he sets, and his response to the Tudor poet Robert Greene's *Sephestia's Lullaby* (part of Britten's *A Charm of Lullabies* of 1947) is just as bold and fresh.

© Richard Bratby

Imogen Cooper piano

Regarded as one of the finest interpreters of Classical and Romantic repertoire, Imogen Cooper is internationally renowned for her virtuosity and lyricism. Recent and future concerto performances include the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra with Sir Simon Rattle, London Symphony Orchestra with Manfred Honeck, Hallé Orchestra with Sir Mark Elder and The Cleveland and Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestras with Dame Jane Glover. This season her solo recitals include London, Vienna, Amsterdam, Philadelphia and the Klavierfest Ruhr in Germany. In Spring 2026 she will perform in China for the first time, playing solo recitals and Schubert's Winterreise with Mark Padmore.

Imogen's international career has included the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Berliner Philharmoniker, Vienna Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Dresden Staatskapelle, Budapest Festival and NHK Symphony Orchestras. She has played at the BBC Proms and with all the major British orchestras, including particularly close relationships with the Royal Northern Sinfonia and Britten Sinfonia. Her recital appearances have included Tokyo, Hong Kong, Prague, Paris and the Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg.

As a committed chamber musician Imogen performs regularly with Henning Kraggerud and Adrian Brendel. Following a long collaboration with Wolfgang Holzmair in both concert and recording, her current Lieder partners include Ian Bostridge, Dame Sarah Connolly and Mark Padmore. Imogen's recent solo recording for Chandos Records features music by Fauré, Liszt, Ravel and Respighi. Her discography also includes Mozart Concertos with the Royal Northern Sinfonia and a cycle of Schubert's solo works recorded live in concert.

Imogen received a DBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2021. Her many awards and accolades, including the Queen's Medal for Music (2019), Royal Philharmonic Society Performers Award (2008) and Doctor of Music at Exeter University (1999). In 2015 she founded the Imogen Cooper Music Trust to support young pianists and give them time in an environment of peace and beauty. Imogen was the Chair of the Jury at the Leeds International Piano Competition in 2021 and 2024.

Sarah Connolly mezzo-soprano

Sarah Connolly was made a DBE in the 2017 Birthday Honours, having previously been awarded a CBE in the 2010 New Year Honours. In 2020 she was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Philharmonic Society in recognition of her outstanding services to music.

In 2023 she was awarded The King's Medal for Music, an award given annually to an outstanding individual or group of musicians who have had a major influence on the musical life of the nation.

She has sung at the Aldeburgh, Edinburgh, Lucerne, Salzburg and Tanglewood Festivals and the BBC Proms where, in 2009, she was a soloist at the Last Night. Opera engagements have taken her around the world from the Metropolitan Opera to the Royal Opera House, the Paris Opera, La Scala Milan, the Vienna and Munich State Operas and the Bayreuth, Glyndebourne and Aix-en-Provence Festivals.

Highlights in her 2025/26 season include Jocasta Oedipus Rex for The Norwegian Opera & Ballet and Mrs. Patrick De Rocher Dead Man Walking for the English National Opera.

On the concert platform she sings Messiah with the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra/Christophe Rousset, The Dream of Gerontius with the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra/Matthew Halls, Mahler's Symphony no. 2 with the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra/Alexander Shelley and the Aalborg Symfoniorkester/Joshua Weilerstein and his Kindertotenlieder with the Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra/Joel Sandelson and his Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen with the Symphony Orchestra of India/Martyn Brabbins.

Dame Sarah is a Vocal Professor and Fellow at her alma mater the Royal College of Music, a Trustee of the Countess of Munster Musical Trust, and Ambassador for the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestras' Apprentices Programme.