

Mentor and Muse

Songs by Vaughan Williams and the women around him



ALBION RECORDS



Ralph Vaughan Williams
Elizabeth Maconchy
Grace Williams

Kitty Whately
William Vann

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Ralph Vaughan Williams

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Four poems by Fredegond Shove

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Kitty Whately *mezzo-soprano*
William Vann *piano*

left to right:
Tim Burton, William Vann,
Kitty Whately, Andrew Walton

Grace Williams

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Total Running Time

68'56



FOREWORD

This album grew out of several years of performing together, during which William Vann and I found ourselves repeatedly drawn back to the musical world surrounding Ralph Vaughan Williams. While his own songs remain at the heart of the English repertoire, we became increasingly fascinated by the creative circle around him - in particular the remarkable women whose music and poetry formed part of his artistic life.

During his years teaching at the Royal College of Music, Vaughan Williams proved a generous and perceptive mentor to a number of young composers. Among them were Grace Williams and Elizabeth Maconchy, both of whom spoke warmly of his encouragement and the freedom he gave them to develop their own voices. Writing to Williams, Maconchy affectionately described their teacher as “Uncle Ralph,” reflecting that she increasingly regarded him as “a pioneer... if it hadn’t been for him, where would we all have been?”. Maconchy later recalled that he “had no use for ready-made solutions,” but instead encouraged his pupils to work out their own “salvation” as composers - an approach that gave them the freedom to develop voices entirely their own.

Listening to their songs alongside his, we were struck by both his recognisable influence and yet their remarkable individuality and unique sound worlds, particularly in their later compositions.

Equally compelling are the poetic voices represented here. Vaughan Williams returned often to the words of women close to him, including his second wife Ursula Vaughan Williams and his niece Fredegond Shove. In setting Ursula’s poetry, in particular, there is a sense of intimacy that feels almost like a glimpse into a private conversation; moments where the music and the words illuminate something deeply personal within their relationship.

As performers, exploring this repertoire has felt like uncovering a network of artistic friendships and influences: teacher and student, poet and composer, husband and wife. These connections have shaped the programmes William and I have shared in recital over recent years, and they have brought us immense joy in performance.

We are deeply grateful to Albion Records for giving us the opportunity to record this music and to bring together these intertwined voices. It is our hope that this recording not only celebrates Vaughan Williams, but also shines a light on the extraordinary women whose creativity surrounded and enriched his world.

Kitty Whately

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872-1958)

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in the Cotswolds and brought up in the Surrey countryside close to Dorking from the age of two. He was educated at Charterhouse, Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Royal College of Music, where he later became a Professor of Composition. He married his first wife, Adeline Fisher, in 1897; they lived first in London, then in Dorking as arthritis restricted Adeline's mobility.

Ralph's close friendship with Ursula Wood (née Lock) began in 1938. Ralph and Adeline cared for Ursula after the death of her husband, Michael Wood, from a heart attack in 1942; she continued to support Ralph in his work in the years up to Adeline's death in 1951. Ralph and Ursula married and returned to London in 1953, remaining there until his death in 1958.

This album includes nine of his songs, written over a span of 50 years.

1 The Sky Above the Roof (1908)

Vaughan Williams worked closely with Percy Dearmer on ten hymn books and carol books from 1904 to 1936. Dearmer's first wife, Mabel White (*below right*), was a socialist, feminist, artist, book illustrator, poet, novelist and playwright. She was a pacifist but volunteered as a nursing orderly in March 1915, dying of typhoid in Serbia just four months later. Her semi-autobiographical play of 1908, 'Nan Pilgrim', included her English paraphrase of a poem by Verlaine, which Vaughan Williams set in a way that William Vann suggests mirrored Fauré's equally simple but monumental 1896 setting of the French original. There is something of Ravel's directness in this song, which was composed not long after his period of study with him in Paris.

The sky above the roof
Is calm and sweet.

A tree above the roof
Bends in the heat.

A bell from out the blue
Drowsily sings:

A bird from out the blue
Plaintively sings.

Ah God! A life is here,
Simple and fair,

Murmurs of strife are here
Lost in the air.

Why dost thou weep, O heart
Poured out in tears?

What has thou done, O heart,
With thy spent years?

Paul Verlaine: *Le ciel est par-dessus le toit*

Translated by Mabel Dearmer (1872-1915, *right*)



Four poems by Fredegond Shove (1925)

Fredegond Shove (née Maitland) was the daughter of Florence, the older sister of Adeline Fisher, Vaughan Williams's first wife. Fredegond and her sister Ermengard were bridesmaids at Aunt Adeline's marriage to Vaughan Williams in 1897. Fredegond spent some time in London with Ralph and Adeline while also studying at Newnham College, Cambridge, from 1910-13 and went on to become a published English poet. She married the Cambridge economist Gerald Shove (whose name rhymes with Hove) in 1915.

All four of the poems selected were included in a collection called 'Dreams and Journeys', published by Blackwells of Oxford in 1918. *The New Ghost* (track 4) was one of four chosen for 'Georgian Poetry 1918-19' and was published again in 'An Anthology of Modern Verse' (1921), leading the critic Herbert Palmer, who described it as one of the best poems in the book, to identify Fredegond as a religious poet.

Vaughan Williams returned to writing songs after the war, perhaps with the encouragement of the tenor Steuart Wilson whose concert in London's Aeolian Hall on 27 March 1925 included ten new unpublished songs. Three of these songs were included, omitting *Four Nights*. The song that won the best reception was *The Water Mill*, which was encored, Ernest Newman predicting that 'with its delightful geniality and ease and its exquisite workmanship, it will soon be one of the prime favourites of English song'. Over the years, many critics affirmed that verdict.

While *The Water Mill* is acknowledged to be Vaughan Williams's most charming song, modern critics have suggested that *Motion and Stillness* may be his most evocative.

2 Motion and Stillness

The sea shells lie as cold as death
Under the sea;
The clouds move in a wasted wreath
Eternally;
The cows sleep on the tranquil slopes
Above the bay;
The ships like evanescent hopes
Vanish away.

3 Four Nights

O when I shut my eyes in spring
A choir of heaven's swans I see,
They sail on lakes of blue, and sing
Or shelter in a willow tree:
They sing of peace in heart and mind
Such as on earth you may not find.

When I lie down in summer-time
I still can hear the scythes that smite
The ripened flowers in their prime,
And still can see the meadows white.
In summertime my rest is small,
If any rest I find at all.

In autumn, when my eyes I close
I see the yellow stars ablaze
Among the tangled winds that rose
At sunset in a circled maze;
Like armoured nights they ride the skies
And prick the closed lids of my eyes.

But when in wintertime I sleep
I nothing see, nor nothing hear;
The angels in my spirit keep
A silent watch and, being there,
They cause my soul to lie as dead—
A stream enchanted in her bed.

4 The New Ghost



The New Ghost is generally regarded as being about the spirit's journey after death. It was prefaced, on first publication in 1918, by a quotation from St. Mark's gospel: 'And he casting away his garment rose and came to Jesus'. While this gives an initial context, the poem develops from that starting point to embrace death and resurrection.

Fredegond Shove

The New Ghost

And he cast it down, down, on the green grass,
Over the young crocuses, where the dew was—
He cast the garment of his flesh that was full of death,
And like a sword his spirit showed out of the cold sheath.

He went a pace or two, he went to meet his Lord,
And, as I said, his spirit looked like a clean sword,
And seeing him the naked trees began shivering,
And all the birds cried out aloud as it were late spring.

And the Lord came on, He came down, and saw
That a soul was waiting there for Him, one without flaw,
And they embraced in the churchyard where the robins play,
And the daffodils hang down their heads, as they burn away.

The Lord held his head fast, and you could see
That He kissed the unsheathed ghost that was gone free—
As a hot sun, on a March day, kisses the cold ground;
And the spirit answered, for he knew well that his peace was found.

The spirit trembled, and sprang up at the Lord's word—
As on a wild April day, springs a small bird—
So the ghost's feet lifting him up, he kissed the Lord's cheek,
And for the greatness of their love neither of them could speak.

But the Lord went then, to show him the way,
Over the young crocuses, under the green may
That was not quite in flower yet—to a far distant land;
And the ghost followed, like a naked cloud holding the sun's hand.

5 The Water Mill

There is a mill, an ancient one,
Brown with rain, and dry with sun,
The miller's house is joined with it
And in July the swallows flit
To and fro, in and out,
Round the windows, all about;
The mill wheel whirrs and the waters roar
Out of the dark arch by the door,
The willows toss their silver heads,
And the phloxes in the garden beds *
Turn red, turn gray,
With the time of day,
And smell sweet in the rain, then die away.

The miller's cat is a tabby, she
Is as lean as a healthy cat can be,
She plays in the loft,
 where the sunbeams stroke
The sacks' fat backs, and beetles choke
In the floury dust. The wheel goes round
And the miller's wife sleeps fast and sound.

There is a clock inside the house,
Very tall and very bright,
It strikes the hour when shadows drowse,
Or showers make the windows white;
Loud and sweet, in rain and sun,
The clock strikes, and the work is done.
The miller's wife and his eldest girl
Clean and cook, while the mill wheels whirl.
The children take their meat to school,
And at dusk they play by the twilit pool;
Bare-foot, bare-head,
Till the day is dead,
And their mother calls them in to bed.

The supper stands on the clean-scrubbed board,
And the miller drinks like a thirsty lord;
The young men come for his daughter's sake,
But she never knows which one to take:
She drives her needle, and pins her stuff,
While the moon shines gold,
And the lamp shines buff.

* *'miller's beds' in the original poem*

Fredegond Cecily Shove (1889-1949)

ELIZABETH MACONCHY (1907-1994)

Dame Elizabeth Violet Maconchy LeFanu was born in Hertfordshire, but her family moved to Ireland when she was ten – as a result of which she considered herself Irish. In 1923 she went to London’s Royal College of Music (RCM) to study composition with Vaughan Williams and his old harmony teacher, Charles Wood. Vaughan Williams’s biographer Michael Kennedy thought that of all his pupils Maconchy understood Vaughan Williams the best; she wrote that ‘he was always on the side of the young and somehow imparted to his pupils his own attitude to composition, a complete and uncalculating devotion to music.’

She was to dedicate her second symphony to him in 1948; he, in turn, presented her with the autograph manuscript of *Flos Campi*, despite its dedication to Lionel Tertis. They remained good friends to the end of the older composer’s life. A typical letter from him would be formally addressed to ‘Mrs. LeFanu’, beginning ‘Dearest Betty’ or else ‘Darling Betty’, followed by words of encouragement and occasional constructive criticism about the project of the day, concluding with ‘Much love from Uncle Ralph’. Despite the typical flirtatiousness, there is no doubt that he took her seriously as a composer. By 1951 he was able to write: ‘You are getting performed at last, I am so glad.’

Vaughan Williams always made a point of attending her concerts or listening to broadcasts, but would not have heard any of her works included in this album.



6 In Fountain Court (1929)

This 1892 poem by Arthur Symons has been set by a dozen composers; Maconchy is thought to have done so close to leaving the RCM in 1929, Vaughan Williams declaring that he was: ‘very sorry to lose her - but I can teach her no more - she will work for her own salvation and will go far.’ It seems not to have been performed in her lifetime; the unpublished manuscript was found after her death.

The fountain murmuring of sleep,	A waiting ghost, in the blue sky,
A drowsy tune;	The white curved moon;
The flickering green of leaves that keep	June, hushed and breathless, waits, and I
The light of June;	Wait too, with June;
Peace, through a slumbering afternoon,	Come, through the lingering afternoon,
The peace of June.	Soon, love, come soon.

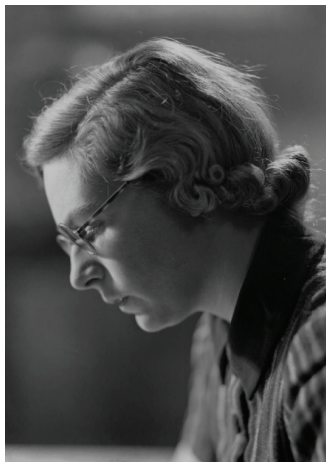
Arthur Symons (1865-1945)

7 Impetuous Heart, Be Still (1924)

Maconchy was a seventeen year old student when she set this verse (‘Aleel’s Song’) from W B Yeats’s 1892 verse-drama *The Countess Kathleen*; the song has been described as remarkably confident.

Impetuous heart, be still, be still,
Your sorrowful love can never be told;
Cover it up with a lonely tune.
He that could bend all things to His will
Has covered the door of the infinite fold
With the pale stars and the wandering moon.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)



8 The Woodspurge (1930)

Wood Spurge, *euphorbia amygdaloides*, is a bushy ever-green perennial; it thrives as ground cover in the dry shade of trees. D G Rossetti was attracted to its form, ‘three cups in one’. He wrote the poem in the spring of 1856 as an expression of emotional turmoil.

Maconchy wrote in a letter to Grace Williams that her setting was composed first as a solo piano piece in 1929, while away in Prague, ‘but it didn’t feel satisfactory somehow and I couldn’t get it to feel so - then, nearly a year later, when we were on our honeymoon, I was reading those words and thought “that’s just the thing - it ought to be a song.”’ It was first performed by soprano Muriel Herbert, accompanied by Alannah Delias, on 15 November 1932 at a Macnaghten-Lemare concert at the Mercury Theatre, Ladbroke Road, London.



The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill:

I had walked on at the wind’s will,—
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was,—
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)

9 The Exequy (1956)

An exequy is a funeral rite; the text below is drawn from Bishop Henry King's much longer 'Exequy on his wife', written after the death of his wife, Anne, at the age of 23. The sombre piano accompaniment is reminiscent of a tolling bell at intervals from beginning to end. There is no record of a performance in Maconchy's lifetime.

Sleep on, my love, in thy cold bed
Never to be disquieted!
My last good-night! Thou wilt not wake
Till I thy fate shall overtake:
Till age, or grief, or sickness must
Marry my body to that dust
It so much loves; and fill the room
My heart keeps empty in that tomb.
Stay for me there: I will not fail
To meet thee in that hollow vale.
And think not much of my delay:
I am already on the way,
And follow thee with all the speed
Desire can make, or sorrows breed.
Sleep on, my love.

Henry King (1592-1669),
Bishop of Chichester



10 Come Away, Death (1965)

Come Away, Death and *King Stephen* made up two of a group of *Four Shakespeare Songs* that were gathered together for a first performance by Noelle Barker (soprano) with Wilfrid Parry (piano) in a BBC Network Three broadcast on 20 April 1966; they were published together in 2007.

Come Away, Death is a highly dramatic setting, with rapid changes of dynamic. *King Stephen* is a lighter work with a toccata-like accompaniment.

Come away, come away, death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fly away, fly away, breath;
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O, prepare it.
My part of death no-one so true
Did share it.
Not a flower, not a flower sweet,
On my black coffin let there be strown:
Not a friend, not a friend greet
My poor corpse where my bones shall be thrown:
A thousand, thousand sighs to save,
Lay me, O where
Sad true lover never find my grave,
To weep there.

Twelfth Night, Act II, Scene 4
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

11 King Stephen (1965)

King Stephen was a worthy peer,
His breeches cost him but a crown;
He held them sixpence all too dear,
With that he called the tailor loon*.
He was a wight** of high renown.
And thou art but of low degree:
'Tis pride that pulls the country down;
Then take thine auld cloak about thee.

* *loon* (sometimes *lown*), a rogue

** *wight*, a person

An old ballad, quoted in *Othello*, Act II, Scene 3
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

12 Ophelia's Song (1926)

This early work was published in 1930. The text has inspired a dozen composers; Maconchy sets it at a gentle *moderato*.

How should I your true love know
From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff,
And his sandal shoon.

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;

At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

White his shroud as the mountain snow,
Larded with sweet flowers:

Which bewept to the grave did go
With true-love showers.

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;

At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

Hamlet, Act IV, Scene 5
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

GRACE WILLIAMS (1906-1977)

Grace Williams was born in Barry, Glamorgan; her parents were teachers and music was encouraged. She won a scholarship to the University of South Wales in 1923 and in 1926 went to the RCM where she was taught by Gordon Jacob and Vaughan Williams. Her early career was spent in London, teaching and working for the BBC, but in 1946 or 1947 she returned to Barry and spent the rest of her life in Wales. She was one of the first professional Welsh composers of the twentieth century to attain significant national recognition, and many of her remarkably distinctive pieces are directly inspired by Wales and its culture. Despite that, the works in this album illustrate her broader outlook, with texts drawn from far and wide.



BILLOWS OF THE SEA (1969)

This is the first recording of Grace Williams's cycle *Billows of the Sea*. It was commissioned for the 1969 Swansea Festival by the Guild for Promotion of Welsh Music, and first performed by Helen Watts accompanied by John Streets in St. Mary's Church, Swansea, on 6 October 1969. Kenneth Loveland, for *The Times*, noted that Williams lived by the sea and that her sea on this occasion 'is a demanding and angry one, tearing lovers apart as in John Gay's *Black-Eyed Susan* or claiming them as its prey as in Scott's *Rosabelle* and the anonymous Galloway ballad *The Lowlands of Holland*.' He found the most successful setting to be *Black-Eyed Susan*, 'salty and jaunty and brightened with evocative touches for the piano.' The only song of repose, Tennyson's *Sweet and Low*, a recasting of an earlier setting, serves to separate two songs with a similar subject.

13 Rosabelle

O listen, listen, ladies gay!
No haughty feat of arms I tell;
Soft is the note, and sad the lay
That mourns the lovely Rosabelle.

‘Moor, moor the barge, ye gallant crew!
And, gentle ladye, deign to stay!
Rest thee in Castle Ravensheuch,
Nor tempt the stormy firth to-day.

‘The blackening wave is edged with white;
To inch and rock the sea-mews fly;
The fishers have heard the Water-Sprite,
Whose screams forebode that wreck is nigh.

‘Last night the gifted Seer did view
A wet shroud swathed round ladye gay;
Then stay thee, Fair, in Ravensheuch;
Why cross the gloomy firth to-day?’

‘‘Tis not because Lord Lindsay’s heir
Tonight at Roslin leads the ball,
But that my lady-mother there
Sits lonely in her castle-hall.

‘‘Tis not because the ring they ride,
And Lindsay at the ring rides well,
But that my sire the wine will chide
If ’tis not fill’d by Rosabelle.’

O’er Roslin all that dreary night
A wondrous blaze was seen to gleam;

’Twas broader than the watch-fire’s light,
And redder than the bright moonbeam.

It glared on Roslin’s castled rock,
It ruddied all the copse-wood glen;

’Twas seen from Dryden’s groves of oak,
And seen from cavern’d Hawthornden.

Seem’d all on fire that chapel proud
Where Roslin’s chiefs uncoffin’d lie,
Each Baron, for a sable shroud,
Sheathed in his iron panoply.

Seem’d all on fire within, around,
Deep sacristy and altar’s pale;
Shone every pillar foliage-bound,
And glimmer’d all the dead men’s mail.

Blazed battlement and pinnet high,
Blazed every rose-carved buttress fair—
So still they blaze, when fate is nigh
The lordly line of high Saint Clair.

There are twenty of Roslin’s barons bold
Lie buried within that proud chapel;
Each one the holy vault doth hold
But the sea holds lovely Rosabelle!

And each Saint Clair was buried there
With candle, with book, and with knell;
But the sea-caves rung, and the wild winds sung
The dirge of lovely Rosabelle.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

‘Fair Rosabelle of Roslin’ from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, 1805

14 Sweet and Low

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea,
Low, low, breathe and blow,
Wind of the western sea!
Over the rolling waters go,
Come from the dying moon, and blow,
Blow him again to me;
While my little one,
while my pretty one, sleeps.

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest,
Father will come to thee soon;
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,
Father will come to thee soon;
Father will come to his babe in the nest,
Silver sails all out of the west,
Under the silver moon:
Sleep, my little one,
sleep, my pretty one, sleep.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)
Written in 1849, published in *The Princess*, 1850

15 The Lowlands of Holland

My love he's built a bonny ship and set her on the sea
With seven score guid mariners to bear her companie.
There's three score is sunk and three score dead at sea;
And the lowlands of Holland hae twined my love and me.

My love he built a nether ship and set her on the main,
And nane but twenty mariners for to bring her hame;
But the weary wind began to rise, and the sea began to rout;
My love then and his bonny ship turned withershins about.

There shall neither coif come on my head nor kame come in my hair;
There shall neither coal nor candlelicht shine in my bowir mair;
Nor will I love another man until the day I die,
For I never had a love but ane, and he's drowned in the sea.

O haud your tongue my daughter dear, be still and be content;
There are mair lads in Galloway, you need na sair lament.
O! there is nane in Galloway, there's nane at a' for me;
For I never loved a love but ane, and he's drowned in the sea.

Traditional, from David Herd: *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*, Vol. II, Edinburgh, 1776

16 Black-Eyed Susan

All in the Downs the fleet was moored,
The streamers waving in the wind,
When black-eyed Susan came on board:
'O! where shall I my true-love find?
Tell me, ye jovial sailors, tell me true,
If my sweet William sails among the crew?'

William, who high upon the yard
Rocked with the billows to and fro,
Soon as her well-known voice he heard,
He sighed and cast his eyes below:
The cord slides swiftly through his glowing hands,
And quick as lightning on the deck he stands.

So the sweet lark, high poised in air,
Shuts close his pinions to his breast.
If chance his mate's shrill call he hears,
And drops at once into her nest.
The noblest captain in the British fleet
Might envy William's lips those kisses sweet.

'O Susan, Susan, lovely dear,
My vows shall ever true remain;
Let me kiss off that falling tear,
We only part to meet again.
Change as ye list she wins, my heart shall be
A faithful compass that still points to thee.'

'Believe not what the landmen say,
Who tempt with doubts thy constant mind:
They'll tell thee, sailors, when away,
In ev'ry port a mistress find.
Yes, yes, believe them when they tell thee so,
For thou art present wheresoe'er I go.

'If to far India's coast we sail,
Thy eyes are seen in di'monds bright,
Thy breath is Afric's spicy gale,
Thy skin is ivory, so white.
Thus ev'ry beauteous object that I view,
Wakes in my soul some charm of lovely Sue.

'Though battle call me from thy arms
Let not my pretty Susan mourn;
Though cannons roar, yet safe from harms,
William shall to his dear return.
Love turns aside the balls that round me fly,
Lest precious tears should drop from Susan's eye'.

The bos'n gave the dreadful word,
The sails their swelling bosom spread;
No longer must she stay aboard:
They kiss'd, she sigh'd, he hung his head.
Her lessening boat, unwilling rows to land:
'Adieu!', she cries; and wav'd her lily hand.

John Gay (1685-1732), published in 1720

17 The Lament of the Border Widow (1952)

The Lament of the Border Widow is from the Scottish rather than the Welsh border. It is described as a fragment obtained by Sir Walter Scott from ‘recitation in the Forest of Ettrick’. It is said to relate to the execution of Cockburne of Henderland, a Border freebooter, hanged (with others) over the gate of his own tower, by James V in 1529. The composer’s instruction is *Andante declamando*.

My love he built me a bonny bower,
And clad it a’ wi’ lilye flower;
A brawer bower ye ne’er did see,
Than my true love he built for me.
There came a man, by middle day,
He spied his sport, and went away;
And brought the king that very night,
Who brake my bower, and slew my knight.
He slew my knight, to me sae dear;
He slew my knight, and poined* his gear;
My servants all for life did flee,
And left me in extremitie.
I sewed his sheet, making my mane;
I watch’d the corpse, myself alane;

I watch’d his body, night and day;
No living creature came that way.
I took his body on my back,
And whiles I gaed, and whiles I sat;
I digg’d a grave, and laid him in,
And happ’d him with the sod sae green.
But think na ye my heart was sair,
When I laid the moul’ on his yellow hair;
O think na ye my heart was wae,
When I turned about, away to gae?
Nae living man I’ll love again,
Since that my lovely knight is slain;
Wi’ ae lock of his yellow hair,
I’ll chain my heart for evermair.

**poined or poinded* – attached by legal distress.

Anon, collected by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Four Last Songs (1954-8) (settings of poems by Ursula Vaughan Williams)

Ursula Wood (née Lock) served as Vaughan Williams's companion and collaborator from 1938 and became his second wife in 1953. She was an established poet and her work has been set by more than 20 composers. Vaughan Williams was among them, notably in *The Sons of Light* and *Sun Moon, Stars and Man* (both 1950). These four late songs (which are the completed parts of two projected song cycles) are all settings of poems by her. They were published together in 1960.

18 Procris

First published in 'Fall of Leaf' (1943)

Ursula's poem was inspired by Piero de Cosimo's 1495 painting 'The Death of Procris', found in London's National Gallery, with many corresponding descriptive elements. Procris, the daughter of an Athenian king in Greek mythology, falsely suspects her husband Cephalus of having a secret lover. Cephalus shoots an arrow at what he thought was an animal in the bushes and is horrified to see that he has shot Procris, who dies in his arms.

Procris is lying at the waterside,
the yellow flowers show spring, the grass is green,
before a gentle wind the thin trees lean
towards the rushes, the rushes to the tide.
She will not see the green spring turn to summer, summer
go in a long golden dusk towards the snow,
With eyes so lit by love that everything
burned, flowed, grew, blossomed, moved on foot or wing
with the guessed rhythm of eternity.
All her hope and will
flowed from her unavailing
and she knew darkness, as her eyes know now
shut to the daylight, and despair prevailing
she saw no way to go.



Ursula in 1957

19 Tired

First published in 'Fall of Leaf' (1943)

Vaughan Williams wrote *Procris* in 1958 and *Tired* in 1956, but they were not performed in his lifetime. John Carol Case, accompanied by Daphne Ibbott, gave first performances of both on 27 November 1959. We might imagine that Ursula wrote *Tired* as she observed Ralph taking a nap by the fireside after supper, perhaps at his home in Dorking with Ursula and Adeline together.

Sleep, and I'll be still as another sleeper
holding you in my arms, glad that you lie
so near at last.

This sheltering midnight is our meeting place,
no passion or despair or hope divide
me from your side.

I shall remember firelight on your sleeping face,
I shall remember shadows growing deeper
as the fire fell to ashes and the minutes passed.

20 Hands, Eyes and Heart

First published in 'No Other Choice' (1941)

This is the final section of 'Prologue', which has an introduction and six numbered parts. A few days before her first meeting with Ralph on 31 March 1938, Ursula wrote 'a poem that seemed quite extraordinary to me, and which I did not understand. It was one of those few that was complete, and came from an unknown part of brain or thought at dictation speed, one of the experiences that seemed to have no relation to anything already known, but which was prophetic'.

The introductory verse includes the lines: 'I am two fools I know / for loving, and for saying so' The poem is an expression of 'more love than I can bear', finding peace and resolution in this closing verse.

Vaughan William's song was complete by March 1955 and first performed by Keith Falkner with Christabel Falkner for the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation in December 1956, but had to wait until 1960, after the composer's death, for a performance of all four songs for the BBC Home Service by Pamela Bowden with Ernest Lush.

Hands, Eyes and Heart

Hands, give him all the measure of my love
surer than any word.

Eyes, be deep pools of truth, where he may see
a thought more whole than constancy.

Heart, in his keeping, be at rest and live
as music and silence meet, and both are heard.

21 Menelaus

First published in 'Silence and Music' (1959)

The full title of the poem is 'Menelaus on the Beach at Pharos' and the song was thus titled at its first performance by Keith Falkner at Cornell University, on 14 November 1954, with both Ralph and Ursula in attendance.

The descriptive language suggests another picture, but the real inspiration was T E Lawrence's translation of Homer's *The Odyssey*, which Ralph read in the summer of 1953. One day he had been reading its fourth book, which tells of Menelaus and Proteus at Pharos, ending: 'from the river of earth the west wind ever sings soft and thrillingly to re-animate the souls of men—there you will have Helen for yourself and will be deemed of the household of Zeus.'

Ursula wrote: 'The same day I wrote some verse which I left on Ralph's table before I went out to work in the garden. When I came in the song was almost finished. This, like a very few other of his songs, was written in one day.'

Menelaus

You will come home, not to the home you knew
that your thought remembers, going from rose to rose
along the terraces and staying to gaze at the vines
and reeds and iris beside the lake
in the morning haze.

Forgetting the place you are in when the cold sea winds
go crying like gulls on the beach where the horned sea poppies grow.

Homesick wanderer, you will come home
to a home more ancient, waiting your return:
sea frets the steps that lie green under waves
and swallows nest below lintel and eaves;
there lamps are kindled for you, they will burn
till you come, however late you come,
till the west wind's sheltering wing
folds round your sail and brings you to land.

Stretch out your hand,
murmuring, lapping sea and the lamps and the welcome wait
to draw you home to rest.

You shall come home and love shall fold you in joy
and lay your heart on her breast.

All of these poems can be found in *The complete poems of Ursula Vaughan Williams and a short story – Fall of Leaf*, Albion Music Ltd, 2003.

Notes by John Francis

Further reading: Music, Life and Changing Times; correspondence between British Composers Elizabeth Maconchy and Grace Williams, 1927-77, edited by Sophie Fuller and Jenny Doctor, Routledge, 2020

Kitty Whately

Kitty Whately is one of the UK's most characterful mezzo-sopranos, acclaimed on both the operatic stage and concert platform, and renowned for her work particularly in contemporary opera and art song.

Operatic highlights include world premieres in Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Festen* (Michelle) and *Coraline* (Mother/Other Mother) for the Royal Ballet & Opera. She has performed Isabelle in Missy Mazzoli's *Song from the Uproar* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and appeared at major festivals including Verbier (*Le nozze di Figaro*) and Aix-en-Provence, where she sang in Cavalli's *Elena*, Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and premiered Vasco Mendonça's *The House Taken Over*. Her wider repertoire includes *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, *Così fan tutte*, *Albert Herring*, *Don Giovanni*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*.

A former BBC New Generation Artist and Kathleen Ferrier Award winner, she appears regularly with leading orchestras including the Berlin Philharmonic and BBC ensembles. Her recordings include seven solo albums, notably *Befreit* with Joseph Middleton, the complete songs of Rebecca Clarke, and a French song disc for Chandos.

Kitty is the co-founder of the charity SWAP'ra (Supporting Women And Parents in Opera)

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Sara Porter

William Vann

A multiple-prize winning and critically acclaimed song accompanist and choral, orchestral and opera conductor, William Vann is particularly renowned for his recordings and revival performances of lost and lesser-known works of vocal and choral music by British composers. He was a Chorister at King's College, Cambridge and a Music Scholar at Bedford School; he subsequently read Law and was a Choral Scholar at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, learning the piano with Peter Uppard, and studied piano accompaniment at the Royal Academy of Music with Malcolm Martineau and Colin Stone.

His studio recordings of Hubert Parry's *Judith* and *Prometheus Unbound* have been awarded a host of accolades, including Gramophone's 'Recording of the Month'. This is his twentieth release on Albion Records, including a critically acclaimed four-disc compilation of the complete Vaughan Williams folk song arrangements for voice and piano.

He is a Trustee of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, the Director of Music at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, Chorus Master of The Grange Festival, Musical Director of Dulwich Choral Society and The London Chorus, an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music, a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, the founder and Artistic Director of the London English Song Festival, a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Musicians and the Chairman of Kensington and Chelsea Music Society.

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Thanks to the following for help with scores:

James Geer, Ronald Woodley and Chester Music for generously sharing their scores of the songs by Elizabeth Maconchy ahead of publication (*In Fountain Court*, *The Exequy*, *The Woodspurge* and *Impetuous Heart, Be Still*); Fred Broom for transpositions and Martin Pacey for assistance with music preparation.

Production credits

Recorded at St. George's Headstone, London, from 15-16 July and 20-22 October 2025.

Producer: Andrew Walton; Engineer: Tim Burton; K&A Productions.

Executive production and booklet design: John Francis.

Cover: Kitty Whately and John Francis; photograph of Ralph and Ursula Vaughan Williams in 1954 from the collection of Stephen Connock; the music in the background is part of the manuscript of *Tired*.

Proof reading: Martin Murray and Andrew Slater.

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