



CLOSE HARMONY SONGS

by Ellington • Shearing
Sondheim • Legrand
The Beatles • The Swingles

THE MUSIC NEVER ENDS

Gareth Giles, Piano

Gareth Huw Davies, Double bass

Vasari Singers • Jeremy Backhouse



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Traditional		
1	Waltzing Matilda (arr. Jonathan Rathbone [b. 1957], 1992) Text: Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson (1864–1941)	3:51
2	Danny Boy (Londonderry Air) (1913, arr. J. Rathbone, 1991) Text: Frederic Edward Weatherly (1848–1929)	3:39
3	Vem kan segla förutan vind? ('Who can sail without the wind?') (arr. J. Rathbone, 1991) Text: Traditional Swedish	3:10
4	El Paisanito (arr. Ward Swingle [1927–2015], 1985) Text: Traditional Argentinian	4:24
Ward Swingle (1927–2015)		
5	Romance (1984) Text: Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894)	3:10
John Lennon (1940–1980) / Paul McCartney (b. 1942)		
6	The Fool on the Hill (1967, arr. J. Rathbone, 2003)	5:09
7	Penny Lane (1967, arr. J. Rathbone, 2003)	3:30
8	Blackbird – I Will (1968, arr. J. Rathbone, 2003)	4:55
Michel Legrand (1932–2019)		
9	You Must Believe in Spring (from <i>Les Demoiselles de Rochefort</i>) (1967, arr. Gareth Giles [b. 1964], 2017) Text: Alan Bergman (b. 1925), Marilyn Keith Bergman (1928–2022)	4:03
10	How do you keep the music playing? (from <i>Best Friends</i>) (1982, arr. Alexander L'Estrange [b. 1974], 2016) Text: Alan Bergman, Marilyn Keith Bergman	4:28
11	The Summer Knows (from <i>Summer of '42</i>) (1971, arr. G. Giles, 2018) Text: Alan Bergman, Marilyn Keith Bergman	6:33
Kevin Olson (b. 1971)		
12	A Summer Sonnet (2015) Text: William Shakespeare (1564–1616)	5:03
George Shearing (1919–2011)		
Songs and Sonnets from Shakespeare (1999) Text: William Shakespeare		
13	No. 1. Live with me and be my love	2:50
14	No. 2. When daffodils begin to peer	1:46
15	No. 3. It was a lover and his lass	2:20
16	No. 4. Spring	2:13
17	No. 5. Who is Silvia?	4:31
18	No. 6. Fie on sinful fantasy	1:19
19	No. 7. Hey, Ho, the Wind and the Rain	2:38
Stephen Sondheim (1930–2021)		
20	Send In the Clowns (from <i>A Little Night Music</i> , Act II) (1973, arr. W. Swingle, date unknown)	4:07
Duke Ellington (1899–1974) / Ben Parry (b. 1965)		
21	It don't mean a thing (if it ain't got that swing) / Swing Time (1931, arr. Ben Parry, 2002) Text: Irving Mills (1894–1985)	3:51

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What is close harmony singing? Barbershop is a close relative, as is Gospel, but it is neither of those things. It can be described as the vocal equivalent of a jazz big band: the saxophones, the 'horns' and even the rhythm section are replaced by voices. It is principally a 20th-century phenomenon, but it has been claimed that its earliest recorded manifestation dates from 1773 when Captain James Cook came across indigenous people in New Zealand singing this way and was deeply intrigued, even if his attempts to promulgate it did not catch on in Europe. As well as The Andrews Sisters, The King's Singers, Take 6 and The Manhattan Transfer, one of the most iconic groups that made close harmony their own was the Swingle Singers, about whom more later.

Without getting too technical, there is an audible difference in musical terms between close harmony and what you might hear in the music of, say, Brahms or Mozart. As the term implies, this specifically concerns two things: the vocal texture and the harmonies themselves. The voices are not only close together – there is often less than an octave between high and low voices – but they regularly move in parallel motion from one chord to the next (something that 'classical' composers tend to avoid). This is the vocal equivalent of the Glenn Miller big band sound. The chords themselves, compared to the triads used in classical music, very often have added notes – sixths, sevenths, ninths or other more adventurous additions – making the harmonies richer and sometimes remarkably dissonant.

Close harmony is something that the Vasari Singers have frequently explored in concert and on disc, and the current programme is a personal tour of this musical genre.

Ward Swingle, an American who lived for a long time in France and the UK, first established an eight-voice team, which he called the Swingle Singers, in Paris in the early 1960s. They were a double quartet in both the original French line-up and its later British incarnation, and used microphones to create an intimate, highly focused sound. They sang initially with drums and bass, and occasionally piano, but later became a primarily a cappella group. The influence of scat singing was highly significant in their development. Scat, which is singing to nonsense syllables, was supposedly invented by Louis Armstrong when the sheet music fell to the floor during a recording session and, rather than stop, he improvised a series of nonsense 'words' to fit the notes. Ward Swingle applied this technique to classical instrumental pieces – his scat arrangements of Bach and Mozart are legendary. This album features a number of arrangements created for the Swingle Singers. Ward Swingle was the Vasari Singers' patron until his death in 2015 and the singers worked with him, so this is a natural connection. Vasari transform the one-to-a-part originals into idiomatic choral pieces, full of panache, as they demonstrated when they sang with the Swingles during their residency at Kings Place, London, in 2012.

The first group of works on this album is a series of folk songs, or folk-song-like pieces, using the original words but preserving the idea of vocal imitations of instrumental effects as well. Many of these arrangements are by long-time Swingle tenor Jonathan Rathbone, who became music director of the Swingle Singers after Ward's departure for America in 1984. The selection kicks off with *Waltzing Matilda* from Australia (complete with didgeridoo, and ethnic drum and flute effects), followed by *Danny Boy*, a haunting Irish melody known as the *Londonderry Air*, collected in that county in the mid-19th century, to which words were added by Fred Weatherly in 1913. *Vem kan segla* is a lovely Swedish tune: 'Who can sail without the wind? Who can row without an oar? Who can say goodbye to their love without weeping?' *El Paisanito* comes from Argentina, with a text also known as *Pobre mi negra*: a country boy, sitting under the eaves, laments the absence of his sweetheart, his poor black-haired girl, sure that she will return someday. This arrangement is by Ward himself. The group finishes with a beautiful original version of a Robert Louis Stevenson text, *Romance*, composed by Ward Swingle.

The second group of songs are by The Beatles, with music by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, again in arrangements by Jonathan Rathbone, which he wrote for the Swingles' Beatles tribute album, *Ticket to Ride* (1999). In *The Fool on the Hill* (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967), open-spaced, 'classical' choral textures alternate with close harmony and unison writing to mesmeric effect. *Penny Lane* (released as a single in 1967 but originally intended for the *Sgt. Pepper* album) was inspired by a street in Liverpool. Its slightly surreal text was described by the classical music critic Wilfrid Mellers as being 'childishly merry yet dreamily wild at the same time'. The arrangement is resolutely punchy throughout, with clear echoes of big band sounds. The third piece, *Blackbird* (*singing in the dead of night*), dates from 1968 (the original was released on *The Beatles*, aka the 'White Album'), its lyrics inspired by the song of a blackbird in India and referencing the American civil rights movement. Here, it is skilfully combined with *I Will*, a love song (also from the 'White Album') that McCartney claimed to be one of his favourite creations.

Michel Legrand is the composer of the third group of pieces. There is a strong connection here: Christiane Legrand, Michel's sister, was the lead soprano of the original French Swingle Singers. Gareth Giles, the pianist on this album, contributes two arrangements: *The Summer Knows* is the theme music for the film *Summer of '42* and *You Must Believe in Spring* is from the soundtrack to *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*. Both have texts by Alan and Marilyn Bergman. Between them is an arrangement by Alexander L'Estrange, for solo voice and choir a cappella; *How do you keep the music playing?* The last line gives this album its title: 'If we can be the best of lovers, and be the best of friends, if we can try with every day to make it better ... the music never ends'.

The fourth selection takes as its theme the poetry of William Shakespeare, introduced by Kevin Olson's *A Summer Sonnet*. The text is Sonnet 18, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.' Olson is a jazz pianist and teaches piano at Utah State University. This Latin-music-inspired setting, which features a prominent tenor solo, was composed for Chicago a cappella, a ten-voice close-harmony group founded in the 1990s.

The principal work is by another jazz pianist, George Shearing (1919–2011). Blind from birth, Shearing made a name for himself with such hits as *Lullaby of Birdland* and *September in the Rain*. He describes the genesis of his *Songs and Sonnets from Shakespeare* in typically amusing fashion:

William Shakespeare and I brought forth a series of pieces for choir, jazz piano and bass entitled *Music to hear*. ... Because we'd enjoyed working together so much, we thought we'd give it another go. Mr Shakespeare dug around in his trunk and came up with seven more songs and sonnets that we hadn't used yet. ... In them you'll hear my English musical background and my American jazz influence.

The first performance was given by Shearing (piano) and Neil Swainson (bass) with The Mostly Madrigal Singers, who commissioned the piece, directed by John Rutter. (The latter composer later wrote a tribute piece for Shearing, *Birthday Madrigals*, setting some of the same texts, which Vasari recorded on their album *Deep Purple* [Guild, 2003].) There are seven very eclectic movements: *Live with me and be my love* (from *The Passionate Pilgrim*); *When daffodils begin to peer* (*The Winter's Tale*); *It was a lover and his lass* (*As You Like It*); *Spring* (*When daisies pied – Love's Labour's Lost*); *Who is Silvia?* (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*) – a setting which pays homage to Schubert's well-known song on the same text; *Fie on sinful fantasy* (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*); and ending with Feste's wry epilogue to *Twelfth Night*, 'When that I was and a little tiny boy, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain'.

Following Shakespeare comes another fine dramatist: Stephen Sondheim. In Ward Swingle's arrangement of *Send In the Clowns*, from *A Little Night Music* (1973), the famously short-phrased melody conceived for the actress Glynis Johns is given to an alto solo, while the remaining voices sustain delicious harmonies to which a gentle rhythmic impetus is given by regular, soft 'doon-doon' attacks.

The album ends with a Duke Ellington number, *It don't mean a thing (if it ain't got that swing)*, with lyrics by Irving Mills, in a suitably up-beat arrangement by Ben Parry, who was also a member of the Swingles in the late 1990s. The arrangement includes some original music taking inspiration from other well-known swing numbers, including snippets you may recognise from elsewhere on this recording!

David Bray

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Vasari Singers

Sopranos: Nicola Balzan, Elena Carlton-Jones, Victoria Cross, Rachel Holmes, Miranda Johnson, Liz Limb, Rachel Limb, Fiona McWilliams, Rosalind Newis, Rachel Robinson, Julia Smith, Polly Smith, Jocelyn Somerville, Jess Stansfield, Laura Stephenson, Susan Waton.

Altos: Elizabeth Atkinson, Alison Benton, Alex Brougham, Jennifer Griffin, Lizzie Isherwood, Sarah Kendrick, Stephanie May, Sarah Mistry, Julia Ridout, Ellie Searley.

Tenors: Paul Bradbury, Daniel Burges, Roger Carpenter, Andrew Isherwood, Paul Robertson, Andrew Rochford, Jon Scott.

Basses: Imants Auziņš, Rory Benton, Jeremy Brown, James Cross, John Hunt, Keith Long, Paul Newis, Matthew Wood.

Gareth Huw Davies



Gareth Huw Davies is a London-based musician, producer and sound engineer. His first association with Jeremy Backhouse and the Vasari Singers was the highly successful recording of Will Todd's *Mass in Blue*, which he played on, recorded and mixed. Davies has also continued that association with Will Todd, working with him as a member of the Will Todd Trio for over 25 years. Davies' other credits include Willard White, the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Echo and The Bunnymen, Michael Nyman and 17 years as house bassist on *Noson Lawen* on S4C. He studied at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and also leads a jazz piano trio, Paradolia.

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Gareth Giles



Gareth Giles was head chorister at Hereford Cathedral, and is a graduate of the Royal College of Music. Following 17 years leading a large school music department, he now works as a freelance pianist, organist, composer and educator. His compositions have premiered at the Royal Albert Hall, Dorking Halls and Guildford Cathedral. He is the accompanist of Leatherhead Choral Society and Claygate Choral Society, organist of First Church of Christ, Scientist, Claygate, and resident pianist of the Royal Automobile Club, Epsom.

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Jeremy Backhouse



Jeremy Backhouse is one of Britain's leading choral conductors, and has been the sole conductor of the internationally renowned chamber choir Vasari Singers since its inception in 1980. Since winning the prestigious Sainsbury's Choir of the Year competition in 1988, the ensemble has broadcast frequently on BBC Radio and Classic FM, and has recorded a discography of over 30 highly acclaimed albums on EMI, Guild, Signum, Naxos and its own VasariMedia label. In 1995, Backhouse was appointed music director of the Vivace Chorus. Alongside the standard classical works, he has conducted the choir in a vast array of ambitious programmes, including sell-out performances at the Royal Albert Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. From 2009 to 2022, Backhouse was music director of the Salisbury Community Choir. During that period, specially commissioned works by Bob Chilcott, Will Todd and Alexander L'Estrange were given world premiere performances in the cathedrals of Salisbury, Winchester, Guildford and Lincoln. He has also worked with leading UK choirs, including the BBC Singers, London Symphony Chorus, the Philharmonia Chorus, The London Chorus and Brighton Festival Chorus.

www.jeremybackhouse.com

Vasari Singers



Vasari Singers was founded in 1980 and is regarded as one of the leading chamber choirs in Britain. Under the direction of its founder-conductor Jeremy Backhouse, Vasari Singers performs a wide range of repertoire from Renaissance to contemporary. The choir regularly sings at major concert venues and other locations in London and elsewhere, including abroad. Two crucial foundation stones of the choir's history have been the commissioning of new choral works and making recordings: the ensemble's extensive discography includes a large collection of premiere recordings, many of which are of works commissioned by Vasari Singers, as well as three collections of Christmas music. Many of the choir's recordings have received high acclaim, achieving chart successes and similar recommendations. During the moratorium on live choral singing in 2019 and 2020, Vasari turned its attention to online activities, successfully engaging with a worldwide audience through virtual performances and choral workshops. Notable among these was the online launch concert for the critically acclaimed *Heaven Full of Stars* (Naxos 8.574179). Vasari's discography includes *Five Mystical Songs and other British Choral Anthems* (8.574416). Its latest recording, *Music on Christmas Morning* (8.574542), again featuring baritone Roderick Williams, was released to great critical acclaim.

Close harmony singing is the vocal equivalent of a jazz big band, and this programme is the Vasari Singers' personal tour of a style in which they have excelled for years. Their connection with Ward Swingle and the pioneering Swingle Singers is explored in arrangements ranging from traditional folk songs such as the haunting *Danny Boy*, to favourites by The Beatles and the delicious harmonies of Stephen Sondheim. George Shearing's English musical background and American jazz influence combine in his *Songs and Sonnets from Shakespeare*, and the album closes with a cleverly integrated and up-beat version of Duke Ellington's classic *It don't mean a thing (if it ain't got that swing)*.

THE MUSIC NEVER ENDS

Traditional		Michel Legrand	
1	Waltzing Matilda	3:51	9 You Must Believe in Spring 4:03
2	Danny Boy	3:39	10 How do you keep the music playing? 4:28
3	Vem kan segla förutan vind? (‘Who can sail without the wind’)	3:10	11 The Summer Knows 6:33
4	El Paisanito	4:24	Kevin Olson
Ward Swingle			12 A Summer Sonnet 5:03
5	Romance	3:10	George Shearing
John Lennon / Paul McCartney			13–19 Songs and Sonnets from Shakespeare 17:35
6	The Fool on the Hill	5:09	Stephen Sondheim
7	Penny Lane	3:30	20 Send In the Clowns 4:07
8	Blackbird – I Will	4:55	Duke Ellington / Ben Parry
			21 It don't mean a thing (if it ain't got that swing) / Swing Time 3:51

Jocelyn Somerville, Soprano solo 10 • Jennifer Griffin, Alto solo 20

Daniel Burges, Tenor solo 12 • Matthew Wood, Baritone solo 5

Gareth Huw Davies, Double bass 9 11 13–15 18 19

Gareth Giles, Piano 9 11 13–15 17–19

Vasari Singers • Jeremy Backhouse

A detailed track list and publishers' details can be found inside the booklet.

Recorded: 25–27 October 2024 at the Recital Room, Tonbridge School, Kent, UK • Producer: Adrian Peacock
Engineers: Dave Rowell, Caitlin Pittol-Neville • Booklet notes: David Bray • Cover design © Katie Youdale, 2025

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