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CLASSICS

WILLIAM MIVAL

Vale - a pastoral symphony

Tristan - still

Pluen (feather)

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA

MARTYN BRABBINS



**Vale - a pastoral symphony,
Tristan - still, Pluen (feather)**
Works for orchestra by William Mival

Vale - a pastoral symphony

1	I. Senza ironia	[04.39]
2	II. Fluido, bucolico e espressivo	[02.48]
3	III. Fluido, bucolico e espressivo (cont.)	[05.23]
4	IV. Lento	[05.50]
5	V. Piu mosso, fluido	[06.49]
6	VI. Meno mosso - rubato e molto espressivo	[01.47]

Tristan - still

7	I. Lento - tempo flessibile - teneramente	[02.35]
8	II. Poco meno mosso. Tenero e fragile	[04.21]
9	III. Delicato e molto fragile	[05.39]
10	IV. Delicato (cont.)	[06.23]

Pluen (feather)

11	I. Lento e espressivo molto	[03.30]
12	II. Poco meno mosso, molto espressivo	[02.35]
13	III. Sempre molto espressivo e con anima	[03.14]
14	IV. Non meno mosso	[01.37]

Total timings **57.13**

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA
MARTYN BRABBINS, conductor

Composers need their supporters! A recording of three of my most substantial orchestral pieces would have been barely thinkable without the committed backing, joyous encouragement and dogged support, moral and material, of Laurence Modiano. Of the three works presented here, the newest and most ambitious in scale, **Vale, a pastoral symphony**, was commissioned by Laurence especially for this project and is dedicated to him with heartfelt gratitude.

Tristan – still is the earliest of these pieces and is heard on this recording for the first time since a successful premiere by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Donald Runnicles in London in 2003. I've made some changes; tightening up pacing and orchestration. Though in every other respect the piece remains as it was. It was a special joy to revisit it for this recording.

Pluen (feather) (2018) revived my interest in the orchestra after a pause since **Tristan – still**. It too was commissioned by Laurence Modiano who suggested a short orchestral work that would mark the seventieth birthday of Prince Charles, then President of the Royal College of Music where, at the time, I was Head of Composition. It seemed right that it should be based on a Welsh folk song, and have a Welsh title; (the Welsh word for feather; pronounced 'plee-un') it was after all celebrating a Prince of Wales, the country of my birth and upbringing.

The composition of **Pluen** set something ringing inside me – a conscious realisation of something I had always intuitively done; that apparently simple lyrical ideas can be reimagined in terms of the cultural 'now': That we can be ambitious for a music that can both resonate with tradition and speak directly to current experience. **Vale, a pastoral symphony** composed in 2022-23 has been a step along that road. There's so much further to go.

The works on this recording span two decades in the creative life of William Mival – a period of creative consolidation and renewal, informed by his work training and inspiring a new generation of composers as Head of Composition at the Royal College of Music in London. Born in Rhyl, North Wales, Mival is fascinated by the possibilities of the modern symphony orchestra and unafraid to engage with tradition in its deepest sense.

Indeed, the earliest piece here, **Tristan - still**, grapples directly with the mightiest of Romanticism's sacred monsters, Richard Wagner himself. It was a commission from the BBC, originally intended as a counterpart to a concert performance of Act Three of *Tristan und Isolde* by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Donald Runnicles. As with a previous BBC commission – Howard Skempton's *Lento* (1990) – Mival was asked to use the same instrumentation as Wagner, and in fact he added only one additional instrument, a bass drum. For the première, at the Barbican in London on 19 February 2003, Mival supplied his own programme note:

The myths that have grown up around the life and music of Richard Wagner are almost as fantastic as the reality. Especially intriguing to me is the so-called Starnberg Quartet – a string quartet Wagner was reputed to have composed as he embarked on his relationship with Cosima von Bülow just months before the first performances of Tristan und Isolde in Munich in 1865.

Eminent scholars have assured us that this piece was never written and never could have been. But if it is possible for something that never was to have a ghost then the spirit of Wagner's non-existent string quartet haunts my orchestral work. A single slow movement lasting twenty minutes is built out of a few tiny splinters of 'echt' Wagner tweezered out of the love duet from the second act of Tristan und Isolde. There's no intention of homage to the original. A faint echo of solo strings evokes the quartet which repeatedly melts into a meandering dreamscape of romantic half-memories before a climactic drowning as the still, cold waters of Lake Starnberg flood the life out of Wagner's patron and obsessive fan, Bavaria's King Ludwig.

For a composer with Mival's individuality, there could be no question of a simple surrender to Wagner, and the language and musical material in *Tristan - still* is unmistakably his own,

though the challenge initially prompted what Mival describes as a creative "crisis". The idea of the (probably fictitious) *Starnberg Quartet* provided only part of the solution. "As a student I'd come across a very beautiful piece by Bernd Alois Zimmermann called *Stille und Umkehr* – 'Stillness and Return'", Mival explains. "It's an absolute little masterpiece, focused on a moment of stasis with a constant blues riff going on underneath it. It's always impressed me, so I tried to bring these elements together. The idea of being explicitly romantic and tonal in the piece is me being deliberately provocative. After they heard it, one of my students actually said to me: 'how can you write like that?'"

Mival's audacity in writing a large-scale romantic orchestral score in 2003 would trigger another creative crisis. "The audience loved it" he recalls, " – it went down incredibly well in the hall, and it was nominated for a British Composer Award. But it was either too much, or too little for some I think – the words 'time travel' were used on several occasions. I was taken aback. A lot of things dried up for me after that. So I concentrated on my teaching, taking virtually a ten-year break from composition. The piece that got me going again was *Correntandemente*, an ensemble piece, in 2015, and then **Pluen** came along".

Pluen, in Welsh, means "feather"; a reference to the three heraldic feathers of the Prince of Wales's coat of arms. The commission came from the Laurence Modiano Charitable Trust, in celebration of the 70th birthday of the then-Prince; famously a music-lover and now, of course, King Charles III. It was premiered by the Royal College of Music Philharmonic Orchestra on 10 January 2019, with Martyn Brabbins conducting. Again, Mival provided a brief official programme note:

It is a meditation on a Welsh folk song, found in an arrangement for choir by Gustav Holst; Y Glomen, "The Dove". Barely recognisable fragments of the original melody are woven into three extended variations followed by a conclusion. The durations of each variation deriving from the relative proportions of the three feathers in the emblematic heraldic badge of The Prince of Wales.

"I'd originally met Laurence Modiano at a fundraiser for the RCM; I sent him a bootleg recording of *Tristan - still* and he immediately commissioned this little piece. I thought - let's write a folk song, basically, and see where I can go with it. I've always had a huge interest in

Mahler, as you can probably hear in places – I’m fascinated by the way that Mahler takes simple ideas and then moulds them into something much more complex. So I had a go at that with *Pluen*, but at the same time, I wanted to make something direct. Aaron Copland said that as a composer you need to have a language in common with the people you’re writing for, so directness has always been a part of what I do”.

And so too – perhaps inevitably, given the subject matter, and musical material of *Pluen* – has Welshness. During his youth in Rhyl, Mival was surrounded by music-making at both grass-roots and European levels; he played the bassoon in the Clwyd and the North Wales Youth Orchestras and attended premieres by the pre-eminent Welsh composer of the day, William Mathias (1934-1992), at the nearby St Asaph Festival. But his outlook was international. His student-composer contemporaries in London, as he points out, included “Mark-Anthony Turnage, Simon Holt, George Benjamin – all doing very, very different things. I certainly threw myself into modernism as a student with a great deal of gusto. Tippett, Boulez, Messiaen all played a huge role in forming my voice at that time”. He went on to study in Cologne with York Höller, a disciple of Stockhausen.

And yet, “I do feel a strong sense of being Welsh - even though very much Anglo-Welsh”. Mival’s brief programme note for his “Pastoral Symphony” **Vale** (2023) alludes to the landscape of his youth, quoting from two sources – an official geological survey, and the poet WH Auden:

The Vale of Clwyd is an area of outstanding natural beauty entirely within the Welsh county of Denbighshire. It is fertile land, drained by the river Clwyd which reaches the sea at Rhyl.

“The oldest rocks in the area are Carboniferous Limestones which outcrop at the southern end of the Vale near Graigfechan and Pwll Glas. They also occur as faulted blocks on the western side...and as smaller slivers on the eastern side at Llanbedr Dyffryn Clwyd, Llangwyfan, Bodfari and Tremerechion”

*“If it form the one landscape that we the inconstant ones
Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly
Because it dissolves in water.” - W H Auden (from In Praise of Limestone).*

It’s not much to go on; especially in the face of music of such generosity and sweep. “There are three *Pastoral* symphonies that I know”, says Mival. “Obviously, the Beethoven; then there’s Vaughan Williams and more recently Brett Dean. Plus, of course, Handel: there’s a little *Pastoral Symphony* in *Messiah*.” These composers famously resisted direct programmatic interpretations, and Mival is no different.

“There is nothing in the piece that directly refers to the Vale of Clwyd”, he says. “In fact, it’s far more German Romantic-centred in many places. Firstly, it is symphonic: this was something I wanted to attempt for myself. I’d heard an especially moving performance of Vaughan Williams’s Fifth Symphony, which I think is an absolute masterpiece, and I wondered whether that language could somehow be revisited – the directness and apparent simplicity of it, and a quality that is unmistakably British. There’s always been part of me that likes musical structures where you feel completely involved; where the music develops and grows, where you follow it every step of the way from the first note to the last”.

“It starts in E flat major; it even has a key signature at the beginning! That was deliberate; me being provocative again. Certainly the symphonies of Beethoven were playing on my mind - the *Eroica* as well as the *Pastoral* - and elements of Sibelius; there are also references to Brahms. But I can’t write music without filling it with all sorts of private references which I don’t intend to be recognised.” A winter trip to visit his dying father back in Rhyl; the sight of the snow-covered Vale glowing in the sun as his car crested the Clwydian mountains on the final stretch – Mival admits that some of these emotions could have found their way into his symphony, though not in the ways that we might assume.

“You can’t write music without referring now and then to something else”, Mival observes, and when he heads the first section of *Vale* with the marking *Senza ironia* – “without irony” – it’s as much a reflection on the climate in which a contemporary composer is compelled to work than anything in this expansive, heartfelt and intensely beautiful work. This, in short, is music that means what it says.

Richard Bratby (2025)

WILLIAM MIVAL is a composer, broadcaster, writer and teacher. From 2004 until 2022 he was Head of Composition at the Royal College of Music in London where he grew a diverse, energetic and world-leading faculty which attracted and nurtured an exceptional array of today's most gifted emerging composers.

Born in Rhyl, in North Wales, William Mival was a student of Anthony Milner, Robert Saxton and, in Cologne, of York Höller. He has written works for, amongst others, Ensemble Gemini, the Belcea String Quartet, The BBC Symphony Orchestra, The Welsh Chamber Orchestra, the virginalist Sophie Yates, the pianist Andrew Ball, the baritone Jeremy Huw Williams and the Choirs of Salisbury Cathedral. He has taught world-wide and has given lectures and classes in, amongst others, Berlin, Jerusalem, Shanghai and Singapore.



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William Mival's writings include a survey of the performance history of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* for the Cambridge History of Musical Performance (published in 2012). As a broadcaster he has been a regularly heard on BBC Radio, in particular on Radio Three's *Record Review* and is a frequent contributor to the 'Building a Library' segment of the programme where his meticulous exploration of some of the most frequently performed and recorded works in the catalogue, from Beethoven to Mahler and from Rachmaninov to Strauss have won praise from listeners and continue to be available on podcast. He has also made appearances on television introducing performances from the BBC Proms and also discussing the concept of musical 'resonance' on BBC Television's *The Culture Show* with sculptor Conrad Shawcross.

Mival's *On the Ringstreet* was written for the BBC Symphony Orchestra's Land Rover sponsored Sound Discovery Programme in 1996 and first performed by the orchestra conducted by Pascal Rophé. His *Quartet RBG*, was premiered at City Recital Hall, Sydney, by the Belcea String Quartet as part of the Michael Berkeley curated chamber music series at the Sydney Festival in January 2002 and repeated the following week at the Wigmore Hall in London during a BBC Lunchtime concert.

His orchestral work *Tristan-still* which was commissioned by BBC Radio Three and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, was first performed at the Barbican Concert Hall in February 2003 conducted by Donald Runnicles and broadcast live. *Tristan-still* was also that same year shortlisted in the orchestral category of the inaugural British Composers Awards. '*And Singing Say and Saying Sing*' – *The Private Devotions for the Hours of Prayer of John Cosin* received its first performances in Salisbury and London in 2012 by the Choirs of Salisbury Cathedral led by their Director of Music, David Halls.

Mival's *Correntandemente (Runningly – ish)* for large ensemble which was written for the RCM New Perspectives Ensemble and a concert celebrating the work of RCM composers led by London Sinfonietta clarinetist Timothy Lines, was also selected for performance at the Beijing Modern Music Festival as part of the ISCM World Music Days, having been nominated by the Wales section of the ISCM. It was performed in Beijing in May 2018 as part of the Beijing New Music Festival: The Tianjin Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Li Yang. His orchestral work *Pluen (feather)* was written to a commission by the Laurence Modiano Charitable Trust. The world premiere was given in January 2019 by the RCM Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Martyn Brabbins. The Chinese premiere followed in November 2019 with the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Zhang Liang and the UK professional premiere in May 2022 by the Philharmonia Orchestra. A substantial new work for the Philharmonia Orchestra, *Vale - a pastoral symphony* was completed in August 2023 and was supported both by the Laurence Modiano Charitable Trust and the Composers Fund of the Performing Rights Society Foundation.

Founded in 1945, the **PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA** is one of the world's great orchestras. Finnish conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali took up the baton as Principal Conductor in 2021, and Marin Alsop joined him as Principal Guest Conductor in 2023. They follow in illustrious footsteps: Herbert von Karajan, Otto Klemperer, Ricardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Christoph von Dohnányi, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Esa-Pekka Salonen.

The Orchestra is made up of 80 outstanding musicians. It has premiered works by Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Errollyn Wallen, Laufey and many others, and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists.

Resident at the Southbank Centre in the heart of London, the Philharmonia also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, at Garsington Opera and at the Three Choirs Festival. In each of these residencies, the Orchestra is deeply embedded in the community, empowering people to engage with and participate in orchestral music. The Orchestra has a global audience – it tours extensively throughout Europe and has performed in China, Colombia, Japan, Mauritius and the USA.

The Philharmonia is known for embracing innovative technology. The Orchestra's recordings include benchmark LPs, more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks and streamed performances. Its recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and its immersive installations and virtual reality (VR) experiences have introduced many thousands of people to orchestral music.

The Philharmonia is committed to nurturing and developing the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.

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Andrew Sutton
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TRUMPET

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Thomas Nielsen
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Ruby Orłowska
Chris Evans

TROMBONE

Dudley Bright
Rory Cartmell
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BASS TROMBONE

Andy Wood

TUBA

Ben Thomson

TIMPANI

Bill Lockhart
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PERCUSSION

Sam Walton
Barnaby Archer

HARP

Sally Pryce
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MARTYN BRABBINS was recently appointed Chief Conductor of the Malmo Symphony and of the Symphony Orchestra of India, both starting in the 2025/26 season.

He guests with top international orchestras such as the Royal Concertgebouw, San Francisco Symphony, DSO Berlin and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony, as well as the Philharmonia, BBC Symphony and most of the other leading UK orchestras. He is a popular figure at the BBC Proms, which in 2019 commissioned 14 living composers to write a birthday tribute to him, released in 2024 on the BIS label. Known for his advocacy of British composers, he has conducted hundreds of world premieres across the globe. He has recorded nearly 150 CDs to date, including prize-winning discs of operas by Korngold, Birtwistle and Harvey. In 2023 he received the RPS Conductor Award for his “colossal” contribution to UK musical life.

He was Associate Principal Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra 1994-2005, Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Flemish Philharmonic 2009-2015, Chief Conductor of the Nagoya Philharmonic 2012-2016, Artistic Director of the Cheltenham International Festival of Music 2005-2007, and Music Director of the English National Opera 2016-2023. He is Prince Consort Professor of Conducting at the Royal College of Music, Visiting Professor at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire and Artistic Advisor to the Huddersfield Choral Society.

His discography ranges from Romantic to contemporary repertoire, with over 60 recordings for Hyperion Records alone, notably of Elgar, Walton and Tippett. He has received three Gramophone Awards, for Birtwistle’s *Mask of Orpheus* with the BBC Symphony (NMC), Pickard chamber works with the Nash Ensemble (BIS) and (in 2023) shared the Concerto Award with viola soloist Tim Ridout for Elgar and Bloch with the BBC Symphony (Harmonia Mundi).

Brabbins studied composition in London and conducting with Ilya Musin in Leningrad, subsequently winning first prize at the 1988 Leeds Conductors’ Competition which launched his international career.



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