

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Winter Words Op. 52 (1953)

Thomas Hardy

At day-close in November

The ten hours' light is abating,
And a late bird wings across,
Where the pines, like waltzers waiting,
Give their black heads a toss.

Beech leaves, that yellow the noontime,
Float past like specks in the eye;
I set every tree in my June time,
And now they obscure the sky.

And the children who ramble through here
Conceive that there never has been
A time when no tall trees grew here,
That none will in time be seen.

Midnight on the Great Western

In the third-class seat sat the journeying boy,
And the roof-lamp's oily flame
Played down on his listless form and face,
Bewrapt past knowing to what he was going,
Or whence he came.

In the band of his hat the journeying boy
Had a ticket stuck; and a string
Around his neck bore the key of his box,
That twinkled gleams of the lamp's sad beams
Like a living thing.

What past can be yours, O journeying boy
Towards a world unknown,
Who calmly, as if incurious quite
On all at stake, can undertake
This plunge alone?

Knows your soul a sphere, O journeying boy,
Our rude realms far above,
Whence with spacious vision you mark and mete
This region of sin that you find you in,
But are not of?

Wagtail and baby

A baby watched a ford, whereto
A wagtail came for drinking;
A blaring bull went wading through,
The wagtail showed no shrinking.

A stallion splashed his way across,
The birdie nearly sinking;
He gave his plumes a twitch and toss,
And held his own unblinking.

Next saw the baby round the spot
A mongrel slowly slinking;
The wagtail gazed, but faltered not

In dip and sip and prinking.

A perfect gentleman then neared;
The wagtail, in a winking,
With terror rose and disappeared;
The baby fell a thinking.

The little old table

Creak, little wood thing, creak,
When I touch you with elbow or knee;
That is the way you speak
Of one who gave you to me!

You, little table, she brought –
Brought me with her own hand,
As she looked at me with a thought
That I did not understand.

Whoever owns it anon,
And hears it, will never know
What a history hangs upon
This creak from long ago.

The Choirmaster's Burial

He often would ask us
That, when he died,
After playing so many
To their last rest,
If out of us any
Should here abide,
And it would not task us,
We would with our lutes
Play over him
By his grave brim
The psalm he liked best –
The one whose sense suits –
'Mount Ephraim' –
And perhaps we should seem
To him, in Death's dream,
Like the seraphim.

As soon as I knew
That his spirit was gone
I thought this his due,
And spoke thereupon.
'I think', said the vicar,
'A read service quicker
Than viols out of doors
In these frosts and hoars.
That old fashioned way

Requires a fine day,
And it seems to me
It had better not be.'

Hence, that afternoon,
Though never knew he
That his wish could not be,
To get through it faster
They buried the master
Without any tune.

But 'twas said that, when
At the dead of next night
The vicar looked out,
There struck on his ken
Thronged roundabout,
Where the frost was gray
The headstoned grass,
A band all in white
Like saints in church glass,
Singing and playing
The ancient stave
By the choirmaster's grave.

Such the tenor man told
When he had grown old.

Proud songsters

The thrushes sing as the sun is going,
And the finches whistle in ones and pairs,
And as it gets dark loud nightingales in bushes
Pipe, as they can when April wears,
As if all Time were theirs.

These are brand new birds of twelve months' growing,
Which a year ago, or less than twain,
No finches were, nor nightingales, nor thrushes,

But only particles of grain,
And earth, and air, and rain.

At the railway station, Upway

'There is not much that I can do,
For I've no money that's quite my own!'
Spoke up the pitying child –
A little boy with a violin
At the station before the train came in.
'But I can play my fiddle to you,
And a nice one 'tis, and good in tone!'

The man in the handcuffs smiled;
The constable looked, and he smiled, too,
As the fiddle began to twang;
And the man in the handcuffs suddenly sang
With grimful glee:
'This life so free
Is the thing for me!'

And the constable smiled, and said no word,
As if unconscious of what he heard;
And so they went on till the train came in –
The convict, and boy with the violin.

Before life and after

A time there was – as one may guess
And as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell –
Before the birth of consciousness,
When all went well.

None suffered sickness, love, or loss,
None knew regret, starved hope, or heart-burnings;
None cared whatever crash or cross
Brought wrack to things.

If something ceased, no tongue bewailed,
If something winced and waned, no heart was wrung;
If brightness dimmed, and dark prevailed,
No sense was stung.

But the disease of feeling germed,
And primal rightness took the tinct of wrong;
Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed
How long, how long?

Jonathan Dove (b.1959)

Out of Winter (2003)

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Song I

Seconds slipping into sand,
The gale heaves through empty trees.
The seat is still half occupied,
How many days has the sun been blind?

Little time to understand,
Perhaps no more new leaves,
The seat's white-spored with fungus,
Grey beard's near to painful knees.

The late linnet shaves her song,
Then gives best to the darkness.
The silver moon's eclipsed by snow.
Clouds, steamy, roll on and go.

Soon no trees, no gale, no time nor seat.
No linnet days, no clouds nor sun.
No breath, no voice, nor blood in veins,
No start, no go, no care, nor fear.

Song II

Sitting alone on my seat in the train
I watch the country pass.
The birds, long gone still fleck the sun.
The furrow remains, the fish now dark
Sucking the stones deep down.
'How are you?' she asks,
I say 'Fine.'
Her mind is sharp, her body divine.
We leave the train, marry, do what people do.
Now she is bones all chipped and traced,
And of her I little knew.
The train goes on.
Where am I going?
From where did I come?

Song III

Eternity is long enough just for a laugh.
Time drops dead when you laugh.
No place for epitaph or draw a graph
To write a paragraph or drink a carafe,
To touch a calf, to ride a giraffe.
To read the Telegraph or consort with riff-raff,
To be a polymath or even be photographed.
With laughter there is no hereafter.

Song IV

From that moment the vicar declined.
He'd seen a vision; it wasn't for him.
His turkey-cock trot became a stoop,
He was no longer for the heavenly coop.
Those angels, how they sang, but not for him,
Crooning 'Ephraim, Ephraim,' again and again
In organum, plainsong, polyphonous quatrains,
'Ephraim, Ephraim, Ephraim!'
But not for him, but not for him.
He'd never had a talent for God, and they knew,
Nor for the spirit nor kindness, and they knew.
For LOVE, no idea above the celluloid collar.
In his soul there was nothing but cholera, and they knew.
He thought frost was frost and dusk was dusk
No idea of the numinous, the Great God in the dust.
When he died, they buried his husk.
No cherubim nor seraphim turned up for the task.

Song V

Because I will not follow you
You follow me.
I hear your pads from close and near.
Seeking hide in needled forests
Into which no light may pierce
And in blue under-water caves
You still blind-stalk this pitiful prey.
Crouching in the runnels of your cool grey brain,
Even here you find me.
Kill me, but do not pity me.
Whether infinite negation or starry eternity
I do not see you.

Song VI

And yet how Zadok and the Higher Ridge combine.
The car drives on and we do not wipe our eyes
And those other eyes in which we are reflected
And those other souls by whom we feel neglected.
How blessed may we be in such epiphany,
When we can see, when we can truly see?

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Myrthen Op. 25 (1840)

Translation by Richard Stokes from The Book of Lieder published by Faber & Faber, with thanks to George Bird, co-author of The Fischer-Dieskau Book of Lieder published by Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Zwei Venetianische Lieder I

Thomas Moore, translated by Ferdinand Freiligrath

Leis' rudern hier, mein Gondolier!
die Flut vom Ruder sprüh'n
So leise lass, dass sie uns nur
vernimmt, zu der wir zieh'n!
O könnte, wie er schauen kann,
der Himmel reden – traun,
Er spräche Vieles wohl von dem,
was Nachts die Sterne schau'n!

Nun rasten hier, mein Gondolier!
Ins Boot die Ruder! sacht!
Auf zum Balkone schwing' ich
mich, doch du hältst unten Wacht.
O, wollten halb so eifrig nur
dem Himmel wir uns weih'n,
Als schöner Weiber Diensten –
traun, wir könnten Engel sein!

Zwei Venetianische Lieder II

Thomas Moore, translated by Ferdinand Freiligrath

Wenn durch die Piazzetta
Die Abendluft weht,

Venetian air I

Row gently here, my gondolier,
ply the water gently,
so that only she, to whom we
glide, shall hear us coming!
Oh, if only heaven could speak
as it can see,
it would tell much about what
the stars discern at night!

Now stay here, my gondolier,
gently into the boat with your oar!
While I climb the balcony,
you keep watch beneath.
Oh, if we devoted ourselves
to heaven half as eagerly
as we seek favours of fair
women, we could be angels!

Venetian air II

When through the Piazzetta
the night air drifts,

Dann weisst du, Ninetta,
Wer wartend hier steht.
Du weisst, wer trotz Schleier
Und Maske dich kennt,
Wie Amor die Venus
Am Nachtfirmament.

Ein Schifferkleid trag' ich
Zur selbigen Zeit,
Und zitternd dir sag' ich:
Das Boot liegt bereit!
O, komm' jetzt, wo Lunen
Noch Wolken umzieh'n,
Lass durch die Lagunen,
Mein Leben, uns flieh'n!

then you know, Ninetta,
who's waiting here.
You know who, despite your veil
and mask, recognises you,
as Amor knows Venus
in the night sky.

At that very hour
I'll come dressed as a gondolier,
and trembling, tell you:
the boat lies ready!
O come now, while the moon
is still covered in clouds,
let us flee, my love,
across the lagoons!

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

On Wenlock Edge (1908-9)

Alfred Edward Housman

Bredon Hill

In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

The bells would ring to call her
In valleys miles away;
"Come all to church, good people;
Good people come and pray."
But here my love would stay.

And I would turn and answer
Among the springing thyme,
"Oh, peal upon our wedding,
And we will hear the chime,
And come to church in time."

But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.

They tolled the one bell only,
Groom there was none to see,
The mourners followed after,
And so to church went she,
And would not wait for me.

The bells they sound on Bredon,
And still the steeples hum,
"Come all to church, good people."—
O noisy bells, be dumb;
I hear you, I will come.

Henri Duparc (1848-1933)

Sérénade florentine (?1880-81) Florentine serenade

Jean Lahor

Étoile, dont la beauté luit
Comme un diamant dans la nuit,
Regarde vers ma bien-aimée,
Dont la paupière s'est fermée,
Et fais descendre sur ses yeux
La bénédiction des cieux.

O star whose beauty shines
like a diamond in the night,
look down on my beloved
whose eyelids now are closed,
and let the blessing of heaven
descend upon her eyes.

Elle s'endort: par la fenêtre
En sa chambre heureuse pénétre;
Sur sa blancheur, comme un baiser,
Viens jusqu'à l'aube te poser,
Et que sa pensée alors rêve
D'un astre d'amour que se lève.

She falls asleep: through the window
enter her happy room;
alight on her whiteness like a kiss
and linger there till dawn,
and let her thoughts then dream
of a star of love ascending.

*Translation by Richard Stokes from A
French Song Companion
(Johnson/Stokes) published by OUP*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Sur l'herbe (1907)

Paul Verlaine

L'abbé divague. – Et toi, marquis,
Tu mets de travers ta perruque.
– Ce vieux vin de Chypre est
exquis
Moins, Camargo, que votre
nuque.

The abbot rambles on. – 'And you, Marquis,
you've got your wig on all askew.'
'This old Cyprus wine's
exquisite,
but less so, Camargo, than the
nape of your neck.'

– Ma flamme ... – Do, mi, sol, la, si.
L'abbé, ta noirceur se
dévoile!
– Que je meure, Mesdames, si
Je ne vous décroche une étoile!

'My love ...' – 'Do, mi, so, la, ti.
Abbot, you're baring your base
soul!
'May I die, ladies, if
I don't detach a spangle from your hair!'

– Je voudrais être petit chien!
– Embrassons nos bergères l'une
Après l'autre. – Messieurs, eh bien?
– Do, mi, sol. – Hé! bonsoir, la Lune!

'I'd like to be a little dog!'
'Let's kiss our shepherdesses,
one by one.' 'Well, gentlemen?'
'Do, mi, sol.' 'Hey! Good evening, Moon!'

*Translation by Richard Stokes from A
French Song Companion
(Johnson/Stokes) published by OUP*

John Dankworth (1927-2010)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (1964)

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd.

Mervyn Horder (1910-1998)

Under the Greenwood tree (1977)

William Shakespeare, As you like it II:5

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.

Who doth ambition shun,
And loves to live i' the sun,
Seeking the food he eats,
And pleas'd with what he gets,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.

If it do come to pass
That any man turn ass,
Leaving his wealth and ease,
A stubborn will to please,
Ducdame, ducdame, ducdame:
Here shall he see
Gross fools as he,
And if he will come to me.
Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me.

Stephen Sondheim (b.1930)

The Girls of Summer (1956)

Stephen Sondheim

The girls of summer get burned...