

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 18 September 2021 1.00pm

An Italian Songbook

Roderick Williams baritone

Rowan Pierce soprano

Kathryn Rudge mezzo-soprano

James Way tenor

Robert Murray tenor

Christopher Glynn piano

Jeremy Sams director

Louise Shephard director

Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

Italienisches Liederbuch (1890-6)

in a new English translation created and directed by **Jeremy Sams** and **Christopher Glynn**

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For the final masterpiece, **Hugo Wolf** looked south – to Italy – and produced a collection of tiny jewel-like songs that paint a kaleidoscopic portrait of village life. He thought these 46 glistening miniatures were the ‘most original and artistically perfect’ of all his works – and history has tended to agree.

He found the words in a compilation of anonymous Italian folk verse, collected and translated into German by Paul Heyse. The music was composed in two manic-creative bursts of activity, with a four-year hiatus between them (in which Wolf laboured over his opera *Der Corregidor*). The songs that resulted are a fascinating synthesis of two traditions. Or, to put it Wolf’s way, ‘Their hearts beat in German but the sun shines on them in Italian’.

The characters are familiar from any small community (or soap opera or sit-com). You’ve met them all before. They fall in and out of love, with squabbles and petty jealousies heard alongside serenades and love songs of great beauty. And above all, there is humour – because Wolf knows that the best way to break your heart is to make you smile first.

Taking inspiration from the world of *Così fan tutte*, our version recreates this vibrant village community with four singers – friends and rivals in love and life – presided over by a Don Alfonso-like figure who has ‘seen it all’ but maybe still has much to learn...

Wolf’s genius is to create characters that are astonishingly precise, vivid and detailed, but also somehow universal. Little things – the *Italian Songbook* teaches us – mean a lot. And Wolf’s tiny scenes of village life paint a bigger picture – a whole world of human frailty, passion and pain.

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Wolf’s generic naming of his *Italienisches Liederbuch* belies the inherent drama in these pieces – and this brings us to tonight’s performance: a powerful reworking of Wolf’s running order, a cast of five, and a dazzling English-language rendering of the texts to transport us straight into the heart of the village community.

In 2015, pianist Christopher Glynn and translator Jeremy Sams began a collaborative project to produce and perform Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin*, *Winterreise* and *Schwanengesang* in English. The result was a brilliantly successful sequence of concerts and recordings, which newly captured the energy and immediacy of the poetry. In discussions of ‘what next?’, Wolf’s name soon came up. And the *Italienisches Liederbuch* had an additional significance for Jeremy. ‘This was pretty much the first music I knew,’ he explains. His father, Eric Sams, was an authority on German song and authored the first English-language book on Wolf’s songs. ‘It seemed quite natural (at the time, not now!) that I should learn German, play the piano, and explore this whole repertoire with him as my guide. Later on, when I found my first girlfriend, a soprano, these songs seemed to perfectly describe every part of being in a relationship. She sang them, I played them. We lived them!’

And this, crucially, led to the realisation that the songs can, and indeed should, ‘be about real people.’ Jeremy and his co-director Louise Shephard ‘set about asking theatre questions of this concert piece... what sort of person would actually *say* that? Whereabouts in a relationship would that row happen, and where would it lead?’. Unsurprisingly, this led to the question of performing order for the set. If the idea was now to tell a story, would it make sense to present the songs in their printed sequence?

Christopher Glynn points out that a ‘straight’ rendering of this collection is far from the norm. ‘Wolf’s order does work brilliantly, but performers have never been able to resist shaking the kaleidoscope, and we are no exception. There’s lots of potential for he-said she-said exchanges and for different relationships between the characters, and it seems in the spirit of the work to explore them.’

An Italian Songbook, then, recasts Wolf’s two paperbound volumes into three dramatic sections: ‘Tell me the truth about love’, ‘To the distant beloved’, and ‘War and peace’. After the opening section (*Aspects of Love*, as it were), the second part ‘is a little playlet about an Italian Serenade, before we focus on the couples. They finally soar heavenwards (God and the afterlife are everywhere in this piece) with our baritone singleton looking on, apart.’

That’s not to say, however, that the baritone doesn’t have a chance to declare affection. He sings a late-night message of love in ‘I hate to wake you up’ (No. 5), although we never meet the object of his affection. Elsewhere, our protagonists seek out lovers with very specific features – ‘I like a man who likes to dress in green’ (No. 9), for instance... or the girl on the lookout for a violinist as her beau (No. 6, ‘I know I’m strange ...’). We overhear fierce arguments and gentle reconciliations too – not to mention a rather disastrous attempt for a young lad to cook for his girlfriend (No. 11, ‘My darling asked me round for lunch on Sunday’).

Of course, Wolf is a composer known for the exceptional care that he took in binding together words and music, and one might question the wisdom of tampering with this intricate process. ‘It’s a big step to take, I agree,’ says Christopher, ‘and impossible to even contemplate without a translator of great brilliance. Jeremy’s brilliance was never in doubt, but what also comes through in every word is his deep love of this music.’ And in any case, as he rightly points out, this is a work ‘with translation in its DNA. Wolf would never have discovered these Italian folk poems, or thought to set them, if Paul Heyse had not translated them into German. It’s worth remembering that translators are culture’s great bridge builders!’

Jeremy, indeed, has aimed ‘to write a text which, had the composer set it in English, might have led to the song we’re hearing. Always, though, I’ve shown respect for the spirit of the original Italian, as well as the original German.’ And in this virtuosic balance of idioms and ideas, it is easy to see (and hear) just how much of a world can be conjured in songs of incredibly pithy brevity.

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