

Scents and sensibilities

Oxford Song, which starts this weekend, is an imaginative festival combining sound, vision and smell—in short, a feast for the senses. **Henrietta Bredin** reports



OXFORD SONG is the new title of Oxford Lieder, reflecting the annual two-week festival's ever-expanding repertoire and breaking out of the German art-song niche indicated by its previous name. Not that it has been in any way confined to niche repertoire: under the guidance of its inspirational founding director, Sholto Kynoch, it has developed steadily in scope and ambition, attracting new audiences as well as managing to keep its existing devotees happy—no mean feat.

He devises programmes and follows themes with a light touch and has an unerring instinct for making connections, teasing out surprising and unexpected links, working with exceptional musicians, both experienced and newer to the scene. The 400th anniversaries of William Byrd and William Shakespeare's First Folio, the Mendelssohn family, the tribulations of love and Picasso's *Guernica*, represent only a handful of themes.

Day of fragrance

October 14 is a day of typically eclectic, imaginative Kynochery. Dedicated to Fashion and Song, it starts with a morning concert inspired by Yves Saint Laurent and his designs for ballet, involves a tenor, a dancer and a pianist and finishes with the aptly named baritone Benjamin Appl giving a recital dubbed *Forbidden Fruit*; in between dips into the Weimar Republic, it touches on artworks by Jeanne Mammen, George Grosz and Otto Dix and, most intriguingly, offers a selection of French song under the alluring title of *Parfums et Paroles*, which comes with olfactory participation for the audience.

The latter single, short, afternoon event, on a day that offers five concerts altogether,



Left: *Allegory of Autumn* by Pieter Bruegel the Younger; vocal ensemble I Fagiolini will respond to his 'The Seasons' series on October 28.

Below left: Benjamin Appl gives a recital on *Forbidden Fruit* on October 14

serves as an insight into the planning, inspiration, care and serendipity involved in putting each and every recital together. It brings together two young singers, the soprano Freya Holliman and the baritone Neil Balfour, with a pianist, Jo Ramadan, who between them have a shared love of song and knowledge of perfume.

‘We had to keep opening the windows to clear the air or we might have passed out’

According to Miss Holliman, it all started when Mr Balfour, with whom she studied at the Royal Northern College of Music, was singing the same role—Don Alfonso—in two different productions of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* in swift succession and in two different English translations. In order not to confuse the two, he came up with the idea of assigning one fragrance to each, so that words associated with the scent of juniper and bay would never spring to his lips when he was lightly spritzed with lavender and patchouli.

By good fortune, he shortly encountered Mr Ramadan, a brilliant pianist, organist, conductor and chorus director, who happens to be passionate about perfume and hosts an occasional YouTube broadcast from the organ loft of a London City church. This is called, naturally, *Wafts from the Loft*, in which he discusses in astonishing detail and with informed fervour the comparative merits of, for example, Guerlain's *Jicky* and Houbigant's *Quelques Fleurs*.

The project eventually led to the master perfumer Christian Provenzano, and a room in Leeds last year, where, with

the help of his gift of about 20 sample bottles, the two musicians spent a day matching scents with songs. 'It was freezing cold, but we had to keep opening the windows to clear the air or I think we might have passed out,' recalls Miss Holliman. 'We got rather nerdy and conceptual about it and made notes of whatever sprang to mind with each scent: phrases like "old wooden box", "granny's boiled sweets", "tropical storm". Then we went for a long walk and discussed repertoire.'

'We decided early on that it should all be French and we each had one piece that was non-negotiable. Neil's was Poulenc's *Hôtel* and mine was Bizet's *Adieux de l'hôtesse arabe*. We eventually sent the list to Sholto, who was thrilled, but said: "What about some more modern stuff?" And that led us to a conversation with my mother, who had lived in France in her early twenties and suggested some things that represented the music of her youth: Charles Trenet's *La Mer*, Yves Montand's *Les Feuilles Mortes*.'

Phoenix rising

Adding layers to the experience of listening to music is crucial to Mr Kynoch's planning. The messages with which visitors to Oxford are repeatedly confronted are 'Keep off the grass' and 'No entry' signs at college gates. 'We use the city as widely as we can, and open up spaces you don't often get to see,' he explains.

This year, the medieval crypt of St Edmund Hall will host 'Ghostly psalmes', a performance of music from 16th-century illuminated manuscripts housed in the Bodleian Library, facsimiles of which will be on display as artworks (October 19). A new performing space in Oxford, a wonderful 1,000-seat theatre at St Edward's School, will be the venue for an ambitious Schubert project (October 21), with the soprano Juliane Banse and dancer István Simon. →



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Music

The first day of the festival (October 13) sees the pandemic-delayed premiere of *The Phoenix*, a song cycle by the Iranian composer Mahdis Golzar Kashani, in the Holywell Music Room. Supporting talks about Persian classical art, poetry and music also include a guide to relevant highlights in the Ashmolean Museum collection. Another link to the Ashmolean is the day of music connected to the museum's 'Colour Revolution' exhibition (October 20), devoted to the legacy of the Pre-Raphaelites, with a recent work by Deborah Pritchard. This was composed in response to Holman Hunt's painting *The Light of the World*, performed in Keble College Chapel by the resident choir.

Malcolm Martineau will be at the piano accompanying the mezzo Catriona Morison, who swept the board at the Cardiff Singer of the World competition in 2017 (October 23). Songs follow a trail from Vienna to London, including the cycle by Richard Strauss that he wrote for medium voice rather than, as



István Simon (above) and soprano Juliane Banse will perform Schubert on October 21



Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* is the inspiration for a work by Deborah Pritchard

he usually did, with his wife Pauline's high soprano in mind. Mr Martineau has also devised a programme with the Swedish soprano Miah Persson of Scandinavian songs that reflect the themes of Robert Schumann's *Frauenliebe und leben (A Woman's Love and Life)* (October 18).

International visitors

Artists come from all over the world—song duos from Serbia and Italy, China and Catalunya, South Africa and Ukraine. Members of the young artists' programme get to perform and to attend all the concerts, fully subsidised. They alternate with international students, 18 of whom will be in Oxford this year, with access to a generous pot for bursaries. There are masterclasses and composition workshops, introductory talks and Song Club, led by the warmly erudite Richard Wigmore. It's described as the song world's equivalent of a book group, which anyone can join.

Celebrating Tom Phillips

That extraordinary polymath Tom Phillips (1937–2022), who was Slade Professor of Fine Art, is celebrated with a day of events around St Catherine's College, where three vast tapestries that he designed will be on display

(October 17). His own music—music that inspired his artwork and music that he loved, played and sang himself—is featured throughout events involving friends, including the actor Samuel West and pianist Joanna MacGregor, Bodley librarian Richard Ovenden, director and designer Netia Jones and Phillips's wife, the writer and music critic Fiona Maddocks.

Double concert

Mr Kynoch chose Caspar David Friedrich's *Winter Landscape*, hanging in the National Gallery, as his favourite painting (COUNTRY LIFE, *September 27*) and, on the last night of the festival (October 28), he plays a programme of Schubert songs inspired by Friedrich's work, with the tenor Toby Spence and soprano Isabelle Peters in the Holywell Music Room.

This runs concurrently with a concert in the University Church by the vocal ensemble I Fagiolini, responding to Pieter Brueghel the Younger's paintings of the seasons. The audience will be divided, swapping places during the interval: a walkabout, sensurround experience that will conclude joyously with celebratory drinks. 🍷

The Oxford International Song Festival runs from October 13–28 (www.oxfordsong.org)

