

Total performance time: approximately 110 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet: Gavin Bryars at 80

Gavin Bryars Ensemble:

Gavin Bryars double bass / piano

Dave Smith piano

James Woodrow guitar

Morgan Goff viola

Nick Cooper, Audrey Riley, Ziella Bryars,

Orlanda Bryars cello

Gavin Bryars (b.1943)

The Flower of Friendship (2009) 12'

Lauda (con sordino) (2002) 12'

Ramble on Cortona (2010) 12'

Added Time (2018) 6'

INTERVAL

The North Shore (1993) 12'

Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet (1971) 25'

Epilogue from Wonderlawn (1994) 6'

The Flower of Friendship – The Music of Gavin Bryars and the Gavin Bryars Ensemble

The title of one piece in the programme tonight might well sum up the ethos that has been central to the Gavin Bryars Ensemble since the group gave its first concerts almost 40 years ago. Since these early performances the Ensemble has been at the centre of the Bryars' thought and compositional output. He may well have considerably expanded his compositional palette to write other chamber music, music for the stage – both opera and dance – orchestral works, and a good deal of music for both solo voice and some of the world's best choral ensembles, but he has always come back to his own ensemble, both as a composer and performer. The instrumentation of the Ensemble expands or reduces according to circumstances, but at its core are, and have been for many years, several of the players performing this evening, who have become a sort of extended family. These in turn are often joined by Bryars' 'real family', his children, Yuri Bryars (double bass/piano), Alexandra-Maria Tchernakova (piano), Ziella Bryars (cello) and Orlanda Bryars (voice/cello). Bryars often speaks of his music being written for and about the people who play it. One of the reasons that he has been one step to the side – or, some would say, ahead – of the 'musical establishment' for all his life, is the feeling that writing for family, friends, colleagues, and people who connect with him and his work in a particular way (whether this be his own Ensemble, the Hilliard Ensemble, the Smith Quartet, the Crossing, the Latvian Radio Choir and others), is more rewarding than composing for globe-trotting soloists and conductors who merely slip his work into their schedules, rather than engage with it in any meaningful way.

The music to be heard tonight covers some 50 years of Bryars' compositional life, from the iconic *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, which has just celebrated its 50th birthday, to the *Ramble on Cortona* (2010). It illustrates the breadth of Bryars' interests and the things that inspire his work: visual art, philosophy, every conceivable dusty corner of literature, and, of course, music – jazz and improvisation, the American experimentalists and minimalists (such as Cage, Feldman and Reich), and last but not least, some rather sidelined figures that range from the usually casually dismissed composers of Victorian/Edwardian liturgical music, to Busoni, Lord Berners, Satie, and a particular hero, the Australian pianist and composer Percy Grainger. Outsiders all, figures that few musicologists seem to know where to place, and surely a reflection of Bryars' own sometimes rather precarious position amongst our own critical fraternity.

The Flower of Friendship (2009), **Lauda (con sordino)** (2002) and **Ramble on Cortona** all take as their starting point a fascination with the 'lauda', a form of vernacular Italian sacred song from the Middle Ages, something akin perhaps to an English carol, that might be sung outside churches or in public spaces. Bryars has now composed over 50 of these 'laudi' for either solo voice, or diverse

vocal/instrumental ensembles. The first two pieces were written for the very 'Bryarsian' combination of electric guitar and low strings, the second featuring a cello solo dedicated to Audrey Riley, whilst the *Ramble on Cortona* was in its original form, Bryars' first solo piano piece, itself growing out of the composer's Piano Concerto ('The Solway Canal'), both of which were written for the Dutch pianist Ralph Von Raat. A 'Ramble' is a sort of 'paraphrase' – again a Grainger inspiration, the older composer using the title for his *Ramble on Love* – a virtuoso piano work based on themes from Strauss's opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. **Added Time** (2018) focuses on the electric guitar, accompanied by low strings, and was written for another long-standing collaborator James Woodrow.

The North Shore (1993), was in the first instance a work for viola and piano, but which – as Grainger would have said – has been subsequently 'dished up' for several different ensembles. Written for an exhibition of the work of the artist James Hugonin (b.1950), whose paintings are inspired by the coast and landscape of Northern England, Bryars' piece moves us slightly further south, to St Hilda's Abbey in Whitby, North Yorkshire, a place the composer remembers from childhood holidays. The work, as is the case with many of Bryars' more picturesque and geographically inspired titles, is a response to the idea of 'the North' rather anything strictly descriptive, revelling in the dark sultry sounds of the viola, one of the composer's favourite instruments.

As an epilogue to the concert, we fittingly hear **Epilogue from Wonderlawn** (1994), which started life as the epilogue to a dance piece for the choreographer Laurie Booth. In effect, a sort of song without words, a long lyrical melodic line (such lines became a recognisable characteristic of Bryars' music as the years went on) for a solo viola, that is supported and developed by the other instruments.

Before *Epilogue ...*, comes Bryars' most performed work, **Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet**, that has without any doubt become a cult classic of the late 20th century. Performable as it is by either a handful of players, by large choral/orchestral forces, by the humblest amateurs or the most experienced professionals, it never fails to strike a chord with listeners. Even Bryars himself, who must have heard the recording of the old man's voice thousands of times, has admitted that whenever he listens to the fragment of the religious song on which the whole work is based, he always hears something new that touches him every time. Despite the composer having little or no traditional religious faith of his own, *Jesus' Blood ...* manages to transcend religious dogma and cheap sentimentality, and – like all the music of Gavin Bryars – leads us to listen in a way that only the best composers can elicit.

David Wordsworth © 2023

David Wordsworth's new book about the music of Gavin Bryars will be published by Kahn & Averill in November this year.