

**Joyful Company of Singers**

**Peter Broadbent - Conductor**

# Transitions

**Choral works by Parry, Tavener, MacMillan,  
Vaughan Williams, Casken and Bingham**

**Northumbrian folksongs arranged by  
Whittaker and Hobbs**

**Readings by  
Katrina Porteous**

**SUNDAY 5th MAY 2024 at 7pm**

**St Paul's RC Church, Alnwick, NE66 1UW**



## JOYFUL COMPANY OF SINGERS

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Friends support us both with donations and as audience members. Friends also support our Youth Fund which has provided bursaries for young conductors to work with us and be coached by our founder-director, Peter Broadbent, one of Britain's leading choral conductors, and Friends' donations have enabled us to engage our Composer-in-Association, Zoe Dixon.

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## PROGRAMME

*The springtime of the year*  
*Just as the tide was flowing*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

*St. Brendan and the Fishes* (Ian Serraillier)

Paul Reade (1943-97)

Julian Tolan (Tenor)

*The Sea Inside*  
*The Wund an' the Wetter - excerpt* Katrina Porteous  
*Off Beadnell Point*

*....fiat mihi...*  
*O Radiant Dawn*

Sir James MacMillan (b.1959)

*The Fulmar*  
*The Bottom o' the Sea* Katrina Porteous  
*The Marks t' Gan By*

*Uncertain Sea* (Katrina Porteous)

John Casken (b.1949)

## INTERVAL

*Distant Thunder* (Robert Bridges)  
*My Soul, there is a country* (Henry Vaughan)  
*Never weather-beaten sail* (Thomas Campion)  
*There is an old belief* (John Gibson Lockhart)

Judith Bingham (b.1952)

Sir Hubert Parry  
(1848-1918)

*Sunrising* (Sylvia Townsend Warner)

John Casken

*The Refuge Box - excerpt*  
*Melt - excerpt from 'Under the Ice'* Katrina Porteous

*Song for Athene* (Shakespeare)

Sir John Tavener (1944-2013)

*Sea, Sky, Stars*  
*#rhizodont* Katrina Porteous  
*The Refuge Box - excerpts*

*The Water of Tyne*  
*Bobby Shaftoe*

Trad. arr. W.G. Whittaker (1876-1944)

*Maa Bonny Lad*  
*Dance ti thy Daddy*

Trad. arr. Derek Hobbs (b.1943)

## PROGRAMME NOTES

Tonight's programme of British music moves between the sea and the land, between earth and heaven, between words and music and between England and Scotland. It features music by composers whose works we have premiered: Judith Bingham, Paul Reade, Sir John Tavener and others with whom we have worked. Sir James MacMillan conducted his *Seven last Words* at the Snape Maltings with JCS and the Britten-Pears Orchestra. MacMillan's teacher at Durham was John Casken and the latter's music features in both our concerts in Northumberland. We will be recording choral works by him in September for Metier, thanks to the sponsorship of Elaine Gould, one of our singers.

The folksong arrangements with which the programme opens were made by Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1913, a year in which he and his closest friend Gustav Holst met up with W.G. Whittaker for a two-week walking tour of the Northumbrian hills. Four of the five folksongs in this collection are related to the sea. There are many songs of love and loss on the seas, but as RVW points out in a very honest note in the score, the words and melody of *The springtime of the year* "are taken from a long ballad called 'Lovely on the water'. As the rest of the ballad is not very interesting and, moreover has very little to do with the first two verses, the editor has felt himself justified in taking these two verses only out of which to make a choral movement." In contrast, *Just as the tide was flowing* tells a more complete and unusually happy story.

A lively story of the sea dates from the sixth century Irish legend of *St. Brendan and the Fishes*, which poet and novelist Ian Serraillier, best known for his books for children, retold in his poem. The poem is based on a passage from a medieval manuscript 'Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis' which describes how the monks were sailing "in water so clear that they could see the different kinds of fish lying on the sand like herds at pasture. They lay in rings, head to tail, and when St. Brendan sang, they swam up in a great shoal around the curragh as far as the monks could see. When Mass ended the fish swam away as if fleeing." Set to music by Paul Reade for the English Chamber Choir, this soon became a regular repertoire piece for the Joyful Company, for whom Reade subsequently wrote two more sets of pieces based on old Irish poetry. The imagery of the monks trembling because of the sea monsters, and the fish frolicking in Paul's music fully catches the humour and storytelling skill of the poem.

Peter Broadbent

*The Sea Inside* is from *The Lost Music* (Bloodaxe, 1996). The first of the two fishing poems set by John Casken in *Uncertain Sea* describes Beadnell Bay and quotes the words of Beadnell fisherman Charlie Douglas (1909-95).

*The Wund an' the Wetter - excerpt* - is from *Two Countries* (Bloodaxe, 2014). Some Northumbrian names for sea creatures, gathered from Beadnell and Amble fishermen.

*Off Beadnell Point* is from *Rhizodont* (Bloodaxe, 2024). A local meditation on the role that oceans play globally (regulating climate, acting as a 'heat sink' absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere), and in our spiritual lives.

Katrina Porteous

Sir James MacMillan is perhaps the most celebrated of present-day Scottish composers, with an international reputation and a catalogue embracing most musical genres, which include many religious choral works. His music is infused with his Catholic beliefs, and some of his works were linked to radical political thinking. The two pieces we perform tonight demonstrate two sides of his choral style, both religious but technically very different.

The title *...fiat mihi...* is a reference to the Virgin Mary's words at the Annunciation – "be it done to me according to your word", and the text sung by the Altos and Tenors are the first three verses of the *Stabat Mater*, the sequence describing the emotions of the Mother of God at her son's crucifixion, whilst they are surrounded by fragments of text voiced by the Sopranos and Basses. The texture is complex: the four voices of Altos and Tenors sing in canon long melodic lines inflected with decorations which clearly have their origin in Scottish folk music, and start two beats, then one, then half a beat apart. The slow moving outside parts change from humming to singing, until in a final phrase taken from a well-known Bach chorale tune sing "your sacred head is wounded".

MacMillan, well aware that much of his choral music was beyond the reach of church choirs, has written a set of communion motets in a much more direct musical language, the best known of which is *O Radiant Dawn*, a setting of an Antiphon for December 21<sup>st</sup> which perfectly captures the meaning of the text.

PB

*The Fulmar* is from *Rhizodont* (Bloodaxe, 2024). The fulmar nests on rocky crags such as the whinstone cliffs at Dunstanburgh, Bamburgh and Holy Island castles. A relation of the albatross, it glides on stiff wings, seemingly without effort.

*The Bottom o' the Sea* is from *The Lost Music* (Bloodaxe, 1996). The second fishing poem set by John Casken in *Uncertain Sea* quotes the words of Amble fisherman Redford Armstrong (1919-2000). The first verse refers to the long-line fishing, which involved fishermen's wives and daughters baiting 1,400 hooks a day with mussels gathered from the shore. The second verse refers to Beadnell fisherman Dick Hall, who was drowned with his son William in Beadnell Bay on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1921. Verse three refers to the misguided regulations which for many years forced fishermen to throw back perfectly good fish – dead – because they were undersized or over quota. The last verse is a direct quotation.

*The Marks t' Gan By* is from *The Lost Music* (Bloodaxe, 1996). Inshore fishermen like Charlie Douglas and Redford Armstrong fished from traditional boats called 'cobles'. They knew their fishing grounds intimately and navigated by landmarks, which they handed down. Coble fishing was small-scale and sustainable, and Charlie and Redford's generation feared that, with increasing reliance on electronic technology, newer fishing methods would not be.

KP



*Uncertain Sea* is a setting of two poems by Katrina Porteous about the lives of fishermen and women on the Northumbrian coast, the difficulties they endured in their work, the precarious nature of their existence, and the decline of the industry. The first poem, *The Sea Inside*, captures the feel of the uncertain sea as it "sets free Rhythms that rock our boat and ropes And shift us restlessly." There are no fish in this place "Unsheltered, far from land", a place with Cheviot and Dunstanburgh in the distance, "our forebears' country." The wind is cold, there is a stink of seaweed and salt, and the sea, "Unknowable, unknown....rolls us round like stones."

The second poem, *The Bottom o' the Sea*, is written in the Northumbrian dialect of the North-East coast. A local character vividly describes the harsh working conditions of being a fisherman, the hours the men and women had to put in, "Wearin' oot w' women wi' mushels an' lines, lads" and how it has all come to an end. We hear of the death of "aa'd Dick Haa', wha was drooned at the trootin' nets", and of Jackie on his death bed who, in the next life will "nivvor be a fisherman, Or gi' ony thowt t' the bottom o' the sea, lad." This is a tragic but witty poem, and any smiles Katrina's lines might bring are tinged with a deep sadness.

Choosing these poems for a work for unaccompanied choir, I imagined the mass of voices as if they were the community, with individuals and groups occasionally stepping forward. Rather than setting the first poem and then the second, I interleaved the two and chose a different music for each. The melancholic mood of the first, initially with its gentle rocking motion, is contrasted with the livelier and more rhythmic music of the second which I have set as if it were an old sea-song.

*Uncertain Sea* was commissioned by the National Youth Choir of Great Britain for its premiere performance at Sage Gateshead on 30 August 2014, conducted by Ben Parry. During lockdown in 2020, Spotify created a project called 'Quarantunes' inviting composers to recommend classical works for their listeners, and *Uncertain Sea* was chosen by the American composer Eric Whitacre. The JCS and Peter Broadbent will record this work on a CD of my choral music in September 2024.

John Casken

Judith Bingham had written two choral pieces which were re-workings of well-loved works, when I approached her for a commission for a special anniversary concert. The second of these was *The Drowned Lovers*, of which we gave the first performance at the Three Choirs Festival in 2000. This was based on the harmony of Stanford's *The Blue Bird*. She told me that she would like to do a third to make a trilogy, and my suggestion of Parry's *My soul, there is a country*, the first of his set of *Songs of Farewell*, delighted her, as it was a great favourite of hers. Since the *Songs of Farewell* were written in the lead up to the First World War, she wanted a poem that had a sombre atmosphere, and settled on words by Robert Bridges, who was a friend of Parry. She added three phrases of the *Nunc dimittis* in Latin, and *Distant Thunder*, built entirely out of the harmonies of Parry's piece into which it leads was first performed at the Cadogan Hall in 2010. In this performance we follow it with two more of these fine motets, the third and fourth of the set, the latter being a setting of a poem by Sir Walter Scott's son-in-law John Gibson Lockhart.

*Sunrising* is a setting of *Early one morning*, a rare religious poem by Sylvia Townsend Warner, written in 1928 but not published until after her death. It is a charming tale of someone rising early, "in a morning mist...sorrowful" and going out alone to meet with Christ. He is known instantly, with his worn clothes and his carpenter's gear.

Between the two figures grows a winter thorn, and image highly charged with symbolism, its apparent brutality softened by drops of dew; a silent, and "More lovely, more innocent/Tree never grew." Christ is asked to give one of these dewdrops, one of these jewels, to which he replies "Of all these dewdrops....I own not one of them/My own..." The double-play on the word own is very striking and at these words "Each dewdrop shone/Enfranchised diamond:/And with sunrising/All was gone."

'Enfranchised diamond' – what an image to try to mirror in music, a setting-free, and what rich imagery as I sought to find musical expression for Townsend Warner's wonderful lines.

*Sunrising* was written as a gift to Durham Cathedral in 1993, the year of its 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary and was subsequently recorded by the Cathedral's Choir directed by James Lancelot.

JC

*The Refuge Box – excerpt* - is from *Two Countries* (Bloodaxe, 2014). The Refuge Box on the causeway between Holy Island and the mainland is intended to save stranded motorists from the tide. In the long radio-poem from which this excerpt is taken, it becomes a metaphor for the Island itself, and for wider ideas of sanctuary. These verses depict the expanse of sands between Holy Island and the mainland, and echo the 'Ooo' sounds of grey seals heard in that space.

*Melt – excerpt* – is from 'Under the Ice' in *Rhizodont* (Bloodaxe, 2024). *Under the Ice* is a collaboration with the late composer Peter Zinovieff about the science which explores the hidden worlds beneath Antarctica's miles-deep ice. This excerpt begins with radar 'echoes', similar to a fisherman's echosounder, used to depict the landscape beneath the ice. It goes on to reflect on the oceanic and atmospheric currents which regulate Earth's climate and connect us all.

KP

Sir John Tavener is often described as one of the "Holy Minimalist" composers, although his early works were influenced by composers like Ligeti and Messiaen, and the first piece to bring his name before the general musical public was a Cantata *The Whale* which was recorded by Apple Records. He was always drawn to religious and spiritual ideas, and after some time as a Roman Catholic he converted to the Orthodox faith, which dominates much of his repertoire, and led him to simpler forms of expression. Undoubtedly the performance of *Song for Athene* at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales led to a worldwide audience of millions hearing his music. Written in memory of an actress who had been a friend, setting words from *Hamlet* interspersed by a simple chant of "Alleluia", the composer asks for a performance of "great inner stillness and serenity" until the climax is marked "with resplendent joy in the Resurrection", before the final pianissimo Alleluias.

PB

*Sea, Sky, Stars* is from *Two Countries* (Bloodaxe, 2014). We return to Beadnell with this elegy for a past generation of fishermen, whose intimate, sustainable connection with the natural world gave them their sense of identity.

*#rhizodont* is from *Rhizodont* (Bloodaxe, 2024). The rhizodont was a fearsome three-metre-long predatory fish which became extinct 310 million years ago. It belonged to a family of lobe-finned fishes which are the ancestors of all four-limbed vertebrates, including humans. The lobe-finned fishes' transition from water to land was one of the most significant events in vertebrate evolution. A rhizodont's fossil has been found at Cocklawburn near Berwick. The hashtag points to the latest stage of our own technological evolution.

*The Refuge Box - excerpts (Chant, Another Place)* - are from *Two Countries* (Bloodaxe, 2014). These last excerpts are set on the sand flats at Holy Island, and reflect on ideas of sanctuary, migration and the spirit's journey.

KP

The final folksong arrangements bring the programme home. Born in Newcastle, William Gillies Whittaker was an enormously influential figure in the music of Tyneside and the North-East in general. He held teaching positions in various schools and colleges, later becoming Principal of the Scottish National Academy of Music and Professor of Music at Glasgow University. He was a considerable scholar, particularly on the music of J S Bach, and a hugely enthusiastic conductor of choirs, for whom he wrote many arrangements of the folk songs of the area. We couple with his arrangements two by Derek Hobbs, a well-known composer, teacher and conductor who has spent all of his life in Northumberland and was Head of Music at Ashington High School for much of his professional life. His music often has a distinctly Northumbrian flavour and he has a great interest in the traditional music of the area.

PB

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## Peter Broadbent

Peter is one of Britain's leading choral conductors and whose experience ranges from brass bands to large-scale choral works, opera and musicals. In addition to his work with the Joyful Company of Singers since our creation, he has conducted the London Mozart Players, Divertimenti Chamber Orchestra, the English Chamber Orchestra, the City of London Sinfonia, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Southern Sinfonia, the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, Apollo Voices and the BBC Singers, broadcasting frequently on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM.



Engagements outside the UK include concerts with the Debrecen Philharmonic Orchestra & Kodály Chorus in Hungary, a broadcast with the National Chamber Choir in Dublin and a European tour with the World Youth Choir in 2006. He gives workshops and master classes throughout Europe, and as the first Director of Training for the Association of British Choral Directors he helped to instigate and develop choral conducting courses.

In 2007 he was presented with the Pro Cultura Hungarica Award by the Hungarian Ministry of Education & Culture for his services to Anglo-Hungarian relations and in 2017 was presented with the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit.

Peter was awarded an MBE in the 2022 New Year's Honours for his service to music.

*Photo – Carol Hartfree*

## Katrina Porteous



Katrina Porteous is a poet and historian based on the Northumberland coast, who writes from a deep commitment to place and community. She often uses Northumbrian speech, and is President of the Northumbrian Language Society and the Coble and Keelboat Society.

Her collections from Bloodaxe Books include *The Lost Music*, *Two Countries* and *Edge* (poems for a planetarium, 2019).

Katrina has performed widely alongside musicians, including Chris Ormston on Northumbrian pipes, Alistair Anderson on English concertina, and (at Dartington) Alexis Bennett on fiddle. She has written libretti for Alistair Anderson's *Tam Lin* (2000), and for Trevor Wishart's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2020). Between

2011 and 2021 she wrote five collaborations for voice and computer with the late electronic composer Peter Zinovieff.

She has written many long poems for BBC radio with producer Julian May, notably 'The Refuge Box'. Her poetry has been set by John Casken, and last year by Kristina Arakelyan for the BBC Proms (*Whin Lands*, 2023).

Katrina received a Cholmondeley Award from the Society of Authors in 2021. Her fourth collection, *Rhizodont*, is due from Bloodaxe Books in June 2024.

*Photo – Joe Grabham*

## Joyful Company Of Singers



One of the UK's leading amateur chamber choirs, the Joyful Company of Singers is known for its virtuosity and intensity of spirit, as well as for an astoundingly wide repertoire, ranging from the 16th Century to the present day, including many first performances.

Formed in 1988 by conductor Peter Broadbent, the choir first came to prominence when it won the Sainsbury's Choir of the Year competition in 1990. Since then, it has maintained its profile in the music world, winning an impressive list of national and international competitions leading to many invitations to perform. Concert appearances include most of the leading UK festivals and regular concert tours in Europe, broadcasting in many countries as well as on BBC and Classic FM. A discography of over 25 CDs includes Rachmaninov's *All-night Vigil* on Nimbus: 'beautifully characterized and shaped by Peter Broadbent' (International Record Review). Their recording of the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* under Richard Hickox was listed in April 2024 by 'Gramophone' magazine as one of the top 20 recordings of the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

The JCS has also instituted a Youth Fund to encourage the development of young choral conductors, singers and composers and this season we have continued to support our first-ever Composer-in-Association, Zoe Dixon.

*Photo – Maurice Green*

## **Tonight's Singers:**

### **SOPRANOS**

Amanda Abbitt, Jenny Ball, Felicitas Biskup, Cathryn Caunt, Isobel Hammond,  
Rachael Jones, Kathryn Salter-Kay, Clare Vincent-Silk.

Carrie Beaumont, Philippa Gardner, Margaret Green,  
Alison Martin, Wendy Norman.

### **ALTOS**

Francesca Caine, Elaine Gould, Debbie Johnstone, Alexandra Loewe,  
Hannah Bale, Denise Fabb, Lorna Perry, Joanna Thompson.

### **TENORS**

Nick Bowater, Mark Johnstone, Ian Kay, Peter Murphy,  
Christopher Nehaul, Julian Tolan.

### **BASSES**

Kevin Bailey, Tim Bull, Neville Hargreaves, Andy Mackinder, Tom Spanyol,  
Jonathan Lane, David Lowe, Robin Osterley, Christopher Williams.



## **Our next performance**

**Friday 21st June – Summer Concert  
St Gabriel’s Church, Pimlico, London SW1V 2AD**

Stanford – Motets & Part-songs

Holst – Folksong arrangements

Zoe Dixon – Seasons Suite (first performance)



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Rear cover photo – Eleanor Caine

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