

2025
YORK
EARLY
MUSIC
FESTIVAL

Fretwork

with

Helen Charlston *mezzo soprano*

My Days

Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall

Friday 4 July 7.30pm

Fretwork

Richard Boothby, Emily Ashton, Emilia Benjamin,
Joanna Levine, Sam Stadlen, Jonathan Rees *viols*

with

Helen Charlston *mezzo soprano*

My Days

Songs and Fantasias by
Orlando Gibbons 1583-1625

Dainty fine bird

Fair is the Rose

Two Fantasies in 6 parts

In Nomine in 5 parts

What is our life?

Now each flow'ry banke of May

In Nomine in 5 parts

Go from my window

Interval

Nay let me weepe; Ne'er let the sunne; Yet if that age

Pavan & Galliard

Fantasy for 2 treble viols

Two Fantasies in 6 parts

My Days

Nico Muhly b.1981

Orlando Gibbons was a genius.

We can probably all agree that this term is massively anachronistic. However, it is justified, I think, in order to establish his music on the same elevated *niveau* as Purcell or Beethoven or Schubert. It is difficult to make such analogies when his music is still relatively rarely performed by comparison with these more illustrious names, but Gibbons' fecundity of imagination, his masterly handling of his material, his emotional depth and maturity, the exquisite turns of phrase, his harmonic assurance, his contrapuntal ease and mastery – all this puts him in the first rank of composers.

And nowhere is this genius more evident than in his string chamber music, which is a surprisingly large body of work: several duos for two treble viols; numerous works involving 'the great dooble bass'; nine 3-part Fantazias, a 4-part In Nomine; three 5-part In Nomines and, the jewel in this elaborate crown, six 6-part Fantazias. Throw in a masterly Pavan & Galliard in six parts, and the boisterous and genial set of variations on the folk song, 'Go From My Window', and you have a body of work that can hold its head up amongst the most accomplished of companies.

The six 6-part Fantasias, each exceptional works, last no more than four minutes; yet each is a profound musical, intellectual and emotional journey. Gibbons' themes are generally simple in construction; but this gives him room to twist and transform his material in a way that draws the listener with him, and in ways that are not immediately obvious. He develops material in an extraordinarily organic way through changes to harmony and rhythm that are subtle and expressive. There are madrigalian episodes, contrasts of texture and mood, but so expertly handled that the whole work hangs together in the most natural way.

Gibbons is among a small group of composers whose works have been continuously performed since their death. His verse anthems have been a staple of Anglican cathedrals and Oxbridge choirs since he was a choirboy at King's College in the 1590s. But during his lifetime, it was as an organist that he was principally known; and he was marked out as successor to the leading English keyboardists – Byrd and Bull – by being included in the publication *Parthenia Inviolata* of 1613, by which time Byrd had retired and Bull fled, leaving Gibbons the undisputed leading exponent in the country.

He had been born in Oxford in 1583, but grew up in Cambridge, where his brother Edward was master of choristers. The young Orlando was a chorister at King's from the age of 13 for three years under his brother's direction and then studied at the University. Aged 20, he started working as a musician at the Chapel Royal,

where he was to remain until his death. He became organist there in 1615, and when he died, a young Thomas Tomkins was his junior assistant.

He had been close to the young Prince Henry, eldest son of James I and who had a significant musical establishment, including Coprario, Lupo and Alfonso Ferrabosco II, all viol players and composers for the instrument. On 6 November 1612, Prince Henry died of typhoid fever, and the artistic and musical establishments were shaken – over 30 poets wrote verse mourning the loss, and Gibbons included three powerfully emotional madrigals (or motets) in a collection that must have been nearing publication.

But, in fact, Prince Charles proved to be every bit as supportive of the musical group as his brother Henry, and Orlando was evidently close to the viol-playing Prince. In 1623, Gibbons became organist and master of the choristers at Westminster Abbey, in addition to his duties at the Chapel Royal.

The King died in March 1625, and Gibbons played the organ at his funeral; and a few months later he accompanied the new King Charles to Canterbury to greet the new queen, Henrietta Maria. Gibbons suffered a sudden seizure and died on 5 June. Such was the nervousness about the plague at the time, he was given an autopsy, quoted in Nico Muhly's piece.

Glenn Gould, the famously eccentric pianist, counted Gibbons as his favourite composer, stating: 'ever since my teenage years his music has moved me more deeply than any other sounds experience I can think of'; and it was the verse anthems that started this passion. He claims to have worn out no fewer than three copies of the Deller Consort's recording of them on Deutsche Gramophon's Archiv label. This recording also included a few fantazias and In Nomines, as well as a pair of madrigals and the Cries of London.

Nico Muhly has written this about the original version of *My Days*:

My Days is a ritualised memory piece about Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) written for two ensembles whose recordings informed so much of my musical development. I feel like I spend half of my life trying to trick string players to play like Fretwork, and vocalists to sing like the Hilliard Ensemble, so it was with enormous pleasure that I composed this piece.

The text is derived from Psalm 39, which Gibbons himself set, as well as an account of Gibbons' own autopsy, which is a poignant seventeenth-century semi-anonymous text. One of the most thrilling things about the sound of five violas da gamba playing together is the sense of their phrasing being derived

from vocal music, but made, somehow, electric and ecstatic through ornamentation and the friction of the strings. The piece has an *idée fixe* based on a minor scale with two possible resolutions, and many ornaments.

In between iterations, the voices, in rhythmic unison, intone the psalm. It isn't until the autopsy text arrives that the voices begin to split into more elaborate, Gibbonsy verses and responses. A series of semi-improvised fragments on the text 'Take thy plague away from me' introduces the third section of the piece, where plucked strings create a halo around the text 'hear my prayer, O Lord'. The piece ends with the ornaments, wildly exploded, over the voices singing two words, endlessly repeated.

He authorised my arrangement of the piece for alto solo, so that we could perform it more frequently.

© Richard Boothby

Daintie fine Bird, that art incaged there,
Alas, how like thine and my fortunes are?
Both prisoners be, and both singing thus
Strive to please her that hath imprisoned us.
Onely thus we differ, thou and I:
Thou liv'st singing but I sing and dye

Faire is the Rose, yet fades with heate or colde;
Sweet are the Violets, yet soone grow olde;
The Lillie's white, yet in one day tis done;
White is the Snow, yet melts against the Sunne,
So white, so sweet is my Mistris face,
Yet altred quite in one short houres space
So short live'd beautie a vain glosse doth borrow,
Breathing delight to day, but none tomorrow.

What is our life? A play of passion,
Our mirth the musicke of division,
Our mothers wombes the tiring houses be,
Where we are drest for this short Comedy,
Heaven the Judicious, sharpe spectator is,
That sits and markes still who doth make amisse;

Our graves that hide us from the searching Sun
Are like drawne curtaynes when the play is done.
Thus march we playing to our latest rest,
Onely we dye in earnest, that's no iest.

Sir Walter Raleigh 1552-1618

Now each flowry bancke of May,

Wooes the streames that glides away,
Mountaines fan'd by a sweet gale
Loves the humble looking Dale.
Windes the loved leaves do kisse,
Each thing tasteth of love's blisse.
Onely I though blest I be
To be lov'd by destiny,
Love confest by her sweet breath
Whose love is life, whose hate is death.

Nay let mee weepe, though others teares be spent,

Though all eyes dried be, let mine be wet.
Unto thy grave ile pay this yeerely rent,
Thy livelesse Coarse demands of mee this debt.
I owe more teares than ever Coarse did crave;
Ile pay more teares than ere was payd to grave.

Ne're let the Sunne with his deceiving light

Seeke to make glad these watry eyes of mine.
My sorrow sutes with melancholy night.
I ioy in dole, in languishment I pine.
My dearest friend is set, he was my Sunne,
With whom my mirth, my ioy, and all is done.

Yet if that age had frosted oer his head,

Or if his face had furrow'd beene with yeeres,
I would not so bemone that hee is dead,
I might have beene more niggard of my teares.
But O, the Sunne new rose is gone to bed,
And Lillies in their spring-time hang their head.

My Days

Behold, thou hast made my days as it were a span long : and mine age is even as nothing in respect of thee; and verily every man living is altogether vanity. For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain : he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them. And now, Lord, what is my hope : truly my hope is even in thee. Deliver me from all mine offences : and make me not a rebuke unto the foolish. I became dumb, and opened not my mouth : for it was thy doing.

Psalms 39: 6-10

We whose names are here underwritten: having been called to give our counsels to Mr. Orlando Gibbons; in the time of his late and sudden sickness, which we found in the beginning lethargical, or a profound sleep; out of which, we could never recover him, neither by inward nor outward medicines, & then instantly he fell in most strong, & sharp convulsions; which did wring his mouth up to his ears, & his eyes were distorted, as though they would have been thrust out of his head & then suddenly he lost both speech, sight and hearing, & so grew apoplectical & lost the whole motion of every part of his body, & so died.

From the autopsy of Orlando Gibbons, 1625

Take thy plague away from me : I am even consumed by the means of thy heavy hand. When thou with rebukes dost chasten man for sin, thou makest his beauty to consume away, like as it were a moth fretting a garment : every man therefore is but vanity. Hear my prayer, O Lord, and with thine ears consider my calling : hold not thy peace at my tears. For I am a stranger with thee : and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength : before I go hence, and be no more seen.

Psalms 39: 11-15

Fretwork

In 2026, Fretwork celebrates its 40th anniversary. In these last decades, they have explored the core repertory of great English consort music from Taverner to Purcell, made classic recordings against which others are judged, and commissioned an entirely new repertory of music for viols.

The list of composers they have encouraged to create new works is like the roll call of the most prominent writers of our time: George Benjamin, Michael Nyman, Sir John Tavener, Gavin Bryars, Elvis Costello, Alexander Goehr, John Woolrich, Orlando Gough, Sally Beamish, Tan Dun, Barry Guy, Thea Musgrave, John Paul Jones, Nico Muhly, Sir James MacMillan and many others.

They have expanded their repertory to include music from over 500 years, from the first printed consort music in Venice in 1501 to music written this year. And, in between, everything that can be played on a consort of viols: Byrd & Schubert, Purcell & Shostakovitch, Gibbons & Britten, Dowland & Grieg.

Recently they have performed in the Lammermuir Festival, in Wigmore Hall with Tenebrae, and in the Malling Festival, and visited North America again, including concerts at Carnegie Hall with Iestyn Davies. This year they commemorate the sudden and untimely death of Orlando Gibbons 400 years ago, in 1625, and celebrate the 90th year of Arvo Pärt with concerts and recordings.

While they used to fly all over the globe, they have now committed to reducing their carbon footprint by travelling in Europe only by train or electric cars, when feasible. Recently, they have toured Germany, France, Spain, Austria and Slovenia in this way.

The future sees many exciting projects based on the thrilling juxtaposition of old and new; making the experience of old music new and bringing the sensibilities of past ages to bear on contemporary music.

Helen Charlston

Helen Charlston was recently a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist (2021-23). In 2023 she won a *Gramophone* Award for Best Concept Album, and collected the Vocal award at the *BBC Music Magazine Awards*, both for her second Delphian album: *Battle Cry*.

This season, Helen makes her debut at the Gran Teatre del Liceu as Sesto in Calixto Bieito's production of *Giulio Cesare* conducted by William Christie, and sings Handel's *Messiah* at BBC Proms with The Academy of St Martin in the Fields, Bach's *St John Passion* with the Academy of Ancient Music, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* with WDR Köln under Simon Halsey, and also with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Václav Luks, and Bach's *Magnificat* with RIAS Kammerchor under Justin Doyle in South Korea. In recital she performs *Battle Cry* with Toby Carr at Brucknerhaus Linz, with Sholto Kynoch at the Oxford International Song Festival, a programme of Handel with the Prague Philharmonia at Lobkowitz Palace, and she returns to Wigmore Hall.

Helen has worked across the globe with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra (San Francisco), Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, Warsaw Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, Seattle Symphony, London Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Symphony

Orchestra, and Royal Northern Sinfonia. She has sung roles at Versailles Royal Opera, The Grange Festival, and covered a title role at Opéra national de Paris.

An artistic advisor for York Early Music Festival, Helen featured in a residency in 2024 performing a wide range music by Dowland and Couperin, to Schumann and Mendelssohn, and a set of new commissions for her and Toby Carr by Ben Rowarth and Anna Semple.

YORK EARLY MUSIC FESTIVAL

Artistic Advisors

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