

Stories as Brittle as Glass

Liam Bonthron tenor
Benjamin Mead piano

George Butterworth (1885–1916) The lads in their hundreds (1911) · text: A.E. Housman (1859–1936)

Cheryl Frances-Hoad (b.1980) Magic Lantern Tales (2015) · Ian McMillan (b.1956):

1. Marching through Time (after Butterworth's 'The lads in their hundreds')

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) Who Are These Children?, Op.84 (1969) · William Soutar (1898–1943):

1. A Riddle 2. A Laddie's Sang

Frances-Hoad Magic Lantern Tales: 2. Lily Maynard (after Novello's 'Keep the home fires burning')

Britten Who Are These Children?: 3. Nightmare

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison (1916) · Claude Debussy 23'

Britten Who Are These Children?: 4. Black Day 5. Bed-time

Frances-Hoad Magic Lantern Tales: 4. Mabel Walsh (after Coles' 'Elegy')

Britten Who Are These Children?: 6. Slaughter

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) Bleuet (1939) · Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) 15'

Britten Who Are These Children?: 7. A Riddle 8. The Lark Lad

Frances-Hoad Magic Lantern Tales: 3. The Ballad of Harry Holmes

(after Powell's 'Pack up your troubles') 12'

Britten Who Are These Children?: 9. Who are these children? 10. Supper

Hugo Wolf (1860–1903) Der Tambour (1888) · Eduard Möricke (1804–1875)

Britten Who Are These Children?: 11. The Children 12. The Auld Aik

Frances-Hoad Magic Lantern Tales: 5. Marching through Time

Ivor Novello (1893–1951) Keep the home fires burning (1914) · Lena Guilbert Ford (1870–1918) 19'

‘My subject is war,’ wrote Wilfred Owen in 1918, ‘and the pity of War’. Owen’s influential verses are perhaps among the best-known on the subject of armed conflict between nations. Yet there are many more words about war to be read and heard, including some very striking examples in this afternoon’s concert. Much of the poetry set by the composers is associated with the First World War, including the touching real-life stories told by Ian McMillan in *Magic Lantern Tales*, the French poems by Claude Debussy and Guillaume Apollinaire, and Ivor Novello’s famous setting of Lena Guilbert Ford’s ‘Keep the home fires burning’. The effect of conflict on children and young people in particular is a further significant feature, notably in the sequence of poems and riddles by William Soutar that Britten selected for his cycle *Who Are These Children?*, with its stark juxtapositions of childhood’s merry games and the brutality of the adult world. In this recital, the two cycles – *Magic Lantern Tales* and *Who Are These Children?* – form the framework, interleaving both with each other and the other works. These songs speak to each other across time, across battlefields; sometimes literally, thematically – often devastatingly.



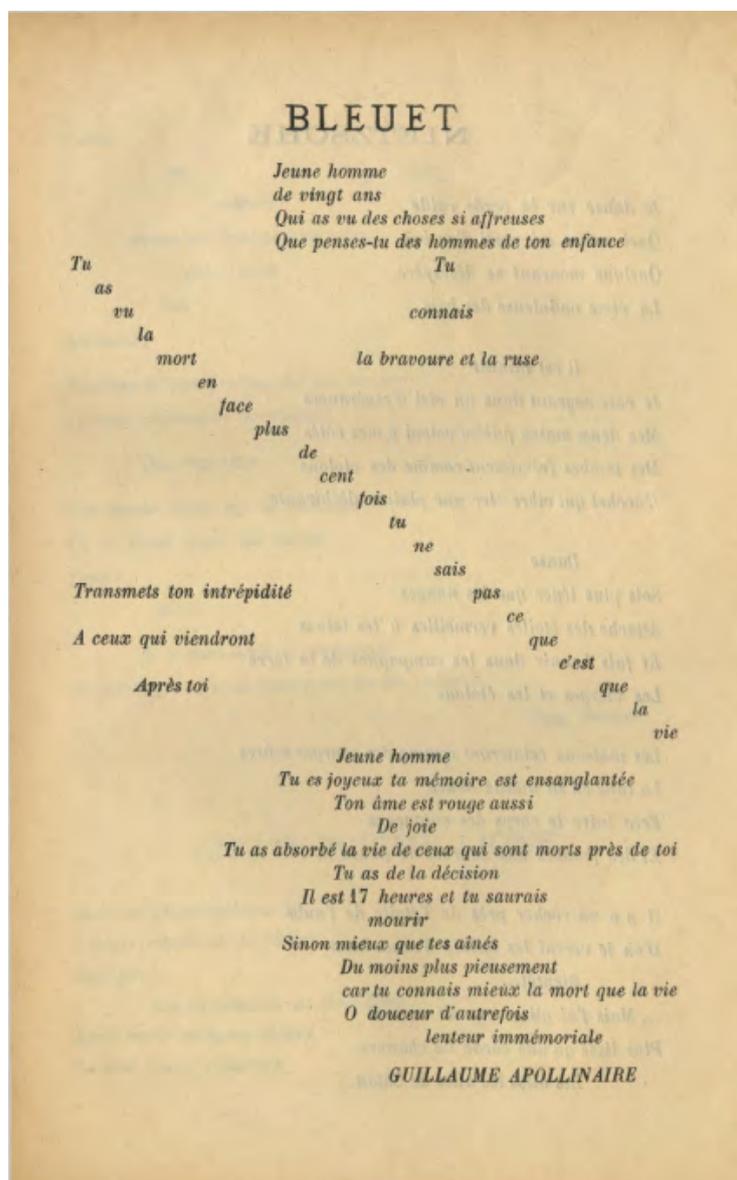
George Butterworth’s settings of A.E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* is so strongly associated with the First World War – the composer was killed during the Battle of the Somme – that it is easy to forget that both the song cycle and the poetry predate it. Housman’s book of poems was published in 1896 and was initially only mildly successful. Yet it became increasingly popular with young men at times of conflict: the Boer War, and the later 1914–18 war, where copies of the work were often to be found in soldiers’ kitbags. The poems are lyrical but elegiac meditations, often on the subject of young men who are likely to die young, whether in war, by their own hand, or through some other misfortune. Butterworth’s 1911 settings, as an early reviewer pointed out, caught ‘the same terrible beauty which one finds in the verses’. In ‘The lads in their hundreds’, an observer watches the ‘lads’ at a Ludlow country fair, contemplating how few will last into old age. If the beauty of Butterworth’s setting is ‘terrible’ it is perhaps in its air of resignation. The dynamic range throughout is soft, for both singer and pianist, and almost unvarying: simple, conversational, and bleakly affecting as a result.

Cheryl Frances-Hoad’s *Magic Lantern Tales* ‘march through time’ from the trenches of the First World War to a care home in the 1990s, via a collection of evocative poetry published in 2014. Ian McMillan’s poems were based on interviews carried out by documentary photographer Ian Beesley in the Moor Psychiatric Hospital with a group of residents – some aged over 100 – who related their memories of the Great War (Beesley later wrote of a sense of urgency to capture these stories before time ran out). Frances-Hoad’s sensitive settings allow their words to unfold against a shifting backdrop of bugle calls, clocks ticking, and echoes of marching songs.

The longest song relates the wartime experience of Harry Holmes, transferring the camaraderie of the trenches to a postwar friendship with Harry Ramsden (of Fish & Chips fame), and a determinedly peaceful life. Frances-Hoad’s setting channels the kind of upbeat marching songs which flourished at the time – ‘Pack up your troubles’ is noted as an influence, more in spirit perhaps than melody – albeit with more ominous, spiky harmonies and tolling bass notes. This gentle epic is a fitting tribute to someone who otherwise would have remained unheralded, his medals lying quietly in a chest of drawers. Framing Harry’s tale are the reminiscences of two women whose sweethearts died in battle before they had the chance to marry. Lily Maynard barely knew the young vulnerable man who went off to war; their embryonic romance is played out in a sweetly harmonised opening, becoming more fragmented as time – for Lily – ‘breaks’ at the moment of his death; the echoes of Novello’s ‘Keep the home fires burning’ are subtle, and progressively broken apart. Mabel Walsh’s song is also sparsely accompanied, fully conveying her sense of loss of what might have been. At the beginning and the end of the whole cycle are two settings of the same verse – ‘Marching through time’ – evoking one of those same kitbags that contained copies of *A Shropshire Lad*, in its homage to ‘The lads in their hundreds’. The first version is hushed and delicate, the voice often flying solo. The second – the final song in the cycle – has a richer, more insistent (even angry) accompaniment to begin with, yet ultimately is a heartfelt plea to remember these stories, which are ‘as brittle as glass’.

The Scottish poet William Soutar wrote partly in the English language, partly in Scots; in his endeavours to reintroduce the latter, he frequently wrote Scots poems for children. He had served in the First World War, and contemplated with disbelief the continuing global conflicts over the following decades. His English-language poems in particular are visceral responses to war and its consequences, and four of them appear in **Benjamin Britten**’s 1969 cycle *Who Are These Children?*. Britten intersperses them among settings of Scots poems which are (apart from the final song) light, short, occasionally whimsical but sometimes tinged with a darker undertone. Their relative innocence and playfulness emphasise even further the violence encountered in the English poems; ‘A Black Day’, for example, with its casual ‘skelps’, feels more ominous after the eerie portents of ‘Nightmare’ (here, it comes after the burning horror of Debussy’s song). The title song, ‘Who are these children?’, is a depiction of casual privilege amongst the rubble of war, Britten’s angular ‘hunting calls’ adding further satirical bite to Soutar’s outrage. ‘The Children’ is perhaps the most haunting, with its sirens and stark descriptions of the ‘blood of children’. ‘The Auld Aik’ which follows offers little comfort.

Claude Debussy’s *Le Noël des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison* (‘The Christmas of children who no longer have a home’) finds children once again at the mercy of war: everyone gone, everything destroyed, even their ‘petits sabots’. In the



Guillaume Apollinaire: Bleuet

last song he ever composed, written in the early years of the First World War (he also wrote the text), the simple strophic melody is sung over an insistent piano part, its hammering triplets unrelenting throughout. **Francis Poulenc's** *Bleuet* ('Rookie') is another French response to world war: the poem dates from the First; the music from at the start of the Second. The text is by Guillaume Apollinaire, one of his *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War 1913–1916*, in which the words of the poem formed designs on the page. This one, as Graham Johnson has pointed out has the verse 'Tu as vu la mort' 'printed diagonally across the page, while the rest is ranged on either side, like opposing sides in trench warfare'. It shares the elegiac quality of Butterworth's *A Shropshire Lad* settings, and the sad awareness that young men have seen far too much death. Poulenc's setting seems to spring from the 'douceur' (sweetness) of the penultimate line, bathing the words in tenderness: in this recital, it is a genuine balm after the savagery of Britten's 'Slaughter'. Yet its tiny military fanfare in the last few bars packs a further punch of its own.

Some light relief is found in **Hugo Wolf's** *Der Tambour*, ('The Drum') the earliest setting, dating from a collection composed in 1888. Rather than specifying a particular war, it features the grumblings of a soldier on some battlefield somewhere – his fantasies of home and good food an understandable desire. It is located here, playfully, after Britten's setting of 'Supper'. The recital concludes with **Ivor Novello's** 'Keep the home fires burning', one of the most popular songs of the First World War. Its refrain has a hymn-like quality rather than a military bounce, giving it a tender, yearning atmosphere. It sums up music's ability to offer hope, or at least to plea for it, on behalf of those on the battlefields:

'And although your heart is breaking
Make it sing this cheery song'.