

# Britten Pears Chamber Choir

**Britten Pears Chamber Choir**  
**Rebecca Austen-Brown** recorder  
**Franziska Roth** narrator  
**Ben Vonberg-Clark** conductor

## **Hugo Distler** (1908–1942)

Totentanz: 14 motets on sayings for the Sunday of Death, Op.12 No.2 (1934)

40'

sung words from 'The Cherubic Pilgrim' by Angelus Silesius (1624–1677)

spoken dialogue by Johannes Klöcking (1883–1951) after characters in the Lübeck Dance of Death, painted 1463

## INTERVAL

## **Vally Weigl** (1894–1982)

Hymnus (1941) · Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770) from the English Hymnal, 1768: 'The Resignation'

4'

Heart's Content (1979) · Vally Weigl, after the German poem 'Allwundheil' by Norman Löns

5'

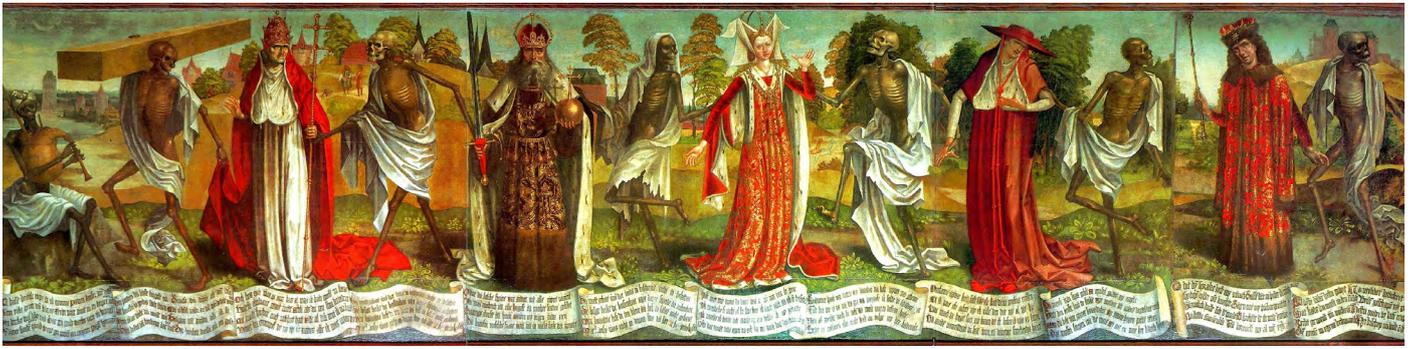
Prayer for Peace (1982) · Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997)

3'

## **Henryk Górecki** (1933–2010)

Totus Tuus, Op.60 (1987) · Maria Bogustawska (1868–1929)

9'



**Bernt Notke:** Totentanz fragment from St Nicholas' Church, Tallinn. Late 15th century, oil on canvas, 157x750 cm

This surviving fragment of another Totentanz by Notke was painted a few decades after he completed the Lübeck artwork. It reproduces the essential design and scenes from the original painting, though with different text and landscape. Death (far left) in this version plays the bagpipes rather than the flute

During his short life, **Hugo Distler** produced some of the most significant choral and organ music of his time. Born in Nuremberg to unmarried working-class parents, he moved to Leipzig to attend the city's Conservatory, enrolling as a conductor and pianist but soon turning his attention to composition and the organ. In 1931, still in his early 20s, he was appointed as organist of St Jakob's Church in Lübeck, adding the post of head of chamber music at the city's Conservatory in 1933 – the same year in which he reluctantly joined the Nazi party. During his four years in Lübeck, Distler produced much of the choral music for which he is now best remembered, including the *Totentanz* ('Dance of Death'), composed in 1936 and inspired by the medieval painting that hung at that time in another of the city's churches, St Mary's. Eight years later, on the night of 28–29 March 1942, both the church and the painting were destroyed during an Allied bombing raid on the city. The church was later rebuilt, but all that remains of the painting is a set of photographs taken in the 1930s by Wilhelm Castelli.

The Lübeck Totentanz was created in 1463 by Bernt Notke, a young painter from an Estonian family who later became one of northern Europe's most celebrated artists. Working on a canvas wall-covering almost two metres high and 26 metres long, Notke conjured up a procession of 24 images, each containing two life-sized figures. Skeletons representing Death danced with diverse unwilling partners, all still alive at the time the painting was created, ranging in social status from the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor and Lübeck's mayor, to local farm-workers, women and children. Behind the macabre dance Notke portrayed Lübeck's distinctive skyline, making the painting's message clear: Death was an omnipresent part of everyday life, and it took its victims equally from all sectors of society, irrespective of status, wealth or moral virtue. Underneath the images were inscribed 50 stanzas of Low German text: dialogues between Death and the living figures that exhorted readers to fulfil their duties to their community while remaining mindful of the hereafter.

From this rich combination of artistic and literary stimuli, Distler fashioned a unique artwork: a sequence of 14 motets for unaccompanied choir interspersed with readings from the text, insofar as it could be reassembled: the original verses on the artwork had been replaced with Baroque poetry around

1700 during the painting's restoration, leaving the medieval text to be incompletely pieced together from fragmentary copies in different locations around Germany and the Baltic coast. Distler took the texts for the motets, meanwhile, from *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* ('The Cherubic Pilgrim'), a collection of religious poetry by the mystic Johann Scheffler, who took the name Angelus Silesius – encapsulating both his spiritual aspirations and his family's Silesian origins – when he converted to Catholicism in 1653.

*Totentanz* was premiered on 24 September 1934 at St Katherine's Church in Lübeck. For the second performance in Kassel two months later, Distler added a third strand to the work, creating a set of twelve variations for solo flute (the instrument played – Pied Piper-like – by Death himself in Notke's painting) on the 17th-century German folk-song, 'Es ist ein Schnitter, heißt der Tod' ('There is a reaper, whose name is Death'). After a couple of performances, the manuscript of the variations became separated from the original score and remained unknown for several decades before being rediscovered and included in a performance in 1976. Since then, many conductors have chosen, as Ben Vonberg-Clark does this afternoon, to interpolate the variations, played either on flute or recorder, between the readings and the motets. They make for an effective complement: the austerity of the single line bridges the gap between spoken word and elaborate choral singing, while the melody's plangency, evident in all its different guises, reminds the listener both of *Totentanz's* medieval origins and of the omnipresence of Death.

The choral writing in *Totentanz* is virtuosic and extremely demanding for the singers. Though Distler at no point divides the choir into more than four parts, he nonetheless deploys a dizzying variety of textures across the 14 motets: in some the voices move mainly together, the effect often stark and austere; in others the polyphony is intricate and carefully controlled; elsewhere voice parts are given apparent freedom to flower, rhythmically independent of the rest of the group. Changes of time-signature are frequent, and Distler's harmonic language is unusual and distinctive: redolent simultaneously of near-contemporaries like Max Reger and Paul Hindemith and much more distant precursors such as J.S. Bach and Heinrich Schütz.



St Mary's Church, Lübeck, after the bombing raid of 28–9 March 1942

Distler's life ended tragically: he committed suicide at the age of just 34, his health destroyed by the pressures of working in Nazi-controlled Berlin, where he lived under continual threat of having his music proscribed as 'degenerate', while attempting to fulfil demanding roles at the Hochschule für Musik and (for the last few months of his life) as director of the Berlin State and Cathedral Choir. The Austrian Jewish composer **Vally Weigl**, by contrast, decided to flee Vienna in 1938 with her composer husband Karl Weigl to escape Nazi persecution. She subsequently enjoyed a long and successful post-war career in the United States, where she became chief music therapist at the New York Medical College as well as continuing to compose prolifically.

The three short pieces in this afternoon's programme date from opposite ends of Weigl's American career. *Hymnus* was composed in 1941 and sets a well-known hymn text by the precocious and short-lived 18th-century English poet, Thomas Chatterton. Weigl surely chose the text for its relevance to the war into which her adopted country would shortly enter, but her setting emphasises the strength that can be drawn from faith in God, with a high solo soprano voice introduced in the final moments seeming to seal the optimistic message.

*Heart's Content* is a simple but very beautiful strophic setting from 1979 of an English text that Weigl herself freely adapted from a German poem by Hermann Löns. *Prayer for Peace*, meanwhile, dates from the final year of Weigl's life and sets a prayer that Mother Teresa of Calcutta drew from Hindu scriptures and intended to be used by people of all faiths around the world. The text's message that hope can be found even in despair is perfectly mirrored in the progress of Weigl's setting towards its radiant major-key conclusion.

Like *Prayer for Peace*, *Totus Tuus* is strongly associated with one of the world's leading spiritual figures of the later 20th century. **Henryk Górecki** composed it in 1987 to mark the third pilgrimage of his compatriot, Pope John Paul II, to his home country of Poland. It was performed twice during the Pope's visit, on the second occasion during an open-air High Mass in Warsaw's Victory Square. Setting a Latin text by Maria Bogusławska addressed to Poland's patron saint, the Virgin Mary, Górecki's almost entirely homophonic anthem moves compellingly towards the hushed incantations of Mary's name with which it so memorably ends.

Michael Downes © 2025



Vally Weigl at the piano, playing duets with her husband Karl

## **Britten Pears Chamber Choir**

Britten Pears Chamber Choir is the resident choir at Britten Pears Arts, performing, recording and collaborating throughout the year. The choir follows in the tradition of Benjamin Britten's Festival Chorus from the earliest days of the Aldeburgh Festival and prides itself on an inclusive and supportive atmosphere and culture.

Britten Pears Chamber Choir enjoys a rich and varied performance season including collaborations with leading orchestras, opera companies and guest artists. The choir is committed in its performances to a broad range of choral repertoire from early music to contemporary masterpieces from across the centuries and throughout the world. We welcome new singers to audition at several times throughout the year. For further information about what to expect and to arrange an audition please contact Olivia Kersey: [okersey@brittenpearsarts.org](mailto:okersey@brittenpearsarts.org)

*Soprano:* Penny Dawe, Camilla Haycock, Coral McEwen, Tracey Rayner, Sara Viney, Liisa Beagley, Jo Hannon, Clare Hawes, Rachel Parsons, Judie Shore

*Alto:* Tamsin Anderson, Kerstin Davey, Natalie Ellis, Susannah Izzard, Alexandra Mayson, Daphne Rose

*Tenor:* Howard Blackett, David Freestone, Colin Hamilton, Tim Haswell, Mark Nicholson, Kit Prime, Geoffrey Smeed

*Bass:* David Edwards, Will Harrison, Andrew Mackney, Mark Nicholls, Angus Pearson, Alex Warcaba-Wood, Tim Miles

## **Ben Vonberg-Clark**

Ben Vonberg-Clark is a conductor and tenor based in East Anglia. He has a long-standing relationship with Britten Pears Arts, where he regularly conducts and performs. Ben is musical director of the University of Essex Choir, Reverb (Framlingham), and the Wivenhoe Youth Choir, and also works with the London Youth Choirs. Recent performances include appearances at the BBC Proms and Snape Maltings, and collaborations with ensembles such as the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the London Mozart Players. Dedicated to widening access to high-quality music-making, he is passionate about developing youth and community choirs across the region.

## **Rebecca Austen-Brown**

Rebecca Austen-Brown grew up in Suffolk, overlooking the mounds of Sutton Hoo. Since studying at the Royal Academy of Music and being awarded the Associate RAM, she has recorded and toured with many ensembles; most recently The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, The Sixteen, Glydebourne Touring Opera, the Dufay Collective, The City Musick, I Fagiolini, the CBSO, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and La Nuova Musica. She is a founder member of the Fontanella Recorder Quartet with whom she has recorded for BBC TV and radio, and more recently for Channel 4's *8 Out of 10 Cats*, where she was charged with teaching Jimmy Carr to play a D! As well as live performance, Rebecca is a regular film session-musician and can be heard on soundtracks including *The Hobbit*, *Les Misérables*, *Grand Hotel Budapest*, *Mary Queen of Scots* and Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio*.

## **Franziska Roth**

Franziska Roth is an internationally leading German-language coach for classical singers and actors. She has recorded spoken Lieder texts for the Faber Music publication *The Language of Song* and regularly performs as reader/narrator at musical events that involve spoken texts and *Sprechgesang* in German.

In the film- and theatre world she has coached renowned actors like Bob Hoskins and, more recently, Cate Blanchett (in the films *Tár* and *Rumours*). For the opera stage she has worked with world-class singers including Plácido Domingo, Bryn Terfel, Lise Davidsen, Renée Fleming and Kiri Te Kanawa. Also much sought-after for Lieder recitals and recordings she has collaborated with Ian Bostridge, Sarah Connolly, Mark Padmore and Gerald Finley. In addition to being employed by the major opera houses and festivals she teaches at their young artist programmes in London, Paris, Amsterdam, Moscow, Verbier as well as at the Britten Pears Young Artist Programme.

Franziska studied musicology, voice and piano at the 'Mozarteum' Academy of Music in Salzburg and now lives in London.