



Ivor
GURNEY

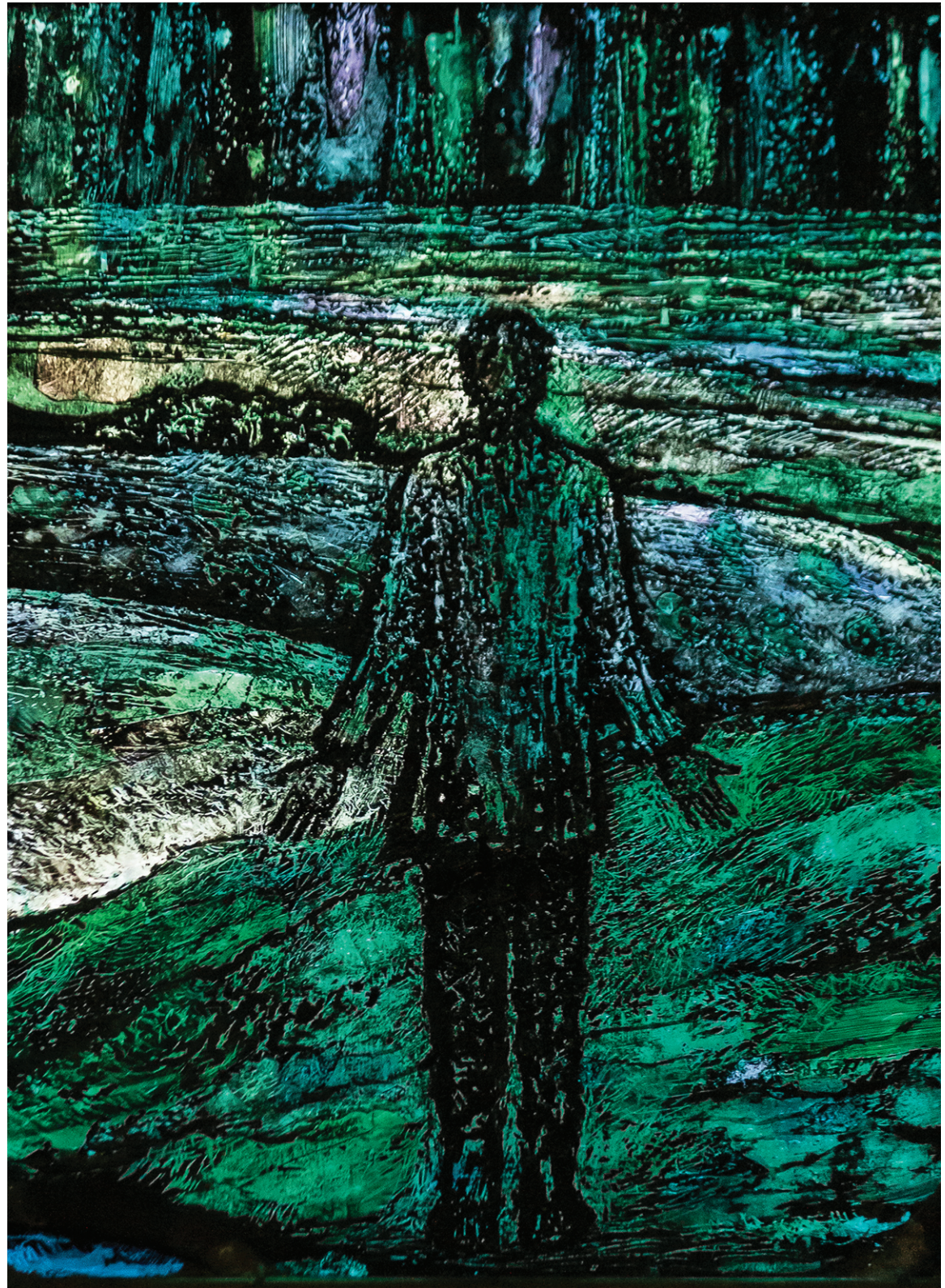
**Piano Sonatas
Nos. 1 and 3**

**Piano Sonata No. 2
– II. Adagio**

Five Preludes

Autumn

**George Rowley,
Piano**



Ivor
GURNEY
(1890–1937)

	Five Preludes (1919–20)	10:52
❶	No. 5 in D major	2:05
❷	No. 2 in A minor	1:05
❸	No. 4 in F sharp	2:09
❹	No. 3 in D flat major	2:54
❺	No. 1 in F sharp major	2:18
	Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor (1910)	26:51
❻	I. Molto allegro	8:38
❼	II. Largo	11:27
❽	III. Moderato	6:46
	Piano Sonata No. 3 in D minor (1919)	22:03
❾	I. Moderato	12:48
❿	II. Adagio	9:10
⓫	Two Poems for Piano – No. 1. Autumn (1912)	4:17
⓬	Piano Sonata No. 2 in D major – II. Adagio (1919)	10:08

Ivor Gurney (1890–1937)

Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 3 • Piano Sonata No. 2 – II. Adagio • Five Preludes • Autumn

Born in Gloucester on the 28 August 1890, Ivor Gurney's musical talents were soon recognised after he joined the choir at All Saints Church in 1898, and only two years later he won a place as a chorister in the Gloucester Cathedral Choir which in turn allowed him to attend King's School. In 1906, he became an articled pupil to the cathedral organist, Dr Herbert Brewer, and, together with fellow pupils Herbert Howells and Ivor Novello, underwent a rigorous apprenticeship. In 1911, he was awarded an open scholarship to the Royal College of Music where he studied composition with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. His college education was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War in which he served as a private with the 2/5th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment. During his time in France, Gurney's poetic gift revealed itself and his first book of poems, *Severn & Somme*, was published at the end of 1917. In September of that year, during the Passchendaele offensive, he was gassed and invalided home, and following his discharge from the army in October 1918 he returned to the RCM, where over the next four years he composed music at an astonishing rate. Those works included a symphony (now lost), two major orchestral essays, *A Gloucestershire Rhapsody* (1919–21) and *War Elegy* (1920), three string quartets, a piano trio, three violin sonatas, fifteen preludes, two sonatas for solo piano and 185 songs. Tragically, Gurney's underlying bipolar illness, as we now know it, was exacerbated by the pressure of this immense creativity – indeed the composer Gerald Finzi noted presciently something of this fragility, when, after hearing a performance of Gurney's song *Sleep* in 1921 wrote, 'one can feel the incandescence in this song that tells of something burning too brightly to last, such as you see in the filament of an electric bulb before it burns out.' By 1922 Gurney's unstable mental condition reached breaking point and his extreme behaviour led to him being declared mentally insane. He was committed to Barnwood House, an asylum near Gloucester, and was later moved to the City of London Mental Hospital in Dartford where he would spend the rest of his life. During the early years of his incarceration Gurney continued to write both poetry and music but as his mental decline accelerated, his ability to compose tailed off and he fell musically silent in 1926. He died on Boxing Day, 1937.

Gurney's earliest compositions date from around 1904 and include several short descriptive piano pieces given titles such as *Reverie* and *Omar Khayyam*. In 1905 he was introduced to the Hunt sisters: Emily was a pianist and Margaret a violinist, and together they welcomed Gurney into their home and nurtured his musical talents. It is no coincidence that the greater part of his juvenilia are works composed for those instruments. Having begun his studies it is not known what pieces he may have taken to his lessons with Stanford – songs would certainly have featured. Gurney's masterly *Five Elizabethan Songs* were completed in early January 1914 and are dedicated to Emily Hunt. After the war Gurney studied composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams, and apart from the works already mentioned, he also composed nine preludes for piano from which he selected five for later publication by Winthrop Rogers, as recorded here. Texturally, these preludes echo the lyrical sound world of Chopin (D flat) and Schumann (A minor, with its affinity with the ninth *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15), while harmonically the influence of Scriabin is discernible. Gurney was, at this time, learning Scriabin's *Piano Sonata No. 3*, and in a letter to his friend the musicologist Marion Scott dated September 1919, he alludes to composing 'a Piano Prelude *a la Scriabine*'. This prelude is quite possibly the (fourth) one in F sharp, as it inhabits a similar aural landscape as Scriabin's *Étude in C sharp minor*, Op. 2, No. 1.

The most ambitious of Gurney's early piano works is his three-movement *Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor*, composed between May and December 1910 and dedicated to Margaret Hunt. On the surface it appears to be very much in the mould of those by Brahms, Schumann and Grieg. Indeed, the first movement's opening idea – an expansive, self-confident theme – could well have been penned by any one of them. It is still, however, a striking opening for a 20-year old fledgling composer who appears to want to 'think big'. The opening movement, *Molto allegro*, is firmly rooted in sonata form, with the first subject becoming the driving force for most of the movement's subsequent ideas; a dance-like second subject appears to be unrelated, but it is structurally essential. Two further ideas (both relying heavily on syncopation) give way to a development section which takes the movement's opening theme through various tonalities. Meretricious octaves lead to a recapitulation which, with some minor variation, is a standard repetition of the exposition. Unusually for such a relatively strict structure, Gurney does not give us a definite ending, but instead, a Beethovenian *largo* appears to 'grow' out of the first movement coda. Thematically, however, there is a link between these two movements as the general shape of both main themes is structurally similar. This second movement *Largo* is, for the most part, through-composed, where several contrasting ideas become increasingly more agitated and unsettled (a parallel is the mercurial slow movement of Schubert's *Piano Sonata, D. 959*). A reprise of the opening material takes us to a coda even more abstruse than its first movement counterpart, where once again we are left suspended and uncertain. However, Gurney does bring us back to the comfortable orbit of F minor in the third movement *Moderato*. Here, a *moto perpetuo* is contrasted with a swaggering Elgarian second subject that is almost orchestral in its conception. A third idea

based on an arpeggio figuration (not dissimilar to those used by Schubert) completes the work's principal ideas, which are repeated and developed with youthful deftness. After a moment of calm, a brief coda moves us into the optimistic world of F major – its throwaway ending scything through the sonata's, at times, emotionally troubled musical journey.

In Gurney's *Piano Sonata No. 3 in D minor* we inhabit a very different sound world from that of the first. In two distinct movements, it opens with a lengthy essay that eschews a rigid sonata structure for one with a double exposition, where the material in the first half is repeated, with variation, in the second. Many writers have observed that, in Gurney's later style, there is a tendency towards constant semiquaver movement – a relentless rhythmic tread which can at times provide the listener with little or no relief. Others have remarked that this stylistic fingerprint is something Gurney uses to great effect and adds to the view that his style was both advanced and modernist. Gurney creates considerable contrast in this long movement, relying heavily on textural variety and repetition and variation of melodic cells. Repeated listening will testify to the movement's structural cohesion and developmental ingenuity. The second movement begins in the distant key of F sharp minor, with the ghost of Beethoven close by: Gurney surely knew the former's 'Hammerklavier' sonata, with its slow movement in the same key? Once again, semiquavers dominate but this time the slow, spectral tread transports us into a very different soundscape altogether.

In a letter to his close friend, the musicologist Marion Scott, Gurney provides an illuminating statement about his aesthetic beliefs: 'it seems to me, a work of Art never should be greatly praised for its perfection; for that should set off its beauty, and its beauty or truth should be the chief impression on the mind.' In many ways, this artistic creed sheds light not only on Gurney's compositional processes but it also offers an explanation as to why, as some critics argue, his music can be uneven in quality. For Gurney, the pursuit of 'beauty' was far more important than striving for a crafted finish; something his teacher Sir Charles Stanford failed to grasp. When the 'spark from heaven' fell, Gurney would work at an intense pace until his inspiration tailed off. These initial musical ideas would often be written down fully formed with no need for further revisions, and indeed many of Gurney's finest songs were composed in this way. However, when faced with a larger-scale composition, sometimes the momentum of his vision overwhelmed the technical and structural demands required to bring it to completion. This is less evident in Gurney's smaller works, such as the preludes and *Autumn* – the first of two *Poems for Piano* composed in 1912, the second of which, *Wind in the Wood*, was left unfinished. Gurney's title, *Poem*, is suggestive of a mood, rather than a programmatic narrative. Indeed, the original title, *Moods of Nature*, was crossed out on the front page of the manuscript. This charming and evocative piece has a hint of Grieg and an echo of Edward MacDowell, whose popular *Woodland Sketches, Op. 51* were similarly inspired by nature. *Autumn* has a ternary structure where a bucolic windswept middle section is flanked by music of a gently lilting and wistful quality.

In June 1919, Gurney wrote to the poet J.W. Haines: 'Just now work does not go well – a Piano Sonata has proved more difficult than pleasant.' This *Piano Sonata No. 2 in D major* was intended to be a three-movement work. Unfortunately, the unfinished manuscript for the first movement, *Allegro molto*, is encumbered by numerous crossings out and re-workings. All that remains of the finale is a brief sketch for an introduction, given the title *Prelude to Last Movement*. The only fully completed movement is the 'slow movement', *Adagio*. This deeply poignant music seems suffused with memories of loss; in particular, his father who had died in May and his close friend Margaret Hunt who had died of influenza in March. She had been his lifelong muse, and Gurney later wrote that 'my work was meant for her'. The movement opens with an elegiac *nobilmente* theme that leads to a brief climax before a restatement of the opening music. This is followed by a contrasting section marked *leggiero* that is reminiscent of a similar passage in the *War Elegy* composed only a year later. The loss of Gurney's comrades was never far from his thoughts and was not only a spectre that haunted his short and tragic life, but also his poetry and music.

Ian Venables

George Rowley



George Rowley began his studies at the age of seven in his home town of Kidderminster. He later received a scholarship to the Junior Royal Birmingham Conservatoire to work with Magdalena Nasidlak before embarking on undergraduate studies with James Kirby at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama. While at the RWCMD, he was accepted to study on an Erasmus exchange programme at the prestigious Hannover Hochschule für Musik, before graduating with a first class honours degree in 2015. Rowley continued his studies with Mark Bebbington at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, graduating with the highest distinction in his cohort. Most recently, he has been a pupil of professor László Borbély at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, having won a full scholarship from the Joseph Weingarten Memorial Trust. As a soloist, Rowley has performed throughout the UK and abroad, including appearances at the Winchester Festival, Holywell Music Room and the Liddell Concert Series. In addition, he has participated in masterclasses with pianists such as Nikolai Demidenko, Freddy Kempf, Steven Osborne, Natalia Trull and Peter Donohoe, and has reached the final stages of many competitions including the Brighton and Hove Concerto Competition, the Intercollegiate Piano Competition (Beethoven Piano Society of Europe) and the Sir Ian Stoutzker Prize. Rowley is based in the West Midlands where he is in high demand as a performer and teacher. He is currently a professor of piano at the Junior Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and has recently joined the piano faculty of Cheltenham Ladies' College while also teaching privately from his studio.

Photo: Candian Li

Ivor Gurney's songs (Naxos 8.572151) have long earned him renown but his works for piano, composed over the period of a decade, are hardly known. The lyrically beautiful *Five Preludes* reflect influences as wide as Schumann and Scriabin but preserve Gurney's expressive freshness. The *Sonatas Nos. 1* and *3* inhabit very different sound worlds from each other, and only one movement of *Sonata No. 2* has survived, a deeply poignant elegy – all of which are heard here in world premiere recordings. His poem for piano, *Autumn*, offers further opportunity to discover this rarely heard music by a composer for whom the pursuit of beauty was of the utmost importance.

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***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

George Rowley, Piano

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet

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