

# The English Song Series • 19

# GURNEY Songs

All night under the moon • By a bierside On the downs • Lights out • Tears • Sleep

Susan Bickley, Mezzo-Soprano • Iain Burnside, Piano



### Ivor Gurney (1890–1937) Songs

Ivor Gurney was one of the truly exceptional talents to emerge from the First World War. He was a poet as well as a composer, and one of the most prolific letter writers of all those who fought in the 1914-18 trenches.

Gurney's talent was not fully recognised by the time of his death, in a mental institution, on 26th December 1937. Yet a few knew of his double artistic gift. Gerald Finzi who assessed Gurney's music, remarked 'There is so little one can really be sure is bad'. Stanford, Gurney's teacher, said that of all his pupils, 'the one who most fulfilled the accepted ideas of genius' was Gurney. Whether this 'tall, gaunt, dishevelled man clad in pyjamas and dressing gown', a heavy smoker who banged the asylum piano to the annoyance of others, then 'several times managed to set fire to his bedlinen'; and who survived before that on a twelve shillings a week army pension, fitted that image, listeners to this disc must judge.

First clear signs of mental instability surfaced in 1913. Yet Gurney's spirits and courage held up throughout the war. He served as a signaller with the Gloucestershire Regiment on the Somme and at Neuve Chapelle: and as a machine-gunner near Passchendaele. before being wounded and gassed, and sent back, in 1917, to a year's tedious convalescence in British war hospitals. Yet these mixed highly emotional experiences fired his most remarkably productive period, 1919-21. 'To dawn often I laboured, and with keen cares/ Kept sleep away with wary avoidance, till/ Sun's fire topped the steep of the Eastern hill.' Night and day, traipsing along the Cotswolds' 'great Roman-trod hillsides' or 'walking the flint ways' of the Chilterns. Gurney conceived song after song, sometimes roughhewn, yet almost all inspired, deploying his unique talent - being a poet also - for adapting each vocal line to the natural idiosyncrasies of ordinary speech.

In his 'making-passion', which embraced piano and chamber music also, we might liken Gurney to the Tudor lutenists, or the German *Lieder*-composers. Many of the poets he set were Georgian-era contemporaries, their poetry hot off the press; and we may sense the composer's attraction to their subjects here: growth and loss; joy and kindness; memory; sleep; childhood; carefree playfulness; young love; mystery, desolation, abandonment, resignation; moonlit nights; the wind, and voyaging; land, and man's relation to it; and the process of making.

Gurney was an avid admirer of John Masefield. His setting of [I] On the downs begins rather like a ballad setting, but its sheer variety reveals the fertile exuberance and originality of his musical lexicon. After he and his friend F. W. (William) Harvey made a fleeting afternoon visit to Masefield's house at Boar's Hill in 1919 he wrote to their fellow-poet and confidant John Haines: 'Neither (of us) thought Masefield cared much for By a bierside, but Upon the downs pleased him'. Did Gurney's fondness for psalm-like triplets perhaps owe as much to his years as a Gloucester Cathedral chorister and organist as to (say) Brahms?

The forlorn desolation of [2] Ha'nacker Mill is spelt out by the oblique, modal qualities of Gurney's melodic line. Halnaker Mill in Sussex, first mentioned in 1540, was struck by lightning and badly damaged in 1905. Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953), like Masefield, was one of the Georgian poets who gained favour after the Great War, and were highly esteemed (and soon joined) by Gurney

Intriguingly the Scots ballad [3] The bonnie Earl of Murray, taken from Thomas Percy's Reliques, was set by Brahms (as Murrays Ermordung) in his Lieder und Romanzen, Op. 14: Gurney knew his Brahms and Schumann backwards, as his piano pieces testify. James

Stewart, a 'fair youth' of royal descent, was murdered by George Gordon, Marquess of Huntly, a rival claimant to his estates, outside his castle in Fife. At home in Doune, near Stirling, his young wife looks in vain for her husband's return.

Edward Thomas (1878-1917), killed near Arras, was arguably the poet to whom Gurney felt closest in spirit; Thomas's wife was one of the few who visited – and captivated – Gurney later in the asylum. [4] The cherry trees contrasts aerated quaver triplets (denoting falling blossom) with weightier chordings: by stages, the initially blithe personification becomes more loaded and poignant.

Gurney composed [5] By a bierside in August 1916, while the Gloucester regiment was in reserve between periods of front line duty opposite the Germans in Aubers, and finished it 'in two sittings, almost without effort'. 'The accompaniment', he observed, 'is really orchestral'. Its conclusion, expressing sentiments more akin to Brooke or Grenfell, is truly magnificent. The song was orchestrated soon afterwards by Gurney's friend, Herbert Howells (1892-1983).

The five Elizabethan songs (his 'Elizas') [6]-[6] are vintage, yet early, Gurney: they were composed in 1913-14, while he was a student at the Royal College of Music, adapted for a small ensemble and performed in London during the war. With them the young composer achieved an astonishing limpid fluency. [6] Orpheus betrays classic Gurney characteristics: a flowing, inquisitive piano accompaniment, a reluctance to start or pause on the tonic, syncopation, triplets, unsettled textures, chromatic key shifts; spare silences which culminate in a desolate rising sixth (reversing the opening's optimistic fall); and the piano's tender envoi.

☐ Tears and ⑤ Sleep – the latter fired Finzi's devotion to Gurney's music – are among the composer's most exquisite creations. Some have pondered their likely source: the Tudor lutenists; possibly Bach's (or Parry's) organ preludes (when he ceased to be a

chorister around 1906, Gurney was effectively an assistant organist at Gloucester Cathedral). There is arguably some kinship with Quilter's Shakespeare settings.

The blithe **B** *Under the greenwood tree*, with its skittish ending, has the gaiety and verve of Arne's Shakespeare songs; while the lulling, harp-like semiquavers and sentinel-like bass shifts of *Sleep* are as magical as Britten's music for the sleeping Lucretia. Making music serve the words, Gurney here brilliantly extends, by stages, the voice's upward reach. The lifelike birdcalls of **10** *Spring* are comic delight, while one augmented interlude (echoed near the close) feels like a Debussyan cakewalk. Could anything be more affirmative?

III The apple orchard comes from Gurney's 1919 settings of the Canadian-American poet Edward Bliss Carman (1861-1929). Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics was a light-hearted reworking of fragments of the Aeolic Greek female lyric poet; again, Gurney's syncopated 6/8 has the easy lilt of a Britten cabaret song.

Wilfrid Gibson's poem 12 All night under the moon has a Yeatsian feel (compare Warlock's The Curlew) and is one of Gurney's most haunting nocturnal songs. Mt Latmos 13 lay near the mouth of the river Maeander in Turkey. The young shepherd Endymion was loved by Selene, the star-girt moon–goddess. 'Tom O' Bedlam' signified a vagrant or beggar who feigned mental illness.

[4] I will go with my father a-ploughing is a folk-like setting of Seaghan (Seosamh) Mac Cathmhaoil, the republican sympathizer Joseph Campbell (1881-1944), one of several Irish poets to whom Gurney felt drawn. Gurney gives the melody a rich modal feel as lovely as the original folk songs Cecil Sharp, Moeran and others were collecting. Its joyous, affirmative character contrasts markedly with the next song.

15 Last hours is a striking evocation of seasonal ennui. Gurney sets the Georgian poet John Freeman (1880-1929) using extensive chromatic colouring in

both voice and piano part. Its passacaglia-like mood is wonderfully melancholy: the evocation of detail ('oak, elm, thorn', 'grass, trees, grass again'; 'drips, drips') suggests a desolate or deprived landscape, quite the antithesis of those 'Beethoven skies' Gurney enthused about on his walks. The apotheosis, in music, of one of those long childhood days when nothing actually happens.

There is a setting of Kathleen ni Houlihan ... which will knock you flat', Gurney confided in March 1919 to his loyal ally, Marion Scott. He loved setting dark ballads, as Schubert, Loewe and Brahms did before him. Cathleen symbolizes Ireland's rugged beauty and wild struggles. Cummen and Mt Knocknarea, topped by the massive neolithic cairn of Maeve, warrior queen of Connacht, are in County Sligo. An urgent thrumming accompaniment, the bleak vocal fall at 'a black wind and dies', stormy build-up, noble incantations of Cathleen's name and almost plainsong quality of the redemptive penultimate phrase all lend the song impact.

By contrast, a rapturous calm informs the next W.B. Yeats setting: In A cradle song elicits from Gurney an unusually restrained berceuse: the upward tensioning at Yeats's words 'The Shining Seven' suggests heavenly rapture, while the musical repetitions dwell on anticipated loss. The seven stars were probably the Pleiades. Gurney would have been especially aware of many constellations during his frequent night journeys on foot.

Another Yeats song, [16] The fiddler of Dooney took shape in 1918 when Gurney was recuperating near Durham: it has the apt feel of a fast-moving Irish jig. Dooney, Kilvarnet and Moharabuiee (now Maugheraboy) are places in Sligo, where a 'Fiddler of Dooney' competition is still held today.

19 Edward Thomas's *Snow* evokes a strange sense of *ennui*, with its striking Yeatsian image ('a white bird'). Magically catching the mood, Gurney eagerly explores new territory, even veering towards a kind of

primitive atonal note-row: this possibly reflects, as in Gurney's piano *Preludes*, the influence of Scriabin.

For ② The Singer by Edward Shanks (1892-1953), he uses wafting triplets to evoke the nebulous atmosphere of the poem. In an opposite, deliberately bravado vein is the next song ② Nine of the clock. 'John Doyle' was a pseudonym of Robert Graves, another younger Georgian, who like Gurney served in the Somme trenches.

The tender intimacy he brings to 22, Squire's Epitaph in old mode (1920), reminds us that Gurney himself had recently suffered loss and bereavement. 23 The Ship features another of Gurney's 'walking' quaver accompaniments, which he clearly deemed elegant enough for aquatic travel too. Sir John Squire (1884-1959) was one of his sturdiest supporters, who used his position as editor of anthologies and journals to promote Gurney's poetry.

The image of the poet 'using its ink as the spirit wills' To write of Earth's wonders' (24) The Scribe) might easily describe Gurney himself, responding to dawn and a changing landscape after a nocturnal walk, and unleashing a flood of accidentals to catch its varying hues. Note the extraordinary, Brucknerian dying fall: 'All words forgotten - Thou, Lord, and I'. Walter de la Mare remained one of Gurney's loyallest allies after he was institutionalised in 1922, soliciting funds to help maintain him.

Es Fain would I change that note (1918), cavortingly reminiscent of Gurney's 'Elizas' [6]-[0], comes from The First Part of Ayres (or Musicall Humors) (1605), compiled by Captain Tobias Hume, a Jacobean composer and viol-player, soldier and wit. Its ebullience offsets the acute pathos of [26] An Epitaph, with its yearning for 'that lady of the West Country'. Here Gurney subtly stages the octave's rise and fall, artfully slows the melodic line, and (as in [6] Orpheus) favours the interval of a sixth, starting and ending as if in midstream. He himself (see [27]) lost both his father (to

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cancer) and the staunch lady friend of his youth, Margaret Hunt, to the influenza epidemic in 1919.

27-28 These two settings of Robert Bridges (1844-1930) date from 1920 and 1921. Since 1913 Bridges had been Poet Laureate, and Gurney, like many, was influenced by his wartime anthology *The Spirit of Man* (1915), encountering there the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Bridges, in turn, quickly divined Gurney's poetic potential.

The lovely Twhen death to either shall come, written when he resumed his studies after the war (under Ralph Vaughan Williams), reveals how Gurney often slightly misremembered the text of poems he set; while Thou didst delight mine eyes reminds us that Ivor Gurney, too, looked for love and all too briefly found it, whether in Gloucester, High Wycombe or Edinburgh. It was composed the year before he himself became a 'castaway', incarcerated from 1922 with his brother's approval (Gurney having attempted suicide) in first Gloucester and then the City of London Mental Asylum in Dartford

Like [27], Gurney completed [28] The boat is chafing in 1920 at Minsterworth, the Severnside home of his lifelong friend Will Harvey, whose poetry he also set. The forward-looking Scottish teacher, journalist, poet and ballad-writer John Davidson (1857-1909), admired

by T. S. Eliot, committed suicide in Cornwall due to depression, a detail which may not have escaped the composer. Thetis, the mother of Achilles, was a Greek sea-goddess. The 'westward flight' of the boat 'to reach a land unknown' would appeal to Gurney, who, thanks largely to Thoreau and Whitman, admired America and during his postwar illness went off to Wales in hopes of working his passage westward. The song is aptly buoyant.

30 Lights out is the adagio of Gurney's song cycle of that name, published by Stainer and Bell in 1926, by which time he was an inmate of the City of London Mental Asylum in Dartford, Kent. It strongly recalls his early masterpiece, Sleep [9]. His word-setting is again superb – an overall spaciousness is offset by subtle detail ('ambition', 'trouble', 'bitter', which tackle the problem of the unaccented English feminine ending; or his dwelling on 'dearest', marked teneramente). It is signed 'Hucclecote, Christmas 1919', and was composed scarcely a mile from his first asylum (from 1922), Barnwood House, in Gloucester. The 'genius' Gurney penned numerous masterpieces. This is unmistakably one of them.

Roderic Dunnett

### Susan Bickley



Photo: Samantha Ovens

Susan Bickley is firmly established as one of the most versatile mezzosopranos of her generation, equally at home in the opera house or on the
concert platform, with a wide repertory encompassing the Baroque, the great
intereenth-and twentieth-century dramatic rôles and the music of today. She
has performed on many great opera stages of the world in her signature rôles,
which include Kostelnička (Jenūfa), Kabanicha (Kát'a Kabanová), Herodias
(Salome), Baba the Turk (The Rake's Progress), Dido (Dido and Aeneas) and
Irene (Theodora). On the international concert platform she has performed
with all of the major British symphony orchestras and ensembles, as well as
with Les Arts Florissants, the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the Deutsche
Kammerphilharmonie and the NDR Sinfonieorchester, Hannover. She has
sung at Carnegie Hall, the Salzburg Festival, the BBC Proms, and Edinburgh
International Festival. Her discography includes works by Purcell, Handel,
Stravinsky, Bach, Judith Weir, Thomas Adès and George Benjamin for labels
such as EMI, Harmonia Mundi, Hyperion and Deutsche Grammophon.

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### Iain Burnside



Interweaving rôles as pianist and Sony-Award-winning radio presenter with equal aplomb, Iain Burnside ("pretty much ideal" *BBC Music Magazine*) is also a master programmer with an instinct for the telling juxtaposition. His recordings straddle an exuberantly eclectic repertoire ranging from Schoenberg and Copland to Debussy and Judith Weir, with a special place reserved for the highways and byways of English Song, as his recent acclaimed recordings of Finzi, Vaughan Williams and Ireland for Naxos have proved. Signum have released two volumes of Beethoven songs with Iain Burnside, Ann Murray, John Mark Ainsley and Roderick Williams. Other collaborations include those with Lisa Milne, Susan Gritton, Susan Bickley, Mark Padmore and Bryn Terfel. He presents *Sunday Morning with Iain Burnside* on BBC Radio 3

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#### 1 On the downs

John Masefield (1878–1967)

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### 2 Ha'nacker Mill

Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953)

Text in copyright

## 3 The bonnie Earl of Murray

Scots Ballad (17th century)

Ye Hielands and ye Lawlands, O whare hae ye been? They hae slain the Earl of Murray, And laid him on the green.

He was a braw gallant, And he rade at the ring; O the bonnie Earl of Murray, He might hae been a king.

O lang may the ladies Look frae the Castle down, Ere they see the Earl of Murray Come riding through the town.

Now wae be to ye Huntley! And wharefore did ye sae? I bade you to take him, But forbade you him to slay.

He was a braw gallant, And he play'd at the gluve; O the bonnie Earl of Murray, He was the Queen's luve. O lang may the ladies Look frae the Castle down, Ere they see the Earl of Murray Come riding through the town.

#### 4 The cherry trees

Edward Thomas (1878-1917)

The cherry trees bend over and are shedding On the old road where all that passed are dead, Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding This early May morn when there is none to wed.

#### 5 By a bierside

John Masefield

Text in copyright

#### FIVE ELIZABETHAN SONGS

### 6 Orpheus with his lute

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Orpheus with his lute made trees, And the mountain-tops that freeze, Bow themselves, when he did sing: To his music, plants and flowers Ever sprung; as sun and showers There had made a lasting spring.

Everything that heard him play, Even the billows of the sea, Hung their heads, and then lay by. In sweet music is such art: Killing care and grief of heart Fall asleep, or, hearing, die.

#### 7 Tears

Anon. (possibly John Fletcher)

Weep you no more, sad fountains, What need you flow so fast? Look how the snowy mountains Heaven's sun doth quickly waste! But my sun's heavenly eyes View not your weeping, That now lies sleeping, Softly now, softly lies Sleeping.

Sleep is a reconciling.
A rest that peace begets;
Doth not the sun rise smiling
When fair at e'en he sets?
Rest you then, rest, sad eyes!
Melt not in weeping,
While she lies sleeping,
Softly now, softly lies
Sleeping.

### 8 Under the greenwood tree William Shakespeare

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And tune his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.

Who doth ambition shun, And loves to live in the sun, Seeking the food he eats, And pleas'd with what he gets, Come hither, come hither, come hither: Here shall he see No enemy But winter and rough weather.

#### 9 Sleep

John Fletcher (1579-1625)

Come, sleep, and with thy sweet deceiving Lock me in delight awhile; Let some pleasing dreams beguile All my fancies, that from thence I may feel an influence, All my powers of care bereaving. Tho' but a shadow, but a sliding, Let me know some little joy. We, that suffer long annoy, Are contented with a thought Thro' an idle fancy wrought: O let my joys have some abiding.

### 10 Spring

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601)

Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleasant king; Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring, Cold doth not sting, the pretty birds do sing, Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-we, to-witta-woo!

The palm and May make country houses gay, Lambs frisk and play, the shepherds pipe all day, And we hear aye birds tune this merry lay, Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-we, to-witta-woo!

The fields breathe sweet, the daisies kiss our feet, Young lovers meet, old wives a-sunning sit, In every street these tunes our ears do greet, Spring! The sweet Spring!

# The Apple Orchard (from Gurney's Seven Sappho Songs)

William Bliss Carman (1861-1929)

In the apple boughs the coolness Murmurs, and the grey leaves flicker Where sleep wanders.

In the garden all the hot noon I await thy fluttering footfall Through the twilight.

# **All night under the moon** Wilfrid Gibson (1878-1962)

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# The Latmian shepherd Edward Shanks (1892–1953)

Eawara Snanks (1892–193

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### 14 I will go with my father a-ploughing

Joseph Campbell (1879-1944) (Seosamh MacCathmhaoil)

Text in copyright

### 15 Last Hours

John Freeman (1880-1929)

A gray day and quiet, With slow clouds that pass, And in dull air a cloud that hangs, hangs All day. The naked and stiff branches Of oak, elm, thorn, In the cold light are like men aged and Forlorn.

Only a gray sky, Grass, trees, grass again, And all the air a cloud that drip

And all the air a cloud that drips, drips All day.

Lovely the lonely Bare trees and green grass. Lovelier now the last hours of slow winter Slowly pass.

### 16 Cathleen ni Houlihan

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

Text in copyright

### 17 A Cradle Song

W. B. Yeats

Text in copyright

### 18 The fiddler of Dooney

W. B. Yeats

Text in copyright

### 19 Snow

Edward Thomas

In the gloom of whiteness, In the great silence of snow, A child was sighing

And bitterly saying: 'Oh,
They have killed a white bird up there on her nest,
The down is fluttering from her breast.'
And still it fell through the dusky brightness
On the child crying for the bird of the snow.

20 The Singer

Edward Shanks

Text in copyright

21 Nine of the clock 'John Doyle' (Robert Graves, 1895-1985)

Text in copyright

**Epitaph in old mode** Sir John Collings Squire (1884-1958)

Text in copyright

23 The Ship J. C. Squire

Text in copyright

24 The Scribe

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956)

Text in copyright

**Estimate** Fain would I change that note *Tobias Hume (c1569-1645)* 

Fain would I change that note To which fond love hath charmed me, Long, long to sing by roate, Fancying that that harmde me, Yet when this thought doth come Love is the perfect summe
Of all delight:
I have no other choice
Either for pen or voyse,
To sing or write.
O Love they wrong thee much
That say thy sweete is bitter,
When thy ripe fruit is such,
As nothing can be sweeter,
Faire house of joy and blisse,
Where truest pleasure is,
I do adore thee:
I know thee what thou art,
I serve thee with my hart,
And fall before thee.

26 An Epitaph Walter de la Mare

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When death to either shall come Robert Bridges (1844-1930)

When death to either shall come, I pray it be first to me, Be happy as ever at home, If so, as I wish, it be.

Possess thy heart, my own; And sing to the child on thy knee, Or read to thyself alone The songs that I made for thee.

28 Thou didst delight my eyes Robert Bridges

> Thou didst delight my eyes: Yet who am I? nor first

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Nor last nor best, that durst Once dream of thee for prize; Nor this the only time Thou shalt set love to rhyme.

Thou didst delight my ear: Ah! little praise thy voice Makes other hearts rejoice, Makes all ears glad to hear; And short my joy: but yet, O song, do not forget.

For what wert thou to me? How shall I say? The moon, That poured her midnight noon Upon his wrecking sea; — A sail, that for a day Has cheered the castaway.

### 29 The boat is chafing

John Davidson (1857-1909)

The boat is chafing at our long delay, And we must leave too soon The spicy sea-pinks and the inborne spray, The tawny sands, the moon. Keep us, O Thetis, in our western flight! Watch from thy pearly throne Our vessel, plunging deeper into night To reach a land unknown.

### 30 Lights out

Edward Thomas

I have come to the borders of sleep, The unfathomable deep Forest, where all must lose Their way, however straight Or winding, soon or late; They can not choose.

Here love ends—
Despair, ambition ends;
All pleasure and all trouble,
Although most sweet or bitter,
Here ends, in sleep that is sweeter
Than tasks most noble

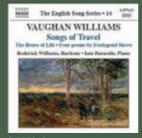
There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown
I must enter, and leave, alone,
I know not how

We regret that for copyright reasons we are unable to reprint the texts for tracks [1]-[2], [5], [12-14], [6]-[8], [20-24] and [26].

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THE ENGLISH SONG SERIES •

19

GURNEY

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14 I will go with my

father a-ploughing

Described by his teacher, Stanford, as 'the one who most fulfilled the accepted ideas of genius', the poet and composer Ivor Gurney composed more than 300 songs despite suffering from bipolar disorder and tuberculosis. The Five Elizabethan Songs show the young composer's astonishing limpid fluency, while Tears and Sleep rank among his most exquisite creations. Comedy, desolation and lovelorn longing all touch the music of this 'lover and maker of beauty', whose songs find ideal interpreters in Susan Bickley and Iain Burnside.

# Ivor GURNEY

(1890-1937)1 On the downs 1:52 15 Last Hours 3:42 Ha'nacker Mill 2:19 Cathleen ni Houlihan 2:56 3 The bonnie Earl of Murray \* 2:27 1:48 17 A cradle song 1:07 The fiddler of Dooney 1:55 4 The cherry trees \* 5 By a bierside 3:59 19 Snow 2:03 2:25 The Singer **Five Elizabethan Songs** 12:45 Nine of the clock 0:53 Orpheus with his lute 2:17 Epitaph in old mode 2:17 3:09 Tears The Ship 2:20 8 Under the greenwood tree 1:35 The Scribe 2:40 3:06 Sleep Fain would I change that note 2:45 Spring 2:37 1:50 An Epitaph When death to either shall come 1:32 1:09 11 The Apple Orchard Thou didst delight my eyes 2:05 (from Seven Sappho Songs) The boat is chafing 1:28 All night under the moon 3:12 3:55 Lights out 13 The Latmian Shepherd 3:45

\* First recording

# Susan Bickley, Mezzo-Soprano • Iain Burnside, Piano

2:26

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