**Silence and Music**

A cuckoo, owls, three ravens, a black swan and a blue bird.

*“The object of my music is not to entertain, but to agonise…*

*it is the contrast between the sweet and the hard that is heart-rending.”*

 *Percy Grainger*

This programme explores that vast twentieth-century secular English choral repertoire which goes under the generic title ‘partsongs’. It is an extraordinarily rich repertoire to which almost all the famous composers contributed. Buried amongst vast quantities of slightly twee pastoralism – the much-derided “cow-pat” school – are to be found many settings of glorious poetry, forming a corpus of sublime twentieth-century madrigals at least as fine as their famous renaissance forebears. However, this programme has another particular theme: how poets and composers reflect upon the natural world as a metaphor for our own emotional experience. At the heart of this programme is the complex relationship between man and nature, the bitter-sweetness of a radiant and beautiful dawn creating the same unbearable sadness of a ravishing song, and both with intimations of mortality.

In many of these pieces there is a nostalgic melancholy as deeply English as the sun setting over green hills. And where better to start than with Stanford’s profoundly glorious, and much imitated, miniature ‘The Bluebird’? That fleeting moment when one senses the truth within one’s soul, a moment of deepest love realised only after loss… or the fragility of our existence reflected in that turquoise flash over the water.

The programme will include Stanford The Bluebird, Vaughan Williams Silence and Music, Elgar There is sweet music, Howells The summer is coming and works by Grainger, Ireland and Warlock and some of Britain’s most beautiful folksong settings.