

The Songs of Thomas Pitfield

James Gilchrist, tenor
Nathan Williamson, piano



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1. The Sands of Dee	3:45	16. September Lovers	1:56
2. By the Dee at Night	2:54	17. The Crescent Boat	1:49
3. The Wagon of Life	2:06	18. Birds about the Morning Air	1:02
4. The Unfulfilled	2:37	19. Lingering Music (second setting)	1:53
5. Winter Evening: Dunham Park	4:43	20. Shadow March	1:24
6. Naïad	1:24	21. Christmas Lullaby	1:10
7. You Frail Sad Leaves	1:52	22. The Child Hears Rain at Night	1:43
8. In an Old Country Church	1:32	23. Song of Compassion	2:03
9. Lingering Music (first setting)	1:49	24. In the Moonlight	1:26
10. Skeleton Bride	3:20	Four Little Songs:	
11. The Carrion Crow	1:55	25. Hilda Had a Garden	0:55
12. So far from my Country	2:32	26. The Tortoise	0:51
13. Faithful Johnny	2:36	27. Marketing	0:59
14. Cuckoo and Chestnut Time	2:00	28. King Nebshazzerod	0:44
15. Willow Song	1:46		

Total playing time 54:57

Thomas Baron Pitfield (5 April 1903 – 11 November 1999)

Foreword

Over the course of a long and productive life, Pitfield composed well over 150 songs. Many of these were written for and dedicated to friends and musical colleagues, particularly singers, including several who hailed from the north of England or who taught at the Royal Manchester College of Music. Dedictees of songs in this album include Honor Sheppard, Owen Wynne, Margaret Hyde, and Ena Mitchell. Other distinguished performers of Pitfield's vocal music included Owen Brannigan and Peter Pears.

The songs vary greatly in mood, from the tragic and sinister to the gently humorous, as well as the delicate and touching, and there are several folksong arrangements. A volume of his songs chosen by himself, spanning the period from 1934 to 1989, lavishly illustrated by his own calligraphy and artwork, particularly trees, and with a foreword by his distinguished pupil John McCabe, was published by Forsyths in 1989, and most of the songs on this album were included in that.

One that was not so included is the remarkable work for reciter and piano, *The Skeleton Bride*, a setting of an eerie poem by his friend and fellow Boltonian poet Phoebe Hesketh, which was originally premiered by his friend and RMCM colleague Sheila Barlow and John McCabe, and later recorded by the great Richard Baker and Keith Swallow. Another recitation, not included in this compilation, was accompanied by a xylophone played with knitting needles, a typical and endearing eccentricity! Pitfield follows, in the tradition of the accompanied recitation, in the footsteps of Sibelius, Prokofiev, Richard Strauss, Elgar, and of course the erstwhile Bowdon resident John Ireland. Most song texts are by Pitfield himself (after once getting inadvertently caught up in a copyright problem) or by close personal friends.

John Turner, January 2024.

THE SANDS OF DEE (Charles Kingsley)

“O Mary, go and call the cattle home
And call the cattle home,
And call the cattle home
Across the sands of Dee.”
The western wind was wild and dank with foam
And all alone went she.

The western tide crept up along the sand,
And o’er and o’er the sand,
And round and round the sand
As far as eye could see.
The rolling mist came down and hid the land:
And never home came she.

“Oh is it weed, or fish or floating hair,
A tress of golden hair
A drowned maiden’s hair
Above the nets at sea?
Was never salmon yet that shone so fair
Among the stakes of Dee.”

They rowed her in across the rolling foam,
The cruel crawling foam,
The cruel hungry foam,
To her grave beside the sea:
But still the boatmen hear her call the cattle home
Across the sands of Dee.

BY THE DEE AT NIGHT (Thomas Pitfield)

And there is the river’s rim,
Sipping at the yielding sand,
Sibilant, creeping, whisp’ring,
Tasting the salty strand,

Greyness envelopes all,
Save for a far light’s glimmer,
Its wriggling image scribbled on the water.
Starless night.

Sounds become disembodied,
Shapes spectral,
Grey sky,
Grey sand,
Grey silence.

THE WAGON OF LIFE (Pushkin, trans. Alice Pitfield,
English verse by Thomas Pitfield)

Though heavy be the burden ever,
At first the wagon smoothly glides,
And hoary Time, the driver, never
A moment drops the reins he guides.

In life’s prime morning gaily mounting
We start, and presently are gone,
Nor cost nor consequences counting
We cry: Drive on!

By noonday we have grown more cautious:
The miles of jogging up and down
Soon grows to midday stomachs nauseous;
So now we cry Be careful clown!

Then onward t’ward our twilight dwelling
Now lulled with long benumbing flight;
Old Time the horses still impelling
Into the bedchamber of night.

THE UNFULFILLED (Pushkin, trans. Alice Pitfield,
English verse by Thomas Pitfield)

I have outlived my aspirations
My dreams, once loved, lie unfulfilled;
Left only suff'rings and negations,
Fruits of a spirit, empty, chilled,
Fate in a tempest unrelenting
Sered my once-flowering diadem.
Will death allay this slow, tormenting
Canker on my native stem?
I, like the chilled leaf, late surviving,
On a bare wintry bough alone
Tremulous in the shrill wind's riving
Await my destiny unknown

WINTER EVENING: DUNHAM PARK (Thomas Pitfield)

Beech boughs are etched on the grey waste of sky
As on a wide-arched canopy of glass;
Below, the snow, and stained leaves counterpane
(White green and brown mosaic) the close-cropped
grass.

Close-cropped by deer, the sole inhabitants
Of parkland nave, a voiceless congregation,
And vesper-shadowy. Now veteran ripe
The time, the winter day's transfiguration.

By Hall and mill and wide enfolding spinneys
The bellcot clock counts out the droop of day;
All other sounds recede into the silence,
All shapes dissolve into the gathering grey.

The sun lies low on saffron-bordered pillow,
And in a cloud-gap, with scarce-visible ray,

The half-bared white rind of the citreous moon
Signals a closing door upon the day.

NAIAD (Dennis Jones)

A life from the river,
A bending red-finned fish
Was caught by the mouth.
A monk's intended dish.

It sad-gulped mammal air
On recreation's hook -
The Lord providing
According to the Book.

A Naiad interposed
Upon her waterway,
Protective of shoals
From such unheeding play.

Unhooked, it awaited
Quietus on the brink;
With tail-flick and splash
Re-entered its dark drink.

YOU FRAIL SAD LEAVES (Thomas Pitfield)

You frail, sad leaves of autumn
Like petals of bronze roses,
You fall sweet-smelling
On pavements sodden with the tears
Of estranged lovers;
Pale emblems of days
Plaintively remembered.

IN AN OLD COUNTRY CHURCH (Thomas Pitfield)

The belfry clock ticks quietly,
Though still as sculptured effigy seems Time,
The sprawling centuries
Compressed into an instant.

The sun's last crawling rays
Filter through fretted stone
Casting a bronzen splendour
On echoing arch and image.

I sit and let the echoing years
With frailest music prick the air;
Till, evening gold all spent,
I tiptoe out into the velvet dusk.

LINGERING MUSIC (Thomas Pitfield)

Over the dusking earth
Fall voices sweet;
Soft as the muted tread of phantom feet,

Quiet as a thought might linger
Through still evening air,
Or sealed lips whisper
A wordless prayer.

So music faded
Comes ghost-like back to trace
It's former strayings
About the vacant place.

SKELETON BRIDE (Phoebe Hesketh)

I come to you now to woo your mind
(Because your heart is dead)
Stripped of defence that you may find
New pleasures for the head

In my chaste and calcined tread.
See how the ribs let the moonlight in!
Feel the sockets of my eyes -
Each one pockets a star; I grin
For you may not chastise
Responses of the flesh, the bloom
Of shoulder, cheek, and breast;
The grey cell of your mind has room
To give a skeleton rest
And still be unpossessed.

I come not to possess or claim
A handshake or a glance;
I come to challenge a living shame
With death's revealing dance
That flings the concealing veils aside -
All seven on the floor -
To strip me naked, heaven's bride
Till now I stand before
Your gaze, a woman no more.

O, won't you test my rigid wrist
And fingers pencil-fine?
Explore the mouth where once you kissed
Your soul away in mine?
And come and take me now dissolved
Of every warm desire -
Each curve and cave and clasping limb
Resolved in Arctic fire?

Fastidious and proud, you may
Remain in my embrace
Remarking the intricate way
My bones fit into place,
Glad that I have no face,
Nor force to pull your soul away
From gravity to grace.

THE CARRION CROW (English folksong, arr. Thomas Pitfield)

A carrion crow sat on an oak
Derry, derry, derry, dee-o,
A carrion crow sat on an oak,
Watching a tailor shape his cloak.
Heigh-ho carrion crow.

O wife bring me my study bow,
That I may shoot yon carrion crow.

The tailor shot and missed his mark
And shot his old sow through the heart.

O wife, some brandy in a spoon,
For our little sow is in a swoon.

The old sow died and the bell did toll,
And the little pigs prayed for the old sow's soul.

SO FAR FROM MY COUNTRY (Irish folksong words and music collected and arranged by Thomas Pitfield)

So far from my country, so far from my home;
Strange faces about me, strange highways I roam.
No yearnings will span me the slow absent years
Nor bridge the salt ocean, the hoard of my tears.

In the country that bred me I was happy and free,
For there lived my dear one, and there would I be.
She treads the home acres, long hallowed and known,
And I a far desert, bereft and alone.

FAITHFUL JOHNNY (Arranged and Scottish dialect words adapted by Thomas Pitfield)

When will you come again,
My faithful Johnny?
When all gathered is the corn,
And the boughs of leaves are shorn,
I will come again,
My sweet and bonny.

Then winter's wind will blow,
My faithful Johnny.
Though the snowdrifts block my way,
And as black as night the day,
I will come again
My sweet and bonny.

Then will you meet me here,
My faithful Johnny?
Though the night were Halloween,
When such fearful sights are seen,
I will meet thee here,
My sweet and bonny.

O, come not by the moor,
My faithful Johnny,
Though I prowling demons meet,
I will come again to thee,
My sweet and bonny.

And shall we part again,
My faithful Johnny.
No not while my eyes can see
Thy fair face so dear to me.
We'll not part again,
My sweet and bonny.

CUCKOO AND CHESTNUT TIME (Robert Faulds)

A soft enchanted season,
Cuckoo and chestnut time
Ledges of chestnut heaped
With the chestnut flower at prime,
Where the pulse of summer beats
In one brief rhyme:

From dawn to soft of evening
Cuckoo to cuckoo cries
Threading the summer air
With throb of warm surprise,
Wizard that old sweet craft
To wizard plies.

A spell lies on the season,
A spell lies quick in me
That this worn heart should scale
This chestnut cliffs in glee,
And take its pleasure there
With wind and bee.

WILLOW SONG (William Shakespeare)

A poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow.
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow.

The fresh streams ran by her,
And murmured her moans;
Sing willow, etc..
Her salt fears fell from her,
And softened the stones,
Sing willow, etc.
Sing all a green willow must be my garland.

SEPTEMBER LOVERS (Thomas Pitfield)

From a day one soft September
Tinged with gold of earth and sky,
Two lovers I remember,
That were you and I.

Now by partless ways they wander
Through September's gilded haze,
See the lonely highways yonder
Of their yesterdays.

THE CRESCENT BOAT (John Grecon Brown)

The moon is but a crescent boat
Sailing out about the night -
Plighting a course across the sky.
Watch it closely when the night is clear
And you'll see its thin-laced sail
Bulging tight about the boat.
On certain nights, when the wind is right
You can see it go by drifting clouds,
Then pass on among the stars.

BIRDS ABOUT THE MORNING AIR (Thomas Pitfield)

Birds about the morning air
Squander music everywhere,
Caring not if you or I
Keep their songs or let them die.

But the songs I, careless, make
Not so careless I forsake.
Hoping that my songs will be
Cherished in your memory

LINGERING MUSIC (see above)

SHADOW MARCH (Robert Louis Stevenson)

All round the house is the jet-black night;
It steals through the window-pane;
It crawls in the corners, hiding from the light,
And it moves with the moving flame.

Now my little heart goes a-beating like a drum
With the breath of the bogey in my hair,
And all round the candle the crooked shadows come,
And go marching along up the stair.

The shadow of the balusters, the shadow of the lamp,
The shadow of the child that goes to bed,
All the wicked shadows coming, tramp, tramp, tramp,
With the black night overhead.

CHRISTMAS LULLABY (Thomas Pitfield)

I stand beside your manger crib,
A lullaby to sing;
And came to bring a birthday gift,
But had not worth to bring.

My words are vain and idle talk,
A new-born child to greet,
So I will leave your lullaby
For angels to complete.

THE CHILD HEARS RAIN AT NIGHT (Thomas Pitfield)

As I lie in bed at night,
Darkness all about my bed,
I hear the tapping of the rain
Above my head.

At my bedroom window too,
Drumming to the wind's complaint,
Shower and gust, and dripping eaves,
Now loud now faint.

And it makes me feel afraid,
Groaning wind, insistent rain,
Clamouring to enter in
At my window pane.

So I cover up my head,
With the sheets and counterpane;
Then I cannot hear the wind,
Or the beating of the rain.

SONG OF COMPASSION (Thomas Pitfield)

In winter night when half awake
In bedroom safely lying
I hear the icy wind without
In swaying branches sighing.

And think of birds and beasts that seek
Night shelter in all weathers;
Of all whose only covering is
A coat of fur or feathers.

Good night to all created things,
Of bough or bank or burrow;
The hare, the lamb born in the snow,
The tiny wren, the sparrow.

IN THE MOONLIGHT (French Nursery Song, arranged and translated by Thomas Pitfield)

In the moonlight pleading,
Here, Pierrot, am I.
Please your pen I'm needing
For my love's reply.

Candle-light nor firelight
Neither have I got;
Let me in your house then,
Pierrot, will you not?

In the moonlight stilly,
Pierrot then replied:
Get you off, you silly,
Waking me inside!

I've no pen to lend you,
Nor a friendly boon.
For a young enchantress
Doting on the moon.

FOUR SHORT SONGS (Thomas Pitfield)

Hilda had a Garden

Hilda had a garden
That nearly hid the sky,
With rose trees and lady-grasses
Seven feet high.

The king's maid took her flowers
To make the table sweet;
But the king took Hilda
To make his home complete.

The Tortoise

With heavy breathing
And hurrying feet,
The tortoise walks
Down Slow-go Street.

His usual pace
Is an inch a year;
But if it's a race,
A little quicker.

Marketing

Out one morning went Miss Green -
Marketing in town,
Wearing a blue bonnet
And a coat of brown.

Met Miss White upon the way,
Going to market too,
Wearing a brown bonnet
And a coat of blue.

King Nebshazzerod

The wicked King Nebshazzerod
Sat on a marble throne.
He gave his servants naught to eat,
Nor even his dog a bone.

The dog bit off his master's leg,
He ordered one of wood,
And said, "Get out, you naughty dog,
I'd kick you if I could!"

Thomas Pitfield

Thomas Pitfield (1903-1999) was born in Bolton, Lancashire, into a conventional and narrow-minded working-class family. Drawn to music and driven by a compelling urge to compose, he overcame initial setbacks and gained a musical grounding through private lessons in piano, cello and harmony. Employed unhappily in the drawing-office of a local engineering firm, he saved enough money to pay for a year's study at the Royal Manchester College of Music, mainly studying harmony and cello, after which he scraped a modest living for seven years from a mixture of music teaching, composition, writing and art. In 1931 Oxford University Press published his *Prelude, Minuet and Reel* for piano, which became one of his best known works. In the same year he gained a scholarship to study at the Bolton School of Art as a teacher of craft and cabinet-work. This led to a variety of teaching posts in the Midlands, but music was his creative focus and as more of his works were performed and published his reputation as a composer grew. From 1947 to 1973 he taught composition one day a week at the RMCM, where his pupils included David Ellis, Christopher Littlewood, John McCabe, John Ogdon, Max Paddison and Ronald Stevenson. The rest of the week he devoted himself to composing.

Pitfield was largely self-taught as a composer and considered himself to be one working in and closely allied to the community. His music was often written for specific occasions or performers, much of it for friends, amateurs or children. His style was typically light-hearted and small-scale, with frequent reference to folk-music and often using irregular rhythms. Larger-scale pieces included two piano concertos, concertos for violin, cello and recorder, and more than a dozen stage works, including the morality plays *The Devil in White* (composed in 1939 in pacifist protest at unfolding events in Europe) and *Adam and the Creatures* (1968), the operas for young performers *Coney Warren* (n.d.) and *Tansy* (1956), and several ballets. *Night Music* (1941) was an outstanding contribution to the unaccompanied choral repertoire and his cantatas *A Sketchbook of Men* and *A Sketchbook of Women*, both published in 1953, were deservedly popular. He became a notable and prolific composer who enjoyed numerous performances and broadcasts of his works, especially in the North West region of England, some by leading artists such as John Barbirolli, Vilém Tauský, Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, John McCabe, and Ronald Stevenson.

Although his main focus was music, Pitfield was also an artist, craftsman and poet, and was interested in nature study, religion, philosophy and folklore; as a result of having such a wide range of interests he found life to be 'endless fascination.' In everything he did, good design

and the desire to give pleasure through the way things looked and the quality of the materials they were made from were paramount, not least in the house in Bowdon, 'Lesser Thorns', which he designed for himself, and the furnishings he made for it. He lived according to principles he worked out for himself, maintaining a modest and honest lifestyle directed by the precepts of vegetarianism and pacifism, keeping faith with his innate gifts to make a living and a home for himself and his like-minded wife Alice. He took immense pleasure in spending time outside walking in the natural world and in particular was drawn to the beauty of trees. His art and craft work reflects the revival of interest in the arts and crafts during the first half of the 20th century, his outstanding work in this area being *The Poetry of Trees*, a series of prose poems written out by him in his calligraphic bookhand, accompanied by superb linocuts of trees, in a binding with boards of English oak and tooled leather, the whole an exquisite complete art work, following the precepts of William Morris and Douglas Cockerell.

Pitfield wrote poetry all his life, producing more than 260 poems. He wrote his poems quite quickly, while travelling on buses, or out walking, or sitting at home with Alice in the evenings, and in a wide variety of established forms, including free verse. He had an enthusiasm for nonsense verse, and relished creating 'an assemblage of related words that click neatly into place.' Most of Pitfield's light and nonsense verse is, however, not aimed at children. It is sophisticated within its genre, written to please himself and make its adult readers smile. An early copyright problem with two poems from James Joyce's *Chamber Music* deterred him from using words by others in his musical settings, as well as the fact that copyright fees payable to the words' authors were deducted from his own fee. With a few exceptions – A.E. Housman, W.B. Yeats, W.H. Davies, Robert Louis Stevenson and Walter de la Mare – he found most contemporary poetry lacking in lyricism and turned to his own poems as a resource, setting many of them over the years, leading him to acknowledge in later life that 'I have perhaps patronised my own lyrics overmuch.'

His short poem 'Words', published in his compilation *Johnnyrobins* (1995), summed up his joy in playing with words:

I love them all -
Words are my playthings.
I toss them like a ball,
I like to say things.

Something along similar lines could be said of his music.

Thomas Pitfield enjoyed a long life, well-lived according to his own unswerving principles. Whether creating music, words, art, calligraphy or bookbindings, he was a honest craftsman who used his skills to make what he believed to be true and important. He wrote several volumes of autobiography of which the first, *No Song, No Supper* (1986) recounts his early struggles, his wartime pacifism and eventual successes with characteristic gentleness and humour, not least in a concluding 'auto obituary' in which he mocked his own profuseness saying that 'it was for his large output in music that he is best forgotten.' Fortunately the current revival of interest in his life and works, reflected in new publications and recordings, means that this is not the case.

Rosemary Firman

James Gilchrist, tenor

Tenor James Gilchrist began his working life as a doctor, turning to a full-time music career in 1996. His musical interest was fired at a young age, singing first as a chorister in the choir of New College, Oxford and later as a choral scholar at King's College, Cambridge. His extensive concert repertoire has seen him perform in major concert halls throughout the world with renowned conductors including Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Sir Roger Norrington, Bernard Labadie, Harry Christophers, Harry Bicket, Masaaki Suzuki and Richard Hickox.

A master of English music, James has performed Britten's *Church Parables* in St Petersburg, London and at the Aldeburgh Festival, Nocturne with the NHK Symphony in Tokyo and *War Requiem* with the San Francisco. Recent highlights have included the role of Rev. Adams in Deborah Warner's award-winning production of Britten's *Peter Grimes* at the Opéra National de Paris, the Teatro Real in Madrid and at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Equally at home in the baroque repertoire, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and *St John* and *St Matthew Passion* feature prominently in James' schedule. Indeed, he is celebrated as perhaps the finest Evangelist of his generation; as one review noted, "he hasn't become a one-man Evangelist industry by chance".

James' impressive discography includes recordings of *Albert Herring* (title role) and *St John Passion* with the Academy of Ancient Music, the Finzi song cycle *Oh Fair To See*, and critically-acclaimed recordings of Schubert's song cycles for Orchid Classics. More recently he has released *Solitude* and

Songs of Travel for Chandos Records, both alongside Anna Tilbrook, and *100 Years of British Song*, a three-part recording project focussing on 'The Art of British Song' in collaboration with pianist Nathan Williamson for Somm Recordings. His most recent release, *Inn Stetter Hut*, is a recording of 16th Century viol music recorded in collaboration with the Linarol Consort for Inventa Records.

Nathan Williamson, piano

Pianist and composer Nathan Williamson collaborates on a range of innovative performance and creative projects with a wide variety of artists both at home and abroad.

Performing highlights include *100 Years of British Song*, a three-CD project for SOMM Recordings with James Gilchrist, the complete Beethoven Concertos with the Prometheus Orchestra, recording Sonatas and Nocturnes by Malcolm Lipkin for Lyrita, the premiere of Christopher Brown's 24 Preludes and Fugues, and international tours with the renowned new music ensemble Piano Circus. During the covid pandemic Nathan gave online recitals for City Music Live and regularly streamed live music into schools and care homes.

Recent compositions include *Quartet Black*, commissioned by the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival for the Heath Quartet, song-cycles for tenor James Gilchrist and baritone Jonathan Evers, a piano Quartet, *Crystal*, for the Rossetti Ensemble, and a Sonata for cello and piano commissioned by Charles Watt. Other commissions the Daejeon Philharmonic Orchestra, Tuscaloosa Symphony Orchestra, Mahogany Opera, Endymion, NOW Ensemble, and Bury St. Edmund's Cathedral.

Nathan's first CD for SOMM, *Great American Sonatas* (2017), was hailed by Musical Opinion as 'a landmark in recordings of American piano music' and *Colour and Light* (2019), of British 20th century repertoire, was chosen as Album of the Month in International Piano Quarterly. His recording debut, of Brahms and Schubert, was reviewed by Donald Sturrock as 'a truly electrifying debut from a musician with a rare marriage of thoughtfulness and passion'.

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Producer and Sound Engineer: Oscar Torres.

Piano: Steinway Model D.

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Cover painting - Weaver Bridge at Church Minshull, Cheshire, from the garden of Weaver Cottage, by Thomas Pitfield. Reproduced by kind permission John Turner.

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