

# The Canticle of the Rose

1. PRELUDE (String Quartet)
2. Song: We are the darkness...
3. Through gilded trellises (from *The Sleeping Beauty*)
4. A Song at Morning (excerpt)
5. INTERLUDE (String Quartet)
6. Gold Coast Customs (excerpt)
7. The Canticle of the Rose (from *Three Poems of the Atomic Bomb*)
8. Madam Mouse Trots (from *Façade*)

*The Canticle of the Rose* (*Goodison Quartet No.3*, commissioned by Sir Nicholas Goodison in 2005) is a sequence of six settings of Edith Sitwell, three of which share the image of the rose as a poetic metaphor. The opening Prelude, scored for string quartet alone, presents a fast, disjointed fugue which is halted abruptly to reveal slower underlying material, only to start up again with full force. The last of these emerging layers forms the soft bed of sound over which the soprano emerges in *Song: We are the Darkness*. The heavy, claustrophobic world depicted by Sitwell is mirrored in the static harmony of the song, lifted only during the first reference to the rose (Beauty's daughter/The heart of the Rose). The energy of the opening returns briefly at the end of the song ('That sun and its false light scorning').

*Through gilded trellises* contrasts dramatically with the previous song, although its poetic world is no less surreal. The theme of time –in particular its elusive, fleeting qualities- is articulated through Sitwell's celebrated irregular rhythms, delivered at speed by the soprano. The poem's rhyming structure is loosely palindromic, and this is mirrored in the musical structure of the song. An excerpt from *A Song at Morning* returns to the image of the rose, whose 'secret love' suggests danger and vulnerability (parallels perhaps with Blake's *The Sick Rose*), before the Interlude, again for string quartet alone, provides a mid-point moment of stasis.

*Gold Coast Customs* is a long and striking poem, horrific in its graphic depictions of human slaughter. Sitwell writes: "In Ashantee, a hundred years ago, the death of any rich or important person was followed by several days of national ceremonies, during which the utmost licence prevailed, and slaves and poor persons were killed that the bones of the deceased might be washed with human blood. These ceremonies were called Customs". This setting uses a passage towards the end of the poem.

*The Canticle of the Rose* presents the third and final image of the rose, and like the opening song it inhabits a world imbued with darkness, this poem forming one of three Sitwell wrote in response to the dropping of the first Atomic Bomb in 1945. Presented almost as an afterthought or coda, *Madam Mouse Trots* closes the cycle. The narrative of the poem has been interpreted freely- the cat, with his razor-sharp vision, finally spotting the ill-fated grey mouse in the 'black night'. The quotation from Verlaine, originally at the top the poem, is sung here at the end: 'Dame Souris trotte gris dans le noir'.

*The Canticle of the Rose* was first performed at the Wigmore Hall in December 2005 by Lisa Milne and the Belcea Quartet, and is dedicated to Linda Lee.

Joseph Phibbs

