

Thomas Stearn: *Where Light is a Thought*

Song Cycle Premiere with Teresa Mckendrick (Mezzo-Soprano), Iris Rea (Cello) and Alley Bridge-York (Harp)

Thursday 23rd April 7.15pm,
Upper Chapel

PERFORMANCE
VENUES
CONCERTS

Teresa Mckendrick (Mezzo-Soprano) and Yang Guo (Piano) - *From the River* by Anna Appleby

I - A Musical Instrument

II - How Do I Love Thee

III - Go From Me

The Cloths of Heaven by Rebecca Clarke

Alley Bridge-York (Harp) and Charlie Hardwick (Cello)

Chanson Dans La Nuit by Carlos Salzedo

Après un rêve by Gabriel Fauré

Sunday Morning by Lou Reed & John Cale (arr. for harp and cello, A. Bridge-York)

The Swan from Carnival des animaux by Camille Saint-Saëns (arr. A. F. Pinto)

Meditation and Spring Song from *Four Short Pieces for Violin and Piano* by Frank Bridge

Teresa Mckendrick (Mezzo-Soprano), Iris Rea (Cello) and Alley Bridge-York (Harp) - *Where Light is a Thought* - song cycle by Thomas Stearn (Premiere)

I - Who comes to the dark woods

II - The Holly Tree

III - The idea of light before dawn

IV - The Robin

V - Light like rain

Thomas Stearn - *Where Light is a Thought*

The five poems in 'Where Light is a Thought' tell the story of a lone figure who walks from darkness into light. She leaves her home during the night and walks through woods and then onward into fields, encountering a holly tree and a robin. As dawn arrives the world slowly appears, each of its details acquiring colour and shape and, in some way, becoming real.

The musical settings of the poems immerse the listener in the journey of the lone figure as she walks, stopping at various points to observe, listen and think. The harp delicately expresses her soft footsteps, while the voice and cello create atmosphere and emotional depth, floating effortlessly, describing her senses and thoughts as she eventually journeys into the dawn.

1. Who comes to the dark woods

Who comes to the woods before dawn?
Who walks across long wet fields,
past heavy mounds of cows asleep,
to stand at the door of the woods' dark room?

Who walks unshadowed, unfollowed
by her own life, which she has left at home?

Who is it tripping over tree roots,
bumping into trees –
too dark to see your own hand almost –
falling into the deep blue clutches of ferns?

Imagine the chilly cry of an owl –
an owl would be a sort of charm.

A pity there's no moon. No, a pity
to think of any source of light
in the dark, in the woods
where she's no one and finds herself alone.

2. The Holly Tree

The darkest dark is in the holly tree,
beneath its dome of shiny inky green.
The blackbird sleeps and dreams his melody
of this year's love among the prickled leaves.

*Always ask the holly tree
if it will spare
its pure-white twigs for thee!*

Walk to the dim-lit middle of the wood
and find the deep-green holly stoutly stood.
It's made of secrets and of childhood.
It's made for hiding in and solitude.

*Always ask the holly tree
if it will spare
its pure-white twigs for thee!*

The darkest dark is in the holly tree.
The deepest secrets live amid the leaves.
Stay here inside its home of inky green
with sleep and dreaming birds for company.

3. The idea of light before dawn

Who walks where there is not light
but there is a thought of light?

After the woods there are fields, fields
like an old dim photograph of fields.
There is a vague shape of drystone wall.

She walks in a pale grey photograph –
less real than the wall, less real than the path;
her feet are cold and wet in the wet grass.

She thinks of the detail of grass,
the unoriginal green of grass in the dawn.
She pictures the wall in its mosses and inks.

She walks alone where there is not light
but where light is a thought, thought
by the dark before the making of morning.

4. The Robin

Pip-pip, pip-pip-pip!
Here is a bird
with a morsel of light in its beak.
Light is like this high sharp song,
a quicksilver knife.

Here is the new day's cutlery
which must be polished to glinting.
Robin is always first
to mention the morning.
Pip-pip-pip! or be quick before it is gone –

*light adds ochre to the blackbird's beak
adds pink to the goose's V-shaped feet
adds creases to the origami of the leaves*

*light adds brown to the bouncing wren
adds golden to the age-old lichen
adds weeping to the willow by the stream*

5. Light like rain

Light cannot choose, so blindly falls
on everything the same, like rain –
falls upon the woods and fields and walls

Without a thought light falls,
as everyday and old as rain.
Light falls on woods, on fields and walls the same.

*light adds turquoise to the pool
adds yellow to the bird's foot trefoil
adds orange to the fox and cubs*

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Anna Appleby - *From the River*

“From the River begins with the creation of the poet: she is plucked from the riverbed by the mischievous god Pan and is carved into an instrument, losing her identity as one of the many reeds in the river. She falls in love, a feeling beyond anything she has felt before, and then loses her lover... yet keeps their heart in her own, a second pulse.”

- Anna Appleby

Anna Appleby (b. 1993) is a Manchester-based composer of operatic, choral and chamber music. Highlights of her output include her youth opera *Pay the Piper* for Glyndebourne (winner of ‘Best Opera for Young Audiences’ at the YAM Awards in 2022), and her radio opera *Drought* for the BBC Philharmonic. She is currently a Professor of Composition at the Royal Northern College of Music, having previously been a Teaching Associate in Composition at the University of Sheffield.

From the River was composed in 2019, and premiered by Stephanie Wake-Edwards and Matthew Fletcher at Glyndebourne, during Anna’s residency as a composer. The cycle weaves together three unrelated poems by Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, suggesting a narrative through-line which follows the emotional journey of a “poet”.

1. A Musical Instrument

What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,
And breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river.

He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,
From the deep cool bed of the river:
The limpid water turbidly ran,
And the broken lilies a-dying lay,
And the dragon-fly had fled away,
Ere he brought it out of the river.

High on the shore sate the great god Pan,
While turbidly flowed the river;
And hacked and hewed as a great god can,
With his hard bleak steel at the patient reed,
Till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed
To prove it fresh from the river.

‘This is the way,’ laughed the great god Pan,
(Laughed while he sate by the river,)
‘The only way, since gods began
To make sweet music, they could succeed.’
Then, dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed,
He blew in power by the river.

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan!

Piercing sweet by the river!
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan!
The sun on the hill forgot to die,
And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly
Came back to dream on the river.

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,
To laugh as he sits by the river,
Making a poet out of a man:
The true gods sigh for the cost and pain,
Of a reed which grows nevermore again
As a reed with the reeds in the river.

2. How Do I Love Thee?

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

3. Go From Me

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forbore,
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes, the tears of two.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Biographies

Thomas Stearn is a British composer of contemporary vocal music, with a focus on SATB and small ensemble works. He won first prize at the 2024/25 Stella Jockel Young Composers Competition, with his setting of for music like the sea – Curlew at Redmires (2025). In 2023, his piece Every Shade of Light was premiered at the Leeds Song Festival. He is currently completing his PhD in vocal composition at the University of Sheffield. Thomas achieved an MMus degree from the University of Aberdeen (2018) and a BA (Hons) degree from Falmouth University (2016).

Katharine Towers has published three poetry collections with Picador, most recently Oak (2021). The Floating Man (2010) won the Seamus Heaney Centre Prize and The Remedies (2016) was shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize. A pamphlet The Violin Forest was published by HappenStance in 2019 and in 2023 The Maker's Press published let him bring a shrubbe, a pamphlet exploring the life and music of English composer Gerald Finzi. A fourth collection, The Worrying Rose, is being published by Picador in summer 2026.

Teresa Mckendrick is a Mezzo-soprano and final year English and Music student at the University of Sheffield, currently studying voice under Emily Howard Cobby. Throughout her time as a student, she has enjoyed performing and recording a range of new compositions and arrangements, and previously gave the premiere of Thomas Stearn's song Fall, Leaves, Fall (2024) at St John's Church, Ranmoor. Outside of her experience as a soloist, Teresa has arranged music and provided musical direction for several vocal ensembles; she also works as an Events Assistant for Performance Venues' Curated Programmes concert series.

Iris Rea is a cellist and final year History and Music student at the University of Sheffield, studying cello with Tim Smedley. Currently the principal cellist and secretary of the University of Sheffield Symphony orchestra, she has also enjoyed playing with the Concert Orchestra, Jessop Collective, Chamber Choir and in a range of independently organised chamber ensembles across her time in Sheffield. From 2024-5, Iris was a member of the National Youth String Orchestra and previously attended the Suffolk music school Aldeburgh Young Musicians. Outside of performing, Iris is the co-president of student run society Music in the City and also has experience working behind the scenes of Performance Venues' concerts.

Yang Guo grew up in Sheffield, and studied piano with Valentina Kalashnik. He read philosophy at Cambridge, KCL, and Durham (where he taught until 2022), worked briefly as a maths teacher in Bradford where he sang with the Cathedral choir, and in 2025 completed an MA in law with the University of Law at Sheffield. As a pianist, in addition to solo and orchestral playing, Yang has especially enjoyed collaborating in chamber music and art song, including recent recitals of music by Finzi, Gurney, and Venables with baritone Peter Taylor. Yang has been an accompanist for the Sheffield University Singers' Society since 2015, and a trustee of Classical Sheffield since 2025.

Charlie Hardwick (cello) and **Alley Bridge-York** (harpist) are long-standing collaborators in Sheffield's musical community. They have performed together in orchestral, chamber, and contemporary settings, including a well-received performance of Ravel's Introduction and Allegro. Both performers are Music alumni of the University of Sheffield and fell in love with their respective instruments from a young age, which they both enthusiastically share with their audiences and instrumental students alike.

Charlie is also former student of the Royal College of Music Junior Department. She performs widely across Yorkshire and the Midlands, is lead cellist for Hallam Sinfonia, is a member of the highly regarded Yorkshire ensemble Simply Strings and regularly works with Platform 4. During her degree, Alley won the Julian Payne Performance Prize while studying with Eira Lynn Jones. She is now an active soloist and ensemble player, sought after by orchestras and choirs across the region and making appearances at events nationwide.

As a duo, these excellent musicians explore the complementary and contrasting richness of both instruments, bringing their love of music out through their musicality and approaching all music as an invitation to engage with and enjoy the music.

Coming Soon:

We've got loads of great events coming up, you can visit our website for full details -

www.performancevenues.group.shef.ac.uk

Xenia Pestova Bennett

Friday 24th April - 8:00pm

£5-£17

Firth Hall

In association with Music in the Round.

Pianist and composer Xenia Pestova Bennett has earned an international reputation as a leading proponent of uncompromising music.

Receiving First Prize at the Xavier Montsalvatge International Piano Competition in Spain, as well as prizes in competitions in Paris and New Zealand, she has earned her reputation as “a powerhouse of contemporary keyboard repertoire” (Tempo). Pestova Bennett pushes the boundaries of performance, having played in tropical rainforests, caves, ponds and countless weird and wonderful spaces, and of classical music with electronics, toy pianos, synthesizers and the Magnetic Resonator Piano.

Kris Drever

Saturday 25th April - 7:30pm

£20 (+ booking fee)

Firth Hall

Plus Support: Annie Dressner

Kris Drever is among Scotland's most acclaimed and distinctive contemporary musicians, celebrated for his warm voice, virtuosically expressive guitar playing and imaginative and evocative songwriting.

Over the course of his career, Kris has won hatfuls of honours, including BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards for Best Singer, Best Original Song, and Best Group with Lau. His solo work combines lyrics of depth and authenticity with expertly pitched arrangements, exploring themes of place, identity, and social change, delivered with clarity, compassion, and poetic insight.

Free Concerts on campus

Throughout term time we run free informal recitals and events in Firth Hall, including visiting guests and the performances from the talented students from the Department of Music.

These events are free to attend and are performed at lunch time and rush hour, which we believe make the events accessible for everyone to enjoy. To find out more about these events and to reserve your ticket, head to our website.

Monday 27th April	Lunchtime Concert - Student Performances	Firth Hall	13:10
Wednesday 29th April	Rush Hour Concert - New Music Ensemble	Firth Hall	17:45
Wednesday 6th May	Rush Hour Concert - Pop and Jazz Ensembles	Mappin Hall	17:45

