



PRESTEIGNE PREMIERES

AMY DICKSON SAXOPHONE

REBECCA AFONWY-JONES MEZZO-SOPRANO

KATHERINE BAKER FLUTE

SUZY WILLISON-KAWALEC HARP

PRESTEIGNE FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA

GEORGE VASS CONDUCTOR

PRESTEIGNE
FESTIVAL
GWYL
LLANANDRAS

Presteigne Premieres

New Music from the Presteigne Festival

Amy Dickson *saxophone*
Rebecca Afonwy-Jones *mezzo-soprano*
Katherine Baker *flute*
Suzy Willison-Kawalec *harp*

Presteigne Festival Orchestra
George Vass *conductor*

About George Vass:

'The saviour of contemporary classical music'
BBC Radio 3

'George Vass conducts with committed precision. Playing and recorded sound are both excellent. It's a fascinating achievement, beautifully done'
Gramophone

Variations on 'Lovely Joan'

Thomas Hyde (b.1978)

1. Prelude – Tema – Tema elaborata [2:26]

David Matthews (b.1943)

2. Variation I: Molto vivace [1:57]

Adrian Williams (b.1956)

3. Variation II: Adagio molto [2:59]

Michael Berkeley (b.1948)

4. Variation III: A Frolic for Lovely Joan [3:47]

Christopher Gunning (b.1944)

5. Variation IV: Andante [4:27]

Huw Watkins (b.1976)

6. Variation V: Allegretto [1:15]

Sally Beamish (b.1956)

7. Variation VI: Adagio; very still [2:23]

Matthew Taylor (b.1964)

8. Variation VII: Finale: Prestissimo [3:56]

Martin Butler (b.1960)

Concerto for Soprano Saxophone and Strings

9. Lively, but heavy and grounded – [7:12]

10. Cantilena – [8:07]

11. Presto [5:04]

Hugh Wood (b.1932)

Beginnings: Three Early Songs, for mezzo-soprano and string orchestra, Op. 54

12. Tom O'Bedlam's Song [3:33]

13. Why East Wind chills [5:38]

14. O Unicorn among the Cedars [5:35]

Joe Duddell (b.1972)

15. Mnemonic, for flute, harp and string orchestra [12:25]

Hugh Wood

Divertimento, Op. 51

16. Maestoso – Andante, calmo ma con moto [3:45]

17. Adagietto [3:11]

18. Allegro molto, feroce [2:47]

Total playing time [80:37]

All world premiere recordings

Amy Dickson records by kind permission of Sony Music



Introduction

Founded in 1982 in the former county town of Radnorshire, the Presteigne Festival has become a significant part of the Welsh cultural calendar. Internationally renowned for its commissioning of new work, support of living composers and with a long tradition for the encouragement of young artists, the organisation works closely with composers and performers to create and curate inspiring events for an ever-widening Festival audience, bringing experience-broadening opportunities to its host community.

In its relatively short history, the Festival has commissioned well over 200 new works and has hosted many eminent musicians as composer-in-residence, among them Sally Beamish, Cecilia McDowall, Joseph Phibbs, Peter Sculthorpe, Pēteris Vasks, Huw Watkins and Dame Judith Weir.

In 1989, the Festival founded its own resident chamber orchestra – a group of twenty or so young professionals who make Presteigne their home at the end of August each year, performing under George Vass, the Festival's Artistic Director since 1992.

In common with many cultural organisations, the Presteigne Festival was forced to cancel

all live performances in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As an alternative, the organisation presented its first digital Festival, sustained with generous donations from Festival supporters and re-purposed grant funding from charitable benefactors.

In addition to 'Presteigne Digital' this recording was arranged, featuring premiere recordings of five of the most striking larger-scale commissions from the last seventeen years, performed by a collection of superb soloists and the excellent Festival Orchestra.

New Music for String Orchestra: Presteigne Festival Premieres

The string orchestra **Variations on 'Lovely Joan'**, commissioned as a sixtieth birthday gift for Artistic Director George Vass and to mark the Festival's thirty-fifth anniversary, was first performed on 25 August 2017 by the Presteigne Festival Orchestra. The English folk-tune *Lovely Joan* has long been a favourite with George Vass, so the idea of commissioning a collection of variations from a group of Festival stalwarts seemed an extremely good one.

Thomas Hyde was instrumental in organising the project and it is quite brilliant that, despite the variations being from eight

different composers, they form such a homogenous work.

After Hyde's brief call to arms and statement of the theme, seven variations unfold; first, and without a break, comes David Matthews' compound-time vivace in which the theme appears in the cellos and basses. Adrian Williams, founding artistic director of the Festival, provides the mysteriously beautiful second variation, marked 'adagio molto', which employs rhapsodising from a solo viola and solo cello before dying away to nothing. The third is an extended tongue-in-cheek 'Frolic for Lovely Joan' from Michael Berkeley, who has served the Festival as President for many years. Christopher Gunning, a recognised master of film and television music as well as being a well-represented symphonist, provides the beautifully-paced fourth variation. Welsh composer Huw Watkins is next with a brief, fragmented waltz which ends quietly with violas alone. Composer and viola player Sally Beamish provides the sixth variation, marked 'very still', in which the exquisite writing for solo violins and viola is particularly tender. The prestissimo finale, an orchestral tour de force, is provided by Matthew Taylor. After a long and exciting build-up to a huge climax, the piece ends quietly with a solo five-note double bass figure on which the entire variation is based.

The music of Martin Butler is widely performed and broadcast both in the UK and abroad. Commissioners include the BBC, London Sinfonietta and the Brighton, Cheltenham, Canterbury and Presteigne festivals. His chamber opera *A Better Place* was premiered by English National Opera in July 2001, and the choral work *Two Rivers* was commissioned by the Oxford Bach Choir and Britten Sinfonia the same year. From 2006 to 2008 Butler was 'Composer in Focus' with the Brighton Philharmonic Orchestra, this residency culminating in a major orchestral commission, *From the Fairground of Dreams*. His chamber nonet, *Rondes d'Automne*, was premiered at the Cheltenham Festival in 2011. For many years Professor of Music at Sussex University, Butler now spends more time composing and as a pianist, also co-directing Club Inégales in London.

The **Concerto for Soprano Saxophone and Strings** was commissioned for the 2009 Presteigne Festival with funding from the Colwinston Charitable Trust and premiered that August by Amy Dickson and the Presteigne Festival Orchestra.

There were three things that fuelled Butler's imagination from the outset: Amy Dickson's wonderfully stylish playing, John Coltrane's disconcertingly earthy and

raw rendition of *My Favourite Things* and thirdly, a tiny, bagpipe-like soprano saxophone phrase in his work *Hootenanny* (1994), which he thought deserved a more prominent role elsewhere.

The result is a single-span concerto, which breaks down into three extended sections – fast, slow, faster. The musical language throughout relates to a number of Butler's other pieces – among them *Hootenanny* itself, *Songs and Dances from a Haunted Place* and *American Rounds* – all of which try to find resonances between his own creative voice and the various forms, styles and performing practices of folk music; hence the sometimes raucous, gritty and ornamented solo part, and the prevalence of open strings and double-stopping in the orchestral writing.

Having had a musical upbringing, it was only after graduating in History from Oxford that Hugh Wood decided to dedicate his energies to composition, moving to London in 1954 to study with William Lloyd Webber, Anthony Milner, Iain Hamilton and Mátyás Seiber.

Sometimes violently expressionistic, sometimes poignantly lyrical, his music is powerfully communicative and intensely felt, though when creating lighter moods, such as in the jazzy Piano Concerto, his writing is

equally eloquent. He typically prefers chamber music genres, though large-scale works such as the Symphony and the two Violin Concertos are amongst his most striking.

In 2010, Hugh Wood responded to a commission from the Presteigne Festival with a beautiful reworking and completion of a sequence of **Beginnings: Three Early Songs, Op. 54** for mezzo-soprano and string orchestra that had its origins in the late 1950s when Wood was at the beginning of his compositional career. Wood himself states, 'these are realisations of a youthful project which has involved a thorough rewriting of what already existed and a degree of completion of the missing bits which varies from song to song; but which I hope has resulted in better composition of the whole'. He has also commented that the choice of texts, 'seem to me – not entirely through hindsight – to have, if not a common theme, then a similar atmosphere, to do with mystery, magic, innocence, childhood'.

The first song, 'Tom O'Bedlam's Song' is the most substantially recomposed. Indeed, only the musical idea at the words, 'I know more than Apollo' remained unaltered from the twenty-five-year-old composer. From its opening upward flourish on strings, the voice is projected against constantly shifting, but always precisely focused, textures.

In contrast, the second song, 'Why East Wind chills', needed the least revision with some original passages allowed to stand and others cleaned up or purged of superfluities. This setting of Dylan Thomas ('I have never lost my enthusiasm for him – or for this not terribly well-known poem in particular' says the composer) opens with imitative counterpoint before flowering into an important descending triadic motif that reappears throughout the song.

'O Unicorn among the Cedars', to words by W.H. Auden, is a more intricate and balanced grafting of old and new, and it is not too fanciful to hear a more autumnal mood to the lyricism, notably in the beauty of the cascading downward turns passed through the strings when the music returns to A flat, and the final climax of 'Send strength sufficient for our days'.

There is something playful, and possibly ironic, in the title *Beginnings, Op. 54*, coming from a composer who writes so slowly and whose creative process was once lovingly described by Stephen Walsh as resembling a man 'running in socks on velcro'. Wood did eventually reach Op. 60 with his large-scale *Epithalamion*, another realisation of a youthful project, at the 2015 BBC Proms. For admirers of his music – of which I am one – we keep hoping that as he heads

towards his tenth decade, the velcro might yield enough for a few more opus numbers. Hugh Wood is as much an Elgarian as Schoenbergian, and so it seemed entirely natural when in 2007 he produced a work for string orchestra that adds to that great tradition of English string works that started with Elgar and Vaughan Williams and continued via Britten, Lennox Berkeley and Tippett. 'I planned something straightforward and positive' says Wood.

His **Divertimento, Op. 51** succeeded, but this is not to deny that its intricate textures and soaring melodies also ensures that listeners drawn into its sound world (it's almost impossible not to be) will find here a richness of invention that they will return to again and again.

There are three short movements, the first launched with an introduction marked 'Maestoso'. The central 'Adagietto' is the emotional core of the work. Its ternary form starts with a hushed eight-bar melody on muted strings, which returns extended, and with high solo violin commentary, at the end. The finale is a vigorous 'Allegro molto, feroce' driven forward with a joyful thumping bass until the music reaches its apotheosis in a recapitulation of the first movement's opening bars.

Commissioned jointly by the Presteigne and Hampstead & Highgate festivals, it is dedicated to George Vass on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday.

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Joe Duddell is a British composer, arranger and conductor renowned for his collaborations with artists such as New Order, Elbow and Richard Hawley. He grew up in Manchester and studied at Salford University and later with Steve Martland at the Royal Academy of Music, where he became Composition Fellow. His teaching posts have taken him variously to Exeter, Brunel, Bath Spa and Salford universities. His music has been performed by Colin Currie, Håkan Hardenberger, Thomas Carroll, the King's Singers, and the London, Bournemouth and BBC Scottish symphony orchestras.

In 2011, he was appointed composer-in-residence for Festival No. 6 in North Wales, creating the UK's first pop festival residency, over the years creating sets with a range of artists including Everything Everything, Daughter, Gaz Coombes, Blossoms, Palace, Nadine Shah, Charlotte Church, Rae Morris, The Charlatans and East India Youth. In 2018, Joe started a new writing partnership with composer/producer Lex

Shellard. Inhabiting an ambient sound world, Drift Chamber creates a mix of classical and electronic soundscapes. They released their debut album *Pulse Nocturnes* in February 2019.

Joe Duddell has kindly provided his own note for **Mnemonic**.

Mnemonic: a pattern of letters or ideas which aid the memory. This piece, which in essence is a chamber concerto for flute and harp with string orchestra, attempts to guide the listener through the successive structural blocks by means of anticipating or revisiting musical ideas in order to enhance familiarity. In musical terms this is partly achieved by the material appearing in four related tempos. This metric modulation obviously forms part of the structural blocks and facilitates the co-existence of musical material. The title is borrowed from a play of the same name by Théâtre de Complicité which dealt with issues about memory and time.

Mnemonic was commissioned by the Presteigne Festival with funds provided by the Arts Council of Wales and the PRS Foundation. It was premiered on 26 August 2004 by the artists featured on this recording.

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Presteigne Festival Orchestra

Violin 1

Sophie Mather (leader), Bethan Allmand, Mary Brace, Simon Howes, Emma Oldfield, Katharina Paul

Violin 2

Laura Rickard, Eleanor Bartlett, Eulalie Charland, Catalin Chelaru, Ingrid Sellschop

Viola

Vanessa McNaught, Jennifer Coombes, Diana Mathews, Amy Swain

Cello

Gemma Wareham, Edward Furse, Tom Wraith

Double bass

Ben Daniel-Greep, Marianne Schofield

Assistant conductor

Augustina Kapoti

George Vass (conductor)

Described by BBC Radio 3 as ‘the saviour of contemporary classical music’, respected English conductor George Vass studied at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and the Royal Academy of Music, London. He was appointed Artistic Director of the internationally celebrated Presteigne Festival in 1992. Vass made his professional debut at St John’s Smith Square in 1979 and, as Artistic Director of the Regent Sinfonia of London and Orchestra Nova, has appeared at many of the UK’s major concert halls and festivals.

As a guest conductor he has worked with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Bournemouth Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National and Ulster orchestras, Amsterdam’s Promenade Orkest, London Mozart Players, Malmö Opera Orchestra, the choirs of Royal Holloway, Merton College Oxford and Schola Cantorum Oxford. He has broadcast for BBC Radio 3 and Channel 4 television.

Vass has made over thirty commercial recordings for Champs Hill, Dutton, Guild, Lyrita, Naxos, Resonus Classics, SOMM and Toccatà Classics.

Founder Artistic Director of Nova Music Opera,

he premiered Thomas Hyde’s *That Man Stephen Ward* (2008; revival in 2015) and, for Nova Music Opera, Sally Beamish’s *Hagar in the Wilderness* (2013), Stephen McNeff’s *Prometheus Drown’d* (2014), Cecilia McDowall’s *Airborne* (2014), Charlotte Bray’s *Entanglement* (2015) and Joseph Phibbs’ *Juliana* (2018). He has also conducted Britten’s *Curlew River* (Hampstead and Highgate Springfest, 2009; Nova Music Opera, 2013) and Holst’s *Savitri* (English Music Festival, 2010).

Over the last thirty years he has commissioned and premiered new work from such eminent composers as Sally Beamish, Martin Butler, Gabriel Jackson, Paweł Łukaszewski, David Matthews, John McCabe, Cecilia McDowall, Paul Patterson, Joseph Phibbs, Robert Saxton, Peter Sculthorpe, Huw Watkins and Hugh Wood, in 2017 being given a BASCA Gold Badge Award marking his support for the UK song-writing and composing community.

Recent highlights include a critically acclaimed recording of James Francis Brown’s choral and orchestral music for Resonus Classics, *Sweeney Todd* at Dartington and the much-lauded premiere of Joseph Phibbs’ chamber opera *Juliana* at the Cheltenham Festival.

George Vass is an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music. From 2014 to 18 he was chair of the British Arts Festivals Association, being presented with the 2018 BAFA Exceptional Service Award for his outstanding contribution to the UK festival sector. From 2016 to 2019, he served the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain as a governor and treasurer.



Amy Dickson (saxophone)

British-Australian saxophonist Amy Dickson has been twice nominated for a Grammy™ award and has been acknowledged by *BBC Music Magazine* as one of the world's six best classical saxophonists ever.

Dickson has recorded eight solo albums for Sony Music. Recognised for her remarkable, distinctive tone and exceptional musicality, she made history by becoming the first saxophonist to win a Classic BRIT Award, for Breakthrough Artist of the Year, and in 2016 she was named the UK's Young Australian of the Year.

Amy Dickson began her musical studies at the age of two and took her first saxophone lesson in Sydney aged six. She made her concerto debut at sixteen, and on her eighteenth birthday made her first recording as soloist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. That year she moved to London to study at the Royal College of Music, then at Het Conservatorium van Amsterdam.

As well as receiving the James Fairfax Australian Young Artist of the Year award, she was the first ever saxophonist to win the Gold Medal at the Royal Over-Seas League Competition, the Symphony Australia Young Performer of the Year

Award and The Prince's Prize.

Dickson is a keen interpreter of contemporary music and is devoted to the development of new repertoire for the classical saxophone. Working closely with many living composers, she has already made a substantial contribution to the legacy of the instrument's concerto, chamber and solo repertoire.

Rebecca Afonwy-Jones (mezzo-soprano)

Rebecca Afonwy-Jones studied at the Guildhall School, London and in 2010, graduated from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland with a Masters degree. She began her career at Scottish Opera, in the title role of *Carmen*, subsequently making her company debut for Opera North at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2012.

In 2013, Rebecca made her debut for Welsh National Opera as Countess Geschwitz (*Lulu*) and was invited to remain with the company as their associate artist, returning as a guest in their acclaimed Elijah Moshinsky production of *Cavalleria rusticana*. She has made notable debuts for Grange Park Opera, Festival Opera New Zealand and in the Longborough Festival *Der Ring des Nibelungen* as Wellgunde, which culminates in 2024.

Other engagements include the world premiere of Joseph Phipps' *Juliana* for Nova Music Opera at the Cheltenham Festival, the British premiere of Mendelssohn's realisation of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* at the Three Choirs Festival, *The Dream of Gerontius* for the RTÉ and Falla's *El sombrero de tres picos* with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Rebecca has been artist-in-residence at the Presteigne Festival and sang in the world premiere of Oliver Tanney's *St Mark Passion* at the St Endellion Festival. She enjoys a close partnership with the Norwegian Wind Ensemble, with whom she has recorded Handel's *Messiah*, conducted by David Hill for Resonus Classics. Rebecca has also recorded Judith Weir's special commission *Sleeping-Mat Ballad*. She performs regularly for the JAM on the Marsh Festival, most recently in a virtual recital broadcast with pianist Anna Tilbrook.

Katherine Baker (flute)

Katherine Baker is principal flute with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Her first principal position was with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, a job she began in 1998 after completing her studies with William Bennett

at the Royal Academy of Music. In 2004, she was appointed first flute of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, a post she held until 2018, during which time she made numerous solo appearances both in concert and on recordings.

Katherine has always enjoyed a varied career and regularly appears as guest principal with many of the UK's leading orchestras including the London Symphony, Philharmonia, BBC Philharmonic and English Chamber orchestras and the Academy of St Martin in the Fields.

Despite the demands on her time that orchestral playing makes, Katherine tries to devote as much time as she can to chamber music. She has performed at festivals and music societies across the UK and in Europe, either as a member of several well-known ensembles or in a solo capacity.

Katherine has always enjoyed teaching and she is currently professor of flute at the Royal Academy of Music.

Suzu Willison-Kawalec (harp)

Suzu Willison-Kawalec has enjoyed a wide and varied career since graduating from the Royal Academy of Music, London under

Professor Skaila Kanga in 1999 with first class honours. An Associate of the Royal Academy of Music, she was appointed professor of harp there in 2018.

Suzu has been principal harpist with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra since 2015 and has a busy concert and recording schedule with them. As a guest principal she has worked with the BBC Symphony, Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Northern Sinfonia and London Chamber orchestras and has performed in major concert halls around the world.

Suzu's recording of William Alwyn's *Lyra Angelica* for Naxos prompted rave reviews, with Gramophone describing her performance as 'immaculate'. She has recorded with soloists including Renée Fleming, Joshua Bell, Bryn Terfel, Janine Jansen and Nigel Kennedy among many others.

Concerto appearances, solo and chamber music recitals have taken her to France, Germany, Italy and the Middle East, with recent solo performances including the Mozart Flute and Harp Concerto and Debussy's *Danse sacrée et danse profane* at St John's Smith Square with the RPO, LCO and also as part of the CBSO's Debussy Festival.

From 1997 to 2000 she was principal harpist with the European Union Youth Orchestra and a finalist in the Royal Over-Seas League Music Competition, winning the Outstanding Chamber Music Harpist Award.

Alongside her orchestral schedule, Suzu is passionate about teaching, chamber music and contemporary works for her instrument. A regular visitor to the Presteigne Festival, she has premiered works by composers including Cecilia McDowall, Richard Dubugnon, Stephen McNeff and Thomas Hyde and is delighted to have recorded Joe Duddell's *Mnemonic* with Katherine Baker – Katherine and Suzu formed their Alwyn Duo whilst students together.

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Damian Thantray (baritone), Nova Music Opera Ensemble & George Vass (conductor)
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'Damian Thantray gives a powerhouse performance as Ward'
Gramophone



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'A warm, rewarding work'
BBC Radio 3 Record Review

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