

In the Shadow of the Tower

Nardus Williams and Elizabeth Kenny

Thursday 27th June | Tower of London

The Line of Kings: Henry VIII's music Henry VIII

De la tromba

Whereto should I express ("Henry VIII")

Pastyme with good companye ("Henry")

Fortune My Foe: stories that ended in the Tower

Raleigh and Essex

Daniel Bachelier To Plead my Faith

John Dowland Fortune my Foe

Dowland (text by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex)

It was a time when Silly Bee

Cosmopolitan London: families of musical immigrants

Italian

Alfonso Ferrabosco Udite Lagrimosi spir'ti
d'Averno

Anon Italian Sta Notte mi Sognava

Giulio Caccini Amarilli mia Bella

Nicholas Lanier Qual Musico Gentil

Lanier Nor com'st thou yet: Hero and Leander

The Line of Kings: Charles II

Pepys' time in the Tower

Nicholas Lanier Loves Constancy

Henry Purcell (text by Katherine Philips)

O solitude

Francisco Corbetta Chaconne

José Marin Sepan Todos que muero

Roderick Williams, words by Rommi Smith

The Blacke Songs (commissioned by Spitalfields Music)

When you come into the Tower, the Line of Kings – “the world’s longest-running visitor attraction” – presents a dramatic story of monarchy and heroism. Music has always played its part in creating these stories and making history vividly present. But the Tower is haunted by many other ghosts, other voices, and our programme weaves these in and among the Kings (and Queen)’s music. We begin and end with Henry VIII and the trumpeter John Blanke who played at his Coronation: his image is striking, his value to the King well-known, but what might his thoughts, and those of other Black Tudors whose words are lost, have been? Past and present imagining coincide in the wonderful words of Rommi Smith set as a sequence of songs by Roderick Williams. We are grateful to them, to Professor Jerry Brotton, and to Spitalfields Music for inciting and commissioning this work.

The Tower was a place of conflict, oppression and the suppression of dissent, even for the “insiders” of Tudor life. Both Sir Walter Raleigh and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, ended up there due to the miscalculation of overweening ambition that put them out of the monarch’s favour. “Fortune my Foe”, heard here in a setting by the keen observer of politics and star lutenist John Dowland, was the tune that went with them from the Tower to the scaffold. Essex’s words, “to Plead my Faith”, set by James I’s “gentleman Usher”, Daniel Bachelier did not help him. “It was a time when silly bees did buzz” depicts the rivalries and factions around the “King” of Bees, the change of gender failing to disguise the speaker – the Earl’s resentment at his Queen Bee monarch.

But London was not only a place where English aristocrats rose and fell: music was a path to travel and to engagement in sometimes dangerously “other” cultures and religions. Jewish-Italian and Catholic musicians found a place as long as their virtuosity was highly prized and their personal views remained discreet. Famous immigrant families such as the Ferraboscos and the Laniers had featured at court since the time of Henry VII. The two most distinguished, Alfonso Ferrabosco the “younger” and Nicolas Lanier

not only served the reigns of James and Charles I but contributed to the masques and entertainments that celebrated this part of the “line”, and brought Italian singing techniques to the English scene. Italian master Giulio Caccini’s song “Amarilli mia Bella” began its own journey through many seventeenth-century manuscript song collections in England, when it was published alongside French, Italian and Spanish music in Robert Dowland’s “A Musical Banquet”. Unlike many lute-song books of the era, this one was never re-printed. Amateur singers who were the main market for expensive music books, likely found the music too difficult, and the glimpse into what cosmopolitan professionals were up to at court, must have been just a little demoralising...

in “Qual musico gentil”, Lanier gives us a glimpse into Italian-imported singing that is as florid and effortless as a bird. Charles I was recorded as listening rapt to Lanier’s performance of “Hero and Leander”, “with his hand on his (Lanier’s) shoulder”. Royal patronage probably never felt as intimate, or perhaps as intimidating.

Royalists kept the flame alive through small-scale musical gatherings in London even when the theatres and institutions of court music were silenced during the Civil War. Poet Katherine Philips’ attended gatherings at the home of court musician Henry Lawes. The text for “O solitude” was one of her many translations, from a poem by Antoine Girard de Saint-Amand. Such enthusiasm for the shared roots of English and European culture was not uncontroversial even then: even the National Treasure, diarist, naval reformer and Member of Parliament Samuel Pepys, had his time in the Tower during the Restoration when in 1679 he was accused of leaking informing to the French and of being a “Papist”. Pepys was an avid guitar-player, who learned with another immigrant, Italian Cesare Morelli. We include a song by José Marin, a Spanish guitarist, priest and murderer: the songs ended up in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Francsico/Francesco/Francisque Corbetta changed his first name as he travelled from his native Spain to stardom at the courts of Louis XIV and Charles II: Pepys was an admirer of his playing, as was Charles who asked him for lessons.

The line of Kings presents the armoured, “official” version of a unified culture. These voices were always there, too.

Elizabeth Kenny

THE BLACKE SONGS

The Blacke Songs is written by the celebrated baritone and composer, Roderick Williams, and I, especially for the wonderful musicians Nardus Williams and Elizabeth Kenny. It’s an honour that this new work is commissioned by Spitalfields Music, premieres tonight as part of the opening concert of Spitalfields Music Festival 2024 – and that Nardus and Liz will be performing it as part of their concert.

The Blacke Songs centres the word “Blacke” - one of the [politer] words by which Black people living in Tudor England were described in inventories and official records. In tonight’s premiere of three songs (from what I hope will be an unfolding, longer work) you’ll hear from, or about, three Black historical figures of the Tudor period: Lucy Baynham, Reasonable Blackman and John Blanke.

Lucy Baynham (sometimes referred to as Luce Baynham or Lucy Negro), is a later sixteenth century woman who was an abbess: Tudor colloquialism for a brothel madam. It is speculated that Lucy Baynham was a Black woman and also Shakespeare’s lover; inspiration for his “Dark Lady” sonnets. Whilst these theorisings about Lucy Baynham’s status are regarded by some as tired and cliched, as a Black woman, and as a scholar who writes about Black women and performance - I relish the idea. Using “faction” (the fusion of fact and fiction), or what the scholar Lisa Knopp (2009) calls “perhapsing”, I imagine Lucy’s reply to Shakespeare. In Lucy Baynham: The Queen of Turnmill Street, “Lucy” speaks back to the Dark Lady sonnets, replying to Shakespeare using his own form: the Shakespearean sonnet. In this sonnet, a critical question is raised: who would Lucy have been to us, had she, like Shakespeare, had the quill and ink in her possession?

Reasonable Blackman’s name conjures a question: how did he come to be named so? In her book *The Black Tudors* (2017), Dr. Miranda Kauffman speculates that, perhaps, Blackman, a silk weaver living in Southwark in 1579 (who fathered at least three children, two of whom died from the plague in 1592), was called “Reasonable” in reference to the price of the material he sold (p.113). In my poem *Reasonable Blackman: Silkweaver of Southwark: A Ballad*, I consider an alternative reading. Kauffman’s chapter includes reference to *Othello* (1604) a play which wrestles with spoken and tacit articulations about skin colour, race and Black masculinity. The Shakespearean England out of which *Othello* emerges, as a character, is a timeframe in close proximity to that in which Reasonable Blackman negotiated Tudor London.

In *Othello*, Iago’s incendiary line: “an old black ram is tugging your white ewe”, is not only uttered into

Brabantio's ear, but seeps out and down the centuries to haunt how anti-Black racism territorialises white women's bodies. The line itself is a witness and arrives out of a context: Shakespeare, a working actor and dramatist (by including the line in his text), was clearly speaking to something (an idea, a fear) to which he (and his collaborators) must have known audiences would have a visceral reaction. Othello, though fictional, has since become a cultural spectre, one fuelled by racist fears. "Reasonable", then, is a name which (when juxtaposed with Blackman) might arguably be read as having functioned as a reassurance policy - of temperament; my ballad is an exploration of this re-reading.

John Blanke was a respected court trumpeter working across not one but two royal courts, that of King Henry VII and King Henry VIII. He was part in King Henry VIII's coronation in 1509 and given new scarlet livery for the occasion. Celebrations for the coronation began with a "stay at the tower of London on Friday 22nd of June 1509" (Royal Historic Palaces, 2024). Five hundred and fifteen years later, I love the idea of John Blanke's energy and musicianship being part of the "music" of the Tower of London; his trumpet authoring the ether, part of the ghost-score for the building that we still hear - if we tune in. In John Blanke: "Blacke Trumpet" (my Meredithian, or sixteen-line sonnet), I explore the idea of John Blanke haunting the Tower and speaking back to, us, the future. Blanke is documented in royal court records (now held in the National Archive) as "Blacke Trumpet." I note the cultural more, that John Blanke (like many other Black people during the Tudor period) had his skin colour documented on records whereas, by contrast, his patrons did not.

My huge thanks and gratitude to Roderick Williams for inviting me to collaborate with him on this commission. Each collaborative project is a creative adventure in crafting, making and learning more about the world and the other people we share it with - past and present.

I am immensely grateful to Spitalfields Music and to its Chief Executive, Sarah Gee, for commissioning this new work. With particular thanks to Professor Jerry Brotton for a research conversation with Sarah Gee and myself back in February 2024. Jerry Brotton's BBC Radio 3 Essay series: *We Other Tudors* (2023), was also very helpful to me during my writing process.

Finally, I wish to express my deep appreciation of Nardus Williams and Liz Kenny, for breathing performative life into Roddy's beautiful music and my words.

Rommi Smith

Nardus Williams - Soprano

Winner of the Rising Talent award at the 2022 International Opera Awards, **Nardus Williams** has established herself as one of the most exciting and versatile young British singers of her generation. Highlights of the 2023/24 season include a return to Opéra de Rouen Normandie for concert performances of Donna Anna Don Giovanni, a return to the role of Belinda in Errollyn Wallen Dido's Ghost with Philharmonia Baroque, her Berlin Philharmonie debut with Academy of Ancient Music, a world premiere of George Lewis' *The Comet / Poppea* playing the role of Poppea, London Handel Festival singing the title role in Handel Esther, Bach St Matthew Passion with The Bach Choir, Handel Brockes Passion with the English Concert, Fauré Requiem with Toronto Symphony Orchestra, tours with Dunedin Consort, Europa Galante and Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, a return to the Wigmore Hall and her debut album of Handel's Italian Cantatas for Linn Records, with the Dunedin Consort.

Last season Williams made her house debut as Helena A Midsummer Night's Dream for Opéra de Rouen Normandie, Countess Le nozze di Figaro on the Glyndebourne tour and returned to the Glyndebourne festival as Adina in L'elisir d'amore. On the concert stage, Nardus returned to the Wigmore Hall, continued her fond collaboration with the Dunedin Consort performing programmes of Handel and Bach, Tippett A Child of Our Time with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Mozart C minor Mass at the BBC Proms with the Dunedin Consort. Williams is a former member of the Houston Opera Studio (2018/19), a former Jerwood Young Artist at Glyndebourne and Harewood Artist with the English National Opera.

Elizabeth Kenny - Lute

Elizabeth Kenny is one of Europe's leading lute players. She has played with many of the world's best period instrument groups and experienced many different approaches to music making. She has an extensive discography of collaborations with ensembles across Europe and the USA, and her own repertoire interests have led to critically acclaimed recordings of solo music from the ML Lute Book, and songs by Lawes, Purcell and Dowland. Her group Theatre of the Ayre focuses on 17th Century vocal music with an improvisational character.

Elizabeth has given premiere performances of solo and chamber pieces by James MacMillan, Benjamin Oliver, Heiner Goebbels and Rachel Stott. In June 2019 she premiered Nico Muhly's *Berceuse* for solo theorbo, which was written for her in 2018, and features on her CD *Ars longa: Old and new music for theorbo* for Linn

records which was nominated in the 2020 BBC Music Magazine Awards in the Instrumental category.

In recent seasons, Elizabeth has performed a series of concerts with the Benedetti Baroque Orchestra, coinciding with a Decca Classics album release, and also played at the Tetbury Music Festival, London International Festival of Early Music, the Trigonale Festival der Alten Musik in Austria, the Ludlow English Song Weekend, the Newbury Spring Festival, the Lammermuir Festival, and a Shakespeare programme with Mark Padmore at the Oxford Lieder Festival.

This season she performs at Chiltern Arts, Winchester Chamber Music and Salisbury International Arts Festivals, and returns to Wigmore Hall and Snape Maltings. She is currently Professor of Lute and Theorbo at the Royal Academy of Music.

Rommi Smith - Poet

Rommi Smith is winner of the Northern Writers' Prize for Poetry. A Cave Canem and Hedgebrook Fellow, she is recipient of prestigious residencies and commissions from institutions ranging from the British Council to the BBC. Rommi is the inaugural British Parliamentary Writer-in-Residence and Poet-in-Residence for Keats' House, Hampstead. In 2022, she was Poet-in-Residence for the Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere.

A three-time BBC Writer-in-Residence, Rommi is a guest curator of the BBC Radio 4 programme, Poetry Please and a contributor to programmes ranging from The Verb to Front Row; Woman's Hour to In Tune. Her radio essay on Ralph Vaughan Williams is part of the BBC series: The Essay.

The Blacke Songs is Rommi's fourth collaboration, as writer, with Roderick Williams, as composer. Not Yet Here (2020) is a response to Beethoven's To My Love Afar Off; Forever? (2023) is a twenty-first century meditation on the public meaning(s) of the hymn Amazing Grace; Cusp (2024), commissioned by the Bach Choir, is a contemporary reflection on grief and loss, in dialogue across the centuries with Elgar/Newman's: The Dream of Gerontius; and now The Blacke Songs (2024), a new meditation upon the voices and stories of Black historical figures of the Tudor period, written especially for Nardus Williams and Elizabeth Kenny – and commissioned by Spitalfields Music Festival.

Rommi was part of the performance ensemble for A Line in the Sand - a fusion of art song and poetry, curated by Roderick Williams, proposed by Spitalfields Music Festival, commissioned by the Aldeburgh Festival and performed at both festivals in 2023.

Rommi has a doctorate in English and Theatre. Her academic work is published by Routledge and New York University Press. Her research focuses on jazz and blues women and civil rights. The BBC has just commissioned a five-part essay series based on her research, to be broadcast in December 2024.

Roderick Williams - Composer

Baritone soloist **Roderick Williams** is becoming increasingly well-known as a composer. His Advent antiphon O Adonai has received numerous recordings and performances around the world while his motet after Ave Verum Re-imagined was awarded a BASCA prize in 2016. An entire album of his sacred choral works was released on the Signum label in 2017. He has been commissioned by Tenebrae, Ex Cathedra, Voces8 and the BBC Singers (who recently appointed him Associate Composer). Roderick sang his own orchestrated arrangements at the Last Night of the Proms in 2014 and the Hallé orchestra released an English Song disc, orchestrated and sung by Roderick, conducted by Sir Mark Elder. Roderick was chosen personally by King Charles III to write music for his Coronation service in May 2023. Selected music is published by OUP and Edition Peters.

For over 40 years Spitalfields Music has been putting music at the heart of East London.

We aim to bring artists, audiences and communities together so that everyone can find, explore and share extraordinary music in one of the most vibrant areas of London. We do this through high-quality performances, an industry leading artist development programme and award-winning projects in schools, special educational needs and disabilities settings, care homes and community centres.

This work is only possible thanks to the generosity of our funders and supporters, including people like you.

If you share our belief in music to change society, you can find out more about our work and how to support it at spitalfieldsmusic.org.uk