

Emerald Ensemble

Flower Songs

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Program Notes and Translations

by Gary D. Cannon

Five Flower Songs (1950)

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The Emerald Ensemble

Joel Bevington, tenor

Melissa Plagemann, mezzo-soprano

Gustave Blazek, bass

Ksenia Popova, soprano

Gary D. Cannon, conductor

Linda Strandberg, soprano

Erica Convery, mezzo-soprano

Lana Van Boven, mezzo-soprano

Sammie Gorham, soprano

Ingrid Verhulsdonk, piano

David Hendrix, tenor

Cliff Watson, bass

Brandon Higa, tenor

Robin Wyatt-Stone, baritone

Alivia Jones, soprano

Kathea Yarnell, mezzo-soprano

J. Scott Kovacs, bass-baritone

Five Flower Songs, opus 47 (1950)
by **Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)**

Benjamin Britten is usually hailed as the most important British composer of the twentieth century, and he belongs on every list of the most important choral composers in all of history. He was born in the bleak but beautiful coastal region of Suffolk, in the east of England, and commentators often claim that his music shares an aesthetic with that region's starkness. His passion for composition began at an early age: his surviving juvenilia number nearly seven hundred works. He studied privately with Frank Bridge, one of the more unusual voices in English composition. Not for Bridge, or for Britten, the pastoralism of Vaughan Williams or the Victorian grandeur of Elgar; rather, Bridge embraced continental models. Britten's great desire was to study with Alban Berg, the Austrian who wedded Schoenberg's atonality with nineteenth-century Romanticism, but the lad's parents would not allow such a scandalously "modernist" teacher.

Instead Britten studied at the Royal College of Music, that great bastion of conservatism, from 1930 to 1932. His music began to draw attention outside of his hometown, with a BBC broadcast of *A Boy Was Born* (a brilliant half-hour set of variations for unaccompanied choir) and a job composing incidental music for government films and radio. Prominent premieres for major works such as the orchestral song-cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936), the Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge (1937) for string orchestra, and the Piano Concerto (1938) added up. By the time of his departure for Canada and the United States in April 1939, Britten was among the leading English composers of his generation. His time in North America was noteworthy for many reasons: a refinement of his orchestral voice in the Violin Concerto (1939) and *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940), his first foray into theatrical writing with the operetta *Paul Bunyan* (1941, to a text by W.H. Auden), and, most importantly, a flowering of love for tenor Peter Pears and the concomitant outpouring of works for Pears's unique vocal timbre. As war raged in Europe, Britten and Pears began to feel that their rightful place was home in England, even if that meant facing tribunals as conscientious objectors. On the sea journey in May 1942, Britten composed two of his most loved choral works, *A Ceremony of Carols* and *Hymn to St. Cecilia*. In the following years, Britten composed for Pears two works which showed a true mature voice and which have become central to twentieth-century classical music: the Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings (1943), and the opera *Peter Grimes* (1945).

At the premiere of *Peter Grimes* in 1945, Britten was hailed as the leading British composer of the day, bar none. In 1947 he founded the English Opera Group, a touring company that aimed to present Britten's newly invented genre of "chamber opera" (i.e., opera with a small chamber group rather than full orchestra); its first production was *Albert Herring* (1947), a delightful parody of English village life. The following year brought the establishment of the Aldeburgh Festival in the Suffolk town where Britten and Pears lived. Orchestral works, solo songs, and choral music poured from his pen, and each new work was instantly hailed as a masterpiece. Among them were two major choral works with orchestra: the cantata *Saint Nicolas* (1948) with parts for children among the singers and orchestra players, and the *Spring Symphony* (1949), a collection of fourteen different English poems set for large chorus and orchestra.

The joy, brightness, and varied content of the large-scale *Spring Symphony* exist in microcosm in the *Five Flower Songs*, composed in the spring of 1950. The occasion was the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of two major donors to the English Opera Group. Leonard Elmhirst was an agronomist who worked between the wars to develop economic growth in depressed rural regions, especially India and the southwest English county of Devon. His wife, Dorothy, had been one of America's richest women when she met and married Leonard at Cornell University; she was a noted philanthropist, especially in support of education and women's rights. Their estate at Dartington Hall, in rural Devon, included a large garden. To reflect the Elmhirsts' love of agriculture and botany, Britten chose five poems related to flowers (perhaps they had been considered for the *Spring Symphony* but rejected?). Imogen Holst, daughter of the composer Gustav Holst and soon to become Britten's amanuensis, conducted a student choir in the first performance, a private outdoor event at Dartington Hall on July 23, 1950.

Here Britten embraces the tradition of the secular partsong, as exemplified by Stanford and Elgar. They are not as adventurous or ground-breaking as many of his other works, but are nevertheless perfectly and beautifully crafted, each one having a unique identity and style. "To Daffodils" begins as a pair of duets: the sopranos and basses are echoed in close succession by the inner voices. Robert Herrick's text compares the short lifespan of a daffodil to our human weakness. At the second stanza, Britten unites the upper three voices and assigns to the basses repetitions of the opening motive. The second movement is a brilliant and original structure, rooted in the text. To depict the entrance of each of Herrick's "Four Sweet Months," Britten assigns one month to each part: the sopranos take April, the altos May, the tenors June, and finally the basses July. The entrances are fugal, with slight differences to render the text clear. The entrances repeat, though in a different order and offset by just one beat. It is only by virtue of Britten's careful craftsmanship that the four voices' overlapping texts do not create a mush: you always hear exactly the words that Britten wants you to hear.

George Crabbe, author of "Marsh Flowers" and of the poems that inspired *Peter Grimes*, had lived in Britten's beloved Aldeburgh. Here Crabbe pessimistically describes the various flora to be found in the marshy county of Suffolk; they are, in turn "slimy," "dull," "deadly," "faded," "wiry," "globose," "fierce," or "poisoned," with "sickly scent" or even "lack[ing] perfume." Britten imbues each flower with a clear musical identity, allowing himself angular, dissonant lines to depict the harsh realities of life on the fen. "The Evening Primrose" follows as a gentle and calm sonic balm. Britten can aurally paint nightscapes as well as anyone. The imitative close—as the shy primrose, blossoming at night, withers at the piercing gaze of day—drifts to silence.

To my knowledge, the opening tempo mark of "Ballad of Green Broom"—*Cominciando esitando*, i.e., "Beginning hesitantly"—exists nowhere else. The choir depicts the strummed guitar of a ballad-singer, a role taken first by the tenors who tell of a young, lazy flower-cutter. The basses grumpily awake the boy at mid-day. The tempo increases slightly as the sopranos tell of the lad's determination to finally make good. The altos take their turn as balladeer when a wealthy woman looks out the window, sees the flower-cutter, and angrily orders: "Go fetch me the boy!" The music accelerates again as he enters "the Lady's fine room" and she surprisingly proposes marriage, being a "Lady in full bloom." As the tempo arrives to *Vivace*, the couple proceeds in lively fashion to church amid the initial guitar chords, now recast as joyous, sonorous wedding bells, in this most perfect conclusion for an anniversary present.

The *Five Flower Songs* are light and airy, which Britten no doubt found a relief while contemporaneously working on the dark and brooding opera, *Billy Budd* (1951). Through his fifteen operas, Britten is often credited as single-handedly resuscitating opera in the English language. In the choral realm, special note must be made of one of the last century's most seminal musical works, the *War Requiem* (1962) composed for the dedication of the newly constructed Coventry Cathedral, which had been destroyed by bombing in the Second World War. The Aldeburgh Festival continued from strength to strength, promoting Britten's works and those of composers past and present whom he deemed worthy. Britten continued to travel widely as a conductor and pianist, especially as Pears's accompanist. For Decca Records he conducted or supervised recordings of nearly all of his major works, a legacy almost unparalleled among composers. He composed demanding works for the world's leading virtuosos but also left many works intended for children to perform. Shortly before his death he became Baron Britten of Aldeburgh in the County of Suffolk, the first composer appointed to a peerage. Few composers have left such an extraordinary legacy.

1. To Daffodils

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.

Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to even-song;
And, having prayed together, we
Will go with you along.

We have short time to say, as you,
We have as short a Spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.
We die
As your hours do, and dry
Away
Like to the Summer's rain;
Or as the pearls of morning dew
Ne'er to be found again.

— Robert Herrick (1591–1674)

2. The Succession of the Four Sweet Months

First, April, she with mellow showers
Opens the way for early flowers;
Then after her comes smiling May,
In a more rich and sweet array;
Next enters June, and brings us more
Gems than those two that went before;
Then (lastly), July comes and she
More wealth brings in than all those three.

— Robert Herrick (1591–1674)

3. Marsh Flowers

Here the strong mallow strikes her slimy root,
Here the dull nightshade hangs her deadly fruit:

On hills of dust the henbane's faded green,
And pencil'd flower of sickly scent is seen.

Here on its wiry stem, in rigid bloom,
Grows the salt lavender that lacks perfume.

At the wall's base the fiery nettle springs
With fruit globose and fierce with poison'd stings;

In every chink delights the fern to grow,
With glossy leaf and tawny bloom below;

The few dull flowers that o'er the place are spread
Partake the nature of their fenny bed.

These, with our sea-weeds rolling up and down,
Form the contracted Flora of our town.

— George Crabbe (1754–1832)

4. The Evening Primrose

When once the sun sinks in the west,
And dewdrops pearl the evening's breast;
Almost as pale as moonbeams are,
Or its companionable star,
The evening primrose opes anew
Its delicate blossoms to the dew
And, hermit-like, shunning the light,
Wastes its fair bloom upon the night,
Who, blindfold to its fond caresses,
Knows not the beauty he possesses.
Thus it blooms on while night is by;
When day looks out with open eye,
'Bashed at the gaze it cannot shun,
It faints and withers and is gone.

— John Clare (1793–1864)

5. Ballad of Green Broom

There was an old man liv'd out in the wood,
And his trade was a-cutting of Broom, green Broom.
He had but one son without thought, without good,
Who lay in his bed till 'twas noon, bright noon.

The old man awoke one morning and spoke.
He swore he would fire the room, that room,
If his John would not rise and open his eyes,
And away to the wood to cut Broom, green Broom.

So Johnny arose and slipp'd on his clothes
And away to the wood to cut Broom, green Broom.
He sharpen'd his knives, and for once he contrives
To cut a great bundle of Broom, green Broom.

When Johnny pass'd under a Lady's fine house,
Pass'd under a Lady's fine room, fine room,
She call'd to her maid: "Go fetch me," she said,
"Go fetch me the boy that sells Broom, green Broom!"

When Johnny came in to the Lady's fine house,
And stood in the Lady's fine room, fine room,
"Young Johnny," she said, "Will you give up your Trade
And marry a Lady in bloom, full bloom?"

Johnny gave his consent, and to church they both went,
And he wedded the Lady in bloom, full bloom;
At market and fair, all folks do declare,
There's none like the boy that sold Broom, green Broom.

— Anonymous

I am the rose of Sharon, first published in *The Singing Master's Assistant* (1778)
by **William Billings** (1746–1800)

Art music was not a focus in colonial North America. Unlike the Spanish colonies to the south, where cathedrals developed strong traditions of choral music that incorporated native elements, the English colonies of the Atlantic coast devoted more attention to economic development than to culture. Indeed, the first composer of note from the English colonies did not emerge until the Revolutionary period. And this individual was far from the typical composer.

William Billings was a professional tanner, blind in one eye and short in one leg, with a withered arm and “an uncommon negligence of person.” Notwithstanding physical deformities and hygienic deficiencies, he successfully taught “singing schools,” group-oriented music lessons aimed at amateur church singers, around the greater Boston area. His 1770 volume, *The New England Psalm-Singer*, was the first publication ever devoted wholly to an American composer. By the time of the American Revolution, he had befriended such rebels as Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, supporting the cause with hymns such as *Chester*: “Let tyrants shake their iron rod / And Slav’ry clank her galling chains, / We fear them not, we trust in God, / New England’s God for ever reigns.”

By the time of his crowning achievement, the 1781 collection *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement*, Billings had achieved substantial financial success. Unfortunately, copyright laws were not enacted until 1790, by which time his best works had been freely reprinted throughout the colonies. He accepted civic posts such as sealer of leather (inspecting goods), scavenger (sweeping streets), and hogreeve (tracking down loose hogs and returning them to their owners). But upon his death in 1800, this widower with six young children died with few assets other than his house. His music fell out of fashion by the early nineteenth century except in Southern and Appalachian hymnals known as “shape-note” books.

Billings’s music, like the man himself, is rather rough-and-tumble. While mostly avoiding dissonance, the harmony doesn’t always move akin to traditional chordal progressions. Sometimes the voice-leading is static and the form may feel like an artificial conjoining of unrelated music. While the anthem *I am the rose of Sharon* does suffer from these—as today’s listeners might call them—deficiencies, it nevertheless achieves an expressive purpose that overrides any quibbling about compositional technique. Certainly the declamatory vigor of the poet’s love is clear at every moment. Occasional imitative entrances vary the texture, which is otherwise limited to homophony or solo lines. The solos seem not to reflect any particular pattern: for example, the poem’s “female” voice is not limited to the sopranos or altos, nor the “male” to lower voices. The text is from the Song of Solomon—the one biblical book with the potential to make a sensitive reader blush—and contains one turn of phrase that might be easily misunderstood: to be “sick of love” is to be “lovesick”, without connotation of frustration or resignation. *I am the rose of Sharon* is simply an ebullient romp in celebration of love.

I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys.

As the lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.

I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

He brought me to the banqueting house, his banner over me was love.

Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.

I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field,
that you stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please.

The voice of my beloved! behold he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.

My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away.

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

— Song of Solomon 2: 1–5, 7–8, 10–11

A red, red rose (2012)

by **Jeremy Kings** (born 1987)

Jeremy Kings's father was a Lutheran pastor; his mother was the church organist. From her, young Jeremy received his first musical training, though he was rather more interested in technology, especially computer gaming. Attending high school in a suburb of Chicago, he joined the choir and fell in love with the world of choral music. In his senior year, he had the rare opportunity to take a class in music theory and—even more rare—to hear his works performed. He kept singing and composing while a computer science major at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. In 2010 he relocated to the Seattle area to study computer game programming at the DigiPen Institute of Technology, where he is now an instructor.

Kings set to music Robert Burns's famous ballad *Oh my Luve's like a red, red rose*, which he had previously sung in a choral setting by Indianapolis composer James Mulholland. Kings's practical experience composing for computer games has served him well in developing a deep understanding of counterpoint, harmony, structure, and subtle variety. After a brief introduction, the principal tune, with its soaring initial octave leap, is first heard in the sopranos. Love's "melodie" is reflected in a sumptuous seven-part chord. The work is in AABA form, with each "A" section invoking the main theme in a different guise. At the end, the men's voices virtually run the final stretch of the poet's "ten thousand mile."

Oh my Love's like a red, red rose
that's newly sprung in June;
oh my Love's like a melody
that's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
so deep in love am I:
and I will love thee still, my dear,
'til all the seas gang dry:

'Til all the seas gang dry, my dear,
and rocks melt with the sun:
I will love thee still, my dear,
while the sands of life shall run.

And fare thee well, my only Love,
and fare thee well, a while!
And I will come again, my Love,
tho' it were ten thousand mile.

— Robert Burns (1759–1796)

Les chansons des roses (1993)

by **Morten Lauridsen** (born 1943)

Here in the Northwest, Morten Lauridsen's story is very much one of "Local Boy Makes Good." The town of his birth is Colfax, Washington, nestled at a crossroads between Spokane and Pullman. He grew up in Portland, studied at Whitman College in Walla Walla, and worked as a firefighter near Mount St. Helens. Upon relocation to Los Angeles, Lauridsen undertook further studies at the University of Southern California, where he then began teaching in 1967. For decades he has divided his time between Los Angeles and a summer cabin on one of the more remote islands in our San Juan archipelago (no ferry, no electricity, no running water, no stores, no paved roads, population 104). However, Lauridsen retired from his USC professorship mere months ago. Now that he and his wife have relocated to our region permanently, I am told that their new home will have a few more amenities.

By some accounts, Lauridsen is the most often performed living American composer, both at home and abroad—no mean feat for a creator of almost exclusively vocal music. As with many composers, far too often one hears only a few pieces performed with great frequency. This can lead to a misconception that all of Lauridsen's music fits roughly the same mould. *Les chansons des roses* is in some respects the focal point of his career. It incorporates elements of his earlier style from the 1980s, as exemplified by the *Mid-Winter Songs* (1980) and *Madrigali* (1987), but also solidifies his mature style, based largely on melodic fluidity, prominence of inner voices, prevailing ninth chords, and steady expansion with perfectly timed culminations. Thus his calling card, the sumptuous *O magnum mysterium* (1994), and the much beloved *Lux æterna* (1997). The twenty-first century, as one hears in his *Sure on this shining night* (2005), brought an even greater emphasis on melody. But the greatest strengths of all of these works can be found in *Les chansons des roses*.

Lauridsen's chosen poet for this cycle is Rainer Maria Rilke. Most of history's greatest poets could find their life's work now reprinted in one handy volume. If a publisher ever attempted such a feat for Rilke, the result would be a mighty tome indeed. Even setting aside his vast output in his native German, Rilke wrote nearly four hundred stunning poems in French. The composer has written that Rilke's French "poems on roses struck me as especially charming, filled with gorgeous lyricism, deftly crafted and elegant in their imagery. These exquisite poems are primarily light, joyous and playful, and the musical settings are designed to enhance these characteristics and capture their delicate beauty and sensuousness."

Consider, for example, the opening number, "En une seule fleur". Here is the quicksilver pace, delicate rubato, and largely homophonic texture of some of the *Madrigali*. But the harmonies are less focused on fourths and fifths: such starkness would hardly be appropriate to a rose's finery. The dissonances of whole tones and small tone clusters found in *Mid-Winter Songs* are treated more subtly, which gave rise to the prevailing compositional tactic for an entire generation of American choral composers. The repetition and slight slowing at the phrase "mais tu na pas pensé ailleurs" ("but you never thought otherwise") draws the ear to that one line: the crux of the poem is that the rose is inherently generous in sharing its beauty.

“Contre qui, rose” provides a fascinating alternate view: the rose is now timid, hiding behind thorns, a contrast drawn out by Rilke’s shift to more formal address. The composer calls this movement “a wistful nocturne”, as the speaker laments that their affections are thwarted by the beloved rose’s thorns. Occasional prominent phrases, hidden in the inner voices, tenderly entreat the rose for sympathy. The loudest sonority is a widely spaced *mezzopiano*—just medium-soft. Next Lauridsen juxtaposes the quick awakening from a dream and the smoothness of weeping in “De ton rêve trop plein”. The playful quick shifts of tempo recall his *Madrigali*. This central scherzo is embraced by two slow movements: in “La rose complète” you’ll hear some of the same motivic characteristics, especially in the turns of countermelodies, that graced “Contre qui, rose”. The consideration of the rose as reflecting “toute la vie” (“everything in life”) brings the twin apexes of the entire cycle.

“Dirait-on” follows without pause. The entry of the piano is a sudden surprise, a breath of fresh air, as if one is finally able to inhale the scent of the rose that one has thus far only seen. Here is the first hint of the overarching melodiousness that would later spawn *Sure on this shining night* and other late works. In the fine documentary about the composer, *Shining Night* (2012), Lauridsen describes in detail how he composed the principal melody of “Dirait-on” to reflect “a tuneful *chanson populaire*, or folksong”: its span is small, it moves in single-breath phrases, its repetitive motives make it easily memorable. In fact, this seemingly simple tune “weaves together two melodic ideas first heard in fragmentary form in preceding movements.” The text centers on a physical description of a rose whose petals fold in on itself narcissistically, and the tune’s internal repetitions act similarly. Of course, all of these texts are not merely naturalistic paeans, but love songs: as each rose bears its own personality, so does a lover. Lauridsen’s genius in *Les chansons des roses* is not simply the gorgeous harmonies or melodic smoothness, but the encapsulation of one poet’s voice addressing five lovers with tenderness.

1. En une seule fleur

C’est pourtant nous qui t’avons proposé
de remplir ton calice.

Enchantée de cet artifice,
ton abondance l’avait osé.

Tu étais assez riche, pour devenir cent
fois toi-même en une seule fleur;
c’est l’état de celui qui aime...

Mais tu n’as pas pensé ailleurs.

It is perhaps we who proposed to you
to refill your bloom.

Enchanted by such artificiality,
your abundance had dared us.

You were so rich as to transform a hundred
times yourself into one sole flower;
it is the state of one who loves...

But you never thought otherwise.

2. Contre qui, rose

Contre qui, rose,
avez-vous adopté
ces épines?
Votre joie trop fine
vous-a-t-elle forcée
de devenir cette chose
armée?

Mais de qui vous protège
cette arme exagérée?
Combien d'ennemis vous ai-je
enlevés
qui ne la craignaient point?
Au contraire, d'été en automne,
vous blessez les soins
qu'on vous donne.

Against whom, rose,
have you adopted
these thorns?
Your joy, too delicate—
did it force you
to become this thing,
armed?

But from whom does it protect you,
this exaggerated weapon?
How many enemies from you have I
rescued
who did not fear it?
On the contrary, from summer to autumn,
you maim the adoration
that one may give you.

3. De ton rêve trop plein

De ton rêve trop plein,
fleur en dedans nombreuse,
mouillée comme une pleureuse,
tu te penches sur le matin.

Tes douces forces qui dorment,
dans un désir incertain,
développent ces tendres formes
entre joues et seins.

From your dream too full,
flower, internally numerous,
melted as one who weeps,
you bow to the morning.

Your sweet powers who sleep
in an uncertain desire,
develop these tender forms
between cheeks and breasts.

4. La rose complète

J'ai une telle conscience de ton
être, rose complète,
que mon consentement te confond
avec mon cœur en fête.

Je te respire comme si tu étais,
rose, toute la vie,
et je me sens l'ami parfait
d'une telle amie.

I have such knowledge of your
being, perfect rose,
that my consent unites you
with my heart in celebration.

I inhale you as if you were,
rose, everything in life,
and I feel the perfect friend
of one such friend.

5. Dirait-on

Abandon entouré d'abandon,
tendresse touchant aux tendresses...
C'est ton intérieur qui sans cesse
se caresse, dirait-on;

se caresse en soi-même,
par son propre reflet éclairé.
Ainsi tu inventes le thème
du Narcisse exaucé.

Abandon enveloped by abandon,
tenderness touching tendernesses...
It is your interior which without ceasing
caresses itself, so they say;

it caresses itself,
by its own clear reflection.
Thus you invent the theme
of Narcissus fulfilled.

— Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), from *Les roses* (1926)