

Christmas with Edward Lear

Turner Sims, Southampton, at 8pm on Friday 10th December 2021

Sweelinck Motet: Hodie Christus natus Est

Josquin Motet: Regina Coeli

Francesco Izzo Lear in Italian

Matyas Seiber Three Limericks:
 There was an old person of Cromer
 There was an old man in a tree
 There was an old lady of France

David Owen Norris *Letters from Lear*: a musical portrait
(first performance)

Followed by some Christmas surprises

Mark Wilde	tenor
Heather Wilde	treble
Helen Sanderson	guitar
Niki Demetriou	flute
Martha Raban	double-bass
Hope Felts-King	drums

Southampton University Chamber Choir
conducted by
Simon Pettite

Regína Cæli

I
Re - gí - na cæ - li lae - tá - re, al - le - lú - ia

II
III

IV
V + VI
VII

Qui - a quem me - ru - í - sti por - tá - re, al - le - lú - ia

VIII
IX
X

Re - sur - ré - xit, si - cut di - xit, al - le - lú - ia

XI
XII

O - ra pro no - bis De - um, al - le - lú - ia.

Letters from Lear: a musical portrait

Selected and set to music by

David Owen Norris

For Tenor, Guitar & Flute, Solo Treble (or children's chorus), Chamber Choir, String Bass & Drum Kit

Composer's Note

Lear wrote the poem "How pleasant to know Mr.Lear!" to fit the tune of the aria 'How cheerful along the gay mead', from Thomas Arne's oratorio *The Death of Abel*. (This was a favourite pastime of Lear's.) The tune promises well, though its second half disappoints. I have taken it as a starting point for my settings of Lear's autobiographical verses. It plays no part in the music for the letters.

I am very grateful to Helen Sanderson for her revision of the guitar part. The piece was commissioned by Sara Lodge of St. Andrew's University.

The complete libretto follows:

My dear Niece,

Tell your Papa that I have been to the Opera & have heard Paganini – both of which pleasures have greatly contributed to widen the crack which nature had originally made in my brain.

"How pleasant to know Mr.Lear!"

Who has written such volumes of stuff!

Some think him ill-tempered and queer,

But a few think him pleasant enough.

My dear Gould,

I wish to goodness I could get a wife! – You have no idea how sick I am of living alone!! –

Please make a memorandum of any Lady under 28 who has a little money – can live in Rome – & knows how to cut pencils and make puddings.

His mind is concrete and fastidious,

His nose is remarkably big;

His visage is more or less hideous,

His beard it resembles a wig.

My dear little tiny child,

As your Grandmamma has written to me that you are just born I will write to congratulate you, & possibly this is one of the first letters you have as yet received. One of the old Greek Tragedians says – and I am sure you will not think me impertinent in translating what he says – ‘Hos ara me ginesthai’ &c – because there has not been time hitherto to buy you a Greek dictionary, (& I am sure you cannot read Sophocles without, – besides, the Dictionaries are so fat & heavy I am certain you could not use them comfortably to yourself & your nurse.) ‘Hos ara me ginesthai’ &c – which means ‘it is better never to have been born at all, or if born, – to die as soon as possible.’ But this I wholly dissent from: & on the contrary I congratulate you heartily on coming into a world where if we look for it there is far more good & pleasure than we can use up – even in the longest life.

He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers,

Leastways if you reckon two thumbs;

Long ago he was one of the singers,

But now he is one of the dumbs.

My dear Fortescue,

I was not well from the East winds, & so completely uncertain whether I had any voice or not, that I thought it better not to sing, than to go to the piano & be obliged to quit. I felt like a cow who has swallowed a glass bottle – or a boiled weasel – & should probably have made a noise like a dyspeptic mouse in a fit.

He sits in a beautiful parlour,

With hundreds of books on the wall;

He drinks a great deal of Marsala,

But never gets tipsy at all.

My dear Mrs. Tennyson,

My evenings - if no friend be here - are dimmydullydillyduffy. - Partly I translate Thousididdles - & so by very slow degrees attain to Greek nollidge. Partly I play on the hinstrument. - partly I drink tea - & rush about the room angrily. - In the morning I feed unfortunate birds.

He has many friends, lay men and clerical,

Old Foss is the name of his cat;

His body is perfectly spherical,

He weareth a runcible hat.

My dear Mrs. Tennyson,

The ducklike benevolence with which you have sent me another letter, before I had answered your last!!

I don't remember ever to have seen such a month of purely beautiful weather at this season: day after day the same, - the same rose & crimson evenings, the same lilac & silver mornings.

I was bored to death by the *noise* of the Corfu houses, - which are so built that you hear *everything* on all sides & above & below: - people over me gave a ball: people under me had twin babies: people on the left played on 4 violins & a cornet: people on the right have coughs & compose sermons aloud. -

Owls are plentiful. Flights of grey gregarious gagging grisogonous geese adorn the silver shining surface of the softly sounding sea.

When he walks in waterproof white,

The children run after him so!

Calling out, "He's gone out in his night-

Gown, that crazy old Englishman, oh!"

I have decided to go to the Palace in dirty boots: to eat my fish with my fingers: & to spit in the tumbler: - on which I shall never be asked again.

My Lord,

Of little birds there is a great paucity throughout the Continent - such a constant warfare is carried on against the little wretches: neither robins - sparrows - thrushes or any of the pretty fellows we have so many of, can feel very comfortable in countries where thousands of them are shot for daily food: nor only these, - for having discovered at Lugano that I had been eating a portion of a Jay - I went to the market place to be certain it was not a solitary nastiness, - and there I saw a beautiful variety to 'game' - multitudes of Jays - & Jackdaws included.

My dear Mrs. Tennyson,

This house is unquiet - for there is a family named 'Maud' above me - which I wish I could send 'into the Garden' if there were one: - and although one of the twins is dead, yet the other, having I firmly believe swallowed the violin (which has been mute of late, -) - hath a hoarser and catguttier voice than in aforetime.

It is all very beautiful & interesting & wonderful here, - but - it is not England: & I am stupid enough to get into very homesick fits sometimes.

He weeps by the side of the ocean,
He weeps on the top of the hill;
He purchases pancakes and lotion,
And chocolate shrimps from the mill.

My dear Fortescue,

By the bye, one of the oddest feelings I can remember to have encountered came to me by a circumstance last Monday. On the Sunday, I had gone to Highgate Cemetery to see about my dear Sister Ann's grave, & returning, perceived afar, that the old House I was born in - (its gardens and paddocks were long ago destroyed by new roads and buildings,) was advertised for sale as building materials, 4 houses to be raised on its site. So the following day I went up there, & all over it: & I can assure you, the annihilation of time which seeing such early-known localities produced was curious, & made me afterwards thoughtful enough. As I stood in various parts of the large empty rooms, I could absolutely hear & see voices & persons, & could - (had I had a pen & ink paper & time,) have written out months & years of life nearly 50 years ago, exactly & positively.

(The old woman who shewed the house seemed horribly puzzled at my knowing all the old closets & doors &c - & received 2/6 with a mixture of pleasure & fear.)

[My dear Nora,]

I am very sorry not to have been able to write all the winter, but I have done the same to everybody, & I don't think I shall ever write much more.

He reads, but he cannot speak, Spanish,
He cannot abide ginger beer:
Ere the days of his pilgrimage vanish,
How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!

Dear Mrs. Prescott,

Thank you for returning my umbrella - I had thought myself relieved of that responsibility.

My dear Lord Aberdare,

'Last letter from my dear old friend - who died Jan 1888.'

Whoever has known me for 30 years has known that for all that time my Cat Foss has been part of my solitary life.

Foss is dead: & I am glad to say did not suffer at all - having become quite paralyzed on all one side of him. So he was placed in a box yesterday, & buried deep below the Figtree at the end of the Orange walk & tomorrow there will be a stone placed giving the date of his death & his age (31 years) - (of which 30 were passed in my house.)

Qui sotto sta sepolto il mio buon Gatto Foss. Era 30 anni in casa mia, e morì il 26 Novembre 1887 - in età 31 anni.

I suppose in a day or two all will be as before, except the memory of my poor friend Foss. My love to all of you.