

## **South Downs Songbook**

Monday 20 June 2022, 6pm - 7pm

Attenborough Centre for Creative Arts, University of Sussex

### **Programme**

#### **South Downs: A Celebration - film (2021) (5')**

Film by Sam Moore/Visual Air - Music by Ed Hughes

First theatrical screening

Commissioned in 2020 by the South Downs National Park Authority to mark its 10th anniversary.

Recorded by the New Music Players on Music for the South Downs Metier MSV28623, 2022.

#### **South Downs Songbook - four new songs:**

- **Ed Hughes: Sky Rhythms (first performance) (5')**
- **Shirley J Thompson: An Hymn to the Evening (first performance) (5')**
- **Rowland Sutherland: Modes from The Downs (first performance) (7')**
- **Evelyn Ficarra: What Larks (first performance) (5')**

performed by The Orchestra of Sound and Light

Voice: Rachel Farago

Flute (doubling piccolo): Helen Whitaker

Clarinet (doubling bass clarinet): Alison Hughes

Electric Guitar: Lee Westwood

Piano (doubling keyboard): Rachel Fryer

Cello: Joe Giddey

Director: Ed Hughes

Producer: Liz Webb

#### **Q&A with the composers and Duncan Mackrill (South Downs Songbook education consultant), chaired by Trevor Beattie, CEO of South Downs National Park Authority**

### **Introduction to the project**

Film-maker Sam Moore, from Visual Air, and University of Sussex composer Ed Hughes were commissioned in 2020 by the South Downs National Park Authority to create a special five minute film to celebrate its 10th anniversary. The film provides an overview of the national park, which unfolds over 628 square miles, and 87 miles, between Winchester and Eastbourne, in an impressively varied landscape, stretching across chalk hills, sandstone, clay hills, woods and vales. Ideas from this project led to a new concept - realising that art and artists have responded to the South Downs for centuries, could we celebrate the South Downs as a place that inspires world leading arts practices through a special contemporary songbook of newly commissioned songs and compositions by UK composers.

Thanks to Arts Council England's support through the National Lottery, Orchestra of Sound and Light, who gave acclaimed multimedia performances at the Brighton Festival in 2016 and 2018, today launch the South Downs Songbook with four new songs from four UK composers. The Songbook will be hosted online as well as through live touring, and over the next ten days approximately 35 songs and compositions will be added to the collection, in a wide range of musical styles, by GCSE and A level music students from Hastings Academy, BHASVIC and East Sussex Academy of Music.

Today's four composers, Shirley J Thompson, Rowland Sutherland, Evelyn Ficarra and Ed Hughes, were each commissioned to write a new song inspired by walking the South Downs. Each composer has chosen a text, and each text gives a very different perspective on landscape and history. Shirley Thompson has chosen *An Hymn to the Evening* by Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) an American writer who spent significant periods in England. Rowland Sutherland has set a poem by Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806). Ed Hughes has adapted words by an early contributor to the Mass Observation Archive (Marion Robinson, 1937), who lived near Felpham and was inspired by William Blake's response to the skies over the South Downs. Evelyn Ficarra has set a poem by the contemporary Brighton based poet, Valerie Whittington.

Today we also announce a free digital education resource pack for educators to inspire pupils and students to compose in response to the South Downs, devised and curated by education consultant Duncan Mackrill. Working with Create Music, West Sussex Music and South Downs Schools Network, the pack will include interviews with the commissioned composers about their work, tips on how to get started with composing, and a bespoke library of sampled sounds from the South Downs specially prepared by composer Peter Michael Davison for use with digital audio software such as Ableton and Logic.

To register for this free pack please see: <https://www.orchsoundlight.org>

## Today's music - notes and texts

### Ed Hughes: *Sky Rhythms* (first performance)

For this song, I selected words written by Marion Robinson for the Mass Observation Archive, on one of the first 'Day Surveys' (12 July 1937). Marion Robinson was a resident near Felpham, West Sussex, in the 1930s. Marion writes about everyday life, her political views and the way in which proximity to the South Downs raises her spirits. She also mentions the fact that William Blake lived in Felpham (in 1800-1803) and speculates that certain visual rhythms in his work from that period were influenced by the unique and beautiful effects of light and cloud over the Downs.

Text for *Sky Rhythms* (adapted from the Mass Observation Archive day survey of Marion Robinson, 12 July 1937):

I live in a seaside bungalow town, in a furnished bungalow.  
Very small and draughty,  
but fortunately,  
looking out across open fields and country to the South Downs

The town is inhabited by get-rich-quick bourgeoisie  
who all let their bungalows in summer to come-and-go visitors.  
These come for a fortnight at a time,  
and wander about in various kinds of holiday dress

shorts, beach slacks, sunbathing garments and bathing suits.  
They rush into the sun and mostly burn bright pink  
through trying to tan too fast.

To the news' agents  
Daily Herald Placard  
Stalin might do something to make our bread dearer  
Further depressed by news in paper  
which hopes that England will not let France down  
but I am quite sure she will

Husband points out that things must get worse before they can get better  
I know this with my mind  
but the immediate prospect weighs upon me.  
Also I have an uncomfortable fear  
that if things come to a fight  
I may not have the guts to do all I should

I live in a seaside bungalow town, in a furnished bungalow.  
Very small and draughty,  
but fortunately  
looking out across open fields and country to the South Downs  
The air is splendid,  
we get whatever sunshine is going,

and witness superb skylscapes.  
Felpham, where Blake lived, is near,  
and one can often see in cloud arrangement his probable inspiration for the rhythms of the lines his pictures take –  
different from sky effects noticed elsewhere...

*Away to Sweet Felpham for Heaven is there  
The Ladder of Angels descends thro the air  
On the Turret its spiral does softly descend  
Thro' the village then winds at My Cot if[t]  
does end*

Words adapted from Marion Robinson Mass  
Observation Day Survey 12 July 1937  
William Blake excerpt from poem, 14 Sept. 1800

### **Shirley J Thompson: *An Hymn to the Evening* (first performance)**

A setting of *An Hymn to the Evening*, poem by Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784)

With this song for the South Downs Songbook project my intention is to evoke the 'Majestic grandeur!' of the English countryside as asserted in the poem, *An Hymn to the Evening*, by the writer, Phillis Wheatley. The vocal part is employed dramatically, assuming the protagonist in the poem and suggesting all kinds of mystery bubbling beneath the surface. The instruments perform supporting roles to the lead character, with intrigues of their own, but as accompaniment and as a chorus. I have much enjoyed setting Phillis Wheatley poems previously. Through her words, her witty and subversive personality reveals deep insights to a Georgian lifestyle, reminiscent of the quintessential Georgian writer, Jane Austen. *An Hymn to the Evening*, a warm and characterful poem, reminds me of walks in the Downs on a beautiful day, enwrapped by the supreme majesty of nature.

Soon as the sun forsook the eastern main  
The pealing thunder shook the heav'nly plain;  
Majestic grandeur! From the zephyr's wing,  
Exhales the incense of the blooming spring.  
Soft purl the streams, the birds renew their  
    notes,  
And through the air their mingled music  
    floats.  
Through all the heav'ns what beauteous dies  
    are spread!

But the west glories in the deepest red: ...  
At morn to wake more heav'nly, more refin'd;  
So shall the labours of the day begin  
More pure, more guarded from the snares of  
    sin.  
Night's leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes,  
Then cease, my song, till fair *Aurora* rise.

**Rowland Sutherland: *Modes from The Downs* (first performance)**

Text for Modes from the Downs, based on the sonnet: Composed During a Walk on the Downs by Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806)

SONNET [42] XLII. Composed during a Walk on the Downs, Nov. 1787.

The poet Charlotte Turner Smith grew up in West Sussex, in Bignor, in the South Downs. She eventually left the region when she married, but later on in her life she returned to Sussex, spending time in Brighton, before settling again in West Sussex near Chichester. She gives a romantic, evocative account of her walk through the South Downs in her poem. We are taken through different emotions of melancholy, sorrow, endeavour and optimism. As well as reflecting upon this nocturnal poem, I also embarked on a musical journey through the contrasting moods and modes this poem evokes, and drew upon some of my own early musical ventures - such as exploring late baroque and early classical soundscapes, British folk suites with symphonic wind bands, through to jazz ballads with hip-hop pulsations and the impetus of Latin jazz. My aim was to paint the vivid depictions the poet expresses, through sound and words.

The dark and pillowy cloud; the fallow trees,  
Seem o'er the ruins of the year to mourn;  
And cold and hollow, the inconstant breeze  
Sobs thro' the falling leaves and wither'd fern.  
O'er the tall brow of yonder chalky bourn,  
The evening shades their gather'd darkness  
fling,  
While, by the ling'ring light, I scarce discern  
The shrieking nightjar, sail on heavy wing.

Ah! yet a little — and propitious Spring,  
Crown'd with fresh flow'rs, shall wake the  
woodland strain;  
But no gay change revolving seasons bring,  
To call forth Pleasure from the soul of Pain,  
Bid syren Hope resume her long lost part,  
And chase the vulture Care, that feeds upon  
the heart.

**Evelyn Ficarra: *What Larks* for voice, chamber ensemble and electronics**

Music by Evelyn Ficarra. Words from a poem by Valerie Whittington

This piece considers the different experiences to be had of nature and time, and the otherness of non human species. What is it to be a lark? How do they experience the closeness and immediacy of their nests in the ground, compared with the vast vistas and freedom of soaring above it? How can we enter into their perspective and imagine their point of view? How do the cliffs and the sea hold it all in place? During composition, I read and re-read a suite of poems by my friend and collaborator Valerie Whittington. I was continually struck by resonant phrases, notions of listening and silence, the intense light, '*stark white and blue*', the '*hard pressed chalk*', the larks '*speaking in tongues*' - '*speaking decisively, but not for us*'. I was particularly attracted to the opening of one poem:

I have not written this  
not yet

I played with this line and it became a refrain for the piece - for all the things we have simultaneously done and not done - written, sung, heard - as our lives play out through imagination and time.

Text for *What Larks*: words from a poem by Valerie Whittington

I have not written this  
not yet

so bright  
it hurts our eyes

I have not sung  
hard pressed chalk

you have not heard this  
the sun is exploding

## Biographies

**Ed Hughes** is a composer and director of Orchestra of Sound and Light. Ed's new CD of compositions, *Music for the South Downs*, released in June, is on Metier records. Richly illustrated with filmmaker Sam Moore's images, this album, recorded at St John's Smith Square and Attenborough Centre in 2021, evokes the experience of walking through downland. Composer Judith Weir writes about this new release, 'the works in this rich collection ...surge forward with textural warmth and harmonic continuity. This is music for walkers and people who love the earth.' A link to order his Music for the South Downs CD can be found via Ed's website: <https://edhughescomposer.com/>. Ed is Professor of Composition in Music at University of Sussex.

**Shirley J Thompson's** music is performed and screened worldwide and often described as "beautiful and powerful" (*Le Figaro*). Thompson is the first woman in Europe to have composed and conducted a symphony within the last 40 years. *New Nation Rising, A 21st Century Symphony* performed and recorded by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is an epic musical story celebrating London's thousand-year history. Thompson has created music for contemporary choreographers, including her most famous dance score for solo cello and string orchestra, *Shift*, that forms a part of the award-winning ballet, *PUSH* starring Sylvie Guillem and Russell Maliphant, whose international tour has led to performances at major venues in over 30 countries including Sadler's Wells and London Coliseum. Her ground-breaking operatic series, *Heroines of Opera*, for solo voice, orchestra, video and dancers asserts triumphant heroines, transforming the conventional femme fatale and morally weak roles of the operatic canon. Shirley Thompson OBE is Professor in Composition and Performance at University of Westminster.

**Rowland Sutherland** is a flautist, composer, arranger, bandleader and educator noted for his work in ensembles, bands, orchestras and as a soloist, working in classical, jazz, contemporary, non-Western and popular music. Since 1987 Rowland has been composing and/or arranging music for a number of artists, bands and ensembles in the UK and around the world, covering many different music genres along the way. Composition commissions include those written for the percussion quartet Ensemble Bash, the contemporary music group The New Music Players whose recording, *Crying Bird*, Echoing Star, features Rowland's composition 'Timeless Odyssey' and is on the London Independent Records label. Rowland has also composed and arranged music for the Fidelio Trio, Jazz Warriors Orchestra, the Gnawa musicians of Morocco, world saxophonist Ray Carless, African master percussionist Pops Mohamed, vibes player Orphy Robinson, Indian east meets west group Shiva Nova and jazz trumpeter Byron Wallen. He has composed and arranged music for bands, ensembles and the BBC. His composition *Enlightenment*, for large ensemble, inspired by John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 early 2015. It also featured on the final day of 2014 Meltdown Festival for two sell-out concerts at the QEH, both of which received standing ovations.

**Evelyn Ficarra** is a composer, sound artist and improviser. Her work finds expression across a range of forms including music theatre, multimedia, installation, dance, film and the concert hall. Her musical ideas often come from sounds, words, images and objects, which inform the development and shape of the music and leave their traces in it. Recent works include *strange birds*, commissioned by the Rainy Days Festival (Luxembourg) 2021. She is a Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Sussex where she is currently leading a research project in robot opera, exploring hybrid human/robot vocal expression.

The vision of **Orchestra of Sound and Light** is to share the excitement of live music-making and composing through participatory projects ranging from primary schools to major Festival commissions, frequently with moving images. OSL is a core line-up of five musicians who all perform professionally at the highest level and have extensive teaching and facilitating experience, directed by composer and Artistic Director Ed Hughes. OSL has presented workshops and performance projects across East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, including performances at the Brighton Festival in 2016 and 2018. Arts Council England awarded funding in 2022 for 'South Downs Songbook' featuring new works by composers Rowland Sutherland, Evelyn Ficarra, Ed Hughes and Shirley J Thompson, workshops in schools and colleges, and new digital resources. Further information <https://www.orchsoundlight.org/>

## Acknowledgements and thanks

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South Downs National Park Authority  
Produced by Liz Webb Management  
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Special thanks to Liz Webb and Duncan Mackrill

We're on Twitter. Performed by @OrchestraSl and directed by @EdHughes16 thanks to #ACEsupported #NationalLotteryFunding #SouthDownsSongbook

The performance is being recorded for inclusion in the South Downs Songbook (<https://www.orchsoundlight.org/southdownssongbook>)

**Therefore please switch off phones/electronic devices, or put in flight mode, especially during the live musical performances**

**FEEDBACK REQUESTED!**

The organisers would be very grateful for your feedback to help them evaluate and report back to their funder.

**What did the music make you feel?**

**What did you like about the show?**

**Any suggestions or any other comments?**

**Would you come to another event like this?**

**PLEASE LEAVE THIS IN THE BOX MARKED FEEDBACK IN THE CAFE**

**If you would like to join the Orchestra of Sound and Light's mailing list, please contact [lizwebbmanagement@gmail.com](mailto:lizwebbmanagement@gmail.com)**

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH**