

## Programme:

Emilio Pujol (1886-1980) - *Invocación*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) - 'Angelus', from *Années de pèlerinage: Troisième année*, S.163 (arr. Steven Watson)

Robert Johnson (c. 1583-1633) - *The First, Second and Third Dances in the Prince's Masque*

Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981) - *Libra* (arr. Steven Watson)

Django Reinhardt (1910-1953) - *Improvisation No. 2*

Wenzel Thomas Matiegka (1773-1830) - *Sonata No. 5 in D Major*, op. 31

## Notes:

Emilio Pujol was one of the great guitarists and early music advocates of the twentieth century. One of his greatest achievements was to revive the *vihuela*, which was Spain's guitar-shaped alternative to the lute. Beginning in the eighth century, much of the Iberian peninsula became Muslim-ruled. Over the next several centuries Christian nations warred with the Muslim forces, and by 1492 had won full control of the peninsula. It is commonly believed that this is why the lute, with its Moorish associations, was never used in Spain. In his short *Invocación* you can hear Pujol drawing upon his love of Renaissance music – particularly in the way that sixteenth-century composers would use solo instruments, like the vihuela, to imitate choral writing.

In the final decades of his life, Franz Liszt's religious belief intensified. He received minor orders in 1865, and for the remaining twenty-one years of his life was known as 'Abbé Liszt'. During this time, his music underwent a radical change. It was still dramatic and harmonically adventurous – in many ways it became more so – but it had also become less overtly virtuosic, with a stripped-down texture that often increases its intensity. We also hear the frailty and melancholy that was a feature of his later life becoming, increasingly, a feature of his music.

*Angelus* is from the third volume of his piano masterpiece, *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage), written in 1877. It begins with an evocation of bells, announcing the Angelus prayer. Soon a chorale begins, which is the basis for the entire piece. In some ways, the work prefigures the beautifully childlike religiosity of Frederic Mompou or perhaps the so-called 'holy minimalism' of composers like Arvo Pärt. There is a radical simplicity about it – there are no more notes than are necessary – and it is without ambitious development, but rather repeats

itself, with love and yearning. Yet it still has that Lisztean majesty, with impassioned highs and lows.

Robert Johnson was the last great English lutenist, and in my view the only one to rival John Dowland. Johnson served in the courts of James I and Charles I, and wrote music for the King's Men, the most important acting company in England. Among the tiny amount of surviving music thought to have actually been used in early Shakespeare productions, Johnson's music for *The Tempest*, *Cymbaline* and *The Winter's Tale* is the most impressive, and may have even been used in the original productions. For this reason he has sometimes been described as 'Shakespeare's lutenist'.

Much of Johnson's music for the theatre has survived as lute arrangements, either by Johnson or by his lutenist contemporaries. The three dances in this programme are from a manuscript that was likely written circa 1620. They were originally composed for Ben Jonson's masque *Oberon, the Faery Prince*. They exemplify Robert Johnson's exquisite lyricism; the dances flow into one another without clear separation, almost seeming to build toward the final bars, when the music changes to triple metre. Despite being dances, these pieces have a dramatic tension, with rhythms that jump and change. We hear the beginnings of the Baroque age, and the influence of new theatrical styles, particularly Italian opera.

Mary Lou Williams was a mid-twentieth century jazz pianist who at various times explored, with great imaginative skill, the western classical tradition. Notably, upon her conversion to Catholicism in the 1960s she wrote a stirringly beautiful choral work, *St Martin de Porres*, as well as jazz masses and other religious and liturgical music. Even before then, in the 1940s, she wrote her *Zodiac Suite*, which to my ears is as much a late-romantic and impressionist work as it is jazz. The suite exists in various forms. Williams recorded all twelve movements herself in 1945 – some for a trio piano, bass and drums, and others for solo piano. Her orchestrated versions of three of the movements were first performed at Carnegie Hall in 1946, and other musicians have made their own arrangements using various instrumentation. My transcription of *Libra* is based on Williams's 1945 solo piano recording.

Django Reinhardt recorded a number of solo works that are titled 'improvisations', yet are actually nothing of the sort. This particular improvisation Django recorded thrice, and each recording is similar. It is a concise and well-constructed piece, and as in the Williams one can hear the influence of Romantic piano literature, and possibly contemporary composers such as Heitor Villa-Lobos, while it still remains unmistakably Django.

In the last few decades, so much historical guitar repertoire has been rediscovered. Among the most interesting, for me, is the music of Wenzel Thomas Matiegka. Matiegka was born in 1773 in the Kingdom of Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. At this point the guitar had just become

the six-stringed instrument familiar to us today (in the Baroque era it was a smaller instrument with five strings and a different tuning). Although in Britain this new guitar was called, and is often still called, the Spanish guitar, it was popular across the continent. Virtuosi soon emerged, and by the beginning of the nineteenth-century the guitar established itself, not merely as a popular amateur instrument, but as part of respectable musical culture.

For example, the Italian guitarist Emilio Giuliani was praised by Carl Maria von Weber, wrote duets with the famous pianist-composers Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Ignaz Moscheles, and was appointed “Honorary Chamber Virtuoso” by Empress Marie-Louise, the wife of Napoleon. The violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini also played the guitar and wrote many works for the instrument. The ballet that opened the Bolshoi Theatre in 1825 was written by one of the most famous guitarist-composers of the time, Fernando Sor. This period was the closest the guitar would come to a golden age until its full reintroduction into concert life in the 20th century.

Matiegka was one of the most important of the first generation of guitarists in Vienna. An 1814 chamber work, *Notturmo*, for flute, viola and guitar, caught the attention of Franz Schubert, who added an additional cello part. Matiegka’s works for guitar were all published between 1805 and 1817, and they show considerable composition skill and a lively imagination. Yet in 1817, for some unknown reason, he abruptly stopped publishing guitar works and dedicated himself to church music – conducting choirs and writing sacred works. Matiegka died in 1830 of tuberculosis, leaving behind a family of six in severe financial distress.

Op. 31 consists of six inventive sonatas of very different characters. The fifth is a joyous tribute to Mozart and Haydn. The first movement borrows its opening theme from *The Magic Flute*, and the third and final movement is sprinkled with Haydnesque whimsy – offbeat accents, a playful bass line, and dramatic pauses. I think it is one of the most delightful sonatas in the early guitar repertoire.

**Bio:**

Steven studied history at university, but soon after leaving he rediscovered a love of music and began studying the classical guitar. He was first inspired by Julian Bream, to whom he discovered, almost providentially, he was distantly related. He therefore wrote to the great man informing him of this remarkable fact and asking for advice, to which Bream responded, in his idiosyncratic style and with much underlined text, that anyone who enjoys ‘music-making or indeed life altogether [should] never become a professional musician, unless you require an ego massage from time to time!’ For good or ill, Steven did not quite follow this advice, and within two years he had achieved the Associate of Trinity College performance diploma with distinction. Shortly after, in 2021, he had his first book published by Mel Bay, a collection of transcriptions of the complete solo works by the Jacobean lutenist Robert Johnson. A second book, an introduction to the Renaissance four-course guitar repertoire for ukulele players, is due out this year. During lockdown he began composing and received his first premiere, *Night Music* for trumpet and guitar, which was performed by one of Scotland’s leading contemporary music groups, the Red Note Ensemble. He has since released some of his compositions on streaming platforms. He also began a growing YouTube channel during this period, which has since gained well over a thousand subscribers. In the last year he has given performances in the Hertfordshire and North London area.