

Electra Mourns

Geranos • Meet me in the Green Glen • Once did I breathe another's breath



Susan Bickley *mezzo-soprano* • Roderick Williams *baritone* • Iain Burnside *piano* • Nicholas Daniel *cor anglais*
Britten Sinfonia • Clark Rundell *conductor* • Psappa • Nicholas Kok *conductor*

Geranos

1	I	7'05
2	II (Adonidia)	6'03
3	III	6'55

Psappa • Nicholas Kok *conductor*

Meet me in the Green Glen *

4	I Meet me in the Green Glen	3'13
5	II Song	2'11
6	III Now is Past	3'12
7	IV Love's Pains	1'22
8	V Hesperus	2'56

Roderick Williams *baritone* (I, III, V) • Susan Bickley *mezzo-soprano* (II, IV)

Once did I breathe another's breath

9	I Dost ask my dear	3'30
10	II Dear, let us two each other spy	1'47
11	III Now sleep, bind fast the flood of air	3'44
12	IV Once did my thoughts both ebb and flow	2'26
13	V There comes a night	2'38

Roderick Williams *baritone* • Iain Burnside *piano*

14	Electra Mourns	18'44
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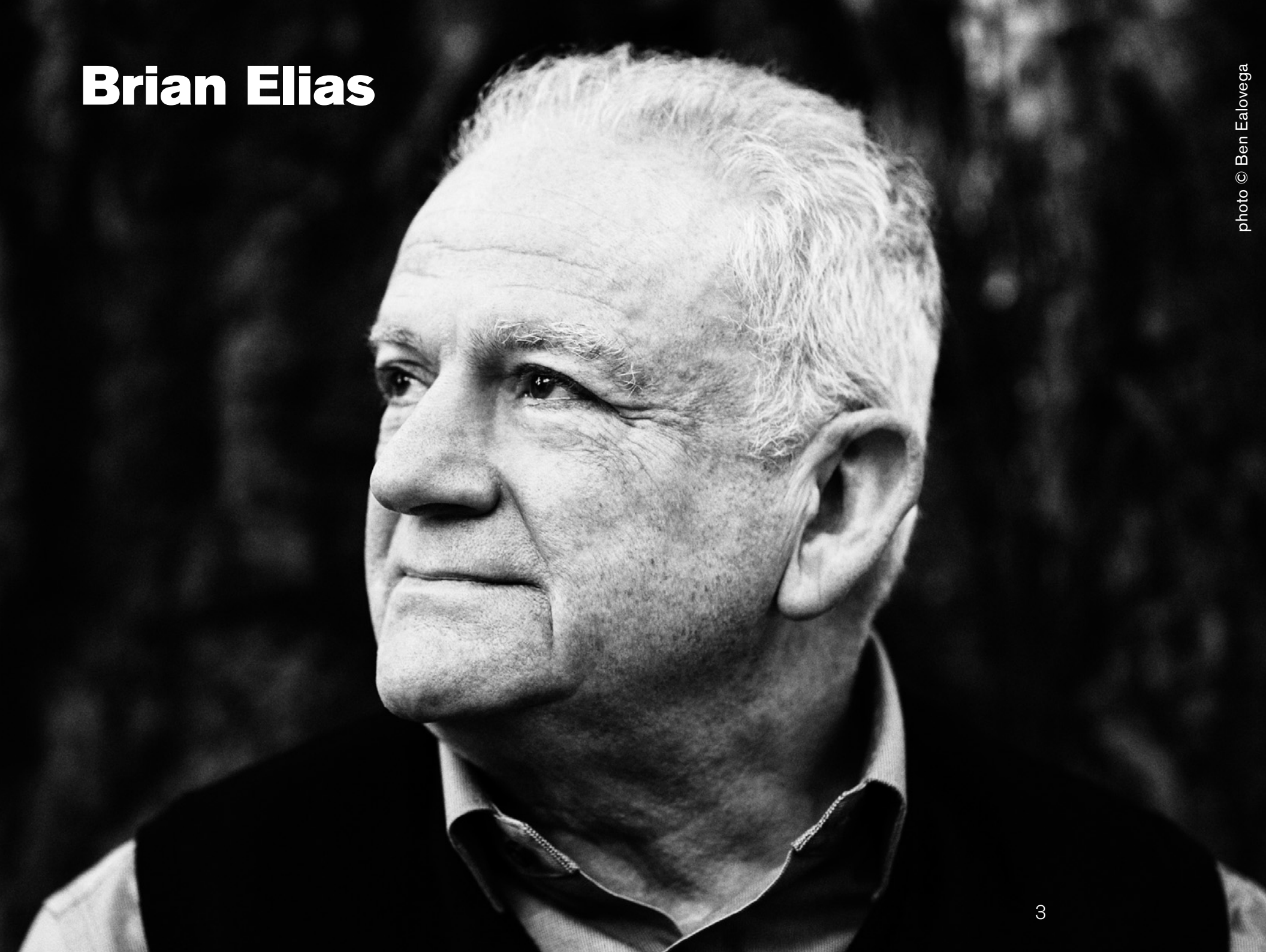
Susan Bickley *mezzo-soprano* • Nicholas Daniel *cor anglais*

Britten Sinfonia • Clark Rundell *conductor*

Total timing: 66'07

* As these songs were written to be sung by any voice, Brian Elias chose this combination, sung in turn by baritone and mezzo-soprano, for the CD. The complete song cycle is also available to download in separate versions for single voice. See page 20 for more details.

Brian Elias



Mounting towards Electra

A step. Another step. And another. These steps, they may seem arbitrary. Why this way, now? But then you look back and you see a progression, with turnings that appear to have been inevitable in order to reach this present point.

Only rarely, perhaps, does life offer us this kind of consolation, but we can gain it from the course of an artist's work, and we can certainly gain it from these recordings, of compositions that Brian Elias produced over a period of almost thirty years, taking him from his mid-thirties to his mid-sixties. At the beginning of that period he had only recently re-established himself as a composer, the works of his late teens and early twenties having been followed by several years of withdrawal. By the end he was an established master, one whose

achievements have been partly documented on two previous NMC releases.

The starting point for this third one is *Geranos*, composed in 1985 for the Fires of London and made to capitalize more on the group's aptitude for extended chamber music than on their equal skills in music theatre. That said, *Geranos* is a dramatic piece. The title comes from a kind of ritual dance in ancient Greece, reproducing Theseus's dance with the thirteen young companions he had brought out with him from the Labyrinth, once he had conveyed them to the island of Delos and set up an altar to Aphrodite. According to some authorities, the dance imitated the flight of cranes in high formation, the Greek word for this bird being also *geranos*. The network – or labyrinth – of images

here, including those of a hero, a rescue, an arrival, a maze, bird flight and a sacred dance, fascinated the composer. In his own words, he 'became intrigued by such dances and with the connections between the dance, lyric poetry and music. In particular I was interested by rhythm as expressed in both dance and music, and their use and juxtaposition of different types of basic metre.' Hence the strongly pulsed rhythmic motifs that feature so much in the outer parts of this *geranos*.

As important as rhythm here, though, is harmony. To quote Elias again: 'The chord used in the introduction dictates the material throughout the piece.' This is the chord, partly built up by the piano from the start, that is affirmed by piano and vibraphone together in the second bar, and whose rule may be perhaps more felt than recognized until it comes forward again at the close.

But again, as important as harmony is harmonic movement, motivated by, and enacted by, melody. Almost immediately, for instance, the two top notes of the determining chord, A and G, are coming to life as a melodic item: a major second, falling or rising. It is with this same interval, this same oscillation, transposed down a tenth, that the main allegro of the first movement gets going as a cello solo. The music is carried further forward in passages led by bass clarinet (at a slower tempo) and piccolo (supplanted by the clarinet asserting one of the prime rhythmic gestures), but there are also sequences where events rotate in repetition, as if we have reached one of the blind alleys in this labyrinth.

Alighting on a middle register G, which the viola plays on both its lowest strings, the piece moves seamlessly into a slow movement, subtitled 'Adonidia' after another

ritual practice of ancient Greece, in which women sang laments over the dead Adonis. Then the viola again, more alert, introduces the final movement, which similarly continues without a break. As Elias puts it, this movement 'shadows' the first, and it is the arrival of a new instrument, the glockenspiel, that makes possible the return to the substance of the work's introduction. The haunting coda is for crotales alone, *pianissimo*.

Right through the piece, as at the start, in the turn from introduction to allegro, cogency comes from how an instrument or a group will seem to hear something in what just happened, hear something that can be taken further. Statement is a register of listening; you repeat what you just heard, but in your own way.

We now move a quarter century forward and into vocal music, the first example being the extraordinary

unaccompanied John Clare cycle *Meet me in the Green Glen* (2008-9). Encountering a poet who combined the sturdy habits of folk song with fine sophistication, Elias does likewise. He uses a modest vocal range, around a tenth, and a high degree of motivic repetition within that narrow limit. For instance, the first stanza of the title song, which Elias wrote for the NMC Songbook, is almost pentatonic, repeatedly emphasizing two note pairs, each of which is usually unified by a single syllable and once more outlines a major second, whether falling ('meet...green...Elm...green') or rising, to the note a tritone below the other's resting point ('me...glen...beside...tree...in...glen'). Most of the song uses just nine notes, and one of the two additions – also the highest pitch – appears just once, where the first syllable of 'crimson' seems at once to call for and respond to special treatment.

Such elemental simplicity, with the allowance of transposition, suggests these might be songs for everyone – and yet they would defy nearly all of us by their rhythmic suppleness, their sometimes awkward intervals and their irregular shapes. A kind of antiquity is being touched here, but within a modern world of complexity and disillusion.

Elias had written for unaccompanied voice before, in the earlier phase of his composing (*Peroration*, 1973), but that was a Berioesque essay. The Clare cycle blends much more with our concept of the natural while being lonely and estranged, evoking a modality whose frame and centre have been lost. The ‘green glen’ is a place we all know but cannot now find. It is a place, too, that different singers (and different listeners) will interpret differently, as here we learn from the performances by Roderick Williams and Susan Bickley.

With confident vocalicity now added to strength of detail (down to the level of two notes – and even the same two notes in *Meet Me* as in *Geranos*), *Electra Mourns* (2011) might seem, looking back at those steps, ready to happen – so, too, a song cycle for the natural-strange, involved-disenchanted voice Elias had discovered: *Once did I breathe another's breath* (2012). The five poems of this work, from two centuries before Clare, are as intensely personal, though it is the music, recognizably nourished by *Meet Me*, that conjures the persona declaiming them. Loneliness again is key. The Ravelian piano offers no foundation but rather quick lighting. The joy of love is rapidly outgrown for more mature experiences, growing to the ultimate moment when the voice goes on after the piano has finished, as if the persona were breaking out from the written world that has created and confined it.

Elias is good at endings (cf. the far-off chimes of *Geranos*), and *Electra Mourns* does not disappoint in that respect. It starts pretty well, too. The protagonist is the Electra of the Sophocles play, caught at the moment of her great lament over the urn she believes to contain the ashes of her brother Orestes, and she begins without accompaniment, not only to indicate she, too, is alone, but also to summon the image of an action taking place two and a half millennia ago, on a Mediterranean stage. Elias's decision to set the original Greek is also important, in allowing him to continue the work he had begun in *Geranos* with music's links to poetic metre, and in making it so that most of us will be confronted by a being from an alien time and place.

Singing her first hexameter in a low register, the singer fills in the chromatic space down from her opening E flat to middle C, echoed

and amplified by the wide-spaced chord that introduces the strings, coming as the strum of a giant instrument. It is with this body of strings as it is with the voice (both here and in the song cycles), that Elias finds plenitude in severity, for there is no recourse to non-standard effects, only the accurate judgement of notes. A third participant then joins these, a solo cor anglais, similar in register to the mezzo voice. Elias has said that the desire for such a partnership came to him as he was writing a duet for alto flute and cor anglais in his orchestral work *Doubles* (which can be heard on one of the earlier NMC albums devoted to his music). Here the cor anglais brings with it the rich history, going back to Bach, of the obbligato instrument, and, as often before, such an instrument is able to express a pathos the singer cannot bring herself to convey. Strong, too, are the moments when even this instrument has to fall silent.

Most often, though, the cor anglais partners the voice, introducing, mirroring or reflecting on the shifting currents of grief, outrage and regret that the words require. Electra's state is indeed wretched, and if her lust for vengeance is unappealing, the music provides a constant reminder not only that this lust is powerfully and justly felt but also that it is thrust on her by the text. Sophocles, in making her an immense and tragic figure, gives her another tragedy, one that perhaps only music can explicate and exculpate.

Towards the centre of the piece a long episode for the strings alone is let loose by the sudden wide intervals of Electra's 'gelosi d'exthroi' ('Our enemies laugh', as the translation in the score has it). This episode is a *moto perpetuo* whose self-contained motor is the A on the treble staff, throbbing rapidly on second violins almost throughout,

like the nagging pain of an unhealed wound, or like the constant reminder of a fate that cannot be avoided, because not only of the situation in which Electra finds herself but also of the play. When the mezzo and the cor anglais return, it is to participate in the frenzy, the vocal intervals again much wider than is the norm for this piece and the cor anglais leaning hard on multiphonic tones. Stability is restored, as it must be, but that A cannot be forgotten. There it is at the end, obstinately sustained by the cor anglais as Electra, against all the force of consonance, keeps pulling herself away, up a semitone. Her victory, bitter as the music makes it, we may also deem sweet.

Meet me in the Green Glen

poems by John Clare (1793-1864)

1. Meet me in the Green Glen

Love meet me in the green glen
Beside the tall Elm tree
Where the Sweet briar smells so sweet agen
There come wi me
Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me at the sunset
Down in the green glen
Where we've often met
By hawthorn tree and foxes den
Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me by the sheep pen
Where briars smell at een
Meet me in the green glen
Where white thorn shades are green
Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me in the green glen
By sweet briar bushes there
Meet me by your own sen
Where the wild thyme blossoms fair
Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me by the sweet briar
By the mole hill swelling there
When the west glows like a fire
God's crimson bed is there
Meet me in the green glen.

2. Song

I would not be a wither'd leaf
Twirled in an autumn sky
Mine should not be a life so brief
To fade and fall and die.

Nor would I be a wither'd flower
Whose stalk was broke before
The bud showed bloom in springs young hour
Heart sicken'd at the core.

But I would be a happy thought
With thy sweet sleep to lie
To live unknown, unseen, unsought
And keep my lonely joy.

Yes I would be a ray of light
In the apple of thy eye
And watch o'er thee the live long night
In beauty and in joy.

3. Now is Past

Now is past – the happy *now*
When we together roved
Beneath the wildwood's oak-tree bough
And nature said we loved.

Winter's blast
The *now* since then has crept between
And left us both apart.
Winter's that withered all the green
Have froze the beating heart.
Now is past.

Now is past since last we met
Beneath the hazel bough;
Before the evening sun was set
Her shadow stretched below.
Autumn's blast
Has stained and blighted every bough;
Wild strawberries like her lips
Have left the mosses green below
Her bloom's upon the hips.
Now is past.

Now is past, is changed agen,
The woods and fields are painted new.
Wild strawberries which both gathered then,
None know now where they grew.
The sky's o'er-cast,
Wood strawberries faded from wood-sides,
Green leaves have all turned yellow;
No Adelaide walks the wood-rides,
True love has no bed-fellow.
Now is past.

4. Love's Pains

This love, I canna' bear it,
It cheats me night and day;
This love I canna' wear it,
It takes my peace away.

This love wa' once a flower;
But now it is a thorn –
The joy o' evening hour,
Turn'd to pain e're morn.

This love, it wa' a bud,
And a secret known to me;
Like a flower within a wood;
Like a nest within a tree.

This love, wrong understood,
Of't turned my joy to pain;
I tried to throw away the bud,
But the blossom would remain.

5. Hesperus

Hesperus the day is gone
Soft falls the silent dew
A tear is now on many a flower
And heaven lives in you.

Hesperus the evening mild
Falls round us soft and sweet
'Tis like the breathings of a child
When day and evening meet.

Hesperus the closing flower
Sleeps on the dewy ground
While dews fall in a silent shower
And heaven breathes around.

Hesperus thy twinkling ray
Beams in the blue of heaven
And tolls the traveller on his way
That earth shall be forgiven.

Once did I breathe another's breath

1. Dost ask my dear

Dost ask (my dear) what service I will have?
To love me day and night is all I crave,
To dream on me, to expect, to think on me,
Depend and hope, still covet me to see,
Delight thyself in me, be wholly mine,
For know, my love, that I am wholly thine.

Terence (c.190-159 BCE) tr. Robert Burton
(1577-1640) from *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

2. Dear, let us two each other spy

Dear, let us two each other spy:
How curious! in each other's eye
We're drawn to life, and thus we see
Ourselves at once, both thee and me,
Distinctly two, yet not alone,
Incorporated, that's but one ...

Because we two must never part
We move down to each other's heart,
And there, all passions turned to joy,
Our loving hearts feel no annoy
Dilated, lest our souls outskips
With joy, kiss quickly! stop our lips!

William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle (1592-1676)

3. Now sleep, bind fast the flood of air

Now sleep, bind fast the flood of air,
Strike all things dumb and deaf,
And to disturb our nuptial pair
Let stir no aspen leaf.
Send flocks of golden dreams
That all true joys presage;
Bring, in thy oily streams,
The milk-and-honey age.
Now close the world-round sphere of bliss,
And fill it with a heavenly kiss.

George Chapman (1559?-1634)

4. Once did my thoughts both ebb and flow

Once did my thoughts both ebb and flow
As passion did them move;
Once did I hope, straight fear again –
And then I was in love ...

Once did I waking spend the night,
And tell how many minutes move;
Once did I wishing waste the day, –
And then I was in love ...

Once did I breathe another's breath
And in my mistress move;
Once was I not mine own at all, –
And then I was in love ...

Anon

5. There comes a night

There comes a night when once the full-orbed moon
Lessens her splendour, and begins to wane;
Clouds from the ocean of the west sweep on,
And all things lovely must obscured remain.
Thou wast my light of heaven. Thy crescent, Sweet,
Promised my heart the all thou didst bestow:
'Twere not in Nature bliss should stay complete –
But, O my soul, the dark into which we go!

Anon

Electra Mourns

Elektra: Translation

O sad memorial of the life I priz'd
Beyond all other lives, my lov'd Orestes,
How much this welcome home belies the hope
With which I sent you forth, so young, so bright –
O child! and now this nothing, which I hold
So lightly in my hand. Would I had died
Before I sent you out, stolen from death,
Retriev'd from murder, sav'd, to dwell far off
With strangers. Better had you died that day
And shared your father's grave than perish'd so,
Miserably in helpless homeless banishment,
Far from my care. Alas! these hands of mine
Which should have dress'd and bathed you lovingly,
Then from hungry flames have gather'd in
Grief's precious load for burial – not so!
Some stranger did my office – all I have
Is this – a little dust, a paltry urn.

Alas for all my care, my loving care,
Prov'd useless now! The labour was so sweet,
Because it was for you, but all in vain.
Your mother never loved you as I loved you;
And you would call me 'Sister', always, 'Sister'.
One day you died, and in that one day all
Has vanish'd, all. You gather'd up my life
And, like a whirlwind, left me. Everything
Vanish'd. Our father's dead, and it is death
To me that you are gone. Our enemies
Laugh, and our mother, most unmotherly
Runs mad for joy. How often you would send
Your secret messages. You would come, you said,
And punish her yourself. The luckless chance
That haunts us both has stolen hope away,
And sent me for the bright form that I lov'd
These ashes and a shade that cannot help.

Elektra: Transliteration of text

O philtatou mnemeion anthropon emoi
pseuxes Orestou loipon, hos s'ap elpidon
ookh honpèr exepempon eisedexamen.
[noon men gar ouden onta bastazdo kheroin,
domon de s, o pai, lampron exepemps ego.] *
hos ophelon paroithen eklipein bion,
prin es gzenen se gaian ekpempesai kheroin
klepsasa tainde kan asosastai phonou,
hopos thanon ékeiso te toth hemera,
toombou patroiou koinon elexos meros.
noon d' ektos oikon kapi ges alles fugas
kakos apolou seis kasignetes dixá,
koot en philaisi kersin he talain ego
loutrois s' ekosmes oute pamflektou puros
aneilomen hos eikos athlion baros,
all en [g]zenaisi kersi kedoipheis talas
smikros prosekeis onkos [en smikro kutei.] *

oimoi talaina tes emes palai trophes
anopheletou ten ego tham amphi soi
pono glukei pareskhon oute gar pote
metros su g' esta mallon e kamou philos,
outh hoi kat oikon esan all ego trophos,
ego d' adelphé soi proseiudomen aei.
noon d' ekleloipe taut en hemera mia
thanonti sun soi pan ta gar sunarpasas
thuell hopos bebékas. oikhetai pater
teth nek ego soi froudos autos ei thanon
gelosi d' exthroi maine tai d' houf hedones
meter ameter hes emoi su pollakis
femas lathra proupempes hos phanoumenos
timoros autos. alla tauth ho dustoukhes
daimon ho sos te kamos exapheileto,
hos s' hode moi proupempsen anti philtates
morphes spodon te kai skiyán anophele.

Ah me, alas!
O pitiful and strange!
Ah me, alas, alas!

O dearest, by what strange and terrible ways
You travell'd, to destroy me utterly,
Yes, brother, to destroy! Come, welcome me
To this same narrow room, which houses you,
My nothing to your nothing. Let me dwell
With you below for ever. Here in life
We shared and shared alike. Now I would share
Your grave, and never part from you again,
I see, only the dead can feel no pain.

J. T. Sheppard Bowes & Bowes, Cambridge 1927
[*The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* 1938]

oimoi moi.
o demas oiktron pheu pheu
o denotatas oimoimoi,

pemphtheis keloithoos, philtat hos m' apolesas
apolesas det, o kassigneton kara.
toigar su dexai m' es to son tode stegos,
ten mèden eis to meden, hos soon soi kato
nayo to loipon kai gar henik esth ano,
zun soi meteikon ton ison, kai noon pothau
too soo thanoosa me apoleipestai taphou.
tous gar thanontas oukh horo loupoumenous.

*omitted in the setting

Brian Elias & Susan Bickley
during the recording session



photo © Ben Ealovega

Brian Elias

Bombay was Brian Elias's first home, until he was sent to school in England at the age of thirteen. By then he had already composed a fair amount – or rather improvised, as it was not until the need arose to make parts for school performances that Elias began properly writing his ideas down. In 1966 he entered the Royal College of Music, officially studying composition under Humphrey Searle and Bernard Stevens, though it was the experience of 'moonlighting' with the composer Elisabeth Lutyens he found most stimulating. Under Lutyens's influence, Elias produced a Webern-like cantata *La Chevelure*, which made a positive impression at its first hearing in 1968.

After leaving the RCM he produced a number of small-scale works, culminating in the unaccompanied choral *Proverbs of Hell*, based on William Blake. This and a revival

of *La Chevelure* gave him the confidence to tackle larger-scale structures: the first significant product was the Petronius setting *Somnia* (1979) for tenor and orchestra, followed in 1982 by the song cycle *At the Edge of Time*. In *L'Eylah* (1983), he at last felt free to write a large, abstract orchestral work; it was greeted with enthusiasm by audience and critics at its BBC Proms premiere.

Geranos for chamber ensemble (1985) confirmed his growing confidence and mastery, as did the vividly atmospheric *Pythikos Nomos (The Law of the Python, 1987-8)* for alto saxophone and piano. But these were surpassed by Elias's next major work, the orchestral song cycle *Five Songs to Poems by Irina Ratushinskaya* (1989), commissioned by the BBC; it was so well received at its London premiere

that it was toured by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, repeated at the 1991 Proms, and later recorded for NMC (NMC D064).

In 1992 came one of Elias's greatest successes, *The Judas Tree*, a riveting forty-minute score written for the Royal Ballet and choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan, which has remained securely in the Royal Ballet's repertory ever since; although written to be danced, it is scarcely less impressive performed purely as an orchestral work. For all his achievement as a composer of largescale works, however, Elias has not forgotten his early liking for music of a more intimate scale and manner: two recent successes include *Three Songs* (2003) on poems by Christina Rossetti for alto voice and harp, and a piece for solo clarinet, *Birds Practise Songs in Dreams* (2004).

Elias has never been a prolific composer, and all his work – from

ambitious orchestral scores to the tiniest instrumental pieces – is executed with meticulous care. Yet the result is music that never sounds merely 'careful'. *The House That Jack Built* (2001) is bold, dazzlingly inventive and full of dancing energy. His 2004 commission for the Cheltenham Festival was *A Talisman*, premiered by the National Youth Orchestra Sinfonietta and Paul Putnins, and scored for bass-baritone and small orchestra; and a more recent orchestral work is *Doubles* (2009), commissioned by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Elias is the recipient of two British Composer Awards; the first in 2010 for the orchestral work *Doubles*, which was commissioned by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and the second in 2013 for *Electra Mourns*. This piece, a setting of Sophocles in ancient Greek, was written for Susan Bickley (mezzo-soprano) and Nicholas Daniel (cor anglais)

and first performed with the Britten Sinfonia at the BBC Proms in 2012. Elias' String Quartet, composed in 2012 for the Jerusalem String Quartet, was premiered at Wake Forest University in North Carolina in 2013. The piece was performed and broadcast by the EBU at the Zeist Festival in Holland in 2014 and received its London premiere at the Wigmore Hall in 2015.

Forthcoming works include a Cello Concerto for Natalie Clein and an Oboe Quintet.

**Information about the artists on this disc can be found on NMC's website:
www.nmcrec.co.uk**

Also by Brian Elias on NMC...

**Five Songs to Poems
by Irina Ratushinskaya**

BBC Symphony Orchestra/Brabbins
NMC D064

The House that Jack Built

BBC Symphony Orchestra/Brabbins/
Davies/Bejohlávek
NMC D173

Compilations:

Peroration (Jane Manning Sings)

NMC D025

Moto perpetuo; Plaint (Spectrum)

NMC D057

Fantasia (In Sunlight)

NMC D098

Meet me in the Green Glen

(The NMC Songbook)

NMC D150

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Electra Mourns was recorded live by the BBC on 11 August 2012
Cadogan Hall, London for the BBC Proms.

MICHAEL BACON & CHRISTOPHER ROUSE *Recording Engineers*
ANTHONY SELLORS *Recording Producer*

Geranos was recorded on 20-21 September 2016 at Hallé St Michael's,
Ancoats, Manchester. *Once did I breathe another's breath* and *Meet me*
in the Green Glen were recorded on 7 December 2016 at The Menuhin
Hall, Yehudi Menuhin School, Surrey

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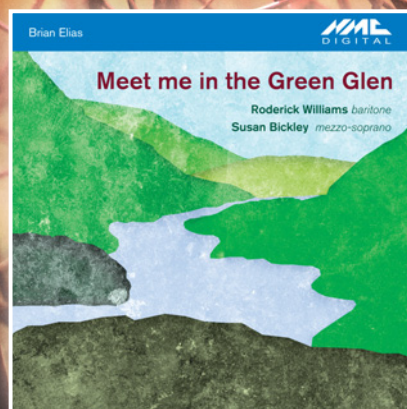
Brian Elias

1 Meet me in the Green Glen

Roderick Williams *baritone*

2 Meet me in the Green Glen

Susan Bickley *mezzo-soprano*



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