

All cultures have their eccentrics, those who deviate from the accepted “norms” of behaviour or ideas. However, it seems particularly English the extent to which eccentrics are seen to have a privileged, creative voice. Perhaps in what is a predominantly conformist society, the brave few who break the rules and defy convention become conspicuous and their perspective on life provides an exception that helps prove the rule of conventional morality.

Edith Sitwell, whose selection of odd and unusual characters is at the heart of the major work on this program, felt that eccentricity existed particularly in the English because of that peculiar and satisfactory knowledge of infallibility that is the hallmark and the birthright of the British nation.”

Sitwell came from the privileged English aristocracy, whose wealth allowed them to thumb their noses at the rules which bound the lives of those of humbler origin. Sitwell commented that “the man of genius and the aristocrat are frequently regarded as eccentrics because genius and aristocrat are entirely unafraid of and uninfluenced by the opinions and vagaries of the crowd”.

Our program starts with a setting of a poem by Edward Lear (1812 – 1888), a brilliant writer and artist, who suffered from epilepsy and depression, causing him to live largely withdrawn, in a world of his own literary creations. He popularized the limerick and three of his poems in this form were set for a cappella voices in 1956 by the Hungarian composer, Mátyás Seiber (1905 - 1960). Seiber, an early teacher of jazz music, lived in England from 1935. When Ballarat composer Rosalie Bonighton (b. 1946) agreed to compose a piece for this program she also looked to Lear and his *Incidents in the Life of my Uncle Arly* which uses an epic form to tell a supremely silly tale.

Songs arranged by the Australian pianist Percy Grainger (1882 – 1961) easily qualify for this program. While not strictly English, Grainger spent much of his creative life in that country and spent much time collecting and then setting folk songs from provincial England. His own eccentricity is famous – he was a free spirit always ready to explore new territory and chart his own course. He married the Swedish poet Ella Ström in front of a crowd of 20,000 at the Hollywood Bowl. Their marriage, while unconventional, was based on a deep and intense love, as the song of hers, *Love at First Sight*, arranged by Percy, bears witness.

Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976) was one of a group of intellectuals and artists of the 1930s who were dissatisfied with the insularity and complacency of British society. A leader of the group, the poet W.H. Auden (1907 - 1973) led something of an exodus to the United States, where Britten lived and worked between 1939 and 1942. His enigmatic *A Shepherd's Carol*, which Britten wrote to Auden's words on the ship which brought him back to wartime England, might be seen as an Englishman's response to American culture, drawing on Hollywood stereotypes.

American composer David Del Tredici (b. 1937) admired the “effortless whimsy” of the works of Lewis Carroll (1832 – 1898) ever since he played the White Rabbit in a school musical version of *Alice in Wonderland*. When commissioned to write a piece for America's Bicentenary celebrations in 1978, he wrote an extended piece for voice and orchestra, “Final Alice”, which includes his lovely setting of the nostalgic dedication to Alice Liddell with which Carroll concluded “Alice Through the Looking Glass”.

Edith Sitwell (1887 – 1964) was one of the most prominent members of the British avant garde between the wars. While she regarded herself first and foremost as a poet, it was her prose works that provided her with the most popular success. Her account of a series of bizarre characters from English history, *The English Eccentrics*, was published in 1933. The work was the basis for a chamber opera which premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1964 and this choral suite was extracted some time after. The elderly Sitwell worked closely with librettist Geoffrey Dunn and the composer, expatriate Australian Malcolm Williamson (1931 - 2003) and the London performance of the opera was one of her last public appearances.

The six pieces each describe characters from the book – Goose Weather perhaps representing Sitwell herself, sifting through the dust of history; the vain amateur actor Robert Coates; Sarah

Whitehead, “The Bank Nun” who went mad after her brother was hanged for embezzlement; two quacks, Graham and Katterfelto; Mary Baker, the Devonshire servant girl who claimed to be the Princess Caraboo from Javasu and finally Beau Brummell, dying destitute in France and being called to his final rest by the nuns of Bon Saviour.

Williamson, although he later became Master of the Queen’s Music, was never fully accepted by the musical establishment in Britain, partly because of his vigorous eclectic style but also because of his colonial origins. He always saw himself as Australian, saying “Most of my music is Australian. Not the bush or the deserts, but the brashness of the cities. The sort of brashness that makes Australians go through life pushing doors marked pull.”

The consistent success of John Rutter's (b. 1945) career is in marked contrast to that of Williamson and while few would regard him or his works as eccentric, we have included set of childhood lyrics because it stands well in the tradition of creating concert works from unlikely sources such as folk songs, nonsense rhymes or, as here, nursery rhymes, including one by the eccentric figure who started our program, Edward Lear.

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| 1. Mátyás Seiber | There was an old lady of France |
| 2. Trad. arr. Percy Grainger | Mary Thomson |
| 3. Trad. arr. Percy Grainger | Brigg Fair |
| 4. Ella Grainger, arr. Percy Grainger | Love at First Sight |
| 5. Benjamin Britten | A Shepherd's Carol |
| 6. Mátyás Seiber | There was an old person of Cromer |
| 7. Rosalie Bonighton | Incidents in the Life of my Uncle Arly |
| 8. David Del Tredici | Acrostic Song |
| 9. Malcolm Williamson | English Eccentrics Choral Suite |
| | 1. Goose Weather |
| | 2. An Amateur of Fashion |
| | 3. from “Sarah Whitehead” |
| | 4. The Quacks |
| | 5. A Traveller |
| | 6. The Old Beau |
| 10. Mátyás Seiber | There was an old man in a tree |
| 11. John Rutter | Five Childhood Lyrics |
| | 1. Monday's Child |
| | 2. The Owl and the Pussycat |
| | 3. Windy Nights |
| | 4. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John |
| | 5. Sing a Song of Sixpence |