

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Tamsin Waley-Cohen & Cordelia Williams: Lullabies

Saturday 6 June 2026, 3pm

Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

Arvo Pärt Spiegel im Spiegel (Mirror in the mirror)	8'
Brahms Wiegenlied (Lullaby), Op.49 No.4 arr. Williams & Waley-Cohen for violin & piano	2'
Dvořák Songs my mother taught me, Op.55 No.4 arr. Kreisler for violin & piano	3'
Freya Waley-Cohen Sweet as plum wine (World premiere)	5'
Scriabin Nocturne in F sharp minor, Op.5 No.1 arr. Mogilevsky for violin & piano	3'
Cage Nocturne	5'
Schubert Wiegenlied (Lullaby), D.498 arr. Elman for violin & piano	3'
Schubert Fantasie in C, D.934	27'

### Performers

Tamsin Waley-Cohen *violin*  
Cordelia Williams *piano*

*Lullaby (noun)* A song sung to children to soothe them to rest. Also, any song which soothes to rest. (*Oxford English Dictionary* online)

As well as serving the eminently practical purpose of sending a child to sleep, lullabies can be a form of parent-child bonding, a learning tool to develop the infant's language skills, and to teach them about the culture(s) they have been born into. But into them are also poured adult troubles – frustrations, nostalgia and a palpable fear of the night's darkness, and of death. Lullabies can be simultaneously child consolation and adult confessional, a relaxant, and a storytelling device that provides a receptacle for all manner of cultural and religious iconography. But they often contain a deep sadness, a nostalgia for lost innocence, an expression of the anxieties of the adult world. They may pave the way for sleep and dreams, but they cannot disregard our primeval fear of night's darkness, and the problems that await on waking – or growing – up. This is music for adults as much as their offspring.

Three of the pieces are instrumental transcriptions of songs, and even a cursory glance at their original lyrics is revealing. Dvořák's song is from his cycle *Gypsy Melodies* (1880) 'When my old mother taught me to sing', go the lyrics, 'Strange that she often had tears in her eyes / And now I also weep / when I teach Gypsy children to play and sing.' It is difficult to ignore the aching nostalgia in this simple song, however daintily embroidered it is by an increasingly florid violin line and even a mini-cadenza. The gently rocking patterns and sweetness of the melody in Schubert's original song of 1816 are undermined by words that at one point liken cradle to coffin ('sleep, sleep, in that sweet grave'). This time the piano supplies the decorative variation.

Brahms provides us with one of the most familiar melodies in all classical music, written in 1868 but recorded in the 20th century by Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra albeit with saccharine, simplified lyrics. The original text is taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the German folk poetry collection that would later provide fertile ground for Gustav Mahler. Those words (sidestepped by Crosby and Sinatra) betray troubling

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undercurrents, promising 'tomorrow morning, if God wills it, you shall be woken again.' The song was written as a gift for his friend Bertha Faber on the birth of her second child. In their youth she and Brahms harboured romantic feelings for each other, and Brahms buries as a hidden countermelody a popular song she used to sing to him on their walks in the German countryside. He made no effort at all to conceal this from her husband, writing to him: 'She will find... that while she is singing Hans to sleep, a love song is being sung to her.' This lullaby has the tempo marking *vivace delicato* – lively and delicate: the famous melody fairly skips along accompanied by contentedly kicking syncopation in the piano, though with a rather agitated middle section. Brahms later described a set of his piano pieces (the *Intermezzi* Op.117) as 'Wiegenlieder meiner Schmerzen' (cradle songs for my sorrows) – again, the cares of adult world encroaching on the innocence of ditties for a drowsy child.

*Spiegel im Spiegel* by Arvo Pärt from 1978 is not a lullaby per se. But its unhurried tranquillity has elevated it to a cult classic, loved by audiences – and film-makers; Wikipedia lists over two dozen films for which it appears as part of the soundtrack, films directed by Guy Ritchie, Gus Van Sant and Richard Curtis among them, but perhaps most memorably in some of the trailers for Alfonso Cuarón's sci-fi blockbuster *Gravity* starring George Clooney and Sandra Bullock. The score is remarkably devoid of expressive or dynamic instructions, a kind of purity that provides a challenge to the performers – how far do I colour this clean slate with my own interpretative palette? The composer himself is in no doubt: 'Everything redundant must be left aside. Just like the composer has to reduce his ego when writing the music, the musician too must put their ego aside when performing the piece.' It is music with its own centre of gravity, an exercise in patience and control, of allowing the inexorable logic to unfold in its own terms at its own pace.

'When Tamsin asked me to write a piece for this concert', writes Freya Waley-Cohen, 'she shared with me this 4,000-year-old lullaby text found etched on a Babylonian stone tablet in Akkadian cuneiform:

*Little one, who dwelt in darkness  
Now you've come and seen the sun.  
Why the crying? Why the worries?  
What has made your peace undone?*

*You have roused the household spirits  
You have scared the guardian gods  
'Who has roused me? Who has scared me?'  
'Little baby woke you up!'*

*May you settle into slumber  
Sweet as plum wine, deep as love.*

'The text itself rocks from tenderness to attempts to tease or scare the baby (depending on the tone of voice) and is viscerally

reminiscent of those nights with a newborn where you rock and shush and sing, and the hours march on and time warps. In those moments I found that the veil between myself and reality would start to thin, and all the things I thought I'd understood about time and what it is to be this animal called a human would transform, all while wrapped in the most transcendent, shimmering, tender intensity of love.

'I memorised this text and started to sing it to my daughter at night. A sort of lullaby improvisation that quickly settled into a set melody. This melody is what you hear in this piece, and the piece is both a setting of my personal version of this lullaby, and a response to the ancient text itself.'

The related musical form the nocturne is designed to be evocative of nighttime, its mystery and uncertainty, destined perhaps to stir the emotions rather than soothe. Scriabin wrote his early Nocturnes for piano alone, clearly influenced by Chopin. Like the earlier Brahms lullaby, Scriabin's Nocturne, Op.5 No.1, has an agitated middle section that is akin to being awoken with a jolt when on the cusp of sleep. It is perhaps surprising that the radical thinker, experimentalist and hero to the avant-garde John Cage once wrote music for such conventional forces as the violin and piano duo. His Nocturne dates from 1947, and is a beguiling, quasi-impressionist miniature, with intense, detailed dialogue, dense chordal clusters but also harmonies that would not be out of place in Debussy. It ends on an unresolved six-note chord, perhaps suspended between wakefulness and sleep, or light and dark.

From nocturnal mystery to something of a compositional fever dream. Schubert's substantial *Fantasie* is an unconventional journey from an uncertain, tremulous opening to boisterous conclusion, written in 1827. It is in four loosely connected movements, has a slow(ish)-fast-slow-fast structure akin to a Baroque sonata, played without a break, and is centred round variations on an earlier Schubert song. First, the violin takes wing over an increasingly hyperactive piano part. There follows an ebullient Hungarian-flavoured episode in which the instruments seem to chase each other round the dance floor, wrong-footing each other with sudden pauses. The four variations come next followed by an energetic finale, with a wild swerve into the distant key of A flat major, just two minutes before the end, for one final reminiscence of the song on which the variation movement is based.

**Programme notes © Dan Whitfield, 2026**

#### **Find out more**

- ▶ Tamsin Waley-Cohen
- ▶ Cordelia Williams
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