

Sacred Physic

music by **Julia Usher**



METIER

Sacred Physic (2001)

Lesley-Jane Rogers (soprano); John Turner (recorder); Nikki Bloomfield (oboe/cor anglais);
Jonathan Price (cello); Janet Simpson (harpsichord)

1	I	Lament 1	1:48
2	II	History 2	2:13
3	III	Lament 2	2:44
4	IV	Arioso	2:56
5	V	Recitative	2:08
6	VI	Salutation	1:28
7	VII	Aria con Obbligato	1:58
8	VIII	Intermezzo	1:19
9	IX	Dramatic Quartet	3:31
10	X	Trio and Close	3:02

A Reed in the Wind (1981)

Nikki Bloomfield (oboe & cor anglais)

11	I	Mistral	2:07
12	II	Sirocco	2:12
13	III	Zephyrus	1:55
14	IV	Bora	2:29
15	V	Khamsin	3:30
16	VI	Harmattan	2:15

17 Before Light Ends (2001)

Peter Lawson (piano)

5:00

Le Isole della Laguna (1984)

John Turner (recorders); Peter Lawson (piano)

18	I	Torcello	6:51
19	II	Merletti di Burano	3:17
20	III	San Francesco del Deserto	6:30

21	What is the Price of Experience? (2001)	6:35
	Lesley-Jane Rogers (soprano); Peter Lawson (piano)	
22	Invocation: "Poor naked Wretches" (2001)	3:55
	Nikki Bloomfield (alto); John Turner (recorder); Jonathan Price (cello); Peter Lawson (piano); Julia Usher (rainstick)	
Total duration		71:29

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Cover image from a painting by Bob Usher

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JULIA USHER

Sacred Physic: a dramatic madrigal (2001)

In this miniature solo opera, the healing power of music reunites King Pericles with his lost daughter Marina. Pericles's passionate grief has reduced him to a frozen and inarticulate despair. In the climactic scene of Shakespeare's play, Marina evokes her musical skills to draw him back into the world - and in so doing, they both realise they are father and child.

Inspired by my own experiences as a music therapist, I created a composite text from Shakespeare's play, the narrative reflected through Marina's dawning understanding.

1. Lament 1

Pericles (represented by the Cello) gives voice to an outpouring of grief for the supposed death of his daughter, Marina.

2. History 1

This vessel is of Tyre; in it the King, a man who for this three months hath not spoken to anyone, nor taken sustenance, but to prorogue his grief... . The main grief springs from the loss of a beloved daughter.

He will not speak to any, in sorrow all devoured.

He bears a tempest which his mortal vessel tears, and yet he rides it out.

3. Lament 2

Alas, the sea hath cast him on the rocks, washed him from shore to shore,
And left him breath- nothing to think on but ensuing death.

I see that Time's the King of men: He's both their parent, and he is their grave, and gives them what he will, not what they crave.

4. Arioso

The still and woeful music that we have, cause it to sound, beseech you.

I will use my utmost skill in his recovery.

I am by Cleon trained in Music's letters.

Questionless, with sweetest harmony I will make a battery through his deafened ports,
which now are midway stopped.

5. Recitative

O stop there a little! thou dost look like Patience, gazing on Kings' graves,
And smiling extremity out of act. The music there... . If that my prosperous and artificial feat
can draw him but to answer me in aught,
O then my sacred physic shall receive such pay... as my desires could wish!

6. Salutation

All hail! The gods preserve you; hail, Royal Sir.

(There is a sudden moment of recognition)

My heart leaps to be gone into my *father's* bosom! Hail sir; my lord, lend ear.

7. Aria con Obbligato (Formal, but in the manner of music therapy)

I am a maid, that ne'er before invited eyes, but have been gazed on like a comet. I come not from these, or any shores, yet I was mortally brought forth. I live where I am a stranger; from the deck you may discern the place. If I should tell my history, it would seem like lies, disdained in the reporting.

8. Intermezzo (She is dismayed that he doesn't respond)

They said you would believe me; but not to be a troubler of your peace, I will end here...
But there is something glows upon my cheek, and whispers in my ear, "go not til he speaks".

9. Dramatic Quartet (She unveils the mystery)

I name a tempest, a birth and a death;

My name is Marina; I am the daughter to King Pericles-

Called Marina, for I was born at sea, supposed dead and drowned.

Thaisa was my mother, who did end the minute I began. (Pericles begins to weep).

But good sir, whither would you have me? Why do you weep: It may be you think me an impostor; No good faith; I am thy child, born at sea, buried in Tharsus, found at sea again.

10. Trio and Close

Give me a gash! Put me to present pain, lest this great sea of joys, rushing upon me o'erbear the shores of my mortality, and drown me in their sweetness... (Pericles hears the music of the spheres.)

A Reed in the Wind for solo oboe / cor anglais (1981)

In these six variations, the theme of the *Western Wynde* (as used in settings of the mass by Taverner, Tye and Sheppard) is heard as a ghostly presence haunting the melodies and rhythms. The piece won the Wangford Festival Prize. Sarah Francis has given many performances and its first broadcast. In 1982 it was added to the syllabus of the Associated Board, consequently receiving many interpretations since. The use of multiphonics is used to suggest the eerie freedom of the blowing winds.

1. Mistral

The cold violent 'master' - Wind that whirls down the French mountain valleys to the Mediterranean.

2. Scirocco

The sultry, moist wind which blows north from the deserts of Africa, bringing discomfort to Italy.

3. Zephyrus

The West Wind: wild and cleansing in the original medieval verse, and in Shelley - but gentle and playful in Chaucer and the Madrigalists.

4. Bora

The Bora is a bitter Northern wind that visits the Adriatic coast near Venice.

5. Khamsin

The 'Doctor' wind of the Nile regions; 'Khamsin' means fifty, the number of days it is said to prevail.

6. Harmattan

The hot, dry 'healing' wind which blows from the barren desert areas of northern Africa.

Before Light Ends for solo piano (2001)

This contemplation for solo piano was written for the memorial service in 2001 of Robert Sherlaw Johnson, my composition teacher; it was first performed in the Holywell Music Room in Oxford by Anna Markland. A dazzling cadenza section marks the climax, like the fading of light after a firework burst. The work is permeated by the plainsong chant "Te Lucis Ante Terminum", which only emerges coherently in the reflective coda.

Le Isole della Laguna: Island Contemplations for recorders and piano (1984)

I wrote these pieces after many visits to the islands of the Venetian Lagoon; especially to San Francesco, with its remote monastery. The work was composed for John Turner and Peter Lawson, and broadcast by them in a programme called *The Magic of Islands* in 1989. Both instrumental parts call for virtuosic techniques, and John Turner encouraged me to discover dextrous flying fingerwork and unusual timbres for his recorders.

1. **Torcello** (Byzantine Church)
2. **Merletti di Burano** (Lace Variations)
3. **San Francesco del Deserto** (Tempest and Sermon to the Birds)

The Price of Experience: (2001)

Text by William Blake, from *Vala*: "Night the Second" from the *Four Zoas*.

Blake's poem *What is the Price of Experience?* is a bleak yet compassionate outcry against the complacency and cruelty of prosperous times. It was originally included as the central focus of the oratorio *A Grain of Sand in Lambeth*, commissioned in 1987 by St James's Church Piccadilly. I had always wanted to reset it for soprano and piano, and had begun to do so for this CD in the spring of 2001; its message seemed appropriate and resonant for the sombre events of that autumn.

In the text, Blake portrays a harsh reality where there is an easy temptation to rejoice over our own good fortune, when others are suffering; and that wisdom is bought at a great price. The poet seems to expose hypocrisy and cynicism; and at the very end, to wearily distance himself from the lures of arrogance.

What is the price of Experience? do men buy it for a song?
Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price
Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.
Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,
And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.

It is an easy thing to triumph in the summer's sun
And in the vintage and to sing on the wagon loaded with corn.
It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted,
To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer...

It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements,
To hear the dog howl at the wintry door; the ox in the slaughterhouse moan;
To see a god on every wind and a blessing on every blast;
To hear sounds of love in the thunderstorm that destroys our enemies' house;
To rejoice in the blight that covers his field, and the sickness that cuts off his children,
While our olive and vine sing and laugh round our door....

It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity:
Thus could I sing and thus rejoice: but it is not so with me.

Invocation: “Poor Naked Wretches” from King Lear, for contralto and ensemble (2001) Text by William Shakespeare.

As the terrible storm on the heath dies away, King Lear, “houseless” and rejected, has a brief moment of self-knowledge, regret and sympathy for his fellow creatures. This setting was specially written to conclude this CD.

Poor naked wretches, where so-e'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm;
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides;
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness
Defend you from seasons such as these?

Nikki Bloomfield has been an organ scholar and singer as well as an adventurous and experimental oboist. A recent graduate of the Guildhall School of Music, Nikki is committed to both teaching and to pursuing further opportunities in new music.

Peter Lawson was born in Manchester and studied there with Derrick Wyndham and Sulamita Aronovsky. He now pursues a busy performing career alongside teaching at Chetham's School of Music and the RNCM. Peter has appeared as soloist with most British orchestras, given concerts in Europe, Russia and Japan and broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio 3.

Peter's commercial recordings reflect his passion for twentieth-century and contemporary music. They include CD's of Satie (for EMI and awarded a Silver Disc), 2 volumes of American Piano Sonatas for Virgin Classics (following the award of a prestigious Churchill Fellowship to the USA) and Michael Nyman's Piano Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Jonathan Price studied at the Royal College of Music under Moray Walsh and Ralph Kirshbaum. He is currently principal cello with the Manchester Camerata.

Jonathan plays with many different chamber ensembles in repertoire ranging from Baroque (with the 'Musical Offering' Ensemble and Platform 4), through Romantic (with the Melzi Trio and the Camerata Ensemble) to contemporary (with the Legrand Ensemble). He has recorded and broadcast with these and other groups, and performed all over the world.

Heralded as one of the most versatile soloists of today, soprano **Lesley-Jane Rogers** is renowned for her captivating and evocative performances. She has worked with many leading conductors and orchestras, and is also a keen exponent of contemporary music, having given several world premieres, most notably Ivan Fedele's *La chute de la Maison Usher* with the Ensemble InterContemporain.

Janet Simpson studied piano and harpsichord at the Royal College of Music in London with Cyril Smith and Millicent Silver, winning several prizes as an accompanist and in chamber music, including a Royal Overseas League Award. In 1976, she was invited to join the Halle Orchestra as principal keyboard player, a position she still holds. She has performed as a soloist with the Hallé on many occasions and has given recitals throughout Britain, including performances at the Perth and Harrogate Festivals and overseas in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Janet enjoys playing contemporary music and with the Goldberg Ensemble has given two British premieres, including that of Stanislaw Skrowaczewski's *Fantasia per Sei*. She performs in an oboe and piano duo with her husband Richard, and they have given many recitals and broadcasts, recently recording a CD celebrating the work of Thomas Pitfield. She is a member of the Bartholdy Trio.

John Turner studied law at Cambridge, but established himself early on as a virtuoso recorder player with, among others, David Munrow. Known as an advocate of both early and contemporary music, he has performed all over the world and commissioned hundreds of pieces. Retired from his work as a solicitor, he now devotes himself tirelessly to performing and encouraging composers to add new and unusual works to his vast and growing recorder repertoire.



Julia Usher acknowledges an early obsession with Shakespeare, which shaped her instinct to interweave words and metaphors with musical themes and images. This CD is the first time she has brought forward works directly based on Shakespearean texts.

Her work was most strongly influenced by her experiences at York University, where radical forms and experiments in sound and soundscape were constantly pursued, often through improvisation. She met Robert Sherlaw Johnson there, with whom she later studied. *Before Light Ends* on this disk is a tribute to his memory.

She was a founder member of Women in Music in 1987; and in 2002 was among their first composers commissioned to write a *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* for the WIM Millennium Project. In 1980 she set up the composer-publishing firm Primavera with Welsh composer Enid Luff.

She has written many of her own poetic texts – from *Ordnance Survey* (1978) and *Handbook* (1984) to the large scale music theatre piece *The Orford Merman* (1990) which was produced and conducted by Michael Finnissy.

Other ensembles and performers with whom she has worked closely include Sounds Positive, the New London Wind Ensemble, the Nash Ensemble, E2K, Ivor Bolton and Inter Artes.

During her time in London (up to 1998), Usher collaborated in cross-arts projects with the sound sculptor and painter Derek Shiel. She wrote and co-produced *Unfinished Business*, involving live electronics with Shiel's sound sculptures, and between 1995 and 1998 they created the live art improvisation performance piece *SoundPaint*, taking it to several venues including Surrey University, Guildford.

Recent works, including the Whitman settings *Vocalism* and *When I Saw the Learned Astronomer*, and *Resurrequiem*, were written during 2002 for Nikki Bloomfield. These pieces first involved improvisation sessions with the performer, material from which was then further incorporated and evolved during later stages of composition. The development of tensions arising between improvisation – a natural way of communicating in her work as a music therapist– and the highly structured and accurately notated modes of composition (as in her theatre pieces) is a characteristic of her work.

Since 2001 Usher has been involved in developing works within community arts projects of North Essex. She has found new collaborative pathways opening up as a result of outreach training by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields – three years Orchestra-in-Residence in Colchester. Julia works as Composer in Residence with the Colchester Youth Chamber Orchestra, and will create a piece with and for them in 2003.

Julia Usher is married, with two sons and a grandson.

The inspiration of John Turner, as performer and mentor has been crucial to bringing together the works on this disk.