

# WARSAW SESSIONS

Premiera

## Cameron Shahbazi – Countertenor Sophia Muñoz – Piano

We developed this programme like a series of journal entries. Imagine a song that once brought you joy now evoking nostalgia — the lyrics have evolved in their meaning over time. The first part blends operatic excerpts with reworked familiar music, headed towards the rediscovery of the wonderful world we sometimes forget we inhabit. The second part showcases the influences of foreign lands on Western classical music and history, notably Turkey and Iran. For me, the soundscapes of the Persian divas spark anemoia — the nostalgia for a time or a place I have never known.

— Cameron Shahbazi

**Che puro ciel** | Christoph W. Gluck  
from *Orfeo ed Euridice*

**Orphée's Room** | Philip Glass  
from *Orphée Suite for Piano*

**Adagiati, Poppea... Oblivion soave** | Claudio Monteverdi  
from *L'incoronazione di Poppea*

**Music for a While** | Henry Purcell  
Original Introduction and Arrangement by Golfam Khayam  
Re-arranged by S. Muñoz/C. Shahbazi

**The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face** | Ewan MacColl  
Arranged by Roberta Flack, Re-arranged by James Blake

**Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair** | Traditional  
Arranged by S. Muñoz & C. Shahbazi

**What a Wonderful World** | Louis Armstrong  
Arranged by Jon Batiste

**Black Earth** | Fazil Say

**Son Stanco ... Deggio Morire, o Stelle** | George F. Handel  
from *Siroe, Re di Persia*

**Nani Nani** | Joaquin Rodrigo

**Dar Emtedad-e Shab** | Googoosh

**Bavar Kon** | Googoosh

**Shanehayat** | *Hayedeh*

**Lalae** | Googoosh

## Programme Notes by Cameron Shahbazi & Sophia Muñoz

**CHE PURO CIEL**, is an excerpt from Christoph W Gluck's transformative opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, which was first performed in 1762. Gluck was a pivotal figure in the transition from Baroque to Classical music, who aimed to reform opera by eliminating excessive ornamentation and convoluted plots. This aria illustrates Orfeo entering the Elysian Fields, filled with awe at the serene beauty of the afterlife. The simplicity of the melody, transcribed for piano, captures Orfeo's emotional depth on his quest through the underworld, and sets the tone for the exploration of love and loss.

Over the course of history, the Greek myth of the Thracian bard, Orpheus, has been reimagined many times in literary, theatrical, and musical forms. Gluck himself reworked his opera several times. The American composer Philip Glass premiered his opera *Orphée* in 1993, based on Jean Cocteau's 1950 film of the same name. In 2000, pianist Paul Barnes was inspired to create seven transcriptions of Glass' opera for piano entitled the *Orphée Suite* (2000). **ORPHÉE'S ROOM** is the second transcription and showcases Glass' minimalist style, characterised by repetitive patterns and subtle harmonic shifts. The hypnotic atmosphere contrasts with Gluck's approach, highlighting the evolution of the story in music over two centuries.

Claudio Monteverdi's lullaby **OBLIVION SOAVE** from *L'incoronazione di Poppea* provides a moment of calm during tumultuous times. Monteverdi is often referred to as the "father of opera" due to his significant contributions to the genre during its formative years. Composed in 1643, this opera is a cornerstone of early operatic history. The lullaby, sung by Poppea's nurse, Arnalta, offers a soothing respite amidst the political intrigue of ancient Rome, while Poppea works diligently to achieve her ambitions of becoming Empress as the wife of Emperor Nero.

Henry Purcell composed **MUSIC FOR A WHILE** in the late 17th century. This piece serves as a medicinal melody, inviting listeners to let their cares vanish momentarily. The iconic figured bass line has lend itself to being reimagined many times — notable examples include arrangements by Sir Michael Tippett and Benjamin Britten. In this iteration from Shahbazi/Muñoz, the duo was inspired by an original introduction and arrangement — which Shahbazi commissioned — by the Iranian composer Golfam Khayam. As a tribute to the *Warsaw Session's* host country, the arrangement features sprinkles of Chopin, creating a unique blend of Baroque, Romantic, and musical contributions from the East to the West.

Ewan MacColl's 1957 classic **THE FIRST TIME EVER I SAW YOUR FACE** has also been covered and reinterpreted countless times, including Elvis Presley, Shirley Bassey, George Michael, and Josh Groban. The selected interpretation is a reworking of Roberta Flack's popular rendition by James Blake. His melancholic style transforms the song into a reflective moment, sung to an empty pillowcase. This arrangement, along with the next two songs, showcases the versatility of the countertenor voice and aims to connect classical music with the singer-songwriter tradition that inspired many renowned classical composers. The song bleeds into the next while recalling the lover's face, as if reluctant to move on and let go.

**BLACK IS THE COLOUR OF MY TRUE LOVE'S HAIR** emerges as a meditation on self-acceptance. Inspired by the great Nina Simone, Shahbazi and Muñoz's original rendition of this Traditional song serves as a therapeutic mantra — an encouragement to find the beauty within themselves amidst life's challenges.

This first part ends with **WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD**, begging the question: how could this be considering the brutal events taking place or the pains in our personal lives? Jon Batiste's arrangement of the adored Louis Armstrong song offers hope through harmonies that create light in otherwise stormy skies. The meditative repeated note harks back to Glass, and prompts us to recognise the beauty in our surroundings, even amidst personal and global turmoil, fostering empathy for ourselves and others.

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Fazıl Say's **BLACK EARTH** opens the second part of the *Warsaw Sessions*. It was composed in 1997 and draws inspiration from Turkish folk music, particularly the work of Aşık Veysel. This piece imitates the sound of the saz, a plucked string instrument similar to a long-necked lute, creating a meditative atmosphere that transports listeners to the heart of Turkish musical traditions. Say's composition weaves together elements of folk, classical, and jazz, inviting improvisation and celebrating cultural exchange.



Turkish music has significantly influenced Western classical music, particularly through the incorporation of modal scales, microtones, and rhythmic complexity. Composers like Fazıl Say have brought these elements into the classical repertoire, creating new textures through the fusion of two forms. Say's work is a testament to the rich cultural exchange between Turkish and Western musical traditions, offering audiences a unique listening experience that bridges cultural boundaries.

The programme journeys further south and eastward down the fertile crescent towards Persia, one of the oldest cultures in the world and a source of ongoing fascination reflected in themes in European music throughout history. **DEGGIO MORIRE, O STELLE** is a poignant aria from Handel's opera *Siroe, re di Persia*, which was premiered in London in 1728. Set in ancient Persia, this opera seria<sup>1</sup> explores themes of political intrigue, love, and betrayal. Siroe, the crowned prince of Persia, has been arrested and sentenced to death by his father, King Cosroe, as result of a web of political intrigue and personal betrayal. In the aria, Siroe expresses his sadness and acceptance of his fate, showing his thought process as he struggles with loyalty, love and integrity.

**NANI, NANI**, a classic romantic lullaby from *Cuatro Canciones Sefardies*, was adapted by the Spaniard Joaquin Rodrigo in collaboration with his wife, Victoria Kamhi. Kamhi was born in Istanbul to a cosmopolitan, fairly affluent Jewish family, and was Rodrigo's link to the Sephardic world. This ode to a rich heritage was selected, among other reasons, for its use of the Ladino language<sup>2</sup>, drawing attention to the many who have had to flee their countries and start their lives anew on foreign lands. This cradlesong paves the way for the nostalgic Persian melodies of decades past to emerge.

Born in 1950, Googoosh continues to reign as one of modern Persian history's most iconic artists. Silenced in Iran for over 20 years, she made a triumphant comeback in the new millennium, fleeing Iran and selling out stadiums worldwide. An avid champion for human rights, Googoosh's performances continue to unite the international Iranian diaspora, rekindling memories of their homeland and inspiring a new generation.

**DAR EMTEDAD-E SHAB** (*Throughout the Night*) comes from the 1977 film of the same name, directed by Parviz Sayyad. Googoosh starred as a famed actress, singing with an earnest desire to prove herself worthy of love. Muñoz transcribed and arranged this song for piano and voice based on a version by guitarist Babak Amini. *Dar Emtedad-e Shab* with *Bavar Kon's* fusion was inspired by Googoosh's performance at London's Royal Albert Hall in 2013.

**BAVAR KON** (*Believe It*) is a lover's plea for trust, incorporating references to traditional Persian poetry such as the "ghazal" (an amatory poem form). This song highlights the similarities between Persian and Western classical texts. Like renowned French and German poetry, Persian texts are rich with nature imagery and emotional intensity. Muñoz's arrangement, inspired by the great Hooman Khalatbari, aims to further this parallel by quoting Chopin, weaving in nostalgic elements that enhance the emotional depth of the piece and create a bridge between the musical traditions worldwide.

Hayedeh (1942-1990), known as the "Queen of Iranian Music", was a legendary Persian singer renowned for her powerful contralto voice. Her career spanned over two decades, beginning in 1968. Hayedeh blended Persian traditions with pop influences, creating emotionally resonant music. She left Iran in 1978, eventually settling in the United States, where she continued performing until her untimely death at 47, the day after a show near San Francisco.

**SHANEHAYAT** (*Your Shoulders*) exemplifies Hayedeh's artistry and the fusion for which she was beloved. The song opens with an extended recitative-like section, where the voice and the accompanying instrument dovetail, passing the melody from one to the other. The singer evokes the search for a lover's shoulders by way of chromaticism and traditional Persian modal scales. Arranged by Muñoz for piano and voice, this first intimate moment is then contrasted with a habanera-like melody, reflecting the passionate nature of Persian music and literature.

The Warsaw Sessions concludes with Googoosh's **LALAE** (*Lullaby*), a soulful lullaby blending traditional Iranian music with contemporary pop. Its metaphor-rich poetry explores innocence, oppression and resilience, mirroring broader societal issues. The maternal advice employs nature imagery, encouraging fantasy and childlike creativity as an escape from harsh realities—a timely reminder from 1960s Iran for today's world.

<sup>1</sup>Opera seria: 18th-century opera known for its focus on tragic, historical, or heroic themes

<sup>2</sup>Ladino language: an archaic form of Castilian Spanish mixed with Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, 2 Bulgarian, and Italian elements