



Saturday 11 October, 1.00pm
St Nicholas Church

IN THE SHADOW OF THE TOWER

Nardus Williams *soprano* & Elizabeth Kenny *lute*

The Line of Kings: Henry VIII's music

Henry VIII 1491-1547

De la tromba
Whereto should I express
Pastyme with good companye

Fortune My Foe: stories that ended in the Tower – Raleigh and Essex

John Dowland 1563-1626

Dowland

Text by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex

Fortune my Foe (instrumental)
It was a time when Silly Bees

Cosmopolitan London: families of musical immigrants

Alfonso Ferrabosco the younger c.1575-1628

Anonymous

Giulio Caccini 1551-1618

Udite lagrimosi spir'ti d'Averno
Sta notte mi sognava
Amarilli, mia Bella
(all from *A Musical Banquet*, London, 1610)

Roderick Williams b. 1965

Words by Rommi Smith

The Blacke Songs
(commissioned by Spitalfields Music)



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ENGLAND**

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The Line of Kings: Charles II – Pepys' time in the Tower

Nicholas Lanier 1588-1666

Loves Constancy

Henry Purcell 1659-1695

O solitude

Text by Katherine Philips

Lanier

Nor com'st thou yet: Hero and Leander

Lanier

Qual musico gentil

There will be a 15-minute post-concert discussion to launch our 2026 community project **One Song**. The panel will include BREMF Co-Artistic Directors Olwen Foulkes and Hannah Ely, members of Ukrainian Voices and Kadir Karababa, Artist and Facilitator of One Song.

The music

When you come into the Tower of London, the Line of Kings – 'the world's longest-running visitor attraction' – presents a dramatic story of monarchy and heroism. Music has always played its part in creating these stories and making history vividly present. But the Tower is haunted by many other ghosts, other voices, and our programme weaves these in and among the Kings' (and Queens') music. We begin and end with Henry VIII and the trumpeter John Blanke who played at his Coronation: his image is striking, his value to the King well known, but what might his thoughts, and those of other Black Tudors whose words are lost, have been? Past and present imagining coincide in the wonderful words of Rommi Smith set as a sequence of songs by Roderick Williams. We are grateful to them, to Professor Jerry Brotton, and to Spitalfields Music for inciting and commissioning this work.

The Tower was a place of conflict, oppression and the suppression of dissent, even for the 'insiders' of Tudor life. Both Sir Walter Raleigh and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, ended up there due to the miscalculation of overweening ambition that put them out of the monarch's favour. 'Fortune my Foe', heard here in a setting by the keen observer of politics and star lutenist (who also spent his life in and out of royal favour) John Dowland, was the tune that went with them from the Tower to the scaffold. Essex's words, 'to Plead my Faith', set by James I's 'gentleman Usher', Daniel Bacheler did not help him. 'It was a time when silly bees did buzz' depicts the rivalries and factions around the 'King' of Bees, the change of gender failing to disguise the speaker's resentment at his Queen Bee monarch.

But London was not only a place where English aristocrats rose and fell: music was a path to travel and to engagement in sometimes dangerously 'other' cultures and religions. Jewish-Italian and Catholic musicians found a place as long as their virtuosity was highly prized and their personal views remained discreet. Famous immigrant families such as the Ferraboscos and the Laniers had featured at court since the time of Henry VII. The two most distinguished, Alfonso Ferrabosco 'the younger' and Nicholas Lanier not only served the reigns of James and Charles I but contributed to the masques and entertainments that celebrated this part of the 'line' and brought Italian singing techniques to the English scene. Italian master Giulio Caccini's song 'Amarilli mia Bella' began its own journey through many 17th-century manuscript song collections in England, when it was published alongside French, Italian and Spanish music in Robert Dowland's 'A Musical Banquet'. Unlike many lute-song books of the

era, this one was never re-printed. Amateur singers who were the main market for expensive music books, likely found the music too difficult, and the glimpse into what cosmopolitan professionals were up to at court must have been just a little demoralising...

In 'Qual musico gentil', Lanier gives us a glimpse into Italian-imported singing that is as florid and effortless as a bird. Charles I was recorded as listening rapt to Lanier's performance of 'Hero and Leander', "with his hand on his (Lanier's) shoulder". Royal patronage probably never felt as intimate, or perhaps as intimidating.

Royalists kept the flame alive through small-scale musical gatherings in London even when the theatres and institutions of court music were silenced during the Civil War. Poet Katherine Philips' attended gatherings at the home of court musician Henry Lawes. The text for 'O solitude' was one of her many translations, from a poem by Antoine Girard de Saint-Amand. Such enthusiasm for the shared roots of English and European culture was not uncontroversial even then: even the National Treasure, diarist, naval reformer and Member of Parliament Samuel Pepys, had his time in the Tower during the Restoration when in 1679 he was accused of leaking informing to the French and of being a 'Papist'.

The line of Kings presents the armoured, 'official' version of a unified culture. Other voices were always there, too.

THE BLACKE SONGS: introduction by Dr Rommi Smith

The Blacke Songs is written by the celebrated baritone and composer, Roderick Williams, and me, especially for the wonderful musicians Nardus Williams and Elizabeth Kenny. This work was commissioned by Spitalfields Music in 2024.

The Blacke Songs centres the word 'Blacke' – one of the [politer] words by which Black people living in Tudor England were described in inventories and official records. You'll hear from, or about, three Black historical figures of the Tudor period: Lucy Baynham, Reasonable Blackman and John Blanke.

Lucy Baynham (sometimes referred to as Luce Baynham or Lucy Negro), is a later 16th-century woman who was an abbess: Tudor colloquialism for a brothel madam. It is speculated that Lucy Baynham was a Black woman and also Shakespeare's lover; inspiration for his 'Dark Lady' sonnets. Whilst these theorisings about Lucy Baynham's status are regarded by some as tired and clichéd, as a Black woman, and as a scholar who writes about Black women and performance – I relish the idea. Using 'faction' (the fusion of fact and fiction), or what the scholar Lisa Knopp (2009) calls 'perhapsing', I imagine Lucy's reply to Shakespeare. In **Lucy Baynham: The Queen of Turnmill Street**, 'Lucy' speaks back to the Dark Lady sonnets, replying to Shakespeare using his own form: the Shakespearean sonnet. In this sonnet, a critical question is raised: *who would Lucy have been to us, had she, like Shakespeare, had the quill and ink in her possession?*

Reasonable Blackman's name conjures a question: how did he come to be named so? In her book *The Black Tudors* (2017), Dr Miranda Kauffman speculates that, perhaps, Blackman, a silk weaver living in Southwark in 1579 (who fathered at least three children, two of whom died from the plague in 1592), was called 'Reasonable' in reference to the price of the material he

sold (p.113). In my poem **Reasonable Blackman: Silkweaver of Southwark: A Ballad**, I consider an alternative reading. Kauffman's chapter includes reference to Othello (1604)¹ a play which wrestles with spoken and tacit articulations about skin colour, race and Black masculinity. The Shakespearean England out of which Othello emerges, as a character, is a timeframe in close proximity to that in which Reasonable Blackman negotiated Tudor London.

In Othello, Iago's incendiary line: "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe", is not only uttered into Brabantio's ear, but seeps out and down the centuries to haunt how anti-Black racism territorialises white women's bodies. The line itself is a witness and arrives out of a context: Shakespeare, a working actor and dramatist (by including the line in his text), was clearly speaking to something (an idea, a fear) to which he (and his collaborators) must have known audiences would have a visceral reaction. Othello, though fictional, has since become a cultural spectre, one fuelled by racist fears. 'Reasonable', then, is a name which (when juxtaposed with Blackman) might arguably be read as having functioned as a reassurance policy – of temperament; my ballad is an exploration of this re-reading.

John Blanke was a respected court trumpeter working across not one but two royal courts, that of King Henry VII and King Henry VIII. He was part in King Henry VIII's coronation in 1509 and given new scarlet livery for the occasion. Celebrations for the coronation began with a "stay at the tower of London on Friday 22nd of June 1509" (Royal Historic Palaces, 2024). Five hundred and fifteen years later, I love the idea of John Blanke's energy and musicianship being part of the 'music' of the Tower of London; his trumpet authoring the ether, part of the ghost-score for the building that we still hear – if we tune in. In **John Blanke: "Blacke Trumpet"** (my Meredithian, or 16-line sonnet), I explore the idea of John Blanke haunting the Tower and speaking back to, us, the future. Blanke is documented in royal court records (now held in the National Archive) as "Blacke Trumpet." I note the cultural more, that John Blanke (like many other Black people during the Tudor period) had his skin colour documented on records whereas, by contrast, his patrons did not.

¹ The RSC website notes that an earlier date is argued, hence my inclusion of reference to the play here. The Tudor period was 1485-1603.

The artists

Winner of the Rising Star award at the 2022 International Opera Awards, **Nardus Williams** has quickly become one of the most exciting and versatile British singers of her generation. Praised for her 'magnetism' and 'unobtrusive intimacy' (*The Arts Desk*), she has 'confirmed her place as an outstanding artist' (*Early Music Review*). Her debut album, *Handel in Rome*, featuring Handel's Italian cantatas, recorded with Dunedin Consort under John Butt, was released on Linn Records in 2024 to great critical acclaim.

Something she relishes about performing and programming early music is the opportunity to combine singing music she loves, with other historic and cultural elements. For example, Nardus and Elizabeth will be exploring the Four Humours and their echoes in music in their next programme; and they frequently collaborate with Mary Beard, combining spoken word and music to explore women's stories from the ancient and modern worlds.

Outside of music, Nardus enjoys running, Renaissance art and procrastibaking.

imgartists.com/roster/narduswilliams

Elizabeth Kenny's lute playing has been described as 'incandescent' (Music and Vision), 'radical' (The Independent on Sunday) and 'indecently beautiful' (Toronto Post). Her solo recordings include the ML Lute Book and Ars Longa (Linn Records, nominated for the BBC Music Magazine Solo Instrumental recording of the year 2019). She is Dean of Students at the Royal Academy of Music; being surrounded by energetic young musicians has reignited her interest in practising, both for the joy of it and as a deterrent to colleagues from knocking too often on the office door...

She used to be embarrassed about having done an undergraduate degree in English Literature rather than music, but now finds it invaluable in her work with a wonderful array of singers in recitals and theatrical productions. Though old music is her specialist subject, encountering new words and new music simultaneously in The Blacke Songs, is a real thrill.

elizabethkenny.co.uk

Rommi Smith is a writer, broadcaster and academic. Winner of the Northern Writers Prize for Poetry, Rommi has been awarded prestigious fellowships, residencies and commissions, from organisations and institutions ranging from the BBC to The British Council. Rommi is the inaugural British Parliamentary Writer-in-Residence. She was Poet-in-Residence for Keats' House and the Wordsworth Trust and is currently Writer in Residence for Harewood House.

Rommi is a librettist and collaborates with the composer Roderick Williams. Their works include Cusp (premiered at The Southbank Centre), The Blacke Songs (premiered at The Tower of London) and Three Dimensions (commissioned by St Paul's Cathedral).

Awarded a doctorate in English, Rommi's academic work is published by Routledge and New York University Press. Rommi wrote and presented Full Moon on Progress St, a five-part BBC Radio 3 essay series based on her academic research. She is currently writing series two, to be broadcast in February 2026. Rommi is delighted to be a judge for the Forward Prizes for Poetry 2025.

rommi-smith.co.uk

Kadir Karababa is a British-Turkish self-taught artist, born, living and working in London. Working across painting, print, sculpture and installation, he has developed an ever-evolving experimental and collaborative practice. Outside of the studio he has an expansive, socially engaged practice, conceiving collaborative projects that engage others who share some of his lived experiences; under-represented and marginalised people who may not consider themselves to be artists.

His audio-visual installation and archive One Song is touring nationally with two new iterations of the work to be shown at Arthouse, Wakefield (June–August 2026) and Fabrica, Brighton (October 2026).

kadirkarababa.com