

THE STORY OF HENRY WICKER

and of what he
unearthed on
Epsom Common
one summer's
day in 1618 or
thereabouts

a suite for cello
and piano in six
movements

by Greg Harradine

"a free art gushing
forth...boundless as
the elements"

— Debussy

MGSO4 FESTIVAL 2018. SATURDAY 7 JULY, 8PM, BOURNE HALL.

Performed by Greg Harradine, *piano* and Midori Jaeger, *cello*

This concert will also feature solo piano works by Greg Harradine and songs for voice and cello by Midori Jaeger.

Many composers have sought to hide coded messages within their music, often creating a melodic theme using the letters of their name, or the names of loved ones. Bach, Shostakovich and Elgar are just some of those who succumbed to the esoteric charm of the musical cryptogram. When I began thinking about composing the piece which became *The Story of Henry Wicker* for the MGSO4 Festival, I came across an early name for Epsom: *Ebba's ham*. It seemed almost too obvious to use the name Ebba as a musical cryptogram, since each letter in that name is, fortuitously, a musical note: E-B-B-A. (There is some disagreement or confusion in the historical record whether the eponymous landowner was named Ebba, Ebbi, or even Ebbe. I opted to remain with Ebba for reasons made clear in the next paragraph.) If you listen closely you will hear the cello spell out this name at the beginning of the first movement.

The MGSO4 Festival, to whom I am indebted for this commission, is named after the chemical formula for Epsom Salts, the discovery of which took place on Epsom Common 400 years ago (or thereabouts). My composition explores the story of this event, of how local man, Henry Wicker, discovered a mysterious substance oozing up on the common in 1618; a liquid that, despite the summer's heat, his cows refused to drink. The story goes that Wicker spotted water gathering in a hoof-print and duly dug a hole which was soon full of the impure fluid. When his cows turned up their noses at it, he took a gulp himself and hence discovered the now famous properties of MGSO4. By a quirk of fate, it turns out that if you take the

elements that make up Epsom Salts – magnesium, sulfur and oxygen – and treat their atomic numbers (12, 16 and 8 respectively) as musical intervals above the note A, then three rather serendipitous letters are produced: E-B-A. Old Ebba rises again, bubbling out of the very elements that put Epsom on the map.

The theme of the 2018 MGSO4 Festival is 'Discovery', and it wasn't just Epsom Salts that were discovered in 1618. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler announced his Third Law of Planetary Motion (or Harmonic Law) which reveals that certain ratios pertaining to the orbits of the planets are in direct alignment with the ratios of musical harmonies. Philosophers and mathematicians had for centuries believed in the idea of 'the music of the spheres' and Kepler's law seemed to give this ancient belief some scientific credence. This concept was in the back of my mind during the composition of *The Story of Henry Wicker*. Each of the six movements has been somewhat inspired by the six planets known about at the time of Kepler and his Harmonic Law.

There are other codes secreted away within this piece. I will divulge just one more here: at the beginning of the fourth movement the year 1618 is stuttered out rhythmically – a crotchet, six quavers, another crotchet, and a final eight quavers. Conceits like this can be useful compositional tools but it is my hope that while listening to the piece you forget utterly about the hunt for musical codes, forget even Henry Wicker and his discovery on Epsom Common, but instead enjoy the music purely as music, as — in the words of Debussy — "a free art gushing forth...boundless as the elements." Greg Harradine

To find out more about Greg's music, visit www.gregharradine.com where you can access audio and video and sign up to his mailing list.



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