

# OX *Musician*

ISSUE 14 2024





# SKYSONGS

## Composing a Contemporary Song-Cycle



*Christopher Churcher is a second-year Music student at Lady Margaret Hall. He is a celebrated young composer, praised by David Hill as 'a remarkable talent', and has won over half a dozen national awards including the 2022 NCEM Young Composer's Award. Christopher's music has been commissioned and performed by some of Europe's leading choirs, orchestras, and chamber ensembles.*

I think my favourite part of starting a new commission is the thrill of the unknown; the beginning of a new creative process begins. Last August, Iain Burnside approached me with the proposal of a new song-cycle. This article reflects on my experience of bringing that cycle to life.

My creative process is rarely linear, rather it is marked by series of breakthroughs. Three pivotal turning points stand out to me which defined the shape of the cycle. The first was pinpointing the title: *Skysongs*. Although the music itself bears little relation, the title is a nod to Meredith Monk's *Volcano Songs*. I love the way the title succinctly ligates music and nature. This title—*Skysongs*—shaped the cycle's overarching aesthetic, engaging in dialogue with the ether and atmosphere.

The second coincided with a break in Edinburgh shortly after Iain approached me with the commission. In tandem with beautiful walks along the Firth of Forth and Holyrood Park, I was there to see Scottish pianist

Fergus McCreadie and his trio live at the Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival. He was magnificent, playing at an intimate, wooden amphitheatre in Leith called the Pianodrome. I remember especially his performance of 'The Unfurrowed Field', commencing with a single, repeated note which blossomed into a complex array of exquisite textures and melodies. I found it utterly spellbinding; you can hear the impression of this gesture in my second song, 'A Short Story of Falling'.

The discovery of the eponymous poem for this second song was the third pivotal moment; finding a cohesive set of three texts was a challenge which loomed large whilst writing the cycle. Initially attracted to a few collections by Alice Oswald, who writes beautifully about nature, I ultimately found myself most drawn to 'A Short Story of Falling'. I love the poem's sense of freedom, its folky couplet-form, and sensitive depiction of rainfall. Connected by the







common thread of rain, I paired it with Ursula Le Guin's 'To The Rain' and Sara Teasdale's 'There Will Come Soft Rains', completing the trio.

The song cycle premiered on 14 April at the Ludlow English Song Weekend, where I was in residence as a composer. The cycle garnered warm praise, while the festival provided an opportunity for me to connect with leading British musicians like Roderick Williams and Elgan Llŷr Thomas. Serendipitously, I also had chance meetings with the music documentary producer John Bridcut and venerable music biographer Diana McVeagh. The festival emphasized to me the power of music to forge connection, as well as the transformative power of giving a platform to emerging artists like me.

*Skysongs* will be recorded by Harriet Burns and Ian Tindale this autumn for their forthcoming album on Delphian.

#### FIND OUT MORE

Learn more about  
Christopher Churcher at  
[christopherchurcher.com](http://christopherchurcher.com)

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