SOMM RECORDINGS

Tree of Life

Emma Johnson

Orchestra *for the* Environment



Nature has always inspired composers, whether overtly, as in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, or more generally, as in the case of Elgar, who moved house just so that he could compose looking over the Malvern Hills. Today, though, to love nature is a more fraught affair than it used to be – thoughts of nature cannot but be tinged with anxiety about its future in the face of climate change.

This is a very personal album of music reflecting my own love of nature, a passion that goes back to my childhood. From my earliest days it has always been birds in particular that have captivated me – my schoolbooks were full of my drawings of birds, and I loved to hear their songs in my parents' south London garden. As I've travelled more, I've realised that birdsong is an indicator of the natural health of a place. Lots of birdsong means that there are plenty of insects and plants around and that the ecosystem is robust. By contrast, an urban place where there is a backdrop of silence is inevitably marked by pollution and a lack of respect for wildlife. "The sedge has withered from the lake, And no birds sing," as the poet John Keats memorably described it.

I wrote **Goðafoss (Waterfall of the Gods)** for full symphony orchestra after visiting this magnificent Icelandic waterfall in 2025. Its 30-metre curtain of water falls onto the rocks and whirling waters below with such force that you are knocked back by its power. For thousands of years the waterfall's elemental interplay of water, rocks and gravity, along with its rainbow mirages created by sunlight glinting on plumes of spray, must surely have convinced even the most sceptical traveller of the existence of powerful gods of nature.

Whale Song (2025). I shall never forget the thrill of seeing humpback whales breaching whilst on a boat trip from the Icelandic coastal port of Húsavík. One minute there is a 40-tonne, four-double-decker-bus-sized creature in front of you, and the next moment

it has disappeared into the eerie ebb and flow of the sea. Incredibly, whales' songs can travel thousands of miles through water. Scientists have found that their songs even have structure and that they change with time, suggesting that, like speech, they impart meaning and promote cohesion within a group. My piece *Whale Song* is an attempt to capture whales' haunting vocalisations and to convey the majesty and mystery of these mammals using the might of the symphony orchestra. Over one thousand whales are killed by humans every year.

Prevented from giving concerts during the COVID epidemic in 2020, I found myself writing **Tree of Life**, a piece of music expressing my feelings about the climate crisis. A subliminal unease about global warming had been growing within me for many years, and it seemed important to express this, as well as to celebrate the beauty of the natural world.

Tree of Life is scored for solo clarinet, strings, harp and percussion and consists of four movements linked by clarinet soliloquies imitating the Australian lyrebird, the Eurasian blue tit and the skylark.

In the Beginning evokes an unspoilt natural environment, discovered by the clarinet with increasing wonder and joy as it climbs to ever higher ranges. The harmonies are based on sequences of notes from the harmonic spectrum to create an elemental atmosphere.

Bacchanalia is a wild dance for strings and drum kit with the clarinet wailing jazzily over the top. The middle section starts in quasi-18th-century style, but things gradually turn sour, culminating in a frenetic duo for clarinet and drum in 7/8 time, which I developed with the drummer Paul Clarvis. When the opening dance returns, the clarinet's wails are not so much jazzy as like warning sirens.

The Truth of Things is when the reality of the situation and of the destruction wrought by humans on our planet hits home. It is a melancholy song for clarinet with harp, which works up into an outburst of fury.

Resolution carries on the bleak mood. Furious crescendos pierce the silence and slowly give way to a tender tune. The music gathers courage as it progresses, and fast scales on the clarinet are coloured by the glitter of the harp as they duet deliriously to end the work in optimism and with a sense of hope that people can act together to find solutions.

The final phrases leave a question mark hanging in the air, however, as the clarinet plays the song of the now extinct Kaua'i 'ō'ō bird from Hawaii, which was preserved for posterity in naturalists' field recordings made prior to its disappearance.

Puccini wrote **Crisantemi** in 1890, in just one night, so moved was he by the sudden death of his friend Amedeo di Savoia, Duke of Aosta (Amadeo I of Spain) at the age of only 44. The exquisite miniature refers to the chrysanthemum flowers often used to express grief at funerals in Italy. Originally written for string quartet, this is our version for string orchestra.

My **Folk Song Set** begins with **The Lark in the Clear Air**, inspired by a springtime walk with friends in Romney, Kent in 2024, when – the air pulsating with the songs of sky larks as they flew up vertically from their ground nests into the sky – "The Lark in the Clear Air" came into my mind. I have always loved this Irish song , because my mother used to sing it to me when I was a child. The words, by Samuel Ferguson, are about someone so moved by hearing larks singing that he finds the courage to express his feelings to his beloved:

I will tell her all my love,
All my soul's adoration,
And I think she will hear me
And will not say me nay.

In my setting, the clarinet is similarly transformed, gradually incorporating into its song the trills, ornaments and scales first played by the strings to mimic lark song, so that by the end, it too has been changed by the glorious sound of the larks.

W.B. Yeats based the words of **Down by the Salley Gardens** on a fragment of an old Irish folk song he'd heard sung in County Sligo, publishing it as "An Old Song Re-Sung" in the collection *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* of 1889. (It acquired its present title when it was reprinted in *Poems* in 1895.) "Salley Gardens" refers to willow trees – their Latin name is *salix*, and their Irish name *saileach* – which were cultivated in the Sligo area of Ireland as a material for thatched roofs.

Down by the salley gardens
my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens
with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy,
as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish,
with her would not agree.

She bid me take life easy,
as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish,
and now am full of tears.

The sadness of unrequited emotion gradually pervades the whole song. Yeats too suffered from unrequited love for his muse, Maud Gonne, whom he met around this time. Towards the end of my version, the clarinet breaks free from the folk melody in a passionate outburst before ending with a *pianissimo* reiteration of the tune's final phrases as if resigned to its life of regret.

The English rhyme **Tom He Was a Piper's Son** (not the similarly named nursery rhyme about Tom stealing a pig) traces its origins to a late-17th-century verse possibly written for the play *The Campaigners*, a 1698 comedy by Thomas D'Urfey. The traditional melody appeared in print around 1877.

> *Tom, he was a piper's son,*
> *He learnt to play when he was young,*
> *And all the tune that he could play*
> *Was "Over the hills and far away";*
> *Over the hills and a great way off,*
> *The wind shall blow my top-knot off.*

My setting most definitely emphasises the humour of the song, and as it cycles its way through all the keys you may recognise two other ditties ("Goodnight, Ladies" and "Shepherd's Hey") muscling their way into proceedings, as well as a tongue-in-cheek moment or two for a double bass playing extremely high.

Gershwin's **Walking the Dog** (later published as *Promenade*) is a delicious clarinet solo written for the film *Shall We Dance* (1937), in which Fred Astaire tries to get the attention of the glamorous Ginger Rogers by walking his dogs to coincide with the time of her daily dog walk. I am often asked to play this as an encore, and this is my version for clarinet, strings, percussion and harp.

Although Holst worked at St Paul's Girls' School in busy Hammersmith, London, he too was inspired by nature. He wrote his **Brook Green Suite** in 1933, the year before he died, whilst recuperating in hospital and picturing in his mind the little park opposite the school. Even a little pocket of nature in an urban setting has immense power to rejuvenate and reassure. The Japanese have even developed a therapy, *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing), inspired by this fact, in which patients are encouraged to embrace trees to boost their immunity and mood. Holst was writing the Suite for performance by his pupils, and the three movements – *Prelude*, *Air* and *Dance* – are written in a simple yet direct and effective style.

Edward MacDowell's **To a Wild Rose** is the first of his *Woodland Sketches* for piano of 1896. The story goes that he was going to throw the melody out, but his wife, Marian, found the crumpled bit of manuscript paper and persuaded him to keep it. Roses had always been MacDowell's favourite flowers, so he agreed, revealing that the melody's pure simplicity reminded him of the wild roses growing near his composing hut. The original piano score has been orchestrated for clarinet, strings, horns and bassoon by Matthew Taylor.

Richard Stoker was a British composer who studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He taught at the Royal Academy of Music for much of his life and made his home in my own part of South London. He was known for the melodic invention and wit of his works. **Chorale for Strings** was written in 1967 for the Ulster Orchestra under Maurice Miles and was subsequently broadcast by the BBC Northern Orchestra on BBC Radio 3. It harks back to medieval plainchant, and its threnodic melody gathers intensity as it is repeated in different instrumental registers.

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ORCHESTRA FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Violins I
Peter Fisher *leader*
Takane Funatsu
Sophie Langdon
Nemanja Ljubinkovic
Alicja Smietana
Fiona McCapra
Clare Hoffman
Jake Rea
Sara Trickey
Rebecca Scott

Violins II
Andrew Storey
Richard Milone
Gemma Sharples
Haim Choi
Oleksandra Reshetilova
Julia Burkert
Gareth Griffiths
Clare Hayes
Rosemary Henbest
Inês Delgado

Violas
Garfield Jackson
Christine Anderson
Clare Finnimore
Lorena Cantó Woltèche
Ian Rathbone
Morgan Goff
Milena Simović

Cellos
Sébastien van Kuijk
Helena Binney
Jane Fenton
Ben Davies
Roberto Sorrentino
Rachel van der Tang

Double Basses
Chris West
Jason Henery
Paul Sherman
David Johnson

Flutes
Anthony Robb
Daniel Shao

Oboe
Gordon Hunt

Oboe / Cor anglais
Rachel Ingleton

Clarinets
Jon Carnac
Méline Le Calvez

Bassoons
Richard Ion
Ruby Collins

Horns
Oliver Johnson
Paul Cott

Trumpets
Matthew Williams
Kaitlin Wild

Trombones
Robb Tooley
Joseph Arnold

Tuba
Callum Reid

Timpani
Tristan Fry

Percussion
Austin Beattie
Laura Bradford

Drum Kit
Paul Clarvis

Harp
Rosanna Rolton

Photo: © Georgie West

Orchestra for the Environment

THE RICHARD STOKER TRUST



The Orchestra for the Environment is grateful for the support of the Richard Stoker Trust.

"Emma Johnson and the Orchestra for the Environment are certainly doing their bit with their outstanding quality of playing and their thought-provoking programmes."
(review of OftE's Newbury Spring Festival Concert)

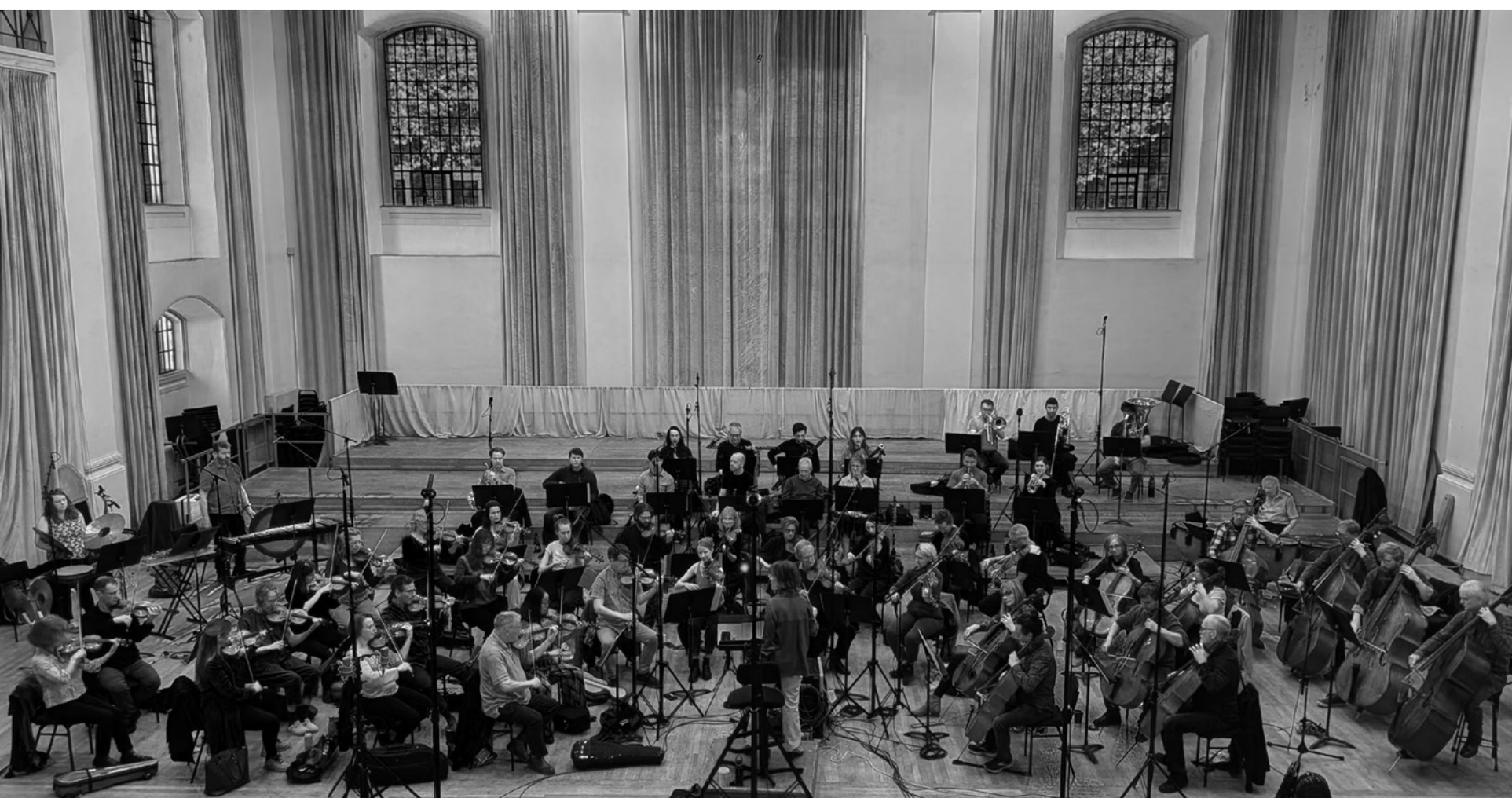
The **Orchestra for the Environment** (OftE) was founded in 2023 by clarinettist/conductor Emma Johnson and double bass player Chris West to give concerts of the highest possible standard that highlight the beauty of nature and the need to take action to combat climate change.

Formed initially for the world premiere of Emma Johnson's clarinet concerto *Tree of Life* in the Kentish village of Lamberhurst, the orchestra has gone on to appear at festivals and concert halls around the UK, from Chichester on the south coast to the Yorkshire Dales, and across to St Davids Cathedral on the westernmost tip of Wales. The Orchestra for the Environment made its Wigmore Hall debut in 2025. The musicians aim to travel in a sustainable way, and where possible the concerts raise money for local wildlife charities.

The players are hand-picked from the country's finest musicians and include not only gifted young chamber musicians and soloists, but also past and present principal players from major orchestras (including the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, Royal Opera House and Bournemouth Symphony orchestras, the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and the Aurora Orchestra, amongst many others), as well as members of the Endellion Quartet and the *Strictly Come Dancing* house band.

In 2027 the Orchestra for the Environment will make return visits to the Wigmore Hall, G Live, Guildford and festivals in Newbury and St Davids.

orchestrafortheenvironment.com



"… one of the most prolific and well-known clarinet soloists of the past quarter century"
– The Clarinet (USA)

Emma Johnson MBE is one of the few clarinettists to have established a career as a solo performer. Emma grew up in London, and her career was launched when, at the age of 17, she won BBC Young Musician of the Year, followed by the Young Concert Artists auditions in New York. Before embarking on a musical path, she studied Music and English at Pembroke College, Cambridge University, and since then she has given concerts all over the world.

Emma Johnson has made 30 recordings to date; tracks from her recent album *English Fantasy* have been streamed over six million times on Spotify. *Voyage* and *The Mozart Album*, on the Universal label, were also classical chart-topping successes, and Johnson's release of Brahms Sonatas with John Lenehan was described as "definitive" in the *Observer*. Her recording of music by Stanford and Finzi was nominated for a Gramophone Award.

Emma Johnson is also a composer; books of her arrangements and compositions have been published by Chester Music, Faber Music and Encore Publications. A series of new solo clarinet pieces has been published by Queen's Temple Publications, and *Songs of Celebration,* Johnson's composition for clarinet and choir, has recently been performed in Dublin, London and Tokyo. Her clarinet concerto *Tree of Life*, about the climate crisis, premiered in 2023 and has toured throughout the UK .

In 2020 Emma Johnson was awarded the Walter Willson Cobbett Medal for distinguished services to chamber music by the Worshipful Company of Musicians of the City of London.

Photo: © Georgie West

She loves to collaborate with other musicians and also directs her own ensemble, Emma Johnson & Friends, whose live recording of the Schubert Octet for SOMM Recordings was critically acclaimed.

Emma Johnson's TV appearances have ranged from a recital for Sky Arts TV to a televised BBC Prom concert. She played the Ivor Novello Award-winning theme music for the BBC TV series *The Victorian Kitchen Garden*. Videos of her performances and masterclasses can be viewed on her YouTube channel.

In 2024 she founded the **Emma Johnson Music Foundation** which has already increased awareness of music amongst thousands of UK primary school children through *Instrument Stories* workshops. Emma has also given masterclasses throughout the world and hosts a clarinet course in London each summer.

Emma was the first woman to be made an Honorary Fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge, and in 2017 the College commissioned a portrait of her.

She enjoys running and is a keen birdwatcher too.

Emma was honoured by the Queen with an MBE in 1996.

Her instrument is made by the English clarinet maker Peter Eaton.

For more details please visit

emmajohnson.co.uk · emmajohnsonmusicfoundation.org

Photo: © Frances Marshall



SOMM RECORDINGS

SOMMCD 0736

Tree of Life

Emma Johnson

1 **Goðafoss (Waterfall of the Gods)** 6:13

2 **Whale Song** 6:22

Tree of Life
Concerto for clarinet, strings, harp & percussion

3 I. In the Beginning 5:54
4 II. Bacchanalia 5:46
5 III. The Truth of Things 5:51
6 IV. Resolution 7:38

Rosanna Rolton *harp* · Paul Clarvis *drum kit*

Giacomo Puccini arr. Emma Johnson

7 **Crisantemi for string orchestra** 6:56

Emma Johnson

Folk Song Set for clarinet & strings

8 I. The Lark in the Clear Air 5:14
9 II. Down by the Salley Gardens 4:06
10 III. Tom He Was a Piper's Son 3:08

George Gershwin arr. Emma Johnson

11 **Walking the Dog** 2:48

Gustav Holst

Brook Green Suite for string orchestra

12 I. Prelude 1:47
13 II. Air 2:28
14 III. Dance 2:25

Edward MacDowell arr. Matthew Taylor

15 **To a Wild Rose** 2:39

Richard Stoker

16 **Chorale for Strings** 4:29

Total Duration **73:49**

Emma Johnson *clarinet, conductor*
Orchestra *for the* Environment

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COMPACT disc DIGITAL AUDIO

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