

The SILVER SWAN

Songs by Eric Thiman & Michael Head
Performed by Emily Gray & Nicole Johnson



CONVIVUM
RECORDS

TRACKLIST

By Michael Head

1	Sweet Chance that Led My Steps Abroad	2.09
2	The Ships of Arcady	3.14
3	Beloved	1.52
4	Blackbird Singing	2.50
5	Nocturne	3.52
6	O Gloriosa Domina	3.20
7	Money, O!	2.01
8	A Green Cornfield	2.39
9	Lavender Pond	4.15

Christmas Music

22	Little Road to Bethlehem	2.42
23	Slumber Song of the Madonna	3.09

By Eric Thiman

10	The Silver Swan	1.59
11	Fain Would I Change That Note	2.00
12	Sleeping	3.11
13	Song of Farewell	2.45
14	I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud	3.30
15	Jesus the Very Thought of Thee	3.48
16	Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal	2.52
17	The Birds	1.50
18	Easter Prayer	2.09
19	In the Bleak Midwinter	4.09
20	I Saw Three Ships	1.33
21	Madonna and Child	2.41
	Running time	64.35

PROGRAMME NOTE

Introduction

This album owes its existence to the tenacity and philanthropy of one woman: Dorothy Webster Thomas.

Although her family were not dedicated music-lovers, Dorothy developed a private interest in music and singing. On 10th February 1952 Dorothy entered a local competitive music festival in Whitehaven, Cumbria, as a teenage solo singer. Adjudicating that festival were the composers Michael Head and Eric Thiman. Both men recognised Dorothy's talent and enthusiasm and, given that she was unaccompanied at the event, walked her safely to her bus stop when the festival finished. This walk would

change Dorothy's life, as the composers encouraged her to apply to the Royal Academy of Music in London. She did so, and took her place at the conservatoire in 1954.

Thiman and Head maintained a paternal interest in Dorothy's well-being. It is Dorothy's recollection that they were both extremely supportive to any students at the Academy who came from less monied backgrounds. Michael Head privately recorded Dorothy singing the first of his 'Three Sacred Songs' to convince the publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, to print these works in a higher key. Thiman would also meet with Dorothy occasionally to ensure she was thriving in the hustle and expense of London life.

Post-Academy, Dorothy continued her

professional relationship with Thiman as she sang in City Temple, Holborn Viaduct, where Thiman was organist and choirmaster. They remained firm friends, with Dorothy visiting Thiman and his wife, Madeline, until his death in 1975.

In 2016 Dorothy attended an English song competition at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, where she first heard Nicole Johnson (pianist) and Emily Gray (mezzo). A friendship formed, and Dorothy maintains a fervent interest in both musicians' careers.

This album was devised and funded by Dorothy. In doing this, she hopes not only to support the careers of two emerging artists, but also pay homage to these two men. Their kindness and encouragement had an extraordinary influence on her life, and she is now affording the same generosity to Emily and Nicole.

Songs

The musical lives of Thiman and Head have certain parallels: both were born in 1900, were talented pianists and composers with a keen interest in the support and development of amateur musicians. Thanks predominately to the work of their predecessors Roger Quilter, Peter Warlock and Ralph Vaughan-Williams, Thiman and Head were writing music at a time of renewed public interest in English art song.

Many English composers at the turn of the century moved away from the more Germanic compositional styles and started to devise a more identifiably English and nationalistic sound. After WWI (and to some extent, before the outbreak of war) it became popular to set secular romantic poetry, replete with depictions of nature, as found in the works of contemporaries

Herbert Howells, Ivor Gurney and Arthur Bliss. Although little is written or known about their personal influences, Thiman and Head certainly followed this trend.

Indeed, Head's cycle '*Songs from the Countryside*', (from which this album takes two songs: *Sweet Chance* and *Money 'O'*) the cycle *Over the Rim of the Moon* (the first four songs of this album), and *A Little Road to Bethlehem* sets poems by Georgian poets William Henry Davies, Francis Ledwidge, and Margaret Rose, respectively. Thiman also appears to have retained an interest in Elizabethan and Victorian poetry, setting works by famed writers such as Shakespeare and Wordsworth and, perhaps notably, generally avoiding the modernist secular poetry of his time.

Dorothy's anecdotal evidence suggests that both composers had a pre-occupation with poetry and diction, stating that every element of their compositions was "in service of the words". This is evident in their

highly melodic, atmospheric and romantic vocal lines. Being such capable pianists, both composers often wrote thick, complicated piano accompaniments (notably Thiman's *Fain Would I Change That Note* and Head's *Nocturne*) when writing for a more overtly emotive poem, but would thin and simplify the texture for texts more rooted in scenes of nature (Thiman's *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*, Head's *A Green Cornfield*).

As a result of Thiman's work with the Non-Conformist Church, his compositional output for voice(s) was weighted towards sacred choral works, often with more modern religious texts (album examples: *Jesus The Very Thought of Thee*, *Easter Prayer*, *The Birds*). The Thiman Archive at Southwell Minster estimates that Thiman wrote over 1,300 pieces, potentially making him the most prolific composer of 20th Century England, but very little is known of him. Many of his works were published in America where he is, likely as a result, better

PROGRAMME NOTE

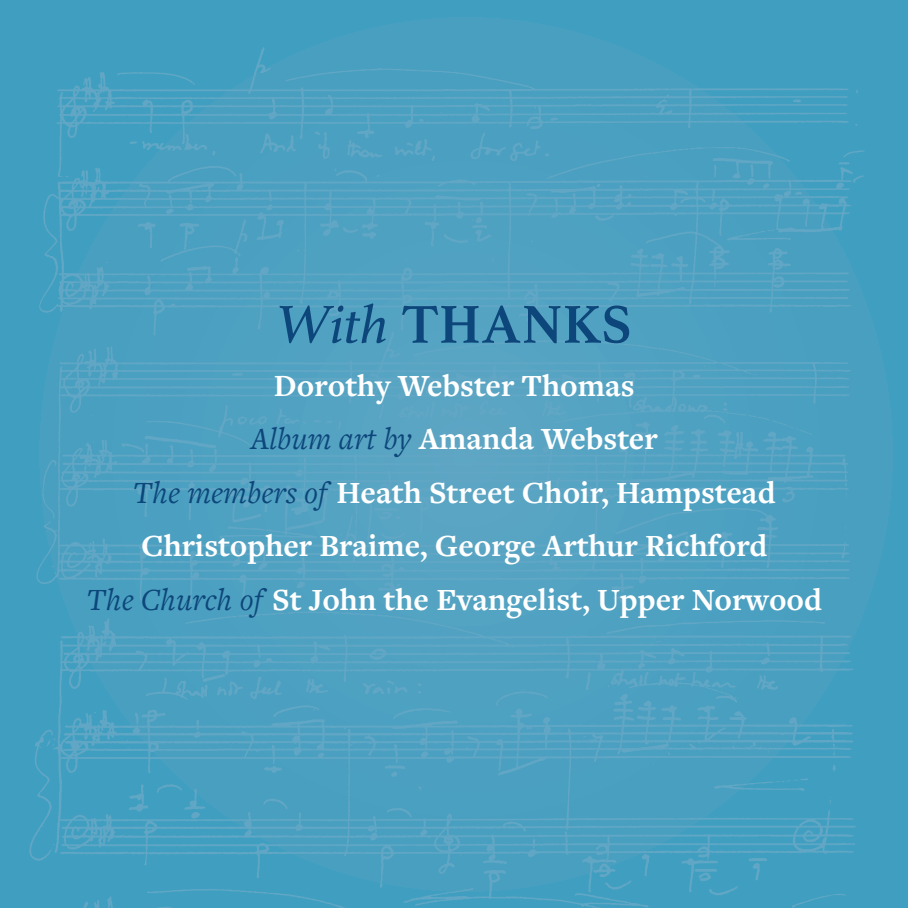
known today. This album is believed to be the first professionally produced recording of any of Thiman's solo songs.

The composing talents of Thiman and Head were evident at very young ages. Whilst Head had enjoyed formal piano and composition lessons as a young teen, his compositional savvy was demonstrated to the public at just 18 years old, when he wrote and published the cycle *Over the Rim of the Moon*. Head started studying at the Royal Academy a year after this composition, which is sometimes considered one of his finest. Thiman's *Fain Would I Change That Note*, which is vast in range and an extremely good example of expansive writing for voice and piano, was written when he was 22 years old. Thiman differs from Head in that he had no compositional training and is said to have had a remarkable capacity for improvisation.

Their performance careers were very different. Whilst Head toured the

country, charismatically accompanying himself on the piano as he sang, Thiman delighted congregations with illustrious organ voluntaries, which were invariably improvisations based on hymns. Their professional worlds collided in the 1930s at the Royal Academy of Music, where Eric Thiman was the Professor of Harmony from 1931, and Michael Head a Pianoforte Professor from 1927. They would go on to tour the country as adjudicators, both together and separately, in the many regional music festivals that ran throughout England in the mid-20th Century. They were unified in their commitment to encouraging and writing for amateur musicians.

Vocally and pianistically the songs presented on this album are not technically simple, but they are accessible. It is hoped that this album will provide stimulus for any musician, professional or amateur, to continue to buy their works and to play them.

The background of the right page is a solid blue color. Overlaid on this background are faint, light blue musical staves and notes, creating a subtle, artistic texture. The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, notes, rests, and bar lines, arranged in a way that suggests a musical score without being a specific one.

With THANKS

Dorothy Webster Thomas

Album art by **Amanda Webster**

The members of **Heath Street Choir, Hampstead**

Christopher Braime, George Arthur Richford

The Church of **St John the Evangelist, Upper Norwood**

BIOGRAPHY

Emily GRAY

Described by Opera Magazine as a “charismatic singer-actress to watch”, Emily has performed as a soloist at the Royal Albert Hall, St. Paul’s, Kings Place, and Purcell Room and regularly performs on BBC Radio 3’s In Tune and Sunday Features. Emily also works with the

Istante Collective – a chamber ensemble comprised of the UK’s foremost baroque musicians. She has taken leading roles in a number of operas, most recently Dove’s ‘Mansfield Park’, and Rameau’s ‘Castor et Pollux’.

Emily achieved success at an early age when she was named BBC Radio 2 Choir Girl of the Year 2000.



BIOGRAPHY

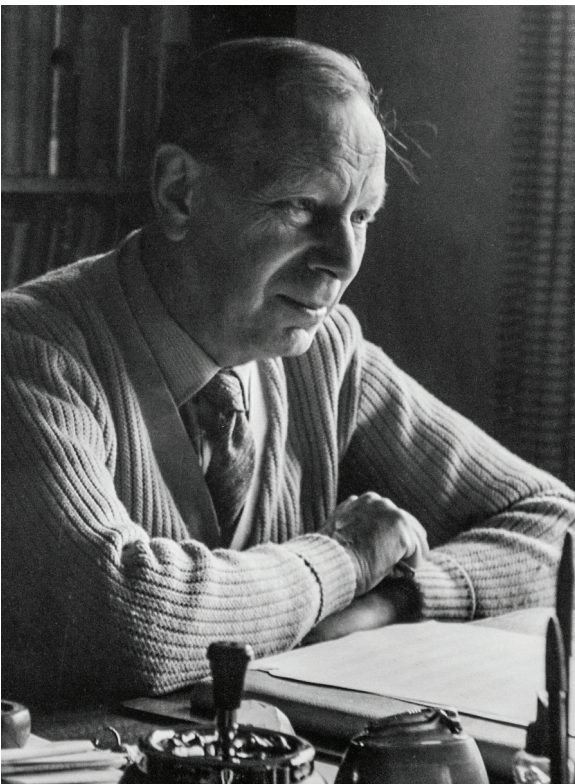
Nicole JOHNSON

Nicole is a music director, pianist and vocal coach working in both the Classical and Musical Theatre industries. She studied at classical piano performance at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and piano accompaniment at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama where she gained first class honours and distinction respectively, alongside the Accompanist’s Prize and the Dave Gosling Prize for Piano Accompaniment.

Together with Emily Gray, she has performed extensively in concerts and competitions to great acclaim, including winning the Accompanist’s prize in the 2018 AESS competition.



BIOGRAPHY



Eric THIMAN

Eric Thiman was born in 1900. Although largely self-taught, he became a respected and prolific composer. Eric Thiman was Professor of Harmony and Composition at the Royal Academy of Music, and a Dean of the Faculty of Music, London University.

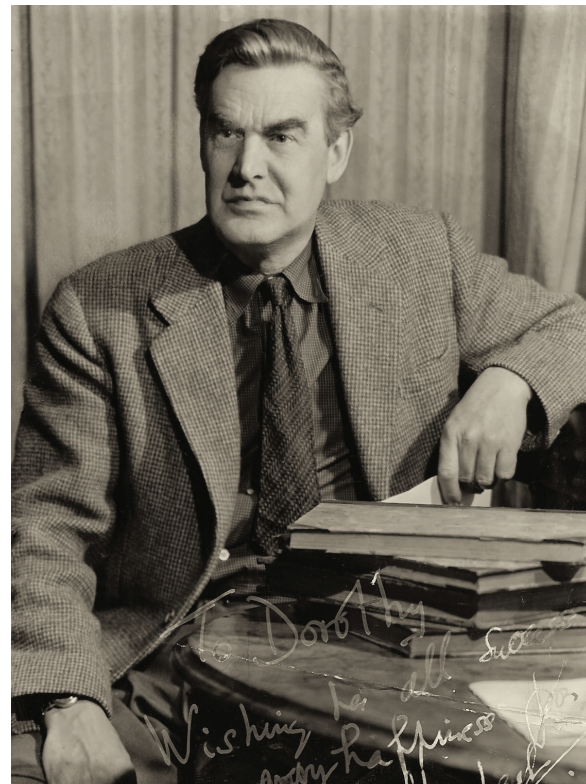
He trained two choirs and was a respected examiner and adjudicator. A talented organist, he was heavily involved with the Congregational Church throughout his life. Southwell Minster holds an archive of over 1,300 of his published compositions. He died in 1975.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael HEAD

Michael Head was born in 1900. He attended the Monkton Combe music school and was later taught piano by Jean Adair, a pupil of Clara Schumann. After service in the war, he studied at the Royal Academy of Music, London where he became a professor aged twenty-seven.

An accomplished singer himself, he wrote one hundred and twenty-four songs, often inspired by the English countryside. As a teacher and examiner, at home and abroad, Michael's aim was to encourage everyone to engage in music. He died in 1976.



CREDITS

Songs by **Eric Thiman** and **Michael Head**, recorded by **Emily Gray** and **Nichole Johnson** at **The Church of St John the Evangelist**, Upper Norwood, on the 24th August, 14th September, 17th September & 1st October 2021.

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