



DECLARATION OF THE FIRMAMENT



TUE 13 JAN, 7:45PM | SUSIE SAINSBURY THEATRE



Declaration of the Firmament (2025)
Eve Willow Dickson | Oil on Canvas

ABOUT ZAPOVIT NEBES: DECLARATION OF THE FIRMAMENT

Declaration of the Firmament (2025) is the result of a one-and-a-half year collaboration between composer Emma Clark and bass-baritone Ian Gillis. Intentionally composed as the narrative centrepiece between Dvořák's *Biblical Songs* and Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, this new composition bridges the singer's journey from a place of spiritual turmoil to one of mortal concession.

With both works presenting the bird in flight as a symbol of spiritual deliverance, the evident mandate became to chart their flight as intentional messengers between the tormented "Beloved," and the compassionate "Creator" — conduits of a heavenly rescue mission. Turning to Ukrainian folk idioms, and the poetic texts of Taras Shevchenko and Volodymyr Sosiura (drawing on Emma's Ukrainian heritage), a three movement structure emerged:

Movement I establishes the primary soloistic roles of the violins as the pair of Doves first encountered in the Dvořák, depicting their tumultuous return flight through a world thrown into chaos in response to the distress of the Beloved. String effects depict branches breaking and waves crashing, while the cello establishes the broad foundation of a raging River in a melodic line which rises in pitch throughout the work — the vertical climb of the River as a heavenly staircase. The movement concludes with a quotation of the traditional Ukrainian folk melody.

Movement II finds us suspended in the intimate drawing rooms of the Creator. Frightened by the storm, the Doves flock to Him for comfort. Alarmed by what news they bring of the Beloved, the Creator hatches a rescue plan. This movement utilizes improvisational extended violin techniques to depict the flapping of wings and timid coos of dove-calls, in conversation with extensive whistled phrases by the vocalist. Broad arpeggiations in the piano establish the environment within the shimmering Stars of the night-sky.

Movement III begins in complete silence. Mirroring the Biblical account of the creation of the Garden of Eden, the Creator's voice initiates the “blooming” of the earth and the awakening of the celestial bodies in preparation of a perfect dwelling for the Beloved. The introductory section is aleatoric, with the musical texture building progressively upon the foundation first established by the voice, forming a rich, dynamic tapestry of sound. The body of the piece is a love song, in which the Creator affirms his all-encompassing love for the Beloved. Performers return to improvisation in a prologue which executes the definitive act of spiritual redemption...

Setting this production within the imposing physical reality of a tempestuous thundercloud (enhanced with an electroacoustic soundscape), we have invited the audience on-stage with the performers to immerse themselves in the intimate nature of this immensely personal narrative. The audience is welcomed to remain seated following the final movement, and exit as they feel led.

ABOUT BIBLICKÉ PÍSNĚ (BIBLICAL SONGS)

Dvořák's *Biblical Songs* (1894), written while living in the United States, is a ten-song cycle on texts from the Book of Psalms in the Czech Bible of Kralice. Unlike the folk-influenced style often associated with Dvořák, these songs are marked by their pious restraint and a strong sense of inward reflection. Dvořák's programmatic musical elements throughout depict sounds from the natural world, including the coos of doves and crashes of divine thunder.

These selected songs, taken from the Psalms of David, highlight the singers' spiritual journey through grief: No. 1, (*Oblak a mrákota jest vůkol Něho*) evokes divine majesty through dark, weighty musical textures. No. 3, (*Slyš, ó Bože, slyš modlitbu mou*) and No. 6, (*Slyš, ó Bože, volání mé*) present desperate prayers for help. The selection concludes with No. 8, (*Popatřiž na mne a smiluj se nade mnou*), an anguished, introspective plea for mercy.

PROGRAMME

DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)

Biblické písně: Biblical Songs (Selections)

No. 1: Oblak a mrákota jest vůkol Něho

No. 3: Slyš, ó Bože, slyš modlitbu mou

No. 6: Slyš, ó Bože, volání mé

No. 8: Popatřiž na mne a smiluj se nade mnou

EMMA CLARK (2003)

Zapovit Nebes: Declaration of the Firmament

No. 1: Revuť ta stohnuť richky buyni

No. 2: Dumy moyi, dumy moyi

No. 3: Tak nikhto ne kokhav

TRANSLATIONS

These idiomatic translations have been prepared by Maria Kolpaktchi and Ian Gillis

No. 1: Psalm 97, Oblak a mrákota jest vůkol Něho

Cloud and darkness are around Him; righteousness and judgement are the pillars of His throne.

Fire goes before Him, blazing forth around all His foes.

His lightnings illuminate the world; the earth beholds and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the face of the Lord, the Sovereign of all the earth.

And all the nations behold His glory.

No. 3: Psalm 55, Slyš, ó Bože, slyš modlitbu mou

Hear, O God! Hear my prayer; do not hide from my plea.
Attend and hear me, for I mourn in my distress and am full of sorrow.

My heart is pained within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me; horror has overwhelmed me.

And I said: Oh, that I had wings like a dove —
I would fly away and be at rest.

Lo, far away I would wander and dwell in the wilderness.

I would hasten to escape from the raging wind and violent tempest.

No. 6: Psalms 61 & 63, Slyš, ó Bože, volání mé

Hear, O God, my call; observe my prayers!

For You used to be a refuge to me

and a firm tower before the faces of my enemy.

Let me live in Your tabernacle through the ages,
safe within the hiding place of Your wings.

God! You are my mighty God.

Tomorrow I will seek You.

My soul longs for You, my whole body longs after You
in this land that is hot and dry, in which there is no water.

And so, I will bless You, and with joyful lips sing,
praising You with my mouth.

No. 8: Psalm 35, Popatřiž na mne a smiluj se nade mnou

Look at me and have mercy upon me, because I am deserted and distressed.

The tribulations of my heart are multiplying;
from my anxiety, deliver me.

Have mercy upon me!

See my torment and my woe, and forgive all of my sins.

Cut my soul and tear me out, for I am not ashamed,
because I trust in You.

No. 1: Revuť ta stohnuť richky buyni

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861)

Wild rivers roar and groan;*,
An angry wind howls,
It bends the tall willows to the ground,
And raises waves like mountains.
And at this time the pale moon
Peaks out here and there from the clouds,
Like a boat in the blue sea,
Now emerged, now sunk.

**Denotes lyrics adjusted from the original poem*

No. 2: Dumy moyi, dumy moyi

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861)

Oh, my Thoughts, oh, my Thoughts,
You are my only.
In an evil hour, fly to me, grey-winged ones,
My little doves.
Ah...
Oh, my Thoughts, oh, my Thoughts...
Don't you abandon me, at least.

No. 3: Tak nikhto ne kokhav

Volodymyr Sosiura (1898-1965)

Such has no one ever loved.
Only across thousands of years arrives such a love.
On such a day, Spring blooms on the earth,
And Earth adorns itself early in the morning.
Oh, you bright stars! My quiet moon!
Where have you seen greater love?
For her I will pluck golden Orion from the sky,
I — poet of the works of dawn.





IAN GILLIS - DIRECTOR, BASS-BARITONE

Canadian bass-baritone Ian Gillis is in his first year of postgraduate studies at the Royal Academy of Music, under the tutelage of Raymond Connell. Ian was a member of the University of Toronto Opera Undergraduate program from 2023-2025, and a frequent artist with the Centre for Opera Studies And Appreciation Canada. Ian furthered his operatic training with the Canadian Opera Company in 2024, and with Brott Opera in 2025. A Sidgwick Scholar for the Orpheus

Choir of Toronto (2024-2025), Ian portrayed the role of Jesus Christ in the Canadian re-premiere of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's previously lost oratorio, The Atonement. From 2024-2025, he hosted the award-winning weekly radio program Tracks From Abroad on CIUT 89.5FM. Ian is a recipient of the Thelma Jean Swaine-Holmes Award at the Royal Academy of Music.



MARIA KOLPAKTCHI - ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, MEZZO-SOPRANO

Maria Kolpaktchi is a British-Ukrainian mezzo-soprano from London. She is in the first year of her masters degree at the Academy, studying with Marie Vasiliou and Iain Ledingham. Maria previously completed her undergraduate degree in Music at The University of Manchester. Her studies are supported by the Academy with the Eleanor Margaret Scholarship. Maria has performed as a soloist and in choirs across the UK. As a soloist she has performed a wide range of

oratorio including Bach's Mass in B Minor, Mozart's Coronation Mass and Handel's Messiah. Maria is also the founder of MOROZ COLLECTIVE, a creative collective geared towards raising funds for Ukrainian humanitarian aid through concerts and exhibitions.



MAX LEVYTSKYI - CONDUCTOR

Max Levytskyi is a UK-based young conductor from Ukraine, rapidly emerging onto the British stage and expanding his work internationally. Having acquired the Junior Professional's

diploma at the Glier Music Academy and the Bachelor's degree at the National Music Academy in Kyiv, he moved to the UK in 2022 and is currently studying composition at the Royal Academy of Music with professors Alexander Walker and Dominic Grier, and privately with Prof. Howard Williams (RCM). In the past 3 years in London he has curated and conducted numerous fundraising concerts with own orchestra and chamber choir "Lihtar" comprising students and young professionals from different ethnic backgrounds. His overall repertoire experience includes orchestral, choral and opera works from the baroque era to contemporary.



EMMA CLARK - COMPOSER

Emma Clark received her Bachelor of Music in Composition from the University of Toronto, under the tutelage Larysa Kuzmenko. Her work explores the intersection of post-tonal and modernist music with jazz, folk tunes, and impressionism. Clark's music has been performed at the SNATS Canadian Art Song Showcase, the Arts and Letters Club

of Toronto, and the University of Toronto New Music Festival. As a composer, she is drawn to storytelling and interdisciplinary collaboration with theatre, technology, and cultural narratives. Much of her catalogue is informed by her Ukrainian-Canadian heritage, incorporating diasporic cultural motifs into a polystylistic language that is sometimes lush, sometimes jarring, and always grounded in narrative.



SHARON LIANG - A DOVE (VIOLIN)

Sharon Liang is a British violinist studying with Professor Jack Liebeck at the Royal Academy of Music, London. She has performed widely across the United Kingdom, working with conductors including Sir Mark Elder and Carlo Rizzi, and appearing at renowned venues such as Bridgewater Hall and Cadogan Hall. She has also toured internationally in China. As an avid chamber musician, she is particularly drawn to underperformed

and experimental repertoire. Sharon performs on a 1720 Daniel Parker violin, generously loaned from the Royal Academy of Music collection.



ANA MOLINA - A DOVE (VIOLIN)

Born in A Coruña, Spain, in 2003. She studies the Master of Music in Performance at The Royal Academy of Music, with Prof. So-Ock Kim. She has been granted the ABRSM EU Postgraduate Scholarship. From 2021 to 2025 she studied at the Reina Sofía School of Music in Madrid with Prof. Marco Rizzi and Sergey Teslya, where she successfully completed the Bachelor's Degree in Violin Performance with distinction. She began her musical studies

at the age of seven at the Professional Conservatory of A Coruña where she obtained the Professional Degree in Violin with Honours and the End-of-Degree Award. She has received prizes in various national and international competitions and has performed as a soloist with orchestras such as the RTVE Symphony Orchestra. She has extensive orchestral and chamber music experience, collaborating with ensembles and conductors of international renown.



GIOVANNI CECCHINATO - THE RIVER (CELLO)

Born in Italy, Giovanni Cecchinato began studying the cello at the age of 5 at I Piccoli Musicisti Music School. He then moved to study under the guidance of Maestro Graziano Beluffi at Milan Conservatory G. Verdi. At the age of 15, thanks to the support of Maestro Beluffi, he had the opportunity to join the private class of maestro Rocco Filippini from whose French instrumental school he drew

constant stylistic inspiration. He has since performed as a soloist and ensemble musician in a variety of settings, including orchestras and chamber groups, and has taken part in projects in Italy, Switzerland, Spain, Austria and UK. Passionate about both performance and collaboration, he has developed a particular interest towards contemporary music and strives to communicate emotions through collaboration with new generation artists while continuing to refine his artistry and technique by completing his Master studies under the guidance of Maestro Robert Cohen at the Royal Academy of Music of London.



ALEXANDER THOW - THE HEAVENS (PIANO)

Alexander Thow is a postgraduate countertenor at the Royal Academy of Music, where he studies with Marcus van den Akker and Iain Ledingham. He is a recipient of the Juliens Award and is supported by the Josephine Baker Trust. Previously, he studied at the University of Cambridge, singing with both Trinity College Choir and St John's College Choir. Alongside his vocal work, Alexander is an

accomplished pianist; his performances include Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, and he has extensive experience performing with fellow singers and instrumentalists.

LIHTAR ORCHESTRA & CHOIR

Lihtar Orchestra and Choir is a London-based, independent collective consisting of Ukrainian and international students from different London conservatoires and focusing on contemporary music from Ukraine. Lihtar [leekh-tahr] means "lantern." Along with Ukrainian composers, Lihtar performs a wide range of repertoire from the Baroque era to the modern day. Many concerts of the orchestra are non-profit fundraisers for Ukrainian aid - previously, Lihtar has supported charities such as 1991 Fund, FADU, Wild Post, Ukrainian Action and Children With Cancer UK.

Lucy Rowan - I Flute
Josie Wakefield - II Flute
Amelia Neilson - I Clarinet
Gemma Winfield - II Clarinet
Kiersten Gustafson - I Horn
Sebastian Barley - II Horn
Anna Fyl - Timpani
Alice Mizelli - Harp
Sharon Liang, Ana Molina - I Violin
Hilda Beskow, Takanori Okamoto - II Violin
Simon Song, Annabel Cullington-Doss - Viola
Giovanni Cecchinatto - Cello
Tilde Grademar - Bass

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Adriana Festeu, Barbara Hannigan, Lada Valešová and The High Commission of Canada for their support and artistic contributions towards this project.

Cover photography: Natalie Rajksa