Composer’s note

The poet Charles Bennett and I had for quite some time discussed the possibility of writing an extended dramatic work for young singers. Charles had the basis of the story in his mind, and we agreed that we wanted to write a piece not only about singing but also about what it means to have the courage to sing with your own voice, thus ultimately being true to who you really are. We were thrilled when Jon Cullen from Magdalen College School in Oxford, alongside Lucy Farrant from the Young Norfolk Arts Trust and Alison Corfield from Norfolk Music Hub, agreed to be partners with us by commissioning this piece. Thus *Birdland* came to life and received its first performances concurrently in the summer of 2020 at the Oxford Festival of the Arts and at the Young Norfolk Arts Festival, in Norwich Theatre Royal.

For us a major consideration was to make the piece as flexible for performance as we could. We have tried to make the solo roles interchangeable, in that they can be sung by any voice part. Even though the piece is fundamentally designed for young singers, the solo roles can equally be sung by adults or by young voices and adult voices combined. The work is scored for an ensemble of ten players, but it can also be performed with just piano or piano with the help of percussion and bass guitar or double bass. In the same way we have tried not to be too prescriptive about stage directions. Even though we have tried to imagine the temporal shape and pacing of the piece through the scoring and narrative, we hope that there will be plenty of scope for creative staging. We imagined that the piece could include dance and movement, from the possibility of an occasional dancing chorus to perhaps a more formal dance routine in movement eight, ‘Downwards.’ We hope that, ultimately, the nature of the piece might be able to stimulate and encourage as imaginative and broad a palette of ideas as possible, when bringing it to life.

As well as the commissioners, I would like to thank a number of colleagues who have helped this piece come to life. Thanks are due to Val Withams from Choral Connections and also to Griselda Sherlaw-Johnson and Jenny Wegg at Oxford University Press. I would especially like to thank our editor, Laura Jones, for her tireless work on this piece, not only for her careful work on the score but also for her masterminding of all the learning materials for the work, which she has done with grace, good humour, and endless patience.

Bob Chilcott
November 2019

Duration: c.45 mins

This note may be reproduced as required for programme notes.
SCENE 1—Early morning in Birdland. Pip is awake, standing centre stage.

My fea-thers are brown,
but what col-our is my voice?
You could lis-ten to a rain-bow, if you...
gave me a choice.

My feathers are brown, but my
song will dance in your ears to-night, if you

give me a chance.

UNISON CHORUS BIRDS emerge from sleep.
3. Feathered Perfection
(Highnote, Solo Birds)

Slower \( \frac{j}{= 104} \)

HIGHNOTE

“Well done, everyone! Another perfect start to the day in Birdland. And tomorrow will be even better, I’m sure.”

UNISON VOICES

“It’s not easy being perfect. But someone has to be!

And that’s us! And that’s us!

“I just can’t wait for tomorrow. Dawn chorus on Midsummer’s Day.”

“Just to be a part of it.”
It's not our fault we're the best.

It's the dream of every bird.

And that's us!

And that's us!

We're feathered perfection,
And that's us!

“And remember, we have to make sure that our ineffable beauty of song keeps the wannabees and aspiring singers out of the running for ever.
5. I have a song
(Pip, Unison Chorus Birds, SATB Chorus Birds, Highnote)

Easy tempo $j = 60$

“Excuse me. Morning. Don’t mean to interrupt. I have a song. It goes like this.”

But pardon me, aren’t you a lowly, useless, good-for-nothing sparrow who will...
PIP “But this song. Inside me. Like this.”

never amount to anything?

I feel my song...

(intake of breath)
day ...

now at last ...

NO! Aaargh! The very best part

NO! Aaargh! The very best part

So let us all ...

is the silence before the start.

is the silence before the start.

ff

ff

ff
We've done what we could to make him a star,
But still he resisted, perhaps we went too far.
Now there is nothing more we can do.
Time to move on to something new.

In my dreams I sang so fair.
I heard my music everywhere.

But this isn't right, this isn't true.
Time to move on to something new.

You'll never do it on your own.
16. One Note (reprise)
(Unison Chorus Birds, SATB Chorus Birds)

One note, to be\-gin, let the\_ light in. One note, now's the time,

One note, to be\-gin, let the\_ light in. One note, now's the time,
let your song shine!

To-day as you know is Mid-summer's Day, when all the birds may have their say.
Now we can tell you, life is good, We all sing in the neighbour-hood.

One note, to begin, let the light in. One note, now's the time,

One note, to begin, let the light in. One note, now's the time,