



SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL
ORCHESTRA

The Lost Words

JAMES BURTON

**Based on *The Lost Words*
by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris**

'We find it hard to love what we cannot give a name to,' says Robert Macfarlane, author of *The Lost Words*. 'And names, good names, well used can help us see and they help us care.' The book has become a bestseller. Now British composer James Burton has set its message to music. It's a tuneful celebration of a vanishing natural world, created for young voices and sung today by the RSNO's inspirational Youth Chorus.

RSNO Youth Chorus

Patrick Barrett Director, RSNO Youth Choruses

Edward Cohen Piano

Judith Keaney Piano

New Auditorium, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall

Sun 22 Mar 2026 1pm

If viewing these notes at the concert, please do so considerately and not during performances. Please silence all mobile telephones and alerts, and refrain from taking photographs, without flash, until the end of each piece.

James Burton (Born 1974)

The Lost Words

FIRST PERFORMANCE

Tanglewood, Massachusetts, 21 July 2019

DURATION 35 minutes

Acorn

Newt

Bramble

Adder

Lark

Dandelion

Magpie

Conker

Bluebell

Willow

Otter

Wren

'Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children. They disappeared so quietly that at first almost no one noticed – fading away like water on stone. The words were those that children used to name the natural world around them: acorn, adder, bluebell, bramble, conker – gone! ... The words were becoming lost: no longer vivid in children's voices, no longer alive in their stories ...'

Thus begins *The Lost Words*, Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris' beautiful book which contains spell-poems and paintings of common names for everyday nature – from *acorn* to *wren* – which had slipped so far out of the consciousness of children that they were omitted from a new edition of a junior dictionary. Published in 2017, *The Lost Words* summons the magic of nature to help conjure these words back to life:

'... it holds not poems but spells of many kinds that might just, by the old, strong magic of being spoken aloud, unfold dreams and songs, and summon lost words back into the mouth and the mind's eye.'

I fell under the spell of *The Lost Words* shortly after it was published, and this coincided happily with a commission from the Hallé Orchestra for the Hallé Children's Choir and the foundation of the Boston Symphony Children's Choir. I have selected twelve of the poems to set to music, each one forming its own stand-alone song. The piece may be performed by any group of upper voices, but I composed it with the timbre and energy of children's voices in mind. The accompaniment was always conceived orchestrally but I also wanted to create a piano version which was musically convincing and practical.

In each of the songs I have set out to capture the spirit of the words and to make them intelligible and enjoyable to sing. Sometimes that means some vocal extremes, such as whispered effects, shouting, some very low mysterious notes, and some triumphant high ones too.

The rhythm of *Acorn* was inspired by the sound of falling acorns on a hard roof. There is high melodrama in *Newt*, who is resisting the unwanted approaches of the pun-filled coot. The march-like *Bramble* has a fruit-inspired musical twist at the end, and in *Adder* the snake is musically mysterious but also unthreatening. Each of the movements is dedicated to loved ones and friends, and *Lark* is dedicated to the memory of my father who, before he died too young, taught me to notice nature, even though we lived in built-up London. *Dandelion* has a deliberately sunny musical disposition, before the uncompromising bully *Magpie* kicks up an enormous fuss: 'pick a fight in an empty room!' *Conker*, set musically as a rondo waltz with a telling cluster chord at the end, is the word used in the UK to describe a horse chestnut (and a children's playground game). Jackie Morris' oceanic *Bluebell* painting with a barn owl is one of the abiding images of the book, and the bluesy music is intended to match the depth of colour. *Willow* gently flows in compound time, and the language of trees is the theme in the Tolkienian conversation between the 'listeners' (us) and the unreachable tree. *Otter* is a musically supple and joyous description of the otter's habitat and behaviour ('a silver-miner with trout its ore') but it is also an appeal to be one's self: 'Ever dreamed of being otter?' The flitting and breathless presto of *Wren* captures a birdwatcher's frustration with these tiny, shy but brilliant vocalising songbirds: 'now you think you see wren, now you know you don't.'

James Burton, July 2019

The Lost Words was commissioned by the Hallé Concerts Society for the Hallé Children's Choir, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The first performance of the version with piano accompaniment took place at the Tanglewood Festival on 21 July 2019 with the Boston Symphony Children's Choir and Graeme McCullough (piano), conducted by the composer. Selections of the orchestral version were performed on 23 July 2019 at the Tanglewood Festival with the Boston Symphony Children's Choir and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer.

The RSNO Youth Chorus and Royal Scottish National Orchestra gave the Scottish premiere of a selection of the songs in Dundee on 14 March 2024.

ACORN

As flake is to blizzard, as
Curve is to sphere, as knot is to net, as
One is to many, as coin is to money, as
bird is to flock, as
Rock is to mountain, as drop is to fountain, as
spring is to river, as glint is to glitter, as
Near is to far, as wind is to weather, as
feather is to flight, as light is to star, as
kindness is to good, so acorn is to wood.

NEWT

‘Newt, oh newt, you are too cute!’
Emoted the coot to the too-cute newt,
‘With your frilly back and your shiny suit
and your spotted skin so un-hirsute!’
‘Too cute?!’ roared the newt
to the unastute coot. ‘With all this careless
talk of cute you bring me into
disrepute, for newts aren’t cute:
we’re kings of the pond, lions of the
duckweed, dragons of the water;
albeit it’s true,’ – he paused – ‘minute.’

BRAMBLE

Bramble is on the march again,
Rolling and arching along the hedges,
into parks on the city edges.
All streets are suddenly thick with briar:
cars snarled fast, business over.
Moths have come in their millions,
drawn to the thorns.
The air flutters.
Bramble has reached each house now,
looped it in wire.
People lock doors, close shutters.
Little shoots steal through keyholes,
to leave in quiet halls,
Empty stairwells, bowls of bright blackberries,
where the light falls.

ADDER

A hank of rope in the late hot sun;
 a curl of bark; a six, an eight:

For adder is as adder basks.

Deep in heather, coiled in gorse,
 sunk among the winter stones:

For adder is as adder hides.

Darts, diamond slides, sine-wave swerves,
 live-wire curves of force:

For adder is as adder glides.

Echo of snake, self-escape,
 a left-behind ghost:

For adder is as adder sheds.

Rustle of grass, sudden susurrus,
 what the eye misses:

For adder is as adder hisses.

LARK

Little astronaut, where have you gone, and how is your song still
 torrenting on?

Aren't you short of breath as you climb higher, up there in the thin air,
 with your magical song still tumbling on?

Right now I need you, for my sadness has come again
 and my heart grows flatter – so I'm coming to
 find you, by following your song,

Keeping on into deep space, past dying stars and
 exploding suns, to where at last, little astronaut,
 you sing your heart out at all dark matter.

DANDELION

Dazzle me, little sun-of-the-grass!
And spin me, tiny time-machine!

Tick-tock sun clock, thistle & dock.

Now no longer known as
Dent-de-Lion, Lion's Tooth or Wind-blow

Tick-tock sun clock, nettle & dock.

No longer known as
Evening Glow, Milk-witch or Parachute, so
Let new names take and root, thrive and grow.

Tick-tock sun clock, rattle & dock.

I would make you some, such as Bane of Lawn Perfectionists
Or Fallen Star of the Football Pitch or Scatter-seed, but
Never would I call you only, merely, simply 'weed'.

Tick-tock sun clock, clover & dock.

MAGPIE

Magpie Manifesto:
Argue every toss!
Gossip, Bicker, Yak and Snicker
All Day Long!
Pick a Fight in an Empty Room!
Interrupt, Interject, Intercept, Intervene!
Every Magpie against Every Other
Walking Flying Swimming Creeping
Creature on the Earth!

CONKER

Cabinet-maker, could you craft me a conker?

Oil its wood, burnish its veneer, set it glowing from within?

Never. Not a chance. No hope at all.

King then, could you command me a conker?

Compel its green spikes to grow, its white plush to thicken?

Impossible. Impractical. Inconceivable.

Engineer, surely you could design me a conker?

Refine its form, mill its curves and edges?

Manufacture me that magic casket?

Unfeasible. Unworkable. Unimaginable.

Realize this (said the Cabinet-maker, the King and the Engineer together),

conker cannot be made,

however you ask it, whatever word or tool you use,

regardless of decree. Only one thing can conjure

conker – and that thing is tree.

BLUEBELL

Blue flowers at the blue hour –

Late-day light in a bluebell wood.

Under branch, below leaf,

billows blue so deep, sea-deep,

Each step is taken in an ocean.

Blue *flows* at the blue hour:

colour is current, undertow.

Enter the wood with care, my love,

Lest you are pulled down by the hue,

Lost in the depths, drowned in blue.

WILLOW

Willow, when the wind blows so your branches billow,
oh will you whisper while we listen so we learn what words your
long leaves loosen?

If you whisper when the wind blows so your branches
billow, willow, we will listen for a day, a week, a year,
till we know what willows say, what willows speak.

*Lean in, listeners, come below our leaves and wait until
the wind blows so our branches billow, listen for a year,
a week, a day but you will never hear what willows speak,
what willows say.*

*Long you linger, listeners, hard you press your ears against
our bark, but you will never sense our sap, and you will
never speak in leaves, or put down roots into the rot –
for we are willow, and you are not.*

O open up your heart-wood to us will you, willow, show
your deep within, your rough without, your water-
brushing bough, your shoot, your grain, your knot?

*We will never whisper to you, listeners, nor speak, nor shout,
and even if you learn to utter alder, elder, poplar, aspen,
you will never know a word of willow – for we are willow
and you are not.*

OTTER

Otter enters river without falter
what a supple *slider* out of holt and into water!

This shape-shifter's a sheer breath-taker,
a sure heart-stopper
but you'll only ever spot a shadow flutter,
bubble-skein, and never (almost never) actual otter.

This swift swimmer's a silver-miner with trout its ore
it bores each black pool deep and deeper delves
up current steep and steeper, turns the water inside-out,
then inside-outer.

Ever dreamed of being otter?
That utter underwater thunderbolter
that shimmering twister?

Run to the river bank, otter dreamer,
slip your skin and change your matter,
pour your outer being into otter
and enter now an otter without falter
into water.

WREN

When wren whirrs from stone to furze the world around
her slows, for wren is quick, so quick she blurs the air
through which she flows, yes –

Rapid wren is needle, rapid wren is pin – and wren's song
is sharp-song, briar-song, thorn-song, and wren's flight
is dart-flight, flick-flight, light-flight, yes –

Each wren etches, stitches, switches, *glitches*, yes –

Now you think you see wren, now you know you don't.

The Lost Words by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris

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James Burton

Composer



Born in London, James Burton is a conductor and composer widely recognised for his dynamic leadership of choirs and orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic. He was appointed Choral Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Conductor of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus in 2017, and over the subsequent eight seasons he was deeply involved in the musical life of New England, appearing as guest conductor with the BSO, The Handel and Haydn Society, Boston Pops, Vermont Symphony, Connecticut Early Music Festival and Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, as well as conducting the BSO's choirs for many collaborations. James was also Director of Orchestral Activities at Boston University's College of Fine Arts (2020-24).

Now based in the UK, James was recently announced as the next Artistic Director of Ex Cathedral, starting in autumn 2027. James has conducted leading professional choirs such as the Gabrieli Consort, Tenebrae, Choir of the OAE and the BBC Singers, and orchestras

including the RLPO, Hallé, OAE and BBC Concert Orchestra. Last year, he conducted three projects with the Ulster Orchestra, and this season he performed *Messiah* with Opera North and the Huddersfield Choral Society. Internationally, James has conducted Mexico's National Symphony Orchestra, Denmark's Aalborg Symphony and Poland's Wrocław Philharmonic Choir, and he has collaborated with the Netherlands Radio Choir. Opera credits include ENO, ETO and Garsington Opera, where he received the 2008 Leonard Ingrams Award. Past leadership roles have included serving as Choral Director of the Hallé (2002-9), where his work culminated in the 2009 Gramophone Choral Award (*The Dream of Gerontius*).

A passionate advocate for young musicians, James directed Schola Cantorum of Oxford (2002-17), creating its conducting scholarship in 2011. He founded the Hallé Youth Choir in 2003 and the Boston Symphony Children's Choir in 2018. He has been a regular faculty member at the Prague Summer Nights Festival, and in 2017 was the honoured guest conductor of the National Youth Choir of Japan.

James' growing portfolio of compositions is published by Wise Classical. His output includes arrangements for the Boston Pops, orchestrations for American folk legend Arlo Guthrie, and choral works which have been widely performed, broadcast and recorded by groups including the BBC Singers, The Sixteen, Voces8 and the King's Singers.

A former head chorister of Westminster Abbey, James was a choral scholar at St John's College, Cambridge and a professional singer before studying orchestral conducting at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory.

Patrick Barrett

Director, RSNO Choruses



Patrick Barrett is a conductor specialising in choral music and opera. He is currently Chorus Director with the RSNO Youth Choruses, the Royal Opera House Youth Opera Company, the Irish Youth Choir (18+), National Youth Choirs (9-15 years) and the award-winning Farnham Youth Choirs.

Recent highlights include conducting the RSNO Youth Chorus in performances with Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Benjamin Grosvenor and Nicola Benedetti, as well as preparing them for the recording of *Gaspard's Christmas* by Jonathan Dove. Patrick also led Farnham Youth Choir to two gold medals at the World Choir Games 2024 in New Zealand. He has premiered new works by Errollyn Wallen, Jonathan Brigg, Emma O'Halloran and DJ R.Kitt.

Patrick's commitment to youth choral music extends to preparing choruses for the Edinburgh International Festival, and for Dunedin Consort, where his work often features in major international performances. As a dedicated music educator, Patrick has worked with organisations including The Sixteen, BBC Singers, Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh Young Musicians, and has spoken at the Post Primary Music Teachers Association in Ireland.

In opera, Patrick collaborates with leading UK companies such as the Royal Opera House, English National Opera and Garsington Opera, where he prepares youth choruses for main-stage productions and world premieres, including *Carmen* under Antonello Manacorda and *Otello* under Sir Antonio Pappano.

Previously, Patrick was the conductor of the University of Birmingham's Upper Voices Choir, University of Reading Chamber Choir and Brockham Choral Society.

Edward Cohen

Piano



Edward Cohen is pianist for the RSNO Chorus and Youth Choruses, and has worked with the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, National Youth Choir of Scotland and Scottish Chamber Orchestra Chorus, alongside some of the world's top conductors. He performs regularly with leading musicians in major venues, and has been broadcast internationally as a soloist and chamber musician, including at the BBC Proms. He has appeared in concertos with a diverse repertoire spanning Beethoven, de Falla, Rachmaninov, Shostakovich and Strauss. A prize-winning first-class graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, and an alumnus of Indiana University and the Lucerne Festival Academy, he holds two Master's degrees with distinction from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, where he received top awards, including the prestigious Governors' Recital Prize. Edward is Manager of the School of Music and Lecturer at the RCS, and serves as CEO of the Scottish International Piano Competition.

Judith Keaney

Piano



Judith Keaney was born in Glasgow and studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland), graduating with a Masters in Piano Accompaniment performance. While there she won many prizes for collaborative piano and was able to develop her love of working within an orchestral environment. Judith has worked with the RSNO, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Scottish Ballet as orchestral keyboard for many years. Touring and recording with these companies have been real highlights of her career. She joined the staff of the RSNO Youth Chorus in 2014, where working as part of such a great team of musicians is a role she cherishes. She is also a sought-after teacher, working at The Glasgow Academy as well as having a busy private teaching practice.

RSNO Youth Chorus



The RSNO Youth Chorus is one of the leading children and youth choirs in the UK. Formed in 1978 by Jean Kidd, the Youth Chorus is currently led by director Patrick Barrett and boasts over 400 members aged 7 to 18. It has built up a considerable reputation singing under some of the world's most distinguished conductors and appearing on radio and television.

RSNO Youth Chorus members sing regularly with Scotland's National Orchestra in major concert halls and festivals throughout the country, and in

2021 performed at COP26 in Glasgow. The Youth Chorus has also sung at BBC concerts and regularly appears at the Edinburgh International Festival.

The RSNO Youth Chorus gratefully acknowledges support from **Dunclay Charitable Trust**, **Rowena Alison Goffin Charitable Trust**, **W A Cargill Fund** and **W M Mann Foundation**.

YOUTH CHORUS 1

Aarnav Bhaat
Anna Davis
Ayva Kyle
Bernadette Xin-Ying
Kho
Bronagh McKinght
Bushan Gaddale
Cara Thomson
Catrin Ogle
Colette Balmer
Daisy Quinn
Elise Job
Eunice Oyedokun
Faith Junyer Wong
Fiamma Milligan
Forbes Loudon
Gabriella Mills
Grace Nickson
Grace Romans
Honor Osmond
Ingrid McGilvery
Joy Lam
Kiaan Kadwe
Kirsty McLean
Layan Shaaban
Lilianna Nemeth
Lucia Fernandez-
McCann
Melissa Maffia
Molly Kerr
Neave Maclachlan
Nethra Mantrala
Olivia Tang

Osazee Orhionkapayo
Penelope Leithead
Rachel Ayers
Rebecca Penman
Rhea Elizabeth
Oommen
Rita El Obbadi
Rory Cameron
Saffron Spybey
Sofia Jorge
Sophie Waller
Yiyi Myler
Zach Baxter
Zara Patel

YOUTH CHORUS 2

Aaleah McAulay
Abigail Gallacher
Abigail Hughes
Ailsa Hutchinson
Aimee Morton
Alec Buckley
Alexandra Cartmell
Alicia Idessane
Alma Correal-Jarrett
Amelia Mashwani
Amelia Philip
Amy Sanderson
Ana Ryburn-Thomson
Anna Arbuckle
Anshi Sai Vanga
Bea Courtial
Blair McKinlay
Cara Mackay

Charlotte Muir
Connie Hunter
Cora Robertson
Edie Dunn
Eilidh Hughes
Eilidh McIntyre
Elizabeth Poet
Emilia Ewer
Emilia Rathbone
Emily Hathaway
Emily McKenzie
Emma Little
Evie Diamond
Greta Ingleby
Hannah Binu
Holly Rodger
Hope Henderson
Indii McCulloch
Iris Stalin
Isla Balitbit
Izzy Hughes
Jayden Odebeatu
Jessica Ewer
Jessica-May Payne
Jeviy Dela Santa
Jodie Sumpter
Jude Tait
Kate Mosley
Katie Rourke
Kimberley McFarlane
Leila Osmond
Louisa Greenhill
Louise Morris
Lucy Arbuckle

Magnus Holden
Maia Fernandez-
McCann
Max Biankin
Megan Parsons
Mia Tomb
Mirren McGonigle
Misha Gupta
Nirvana Balideh
Nuala-Maria McKnight
Olivia Coccozza
Olivia Tait
Orla Gilligan
Rachel Cook
Rachel Snaith
Rosa Caughie
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Sage Plakaris-Knight
Sarah Oliver
Sarah Orimoloye
Shreeya Pandit
Stella MacEachran
Stella Sorenson
Summer Wang
Susie Wu
Tess Fleming
Thea Morag Heinrich
Thomas Wyllie
Timur Kassimkulov
Winona Shashidhara
Yasmin Patel
Yi Han Dong

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*Training Choir, Children's
Chorus 2 and Youth
Chorus 2*

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Alison McNeill
*Youth Chorus 1 and
Children's Chorus 1*

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