

# HALLÉ

## POPS CONCERTS

### AT THE BRIDGEWATER HALL

# 2011-12 SEASON

Saturday 28 April 2012, 7.30pm

Puttin' On Your Top Hat: A Tribute to Fred Astaire

*with Ava Astaire McKenzie in conversation*

Benjamin Pope conductor

Rachel Weston and Gary Williams vocalists

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Programme notes  
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Please turn off all mobile phones, pagers and watch alarms. The use of cameras, video cameras and recording equipment is strictly forbidden.

The Hallé Concerts Society gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of Arts Council England, Manchester City Council, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities and the Heritage Lottery Fund.



## About the music

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### Puttin' on your Top Hat

The Gods and Goddesses of music, dance, fashion and art must have had a plan to introduce Fred Astaire to world culture when they did. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, USA on 10 May 1899 as Frederick Austerlitz, his arrival heralded the 20th century. He made his entertainment debut in vaudeville at the age of 6, appearing with his sister, Adele and for the next 12 years, their exceptional talent and charisma would lead them to success on Broadway in New York and to the West End in London, where they became idols of theatregoers and personal friends of royalty. As America emerged into the 'Jazz Age', Fred and Adele were the facilitators for many of the composers and lyricists who would change the face of theatrical and popular music such as Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Vincent Youmans, Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz. When Adele retired in 1932 to marry Charles Cavendish, the Duke of Devonshire, Fred made his final musical theatre appearances in *The Gay Divorcee* in both New York and London.

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**'I'd rather have Fred Astaire introduce one of my songs than any singer I know.'**

Irving Berlin

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When Fred Astaire was signed to appear in films, the movie musical genre was making its transition from the revue format to screenplays which incorporated music and dance. First sharing the screen with Ginger Rogers in *Flying Down to Rio* in 1933, the team instantly burst into film stardom and, in the subsequent 'Astaire and Rogers' film series, helped create a new film genre: 'the dance musical'. Collaborating with longtime co-choreographer and lifetime friend, Hermes Pan, Astaire changed how dance would be photographed and made possible a seamless film fabric of story and character told through music and dance. America's greatest composers offered their talents just for the opportunity to work with Astaire including Irving Berlin who stated: 'I'd rather have Fred Astaire introduce one of my songs than any singer I know.' The list of timeless musical classics that Astaire introduced, either on stage, on film or in the recording studio, is monumental and his discography contains 77 single recordings and over 300 albums. As an accomplished pianist, drummer and accordionist, he was also the composer of 27 published songs. Tonight, you will be hearing a selection of some of these evergreens.

In addition to the ten films he made with Ginger, from 1933–1977, he also appeared in 45 musicals, comedies and dramas. Among his other memorable song-and-dance partners were the film actresses Joan Crawford, Rita Hayworth, Eleanor Powell, Lucille Bremer, Judy Garland, Vera-Ellen, Jane Powell, Cyd Charisse, Leslie Caron and Audrey Hepburn – as well as two highly anticipated appearances with the 'other' male movie musical innovator, Gene Kelly. At the same time, Astaire's career in another popular medium of the time, radio, was prolific with multiple guest appearances and a 39-week series of his own radio show.

In the late 1940s, television arrived and sent the movie industry into a tail-spin. Rather than fight the new gaining-in-popularity medium, Astaire decided to join it, making nearly 80 appearances in dramas, comedies, talk shows, award ceremonies, documentaries and four 'Specials' which would revolutionize the quality of the medium and earned Astaire multiple accolades and awards, including the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' highest recognition.

Over six decades, Astaire's film work was acknowledged with a Special Academy Award and Best Supporting Actor nomination, inclusion on the Top Ten Box Office Stars list, Golden Globe nominations and awards and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Film Institute. For his other contributions to world culture, he was named Musical Comedy Star of the Century, Entertainer of the Century, The King of Dance, included in the Best Dressed List, the Entertainment Hall of Fame, honoured at the Kennedy Center for Lifetime Achievement and, for his contributions to the world of music, was awarded the ASCAP Pied Piper Award and a Lifetime Achievement honour by the Grammys.

## About the music

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Fred Astaire's name alone is used as a noun, an adjective and a verb by writers, critics and lyricists to describe elegance, grace and the romantic results of dancing 'cheek to cheek'. Despite being a tireless perfectionist, he was a seemingly effortless actor, a singer praised by the greatest composers; a choreographer and dancer who took tap and his personal 'rhythm dance' style and melded them with ballet and ballroom dance and made them narratives. A businessman whose skill and success with the raising and racing of thoroughbred horses and creation of the Fred Astaire Dance Studio chain heralded the business ventures of today's celebrities. An author of an autobiography, he was also a highly educated and noble human being, loving husband and devoted father to his beloved daughter (Ava), son, (Fred Jr.) and stepson (Peter). He is an on-going inspiration to such contemporary dance-and-movement makers as Mikhail Baryshnikov, Matthew Bourne and Jackie Chan. As an iconic style-and-trend setter, he had a life and career unmatched in the 20th century.

Fred Astaire IS music. Please enjoy the pleasure of his company.

Larry Billman © 2007

## About the music

For many Fred Astaire was simply the greatest dancer of them all. His incredible fluency of movement, his meticulous attention to detail, his sheer charm and flair thrilled film and theatre goers for years and inspired dance-artists as diverse as Rudolf Nureyev, Gene Kelly and Michael Jackson. He raised popular dance to the status of an art form. But Astaire's singing voice was equally as influential – its crystal clarity, fine phrasing and rare rhythmic grace made it the favourite of many composers, among them Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Cole Porter (though Astaire remained modest about his own vocal abilities). Tonight's concert celebrates this showbiz legend through his remarkable musical legacy – the songs written for Astaire and his partners by the greatest popular composers of the day.

### IRVING BERLIN (1888-1989) **Top Hat** (1935): Selection

Irving Berlin regarded Astaire as 'pure gold', not least because *Top Hat* – the first complete film score he'd written for five years – restored the composer's flagging self-confidence. 'He's a real inspiration for a writer,' said Berlin. 'I'd never have written *Top Hat* without him. He makes you feel so secure.' As this stunning selection shows, Berlin's score was not only packed with great tunes but was truly ground-breaking – no wonder it became the talk of Hollywood and no wonder the songs remained by far and away Berlin's own favourite creations.

### IRVING BERLIN **Follow the Fleet** (1936): I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket

Just a year after *Top Hat*, Astaire again inspired Berlin to some of his finest work in the shape of *Follow the Fleet*, a film billed as 'THE SUPER-DREADNAUGHT OF MUSICAL SHOWS'. In it sailor 'Bake' Baker (Astaire) and Sherry (Ginger Rogers) are former dance partners who eventually rekindle both their dance routines and their romance. In this song Bake declares to Sherry that his Romeo days are over, beginning the number with his own piano introduction. The couple then alternate choruses before performing a comic duet in which the two dancers are unable to keep in step – it is, of course, a typically artful ruse.

## About the music

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### JEROME KERN (1885-1945) **Roberta** (1933/1935): Smoke Gets in Your Eyes / I Won't Dance

Fred Astaire was a composer's singer. 'Astaire', Jerome Kern once said, 'can't do anything bad'. Indeed, the writer Wilfred Sheed claimed it was Astaire 'who gave us the best of the new Kern, including the songs that people ask the cocktail pianists to sing most often.' Among these is the timeless and much-covered 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' and the breathless tap routine 'I Won't Dance', hits performed by Astaire and Rogers in the 1935 film adaptation of Kern's Paris-set musical *Roberta*.

### JEROME KERN **Swing Time** (1936): A Fine Romance

With lyrics by the great Dorothy Fields, 'A Fine Romance' became a hit song for Astaire in 1936. Its original version was sung by the Astaire/Rogers duo in a snowy scene in the RKO movie *Swing Time*. At the end the angry Rogers gets in her car, switches on the windscreen wipers and deals Fred a face full of snow as he sings his final note – classic stuff.

### COLE PORTER (1891-1964) arr. BILLY MAY **The Gay Divorce** (1932): The Continental

Cole Porter's 1932 stage musical *The Gay Divorce* was made into a movie *The Gay Divorcee* two years later. It was the second film Fred and Ginger paired up for and the first in which they shared starring roles. 'The Continental' won an Oscar for Best Song and is an impressive twenty-two minute production number now heard in the form of Billy May's abridged arrangement. It's shorter than the original but just as much fun!

### GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937) **The Barkleys of Broadway** (1949): They Can't Take That Away From Me

Legend has it that the last words Gershwin uttered were 'Fred Astaire'. Certainly, despite initial reservations about Astaire's voice, Gershwin became one of his biggest admirers and regarded him as one of the greatest interpreters of his songs. One of which, 'They Can't Take That Away From Me' was originally sung by Astaire in the 1937 picture *Shall We Dance*. Twelve years later Fred and Ginger, in the role of a feuding married couple, danced to the number in *The Barkleys of Broadway*, their tenth and final film together.

### COLE PORTER **The Gay Divorce**: Night and Day

Just a few different notes insistently repeated – that's the unlikely opening of one of the greatest love songs of all time. Porter once claimed the inspiration for the ballad came from an Islamic call to prayer and another time, Moorish architecture. Certainly, in addition to its unusual harmonies, those repeated notes give it an exotic flavour and powerfully convey a sense of passionate, even obsessive, love.

### ARTHUR SCHWARTZ (1900-1984) **The Band Wagon** (1953): By Myself Alone

In *The Band Wagon*, Astaire played the part of an ageing musical star Tony Hunter as he tries to revive his ailing career on Broadway. After major problems, not least of them a pretentious director, Tony takes control of the show and, with some major tinkering, it becomes a hit. Of course, he falls in love with his co-star Gaby (Cyd Charisse) in the process.

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### IRVING BERLIN **Easter Parade** (1948): A Couple of Swells

Billed as 'The Happiest Movie Ever Made', *Easter Parade* was the only picture Astaire made with the hugely talented Judy Garland. It contains no fewer than seventeen songs by Irving Berlin including the particularly memorable 'A Couple of Swells'. In this number, Astaire and Garland, donning trampish attire and both with a front tooth blacked out, sing and dance about being somewhat inconvenienced in their travel arrangements to a high society tea party to which they claim to have been invited. The verses and refrain work as wonderfully together as Astaire and Garland did themselves.

### IRVING BERLIN **Follow the Fleet**: Let's Face the Music and Dance

Even by their elegant standards, Fred and Ginger's performance of 'Let's Face the Music and Dance' was a classy and graceful affair. Berlin's sinuous, mildly menacing melody is one of his very best and has since been recorded by a number of Astaire-influenced crooners including Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra.

interval

### GEORGE GERSHWIN arr. ROSE **Girl Crazy** (1930): Overture

Gershwin's musical *Girl Crazy* opened on Broadway in October 1930 and ran for 272 performances. It made a star of Astaire's partner-to-be Ginger Rogers, who played the part of Molly Gray. Its overture introduces a number of the show's show-stopping tunes, including 'Embraceable You', 'But Not For Me' and 'I Got Rhythm'. And, back in 1930, the opening-night pit orchestra had certainly got rhythm. It was conducted by Gershwin himself and featured the now-legendary jazz musicians Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller and Jimmy Dorsey.

### GEORGE GERSHWIN **Funny Face** (1957): 'Swonderful

Astaire starred as fashion photographer Dick Avery in the 1927 Broadway production *Funny Face*, a show featuring songs by George Gershwin and his lyricist brother Ira. Thirty years later it was made into a film, again starring Astaire. 'Swonderful' was one of just four songs to make the transition from the stage to the film version and was sung by Astaire and his much younger co-star Audrey Hepburn (who had insisted that Astaire play the part of Avery). With Astaire's class and Hepburn's sex appeal, the movie simply couldn't fail.

### GEORGE GERSHWIN **Lady Be Good** (1924): Fascinatin' Rhythm

The first George and Ira Gershwin Broadway collaboration was *Lady Be Good* which opened at the Liberty Theatre in December 1924 and ran for 330 performances. A story about a brother and sister who have fallen on hard times, it appropriately starred the brother and sister double-act of Fred and Adele Astaire. 'Fascinatin' Rhythm' is one of its best-loved numbers and just can't fail to get your toes tapping.

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### IRVING BERLIN **Blue Skies** (1946): Puttin' On The Ritz

Though Bing Crosby was the main man in the MGM hit movie *Blue Skies*, today it is best remembered for the masterly Astaire tap dance routine 'Puttin' On The Ritz'. Astaire might have been 47 and just about to go into temporary retirement, but this was dancing of astonishing quality. After five weeks of meticulous and back-breaking preparation, Astaire delivered a glamorous *tour de force*, his cane not merely a prop but a fluent, versatile dance partner. The routine also contains a delicious cinematic sleight of hand – Fred leading a whole dance line of Astaires. Pure genius.

### FRED ASTAIRE (1899–1987) **I'm Building Up To An Awful Letdown** (1935)

Astaire's many talents extended to song-writing, as shown by 'I'm Building Up To An Awful Letdown', a ballad that rose to number four in the Hit Parade in 1936. It includes the memorable Johnny Mercer lyric: 'Poor old Humpty Dumpty / He got the toughest break / And yet his fall / Was nothing at all / Like the tumble I'm gonna take!' Happily, Astaire's career was still very much on the up!

### JEROME KERN **Swing Time** (1936): The Way You Look Tonight

Many believe that the RKO film comedy *Swing Time* was Astaire and Rogers' greatest achievement together. Kern's foxtrot 'The Way You Look Tonight' was Astaire's most successful song ever. It reached number one in the US chart and also won an Oscar for Best Original Song. In the movie it is gently crooned by Astaire from the piano creating a wonderfully nostalgic and romantic atmosphere.

### ARTHUR SCHWARTZ **The Band Wagon** (1953): Dancing in the Dark

Fred and Adele Astaire starred in the original Broadway production of *The Band Wagon* – their final appearance together – but 22 years later, for the movie adaptation, Cyd Charisse joined Fred. Together they performed an elegant routine to an instrumental version of 'Dancing in the Dark' set against the backdrop of an illuminated Manhattan skyline. Conrad Salinger's luscious orchestration added to the overall sophistication of the piece, as did the fact that Fred then whisks Cyd off in a coach and horses!

### IRVING BERLIN **Top Hat**: Cheek to Cheek

'Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak ...' Those immortal words were sung by Astaire to Ginger Rogers as they danced one of their most celebrated (and somewhat infamous) routines. Ginger's feathered dress did trouble Fred but the scene worked perfectly and the song was a huge hit.

### GEORGE GERSHWIN **Shall We Dance** (1937): Let's Call the Whole Thing Off

In the 1937 feature *Shall We Dance*, after Fred and Ginger bicker about pronunciation, they sing one of George and Ira Gershwin's most famous songs. It contains the delicious line 'You like to-may-toes and I like to-mah-toes' and others comically comparing the couple's different accents (pronunciation being a loaded class issue in 1930s America). Fred and Ginger then perform a remarkable roller-skating/tap-dance set piece – that said, the couple end up flat on their faces!

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### ARTHUR SCHWARTZ *The Band Wagon* (1953): That's Entertainment!

Originally sung by Astaire and others in *Band Wagon* (including India Adams singing for Cyd Charisse), 'That's Entertainment!' has gone on to become something of a showbiz anthem. It featured in a documentary film of the same name about MGM studios – a film that included an Astaire segment – and was given new lyrics for a sequel *That's Entertainment, Part II* when it was sung by co-hosts Astaire and Gene Kelly.

### Berlin on Astaire

'You gave Astaire a song and you could forget about it. He knew the song. He sang it the way you wrote it. He didn't change anything. And if he did change anything, he made it better. He might put a different emphasis on the lyric. He'd do things that you hoped other singers wouldn't do.' Irving Berlin

### 'Cheek to Cheek': That Infamous Feathery Frock

Ginger Rogers insisted on wearing one of her own designs for the famous 'Cheek to Cheek' routine: 'I was determined to wear this dress, come hell or high water. And why not? It moved beautifully. Obviously, no one in the cast or crew was willing to take sides, particularly not my side. This was alright with me. I'd had to stand alone before. At least my mother was there to support me in the confrontation with the entire front office, plus Fred Astaire and Mark Sandrich.'

Because of the sheer amount of work involved in stitching each ostrich feather to the dress, Fred Astaire didn't see it until the day of the shoot, and was horrified at the way it shed feathers with every move. He later recalled: 'It was like a chicken attacked by a coyote. I never saw so many feathers in my life.' According to the choreographer Hermes Pan, Astaire lost his temper and shouted at Rogers, who promptly burst into tears, whereupon her mother, Lela, 'came charging at him like a mother rhinoceros protecting her young.' A night's work by the wardrobe department solved much of the problem, though careful scrutiny of the film reveals feathers floating around Fred and Ginger as they dance. Later, Astaire and Pan presented Rogers with a feather and serenaded her with the following parody of Berlin's song:

Feathers – I hate feathers  
And I hate them so that I can hardly speak  
And I never find the happiness I seek  
With those chicken feathers dancing  
Cheek to Cheek

Afterwards, Astaire nicknamed Rogers 'Feathers' – also the title of a chapter of his autobiography – and parodied his experience in a routine with Judy Garland in *Easter Parade*.