

Six Choral Songs “To be Sung in Time of War” Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

These pieces are in a genre which has largely died out today, the song composed to be sung not by a solo voice but by a large group in unison. This type of community singing was very popular in the 1920s and 30s, and was encouraged by such organs as the Daily Express, which published at least one volume of Community Songs (not something one can imagine happening today!) The resurgence of community choirs, brought about largely through the influence of Gareth Malone over the last ten years, has great similarities, but their repertoire is basically the pop songs from the 1950s to the present day rather than works specifically composed for such forces.

Vaughan Williams' *Six Choral Songs* were commissioned by the BBC in 1939 for performance during the 1940 Proms, but in those first months of the war, places of entertainment were closed, and the 1940 season was cancelled. The first performance took place during a BBC broadcast concert in December 1940 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by its chorus master, Leslie Woodgate. The idea for a set of songs relevant to the wartime situation was Vaughan Williams' own, and in the choice of texts he was helped by Ursula Wood, who became his second wife in 1953, two years after his first wife Adeline died. They chose texts from the works of Shelley, and constructed what is really a song cycle on the subject of how war should be approached and conducted. When it is remembered that the texts were chosen and the composition begun in 1939 and early 1940, these texts show not only tremendous optimism, but also a deeply thoughtful and humane approach to how to approach the consequences of the conflict and the (assumed) victory which would undoubtedly not have been endorsed by many people at the time. Though he had been 42 years old in 1914, Vaughan Williams had volunteered for the Medical Corps and drove ambulances in France and later Greece throughout the whole duration of the first world war, being demobbed only in February 1919. This was a man who knew in detail what war entailed, and who would be writing no jingoistic battle cry. The style that Vaughan Williams used was rooted in his love of the modal character and melodic style of English folksongs and the hymns of the Anglican church, thereby linking these poems to the ancient traditions of music that would at that time have been familiar to everyone. Such a style was the perfect one to reflect the need to build a sense of unity and history, and to reflect that this was a war to preserve the very soul of England and all it stood for.

Like any educated man in his time, Shelley had a great knowledge and love of the classics, and his poetry is full of references to the ancient world, especially Greece. Shelley was a great believer in non-violence, and his work left a deep impression on Thoreau, Tolstoy and Gandhi. The view of Athens as the epitome of what a society should be was one which he held, and one of which Vaughan Williams made great use in his choice of texts.

The first song, “Of Courage” is from the poem *On Death*. Vaughan Williams uses it as a starting point for how the war is to be approached - with “courage of soul”, not just physical courage. Shelley was deeply anti-religious (he wrote a pamphlet at the age of 18 entitled “The Necessity of Atheism” which led to his expulsion from Oxford) and sees the outcome of the war as leaving man “Where Heaven and Hell shall leave thee free/ To the universe of Destiny”. After the “war to end all wars” between 1914 and 1918, Vaughan Williams seems to hope that perhaps this war can lead to a truly lasting victory.

The second song "Of Victory" is one of two which set stanzas from the poem *Hellas* which Shelley wrote to raise money for the Greek War of Independence. It is surprisingly written from a Turkish point of view and expresses a view, very unusual for the time, of the futility of war. Vaughan Williams uses the poem to indicate why we must oppose the totalitarian philosophy of Nazism. Without Liberty, all else is worthless.

The third song, "Of Healing", sets verses from *Prometheus Unbound*. This shows how we will achieve true victory - from a starting point of love. A victory which does not heal the wounds of war is a hollow one.

The fourth song, "Of Victory", (also from *Prometheus Unbound*) tells us what true victory is. True victory is one which hopes against hope, forgives the unforgivable, defies the all-powerful and is utterly steadfast. "This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory".

The fifth song, "Of Pity, Peace, and Love", is from *The Revolt of Islam*, a poem about Laon and Cythna who defeat the tyrannical ruler of Argolis, only to be captured by an invading army and executed. They die content that their example will spur others to follow them. Vaughan Williams seems to be saying that those who die do not die in vain, but stand as a reproach to the present and an inspiration for the future.

The final song, "Of a New Age", sets the final stanzas of *Hellas*. Here, using ancient Athens as the pattern, Shelley looks to the future and the world that must come after the defeat of evil, when the world has sloughed off its old skin like a snake and renews itself. We must be brighter than Hellas (Ancient Greece), more awesome than Peneus (a river and the name of its god), more beautiful than Tempes (the valley near Olympus through which the River Peneus runs) sunnier than the Cyclades (the island birthplace of Thalassa, a primordial deity in Greek mythology who was goddess of the sea, and of Artemis, known as Diana in Roman mythology, and her twin brother Apollo). We must build another Athens. But Shelley is realistic, knowing that nothing can survive for ever. However, like ancient Athens, our new Athens can bequeath a legend that can be an aspiration for future generations. He ends with an exhortation that all the violence and hatred should end, for "the world is weary of the past".

Truly, this is a song cycle whose message is as pertinent today as it was in 1940.

Five Mystical Songs

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The *Five Mystical Songs* is a comparatively early work by Vaughan Williams. There had been considerable interest in the premiere of his first great masterpiece, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* at Worcester Cathedral in 1910, so he was commissioned by Ivor Atkins, who was organist at Worcester Cathedral from 1897 to 1950 and organiser of the Three Choirs Festival, to write another piece for the following year. He decided to adapt and rewrite where necessary the *Five Mystical Songs* on which he had been working sporadically since 1906. The first performance took place on September 14th 1911 and was conducted by the composer. Vaughan Williams was very anxious to build on the impressions that the *Tallis Fantasia* had made the previous year, but there was very little rehearsal time as that year's festival also included Elgar's new Second Symphony, Parry's *Coronation Te Deum* and first performances of commissions from Bantock, Walford Davies and W H Read as well as the first performance of the new edition by Elgar and Atkins of Bach's *St Matthew*

Passion. He later recalled that when he took the podium for the first performance “I was thoroughly nervous. When I looked at the fiddles I thought I was going mad, for I saw what appeared to be Kreisler at a back desk. I got through somehow, and at the end I whispered to Reed [the leader of the LSO], ‘Am I mad, or did I see Kreisler in the band?’ ‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘he broke a string and wanted to play it in before the Elgar concerto and couldn’t without being heard in the Cathedral.”

Though a self-declared atheist in his younger years, Vaughan Williams later settled into what his wife Ursula described as a “cheerful agnosticism.” Despite these views, Vaughan Williams always loved the liturgy and music of the Anglican church and the language of the King James Bible and had a mystical view of the world which chimed perfectly with that of George Herbert. Herbert was born in 1593 into a wealthy and artistic family; his mother was a friend and patron of John Donne, who delivered the elegy at her funeral in 1627. At Cambridge he intended to become a priest but in 1620 was appointed University Orator, which involved writing and giving speeches on important occasions. He was briefly the MP for his birthplace, Montgomery, but returned to Cambridge and took holy orders in 1630, becoming priest at St Andrew’s Church in Bemerton near Salisbury until his early death in 1633. Herbert was a musician as well as a poet, and said “Music did relieve my drooping spirits, compose my distracted thoughts, and raise my weary soul so far above earth, that it gave me an earnest of the joys of heaven, before I possessed them.” He was an accomplished lutenist and viol player and “sett his own lyrics or sacred poems... such hymns and anthems as he and the angels now sing in heaven” according to Izaak Walton’s biography of 1670. All his poems are of a religious nature and were published in an anthology called *The Temple* in the year of his death. His verse has been set regularly by composers from Purcell and Blow in the 17th century to Britten, Walton and Judith Weir in the present day.

Vaughan Williams sanctioned several ways in which this cycle can be performed: solo baritone, baritone with chorus and chorus alone.

The first poem, *Easter*, evokes both the joy (Rise, heart; thy Lord is risen) and the solemn dignity (What key is best to celebrate this most high day?) of Christianity’s seminal event, the Resurrection. “Calcined” in the first stanza describes the alchemical process of purifying a mineral through burning.

The Easter theme continues in the simplicity of structure and purity of musical language of *I Got Me Flowers*. The poet imagines being present at Christ’s resurrection. The chorus joins in a triumphant unison confirmation: ‘There is but one, and that one ever.’

Love Bade Me Welcome is the most intimate and passionate song, giving Herbert’s vision of the soul’s redemption, for which Vaughan Williams provided a benediction with a wordless choral recollection of the ancient chant melody “O Sacrum Convivium”, from the second Vespers service of Corpus Christi: “O sacred feast, in which Christ is received: the memory of his Passion is renewed, alleluia”.

The Call is for baritone solo and features a simple folk-like melody which is both entirely personal to Vaughan Williams, yet sounds as if it had always existed. The repeated imperative ‘come’ reflects both the poet’s call to God and God’s call to the poet.

The closing *Antiphon* is a hymn of exultation sung by the choir alone, a triumphant hymn of praise that is punctuated with the refrain ‘Let all the world in every corner sing: my God and King!’

Requiem, Op. 9

Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986)

Although very different composers in most ways, Duruflé has similarities to Bruckner in at least some respects. Both were world-famous organists and both were plagued by self-doubt about the quality of their music. In Bruckner's case this led to constant tinkering with his music and being influenced by well-wishing but mistaken friends into making changes to his scores; in Duruflé's, it led to similar tinkering but also, unlike Bruckner, his crippling lack of confidence led a lamentably small number of compositions. His entire output consists of only fourteen published pieces, most of which are short. He once said of himself, "I am incapable of adding anything significant to the piano repertoire, view the string quartet with apprehension, and envisage with terror the idea of composing a song after the finished examples of Schubert, Fauré and Debussy." Tonight's work is by far his most ambitious composition (though he wrote to a friend in July 1946, during its composition, 'I am terrified by the adventure I have embarked upon'), and its exceptional quality makes one wonder what more he could have given us.

Duruflé was born in Louvain in 1902, and aged 10 joined the choir of Rouen Cathedral. His six years in the choir were the formative experience of his life, leading directly to all that followed. Here he came into contact with the school of chant restoration and performance developed by the Benedictines at the French monastery of St Pierre de Solesmes, who developed a theory of chant rhythm as a free succession of notes of mostly equal value in groups of two and three which would be central to Duruflé's compositional style, most especially in tonight's *Requiem*. When he left Rouen in 1918, he went to Paris to study with Charles Tournemire, the composer and organist of the church of St Clothilde, to prepare him for the examination to enter the Paris Conservatoire. After a year Tournemire considered that he was ready for the Conservatoire, but Duruflé's lack of self confidence made him want further preparation, so he began to study under the organist of Notre Dame, Louis Vierne. Tournemire was most famous for the imaginative quality of his improvisations, whereas Vierne had a much greater insight into the formal techniques of composition, so between them they gave Duruflé a perfectly rounded education. He entered the Conservatoire in 1920 where his classmate in Paul Dukas's composition class was Olivier Messiaen. He graduated having won an extraordinary five first prizes in organ, harmony, accompaniment, counterpoint and fugue, and composition. Whilst still a student, he became assistant organist to Tournemire, and then to Vierne (he was assisting Vierne when the composer died of a heart attack at the console of the organ in June 1937). His career progressed quickly after graduation, and he became Titulaire (principal organist) at St. Etienne-du-Mont in Paris, a post he held for the rest of his life.

In 1939 he gave the World Premiere of Poulenc's Organ Concerto and advised the composer on the organ registrations. In the 1940s he was named Professor of Harmony at the Conservatoire and was, according to Messiaen, "the best we ever had". He also assisted Marcel Dupré with his organ class. In 1953 he married one of his students, Marie-Madeleine Chevalier, and she became co-titulaire at St. Etienne-du-Mont. The two of them toured the world giving joint organ recitals, having a particular success in America, until a devastating event occurred in 1975, when they were involved in a head on collision whilst driving in southern France. After many operations, Marie-Madeleine made an almost complete recovery and was able to resume her career in 1977, but Duruflé himself rarely left his bed in their apartment for the next ten years until his death in 1986.

Tonight's *Requiem* began life as an unfinished suite for organ based on the plainsong of the Mass for the Dead, but on the death of his father he decided to transform it into a requiem, which he dedicated to his father. He said that the idea for the composition came to him "around 1945", and it was completed in September 1947. In its early days it was generally perceived to be a piece in memory of those who had died during the second world war, an idea which was seemingly confirmed by the circumstances of its first performance in November 1947. This was in a broadcast concert by Radio France which also included the premieres of the Symphony No 6 'In memoriam' by Alexandre Tansman, composed in 1944 'in memory of those who have died for France', and the *Pièce Symphonique* 'In Memoriam' by László Lajtha. It was also performed in Paris on Armistice Day 1948 and 1949, but there is no evidence that Duruflé had ever envisaged it as a piece of national mourning.

The clear model for Duruflé's *Requiem* is that of Fauré. The very selective choice of texts from the Mass for the Dead (including two, the "Liberate me" and "In paradisum", which are not actually part of the Mass) is almost identical to Fauré's, and Duruflé also almost entirely dispenses with the grand drama of the Day of Judgement so effectively made use of by Verdi, Berlioz and Britten, using hardly anything from the "Dies irae" sequence. Like Fauré's (and Brahms's very different *German Requiem*) this is a piece as much for those left behind as for the dead themselves; it is a work of consolation.

The essential difference between tonight's *Requiem* and Fauré's is the absolute centrality of the mediæval plainsong *Missa pro Defunctis* to Duruflé's work; every movement is essentially based on the chant. In 1980, the composer wrote: "This Requiem is composed entirely on the Gregorian themes of the Mass for the Dead. Sometimes the musical text has been respected in full, the orchestra intervening only to sustain or to comment on it; sometimes I was simply inspired by it or sometimes removed myself from it altogether." However the chant (which Messiaen described as "pure as an angel's wing") is personalized by the colours, harmonies, and rhythms of a musician steeped in the world of Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc (though he feared his music would be considered out of date by the followers of Stravinsky and Schönberg). He added "This Requiem is not an ethereal work which sings of detachment from earthly worries. It reflects, in the immutable form of the Christian prayer, the agony of man faced with the mystery of his ultimate end. It is often dramatic, or filled with resignation, or hope, or terror, just as the words of the Scripture themselves which are used in the liturgy. It tends to translate human feelings before their terrifying, inexplicable or consoling destiny. It represents the idea of Peace, of Faith, and of Hope."

Duruflé provided three different accompaniments for this work, the first being the original version for large orchestra. He then arranged it for solo organ accompaniment, to enable it to be performed in an ordinary church context, and finally a second orchestral version with much reduced forces to allow for performance on a larger scale but without the expense and difficulty of the original version. He was above all a practical musician. It is the second version which we are performing this evening.

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